

became a megahit, the famously sour Christopher Plummer renamed it "The Sound of Mucus," and Andrews had to endure a cultural backlash as she unwittingly became an emblem of the kind of cinema that '70s auteurs longed to rebel against. The relentless tabloid gossip the actress and singer had to endure makes our sleazy TMZ.com celebrity-crazed media seem not that warped after all.

Stirling's obvious closeness to his subject gives us a portrait that is intimate but also defential. Andrews is shown to be easy, friendly, real, likable almost to a fault. The last scene is a peculiar image of Andrews in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on the Mother Goose float, "miming to her carefully delineated recording of 'The Show Must Go On,' which she has intoned to mark the publication of *The Great American Mouseical*," a children's book she co-wrote with her daughter Emma Walton Hamilton. Sometimes being close to your subject makes you actually believe you are doing her justice.

One theme in all these books is the poisonous allure of Hollywood. The temptation of a glamorous film career toyed with each of these actresses' self-worth. For Martin, it was an early lesson—stuck in Los Angeles as a Paramount studio girl making lackluster films. For Merman, her ambitions for a film career were constantly dangled in front of her and then taken away—most notably when she was passed over for Rosalind Russell for the role of Rose in the film version of *Gypsy*. For Andrews, it was the cultural backlash that came with film success—after *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music* she was imprisoned in a stereotype of the prim and proper British lady of the upper crust.

Overall, these women seem pretty much like we assume they would be: Merman was a headstrong powerhouse with an aversion to self-reflection; Julie Andrews is dignified, funny and vulnerable; and Martin was spunky, professional and probably a closeted lesbian. Each of them, despite their reservations, kept returning to live performance later in life, after renouncing it. Like many of us, they were addicted to the stage, whether they liked it or not. 25

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I Do “the last show I did, I did.” To recover, she spent four years in a Brazil vacation home 200 miles southwest of Brasilia. Davis depicts those years on the farm as beautiful and reenergizing, allowing Martin to regain her health and once again tap into her inner tomboy—riding horses, raising chickens and pigs, and inviting “special friends” like actress Janet Gaynor for a visit.

The book jacket claims that Davis “addresses long-standing claims concerning Martin’s sexuality,” which is a dry, careful way to describe the dry, careful treatment he gives the subject. Davis mentions intense friendships with actresses Gaynor and Jean Arthur, but offers no details—not even speculation—about whether Martin was a lesbian. Davis does mention that the rumor of Martin and Arthur’s affair most assuredly inspired the George Macdonald novel *The Princess and the Goblin*, which depicts a lesbian relationship between a Broadway singer and a Hollywood actress. But then Davis qualifies the rumor like a tight-lipped publicist: “Even close friends vowed they didn’t know whether the speculations were true, and the exact nature of Mary’s sexuality remains in question.”



Andrews

As sycophantic as Davis may be (he includes a snapshot of himself with the star), it’s possible he is telling the truth. It could be that Martin, controlled and unaware of her own desires, never consummated her lesbian feelings. Davis reasons that Martin’s true love was reserved for the theatre, quoting her words, “I beat my brains out performing... and I like to hear the echo.”

IN THE STRANGELY CHUMMY JULIE

Andrews: An Intimate Biography, Richard Stirling one-ups Davis by frequently including his own conversations and run-ins with the celebrity. He often quotes her as talking directly to him (“‘I’ve got a good right hook,’ she once told me”). He describes waiting to see her in the stage adaptation of *Victor/Victoria*. “Making my way into the Marquis Theatre,” he writes, “I asked Barbara Walters, America’s most feared interviewer, what she expected from the star of the show.”

These jarring moments make this book read more like a sycophantic *Vanity Fair* profile than a well-researched biography. Stirling opens the book with Andrews in a hospital in 1997, about to have her ill-fated throat surgery, and returns to that scene near the end, after recounting her rise to fame. He is quite good at discussing the media circus that surrounded Andrews and her husband Blake Edwards; the author cites a vast array of magazines and newspaper interviews, even an essay Andrews wrote for *Good Housekeeping*.

