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Embracing the Lackluster

Investigating the Life (and Afterlives) of a Nineteenth-Century Workaday Actor

Abstract

us actor-manager Harry Watkins (1825–1894) was no one special. He yearned for fame, but merely skirted the edges of it. If Watkins has any “historical significance” at all, it is because he left behind a voluminous diary in which he chronicled his experiences during the years leading up to the us Civil War. When the author discovered the manuscript in 2008, Watkins’s lackluster became the subject of her research, focused on the question: what could this minor actor reveal about nineteenth-century us culture—a culture as obsessed with fame and achievement as today’s culture? The author argues that Watkins is significant precisely *because* of his ordinariness, his obscurity, his run-of-the-mill-ness. His experiences illuminate

how “white mediocrity” (Koritha Mitchell) works and deepens our understanding of the insidious power of the American Dream. Watkins’s lack of visibility during his lifetime and subsequently suggests that mediocrity is a stigmatized state of being, a form of abjection. His cyclical highs and lows bring into focus the cultural forces that still shape the aspirations of today’s theater artists, and the triumphs and failures that define their (our) inexorably ordinary lives.

Keywords

United States, nineteenth century, theater, meritocracy, American Dream, white mediocrity

Abstrakt

Uwzględnij nijakość: Badania nad życiem (także pośmiertnym) dziewiętnastowiecznego zawodowego aktora

A amerykański aktor i antreprenier Harry Watkins (1825–1894) nie był wyjątkowy. Pragnął sławy, ale zaledwie się o nią otarł. Jeśli postać Watkina ma w ogóle jakieś „znaczenie historyczne”, to przede wszystkim dlatego, że pozostawił obszerny dziennik, w którym opisał swoje przeżycia z okresu poprzedzającego wojnę secesyjną. Kiedy autorka w 2008 roku odkryła ten rękopis, właśnie nijakość Watkina stała się przedmiotem jej badań, których osią jest pytanie, jak historia tego niewiele znaczącego aktora oświetla dziewiętnastowieczną kulturę amerykańską – równie obsesyjnie skupioną na sławie i osiągnięciach jak dzisiejsza. Autorka dowodzi, że Watkins to postać znacząca właśnie dlatego, że jest zwyczajny, zapomniany, przeciętny. Jego losy rzucają światło na to, czym jest „biała przeciętność” (Koritha Mitchell), i pogłębiają rozumienie przewrotnej mocy amerykańskiego snu. Niewidzialność Watkina za życia i później sugeruje, że przeciętność jest formą napiętnowania i odrzucenia. Jego cykliczne wzloty i upadki uzmysławiają istnienie sił kulturowych, które nadal kształtują aspiracje współczesnych artystów teatralnych i przesądzają o triumfach i porażkach definiujących ich (nasze) nieubłagane zwyczajne życie.

Keywords

Stany Zjednoczone, XIX wiek, teatr, merytokracja, amerykański sen, biała przeciętność

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Carte de visite of Harry Watkins, circa 1850

Harry Watkins's diary begins with a whimper. In November 1845, sailing from New Orleans to Galveston Island aboard the steamship *New York*, Watkins fell at some point and injured his foot. "Passed a sleepless night—in consequence of the great pain arising from my toe," he grumbled in his diary. The twenty-year-old aspiring actor had just joined an itinerant theater troupe led by Smythe Clark, an entrepreneurial actor-manager seeking to make a profit in the far-flung Republic of Texas. Aboard the *New York*, Watkins probably passed time studying plays and

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Carte de visite of Harry Watkins in costume (possibly as a character in *Photographiana; or, Wives by Advertisement* by Charles Gayler), circa 1860s

memorizing lines, developing the repertory of roles he would perform with Clark's makeshift company. When he set foot in the thriving seaport of Galveston, he likely saw evidence of the bustling military encampment overseen by General Zachary Taylor, who would soon fight the first skirmish of the US–Mexican War. Yet the young actor did not enumerate any of these exciting activities in his diary. He only wrote about his toe. “Had part of the nail of that Toe, taken off,” he lamented five days after his arrival in Galveston, cloistered in his modest room at the Washington House hotel. But he dragged himself to rehearsal that afternoon anyway.¹

¹ Harry Watkins, *Diary* (hereafter *HWD*), vol. 1, November 20–24, 1845, and vol. 13, November 30, 1856. Papers of the Skinner Family, 1874–1979, MS Thr 857, Box 17, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Naomi J. Stubbs and I assembled an edited, corrected, and annotated version of *HWD*, featuring roughly sixty percent of the content, in Amy E. Hughes and Naomi J. Stubbs, eds., *A Player and*

