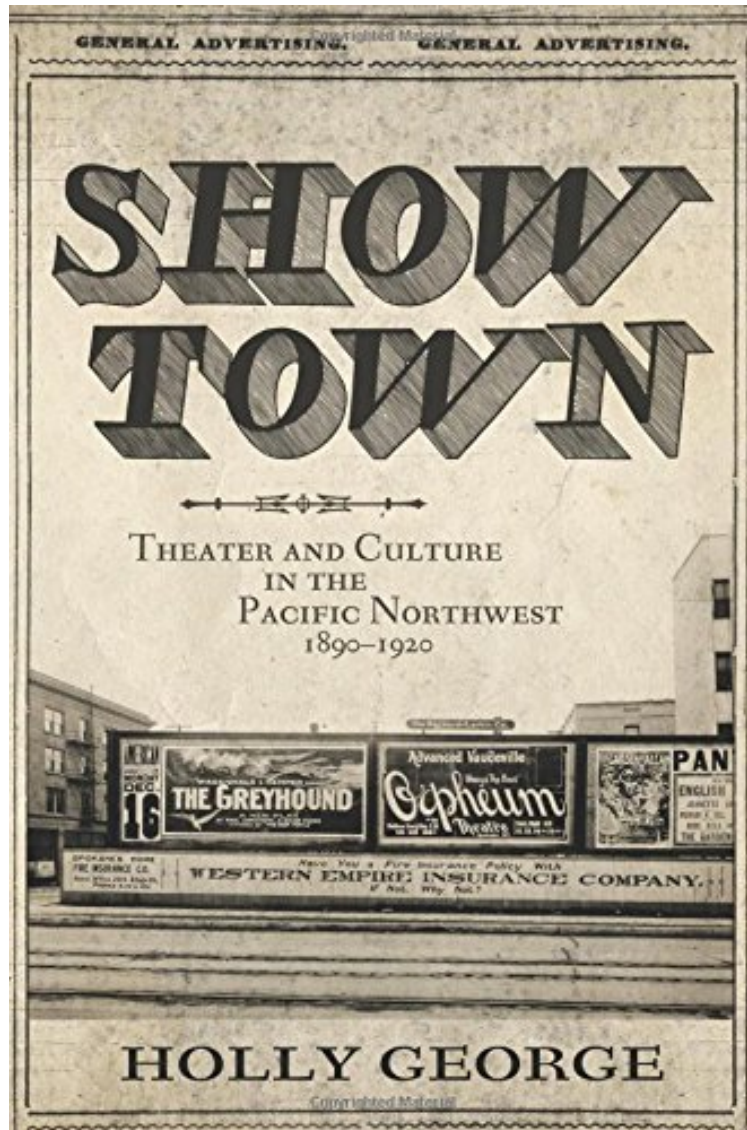


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Show Town: Theater and Culture in the Pacific Northwest, 18901920

Holly George

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Holly George : Show Town: Theater and Culture in the Pacific Northwest, 18901920 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Show Town: Theater and Culture in the Pacific Northwest, 18901920:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Vital Addition to Your Spokane History BookshelfBy LarryCI just finished this book and it is quite good. George looks at the theater scene in Spokane from 1880-1910 or so (with a

bit on the transition to moving pictures in the 1910s). The book is not so much about what happens on stage as it is about how Spokanites consumed and fought about theater. For most of this period there is a sharp divide. Highbrow theater included things like opera and Shakespeare, was attended by respectable people including middle-class women, and took place at the fancy theaters like the Auditorium. Lowbrow theater was often variety theater shows that included scantily-dressed women and blue humor, was attended by working men (and sometimes middle class men whose wives thought they were somewhere else) and was way more popular than highbrow theater. Alcohol was served at the variety theaters, usually by female barmaids who sometimes had other favors for sale as well. Ministers were constantly organizing to try and ban variety theaters, and were defeated again and again by downtown business owners and workers. There is more here as well--the business arrangements of theater and how they change during this period, local theater companies and how they tried to stay respectable, and the small local movie industry in the 1910s and 20s. There are only a handful of deeply-researched, footnoted books on Spokane history so it is great to see another. This is not a popular history book like *Boys in the Boat* or *Breaking Blue*, it is not a page-turner, but if you research and write about local history in this time period this is an important book. I recommend it.

Like many western boomtowns at the turn of the twentieth century, Spokane, Washington, enjoyed a lively theatrical scene, ranging from plays, concerts, and operas to salacious variety and vaudeville shows. Yet even as Spokanites took pride in their city's reputation as a good show town, the more genteel among them worried about its Wild West atmosphere. In *Show Town*, historian Holly George correlates the clash of tastes and sensibilities among Spokane's theater patrons with a larger shift in values occurring throughout the Inland West and the nation during a period of rapid social change. George begins this multifaceted story in 1890, when two Spokane developers built the lavish Auditorium Theater as a kind of advertisement for the young city. The new venue catered to a class of people made wealthy by speculation, railroads, and mining. Yet the refined entertainment the Auditorium offered conflicted with the rollicking shows that played in the town's variety theaters, designed to draw in the migratory workers primarily single men who provided labor for the same industries that made the fortunes of Spokane's elite. As well-to-do Spokanites attempted to clamp down on the variety theaters, performances at even the city's more respectable, legitimate playhouses began to reflect a movement away from Victorian sensibilities to a more modern desire for self-fulfillment particularly among women. Theaters joined the debate over modern femininity by presenting plays on issues ranging from women's suffrage to shifting marital expectations. At the same time, national theater monopolies transmitted to the people of Spokane new styles and tastes that mirrored larger cultural trends. Lucidly written and meticulously researched, *Show Town* is a groundbreaking work of cultural history. By examining one city's theatrical scene in all its complex dimensions, this book expands our understanding of the forces that shaped the urban American West.

Exploring tensions between the Victorian values of middle-class Spokane theatergoers and the often bawdy variety entertainment venues that fueled the town's economic engines, Holly George tells a story that illuminates the turn-of-the-century Pacific Northwest on several levels: theater history, cultural studies, the sociology of money and morality, Spokane's geography as destiny, and influential personalities. Lively anecdotes and sociological data are seamlessly integrated in this fascinating study. Felicia Hardison Londr, author of *The Enchanted Years of the Stage: Kansas City at the Crossroads of American Theater, 1870-1930*