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## EMILY MANN: REBEL ARTIST OF THE AMERICAN THEATRE. Alexis Greene. Guilford, CT: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2023; Pp. 391

By Erica Stevens Abbitt

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Alexis Greene has written a timely, accessible biography of one of America's greatest living theatrical icons, playwright, director and artistic visionary Emily Mann. The creator since the 1970s of a unique brand of documentary theatre featuring the contradictory, impassioned testimony of real people in crisis, Mann is also an award-winning director, and one of a handful of successful female theatre administrators in this country, recognized for her 30-year tenure as artistic director of Princeton's McCarter Theater.

As the title suggests, Greene argues that Mann's allergy to preconceived assumptions and the status quo (both politically and theatrically) has been the engine of her achievement. For Greene, Mann's career does not simply represent triumph over personal trauma, chronic illness and a patriarchal theatre establishment: it provides a testament to the power of radical resistance.

In *Emily Mann: Rebel Artist of the American Theater*, Greene has wisely used an approach akin to Mann's own "theatre of testimony." After hours of interviewing family, friends, associates and the artist herself, Greene uncovered a series of compelling (but sometimes contradictory) narratives. These rich conversations, woven into a deceptively simple chronological structure, provide the reader with a nuanced view of a complex artist and activist.

Well-illustrated, with an excellent bibliography and index, the text is divided into a series of short, readable chapters. The first third of the book moves briskly through Mann's family history and its Jewish roots, the influence of her activist parents, her coming-of-age in Chicago in the 1960s, and her early theatrical experiments as a student at Radcliffe.

In the next section, Greene provides a valuable overview of Mann's evolution as a creative artist, as she developed techniques for representing real people threatened by forces larger than themselves. The arc of Mann's early work, from *Annulla: An Autobiography* (regarding a Jewish woman in post-Holocaust Britain) to *Still Life* (featuring a Vietnam vet, his mistress and his abused wife) and the landmark drama *Execution of Justice* (exploring the 1978 assassination at San Francisco City Hall of Harvey Milk and George Moscone) reveals two key insights on Mann's aesthetic and social praxis. The first insight involves the way Mann gradually widened her perspective and added characters to her plays, creating a vast, polyphonic and more explicitly political dramaturgy. The second is how Mann's youthful experience of violence (as the victim of sexual assault) drove her need to represent both victim and perpetrator, and sharpened her emphasis on the process of reconciliation and recovery.

The final third of Greene's book hones in on Mann's tenure as Artistic Director at the McCarter Theatre, her development of translations and new works exploring race and social legacies in America (such as *Having Our Say* and *Greensboro: A Requiem*), and her forays as a director to regional and Broadway stages. Here, Greene gives readers a perceptive take on the patterns of failure and success that have marked Mann's career—bruising challenges, including her struggles with multiple sclerosis and conflicts with her board, juxtaposed with artistic successes and national recognition. Greene reads Mann's career to exemplify ongoing gender inequity in theatre, despite many generations of women's achievement and advocacy. But persistence is all, and that is what Mann has contributed. As Greene puts it, "Sometimes being a rebel simply means staying the course" (131).

Well-documented and engaging, Greene's *Emily Mann: Rebel Artist of the American Theater* will appeal to a wide range of constituencies. Those concerned with identity and performance in an era of cancel-culture will find descriptions of Mann's techniques reaching across divisions of race, class, gender and ideology to represent difference (including Blackness and queer experience) relevant in ongoing debates on a core issue of contemporary theater practice. In this, the book interacts with several recent publications on race, equity, diversity and performance, such as *Casting a Movement* (edited by Claire Syler and Daniel Banks), as well as the innovative "calling in" movement developed by educator/activist Loretta J. Ross.

Unexpected tidbits in this biography will provide keen theatre-goers with lively insights, including descriptions of Mann's encounters with Winnie Mandela, and her long-standing friendship with leading performers, activists and advocates, from John Spencer to Nadine Strossen and Gloria

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Steinem. Themes of advocacy, alliance building and mentorship run through the volume, furnishing the reader with a vivid sense of the generous, collectivist process that may be one of Mann's least acknowledged, but most important accomplishments.

Greene's exploration of Mann's experience with chronic illness during some of the most productive years of her career provides an important contribution to a growing scholarship on trauma, disability and theatre, as well. Her treatment of Mann's work as part of a national conversation on truth and power should prove valuable to "discourse in the public square" (ix) and to those committed to the study of theatre as civic practice.

For students and emerging artists, especially, Greene's text is an excellent resource, providing a detailed critique of Mann's major works and methodology in clear and accessible prose. The book's depiction of the travails of a theatre administrator on the shop floor of the industry should prove enlightening to would-be producers and artistic administrators, especially those from under-represented groups. Indeed, this biography serves as both a cautionary tale and a blueprint for success, reminding outsider aspirants to positions of power the strategies they may need to transform a supposedly "liberal" theatre establishment.

For theatre scholars in general (and feminist scholars in particular), Greene's examination of this significant artist fills a gap in the literature, providing a much-needed comprehensive and updated appraisal of Mann's career and legacy in the 21st century. Greene, author of *Lucille Lortel: Queen of Off-Broadway*, and a novelist, educator, critic and theatre practitioner in her own right, notes that one of the major goals in her work is to reveal the everyday lives (as well as the extraordinary achievements) of women in the field.

In the end, Greene's approach for this volume, sympathetic but never sycophantic, is resonant with Mann's own process and vision. It reminds us that keen observation and empathetic representation are at the heart of effective theatrical expression. This volume validates the career of a woman whose focus on theatre as means of advancing social justice has never wavered—and it underscores, for theatre-makers, students and researchers alike, the potential of performance as a radical force for change.

## References

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## About The Authors

Dr. Erica Stevens Abbitt is Professor Emerita in the School of Dramatic Art. From 2015-17, she also served FAHSS as director of the Humanities Research Group. A native of Montreal, Erica earned a BA in political science from McGill before training as an actor. Her theatre career in Canada, the US, New Zealand and the UK included the BBC series *OPPENHEIMER*, stage roles in London and Off-Broadway and directing, writing and producing credits in regional theatre. In 1999, she returned to her studies, receiving an MA in Theatre History from California State University, Northridge and a PhD in Critical Studies from UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television. Joining the University of Windsor in 2004, she focused on revitalizing the theatre studies curriculum to include contemporary thinking on race, nation, gender, power and identity, as well as performance.

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