

Description for the general public

Nineteenth-Century Polish Theatre Audience Revisited: the History of Theatre Spectators from the Perspective of Fan Studies

The aim of the project is to research the history of nineteenth-century theatre audience in Polish lands, especially in Warsaw, through the lenses of practices and experiences of the most engaged spectators, whom I propose to call 'theatre fans'. Therefore, the project is about analyzing Polish nineteenth-century theatre culture with the focus on audiences, and not on playwrights, stage masterpieces or great actors of the era. The project highlights those spectators, whose behavior was often interpreted as excessive, in bad taste, inappropriate, and which perhaps somehow subverted moral and aesthetical order.

The project invokes Cornel Sandvoss' (2005) definition of fandom, which underlines the regularity and repetitiveness of fan practices as well as their affective and consumerist dimension. Although the term 'fan' did not refer to theatre in the nineteenth century, I argue that it is justified to define certain nineteenth-century spectators as 'fans' regarding their forms of participation in theatre culture. The premise of the project is that introducing the concept of a 'fan' to the history of theatre audience creates a unique opportunity to revise numerous stereotypes about historical audiences, contemporary fans and the social role of the theatre in the nineteenth century. Such a perspective may be particularly valuable while researching the role of the theatre in everyday experience of people from the underprivileged social groups (because of their class, gender, cultural capital, etc.) in Polish lands in the nineteenth century.

The project is based on carefully selected case studies, which provide us an insight into the key aspects of Polish theatre fan culture of the nineteenth-century:

1. Who were theatre fans?
2. What were their fan practices?
3. Who/what became a fandom object?

The research will encapsulate, among others: the relationship between fan identity and national identity; the class and ethnic profile of fans; popular tastes in theatre; the commercial dimension of theatre performance; fandom wars and conflicts between fans and other fractions of audience; the relationship between the theatre institution and fans; a transnational dimension of fan culture; female fandoms.

The project has an interdisciplinary character as it merges tools and perspectives developed within fan studies, audience studies, theatre history studies and cultural studies. The research will involve working on diverse nineteenth-century sources (e.g. photos, caricatures, memoirs, press materials, maps, playbills, theatre programs, dramas, fiction).

On the one hand the project methodology allows for a critical review of nineteenth-century theatre spectators/fans representations (who, why, where and from what social position produced such representations); on the other hand, it creates the means to recover the practices, experiences, preferences and identities of historical fans.

By combining theatre history perspective with fan studies perspective, the project will broaden both disciplines and advance issues and concepts which have been so far neglected or marginalized within them as there is still a shortage of research on historical audiences, fan history, and theatre fandoms. The project will result in articles and a monograph, which will – at least partially – fill the existing vacuum, particularly regarding the nineteenth-century Warsaw, and have an international impact on our concepts of fan culture and nineteenth-century Polish culture.