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Carte de visite of Harry Watkins in costume (possibly as a character in *Photographiana*; or, *Wives by Advertisement* by Charles Gayler), circa 1860s

In the ensuing decades, Watkins managed to make a modest living as an actor, playwright, and theater manager, working in metropolises like New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia, as well as smaller cities in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Virginia. He performed with some of the brightest stars of the nineteenth century, including J. B. Booth, Edwin Forrest, William E. Burton, Anna Cora Mowatt, and T. D. Rice. He penned at least forty-five plays and toured with them all over the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. But Watkins never became a household name. If he has any “historical significance” at all,

a Gentleman: The Diary of Harry Watkins, Nineteenth-Century us American Actor (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9290953>. Our complete, uncorrected, searchable transcription of *HW* is available at Amy E. Hughes and Naomi J. Stubbs, eds., *The Harry Watkins Diary: Digital Edition*, University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9290953.cmp.1>.

it hinges on the fact that he kept a diary during the fifteen years leading up to the US Civil War, writing in it regularly from 1845 to 1860—recording the plays he saw, the actors with whom he worked, the people he met, and the political and social events he witnessed.² It is the only known diary of substantial density and scope (comprising thirteen volumes and roughly twelve hundred pages) written by a US theater-maker during this tumultuous period. Arguably, this makes Watkins the antebellum equivalent of the famous English Restoration diarist Samuel Pepys.³

Watkins's diary was never quite lost, but it was forgotten. Over the course of a dozen decades, it was preserved, sold, exploited, and neglected: by Watkins himself, who risked life and limb to save it when a fire consumed his boarding house (1857); by his daughter, Amy Lee, who sold it to husband-and-wife actors Maud and Otis Skinner because she needed to buy a set of dentures (1925); by the Skinners, who used it to publish a book, *One Man in His Time: The Adventures of H. Watkins, Strolling Player* (1938); by the Skinners' heirs, who donated it along with the family's papers to Harvard University (sometime between 1969 and 1981); and by a host of twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars who have cited *One Man in His Time*, among them Bluford Adams, Stephen Archer, James C. Burge, Faye Dudden, Foster Rhea Dulles, John W. Frick, Neil Harris, Sam W. Haynes, Claudia Durst Johnson, Jeffrey D. Mason, Benjamin McArthur, Bruce A. McConachie, Geoffrey Proehl, David L. Rinear, Laurence Senelick, and Shauna Vey.⁴ American Studies scholar Carl Bode went so far as to declare,

² Although Watkins calls his manuscript "a journal" (*HWB*, vol. 1, November 20, 1845), I use the word "diary" throughout this essay. As Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray point out, during the nineteenth century the "two terms are usually considered synonymous." Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Journals and Diaries," in *American History Through Literature: 1820–1870*, ed. Janet Gabler-Hover and Robert Sattelmeyer (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006), 2: 602.

³ Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: A New and Complete Transcription*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970–1983).

⁴ Maud Skinner and Otis Skinner, *One Man in His Time: The Adventures of H. Watkins, Strolling Player* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1938); Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Stephen M. Archer, *Junius Brutus Booth: Theatrical Prometheus* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010); James C. Burge, *Lines of Business: Casting Practice and Policy in the American Theatre, 1752–1899* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986); Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Foster Rhea Dulles, *A History of Recreation: America Learns to Play* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965); John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973); Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Claudia Durst Johnson, *Church and Stage: The Theatre as Target of Religious Condemnation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008); Jeffrey D. Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Benjamin McArthur, *The Man Who Was Rip Van Winkle: Joseph Jefferson and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Bruce A. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992); Geoffrey S. Proehl, *Coming*

“If the career of any one man covered the range of American drama during the two decades before the Civil War, it was that of cocky Harry Watkins.”⁵ But none of these authors cite Watkins’s original manuscript. It remained unprocessed and uncatalogued at Harvard until 2008, when I—a doctoral student at the time—managed to track it down.⁶

It’s easy to imagine why the diary languished in the archive for so long. Watkins yearned for fame, but he merely skirted the edges of it. From the beginning, he was no one special. In 1825, he was born at 104 Harman Street (now East Broadway) on the southern tip of Manhattan, where mariners, ship carpenters, and other laborers eked out a living from the sea. His mother, Elizabeth Young Watkins, was orphaned a few weeks shy of her sixteenth birthday when her father, a boat pilot, drowned in New Haven Harbor in 1806. Elizabeth quickly married a mariner named Osmer Watkins, and between 1807 and 1812, she had three sons with him. By 1818, she was a widow, and began supporting herself and her children by working as a seamstress. Her fourth son, Harry Watkins, was born several years later. To avoid being a burden on his beloved mother, at the age of thirteen he joined the US Army, serving for three years as a musician. He enlisted again in 1843, deserted twice, and was finally discharged in 1845. In the army, he performed in amateur theatricals on makeshift camp stages, sometimes playing female roles in drag. Subsequently, he began pursuing a career as a professional actor.⁷