Many pages are spent on *The Sound of Music* and the positive and negative reverberations that film had for Andrews. After it

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of this new medium, was more on edge and almost stopped production.

Davis's book remains mostly worshipful of its subject. The story of the star's birth is told through Martin's own mythologizing—a corny memory about a curtain being raised in her mother's bedroom when she was born in Weatherford, Tex. "I guess they've been raising curtains all my life," Martin often said.

Young Martin had a kind of Hayley Mills-style tomboy childhood. She rode Shetland ponies bareback and dressed in gyneclothes. "My mother always tried to make me into the most feminine thing you ever saw but...I wanted to be a boy," she said.

Davis details Martin's rehearsal process, her fortitude, her focus and her hard work in originating her iconic roles. She spent two preparatory hours in the theatre before every show while performing in *The Sound of Music*. Right before opening night of the play *The Skin of Our Teeth*, she slammed her hand in a door, ripped off a fingernail and went onstage with a throbbing finger. She worked 14-hour days on *Peter Pan* to practice flying around the stage while wearing a body mike—one of the first actors to perfect this difficult feat. She suffered many painful falls during rehearsals and was once accidentally slammed into a brick wall, breaking her arm.

Though Davis doesn't say so, you get the sense that Martin was a somewhat distant and removed figure. She rarely socialized. Often a limo would come pick her up directly after a show, and she would return home to rest up for the next performance. "They pay to see you at your peak," she reasoned.

Davis portrays Martin's husband, Richard Halliday, as a moody, drug-addicted closet homosexual who, nonetheless, was instrumental in building his wife's career. "His whole personal and aesthetic orientation might be interpreted as gay, and he could be vicious in his outbursts," Davis writes. The "Dallas" actor Larry Hagman, Martin's son from her first husband, despised his stepfather. One night, Hagman wrote in his own autobiography, he aimed a .22 rifle at the back of Halliday's head as he left with Martin for the theatre. Hagman remained estranged from his mother until after Halliday's death from pneumonia, brought on by the latter's lifelong alcoholism and drug use.

Martin collapsed on stage during a grueling tour of *I Do, I Do* when she was 52, suffering from an intestinal infection due to a tumor in her stomach. She considered *I Do*,

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married Ernest Borgnine. The two seemed perfectly matched, but a few days into their honeymoon they began fighting and quickly divorced. (Kellow mentions rumors that Borgnine may have struck Merman.)

In portraying her middle and later years, Kellow relies heavily on interviews with Merman's friend, Tony Cointreau, a much younger man who became her confidante and "walker." The book has many delectable moments, most notably Kellow's depiction of the 1957 production of *Happy Hunting*, Merman's attempt at a big Broadway comeback. The show was sub par, and she hated her co-star, the egotistical film actor Fernando Lamas. Notoriously well-endowed, Lamas insisted on wearing tight white trousers on opening night of the play. It infuriated Merman to be upstaged. "I know what's going on! You tell him to wear a goddamn jockstrap!" she is reported to have demanded.

Kellow weaves in the tragedies of Merman's life—her failed marriages; the suicide of her second husband, newspaper executive Robert Levitt; the death of her daughter Ethel Jr.—while providing great detail about Merman's boundless strength and work ethic.



Merman



Martin

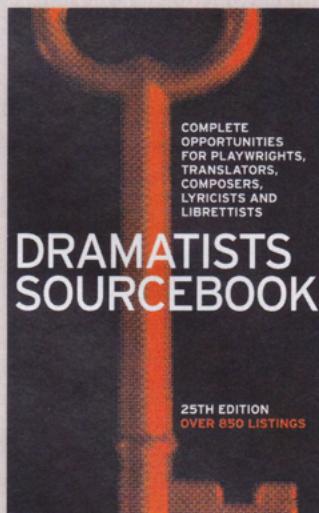
The diva rarely missed a show, even with pneumonia or appendicitis.