After that inauspicious beginning in Texas, playing utility parts and complaining about his toe, Watkins climbed his way up through the lines of business. Ultimately, he specialized in low comedy, excelling in Irish and blackface characters. He married twice, both times to actresses. He parented at least five

Home Again: American Family Drama and the Figure of the Prodigal (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997); David L. Rinear, *Stage, Page, Scandals, and Vandals: William E. Burton and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); Laurence Senelick, *The Age and Stage of George L. Fox, 1825–1877* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988); Shauna Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre: The Work of the Marsh Troupe of Juvenile Actors* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015).

⁵ Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 1840–1861* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 3.

⁶ To date, I have come across only one book that cites the original manuscript: J. S. Gallegly, *Footlights on the Border: The Galveston and Houston Stage Before 1900* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), 49, note 4. Gallegly’s citation reads, “Harry Watkins, *A Journal* (Manuscript in the possession of Cornelia Otis Skinner):” Cornelia was the daughter of Maud and Otis Skinner and began donating the family’s papers to the Harvard Theatre Collection in the 1970s.

⁷ *Register of Enlistments in the US Army, 1798–1914*, 212 and 262; National Archives Microfilm Publication M233, National Archives, Washington, DC, Ancestry website, accessed February 13, 2017, <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1198>; “Death of Harry Watkins,” *New York Tribune*, February 7, 1894, 4; *HWB*, June 4, 1853; and handwritten note by Watkins enclosed with *HWB*. After a careful review of dozens of New York City directories and other sources, I suspect that Watkins was born out of wedlock.

children—two sons with his first wife, Harriet M. Secor, whom he married in 1854 and divorced five years later; and a stepson, son, and daughter with Rosina Shaw Howard, an English actress whom he married in 1860. Only his daughter, Amy Lee, lived long enough to enjoy old age. As the nineteenth century came to an end, no one felt compelled to include Watkins in a theatrical encyclopedia, with one exception: T. Allston Brown, who served as a pallbearer at Watkins's funeral.⁸

In 2008, when I first scrutinized Watkins's diary in the Harvard Theatre Collection's reading room (a space that has since been shuttered), one question pestered me more than any other: Why had no one cared about Harry Watkins? Citations of the Skinners' *One Man in His Time* demonstrated that historians knew about this middling actor's diary, but no one had tried to track it down. I pondered this neglect at length. After reading the Skinners' book, had everyone decided that the diary lacked value? Had they dismissed Watkins, either as a performer or as a diarist? Was I missing something? As my research continued, I noticed that most of Watkins's peers and colleagues had been indifferent about him, too. Why had people omitted him from their memoirs and encyclopedias, initiating a trend of exclusion that continues to the present day?

Despite these patterns of neglect, Watkins and his diary continued to haunt me. I felt compelled to learn more about this obscure actor, even though the histories I had read fixated on big stars and popular plays. Historians of the theater tend to be attracted to subjects with obvious significance: artists who were widely known or remarkably innovative, or dramas with political or cultural resonance. But when scholars focus exclusively on exceptional lives and events, a lot gets left out of the story. Often, the sensational, scandalous, or tragic episodes in a celebrity's life jump into the foreground, overshadowing the quotidian preoccupations that dominate the human experience. Scholars had cited Watkins's diary (or, rather, the Skinners' truncated transcription of it) because the actor's words illuminated some other topic of interest. No one had quoted Watkins because he was interesting in and of himself. To be honest,

⁸ Watkins is not mentioned in Alfred Trumble, *Great Artists of the American Stage: A Portrait Gallery of the Leading Actors and Actresses of America* (New York, 1882); Catherine Mary Reignolds-Winslow, *Yesterdays with Actors* (Boston, 1887); Brander Matthews and Laurence Hutton, *Actors and Actresses of Great Britain and the United States*, 5 vols. (Boston, 1886–1900); John Bouvé Clapp and Edwin Francis Edgett, *Players of the Present*, 3 vols. (New York, 1899–1901); William Winter, *Shadows of the Stage* (New York, 1893). T. Allston Brown includes a joint entry for "Mr. and Mrs. Harry Watkins" in *History of the American Stage: Containing Biographical Sketches of Nearly Every Member of the Profession That Has Appeared on the American Stage, from 1733 to 1870* (New York, 1870), 380. But Brown's book was published while Watkins was still active in the profession, and Brown's participation in Watkins's funeral suggests that they were friends. "Obituary: Harry Watkins," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, February 17, 1894, n.p., Clippings on Persons in the Theater (ca. 1800–2010), Harry Watkins (and Wife), нтс Clippings 14, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

I wasn't particularly curious about him either. Some of the most important, field-changing research I had read about the nineteenth-century theater explored questions about marginalized groups: indigenous people, people of color, people with disabilities, queer folks, women.⁹ In contrast, Watkins's privileges, politics, and pursuits (White, male, straight, nativist, actor) held little inherent interest for me.