MERMAN AND MARY MARTIN ENJOYED a long friendship and mutual admiration, a bond often cited in Kellow's book but not touched upon so much in Ronald Davis's *Mary Martin, Broadway Legend*. Both authors do discuss a famous televised concert for

Ford Motor Company's 50th anniversary when the two singers performed a 13-minute duet medley. (An excerpt can be viewed on YouTube. Martin has a more nuanced, almost jazzy way of singing, but Merman practically steps through the screen and sits on your lap.) Merman, according to Kellow, was fearless about appearing on television, but Martin, unfamiliar with the cameras and mechanics

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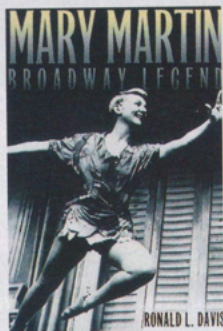
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Diva Talk

Three biographers take stabs at explaining how Ethel Merman, Mary Martin and Julie Andrews ruled

BY MIKE ALBO



MARY MARTIN, BROADWAY LEGEND

By Ronald L. Davis,
University of Oklahoma Press,
Norman.
328 pp, \$26.95 cloth.



JULIE ANDREWS: AN INTIMATE BIOGRAPHY

By Richard Stirling,
St. Martin's Press, New York City.
384 pp, \$27.95 cloth.



ETHEL MERMAN: A LIFE

By Brian Kellow,
Viking, New York City.
336 pp, \$25.95 cloth.

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE THREE GREATEST MUSICAL theatre actresses of the 20th century—Mary Martin, Ethel Merman, and Julie Andrews—have recently hit the bookstores. Normal, sane, non-theatre people will read these volumes with pleasure and find out interesting tidbits about these beloved icons: Merman was actually not Jewish, Martin opened up a boutique in Brazil, Andrews and her husband Blake Edwards sold their Malibu estate for \$7.3 million. But for us mad fools addicted to the stage, the biographies may be a little less satisfying, as we flip through the pages anxiously hoping for some wisdom about why they hell we do what we do.

If you work in the theatre, you read biographies of famous performers with a selfish desperation. Sure, these three women had beautiful, powerful voices and incandescent stage presence, but we theatre freaks want to know more—who they kissed up to, what they sacrificed, how they ate. We secretly hope they had to suffer through some of the humiliations and aggravations we have had to suffer through, like a stupid reviewer saying you were “narcissistic” in your solo show, idiotic audiences who only understand lame jokes about sports and pets, and a talentless loser in your acting class who performs her mundane one-woman show *Off Broadway* just because she wears a size-D bra while you still can't find a producer for yours. You read about these divas' lives, hoping that somewhere they will tell you why you gave your soul to the stage.

In *Ethel Merman: A Life*, author Brian Kellow often uses all-caps when quoting his subject. “DID I EVER ASK YOU TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT NAMING A THEATRE AFTER ME?” she demands of her longtime friend Bob Schear

after he tried to get the Apollo renamed after her: “WHAT THE FUCK DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH ME?” Ethel Merman was indeed a loudmouth and had a tendency to project her voice into the rafters even off stage.

She also had no ability to edit her thoughts before they came out of her mouth—she was known for braying her opinions loudly to directors and frequently confronting fellow cast members. Kellow provides plenty of anecdotes and quotes from co-stars who, even when they loathed her, begrudgingly respected the woman for her showmanship and huge, rafter-shaking personality.

She had crackerjack timing and was mentored early on by Jimmy Durante, but Merman's vaudeville training left her lacking in dramatics or nuance. She had problems looking at her scene partners and instead sent her lines out into the audience. Kellow describes her icy relationship with Stephen Sondheim during his composition of songs for *Gypsy*, and quotes his comment that she learned her material like “a talking dog.”

Of the three legends, Merman had, perhaps surprisingly, the most robust love life. The relentlessly energetic stagehorse loved big, strong men. Her four marriages, all ending in failure, were with serious, dull Don Draper types who didn't have an ounce of femininity in them and had a difficult time expressing themselves.

It was with these men that Merman became most vulnerable, Kellow observes. Her third husband, businessman Robert Six, convinced her to move to Denver from New York. Merman claimed she was done with Broadway, and it was time to be a proper lady. But the marriage to the distant and unexpressive Six deteriorated. Later, in her fifties, she