So, almost out of necessity, his lackluster became the subject of my research. If I were to focus not on what Watkins accomplished, but on how he lived, what insights might emerge? What could this minor actor reveal about nineteenth-century US culture—a culture as obsessed with fame, achievement, and celebrity as my own? As Claudia D. Johnson and Vernon E. Johnson point out,

In the lesser-known autobiographies [of nineteenth-century actors] one can find information that is not available in the work of stars . . . reveal[ing] a seemingly accurate and ugly side of show business that many other show folk and theatre historians ignore.¹⁰

Success is rare—especially in the theater—so Watkins's experiences mirror those of the majority, rather than the extraordinary. Could his account be valuable precisely *because* of his ordinariness, his obscurity, his run-of-the-mill-ness?

Since roughly the 1960s, social and intellectual historians have offered compelling studies of “ordinary” people in hopes of augmenting and complicating our understanding of history. E. P. Thompson, Carlo Ginzburg, Robert Darnton, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Thomas Augst, and many others have revealed that rich insights can be gleaned from studying the commonplace. Their work has often been described as microhistory or “history from below” (although scholars still

⁹ Exemplary works published prior to this moment I'm describing (in 2008) include, among others, Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Nicolás Kanellos, *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States: Origins to 1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Daphne P. Lei, *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Kim Marra, *Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865–1914* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006); Marvin E. McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African and American Theater* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Elizabeth C. Ramírez, *Footlights across the Border: A History of Spanish-Language Professional Theatre on the Texas Stage* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); and Elizabeth C. Ramírez, *Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre: A History of Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Claudia D. Johnson and Vernon E. Johnson, *Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Memoirs* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), xii.

debate who or what constitutes the “below”).¹¹ Similarly, my work on Watkins does not rescue from the archive a person who was especially talented, or popular, or innovative. Instead, it reveals what can be learned when we stretch the limits of those conventional criteria for historical study. I endeavor to exhume Watkins from what Thompson once called “the enormous condescension of posterity” by showing why and how we might care about him, even though he never achieved the renown he craved, let alone the renown usually required to become the subject of a biography.¹²

And yet, in many ways, my work on Watkins is *not* biography. Rather, it is an experiment in allowing a source, rather than a subject, serve as the epicenter of a historical inquiry. Discussing the differences between biography and microhistory, Jill Lepore asserts:

Microhistory is founded upon [the] . . . assumption [that] however singular a person’s life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole.¹³

I am studying the experiences of a single, relatively average person over a substantial period time in order to see what remains invisible in studies concentrating on texts or people with obvious historical significance.

I am discovering that this kind of scholarship does not fit neatly into familiar paradigms. At first, it seemed my investigation might benefit from the critical methods of Failure Studies—an approach most often deployed in fields like engineering and business, but which has gained a foothold in literary and cultural studies through the work of Gavin Jones, David Kur-nick, Scott Sandage, and others. Popularity defines success in the theater;

¹¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); “History from Below” [1966], in *The Essential E. P. Thompson*, ed. Dorothy Thompson (New York: New Press, 2001), 481–489; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John A. Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). See also Jim Sharpe, “History from Below,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, 2nd ed. (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 25–42. For a discussion about the difficulties of defining the “below,” see Mark Hailwood, “Who Is Below?,” paper presented at the online symposium *The Future of History from Below*, July 19, 2013, <https://manyheadedmonster.com/2013/07/19/who-is-below/>.

¹² Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 12.

¹³ Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 133, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674921>.

therefore, Watkins's lack of renown makes him appear a failure. But I worry that most work in Failure Studies (Jack Halberstam's brilliant *The Queer Art of Failure* being a notable exception) reinforces the notion that success is desirable and failure is not.¹⁴ Most people, including Watkins, exist in the wide middle between these extremes.

What I'm doing is more akin to something we might call "Middling Studies." Watkins was neither prominent nor incompetent. Newspapers, playbills, correspondence, and other evidence suggest that he enjoyed some visibility during his lifetime. But gradually, he faded from memory. In many ways, his career reflects the unpredictability, instability, and elusivity of fame itself. As such, he is exemplary of what theater historian Derek Miller has called the "forgotten middle." Miller asserts:

Theatre history can (and I think must) begin to account for the many productions and careers that pass without notice, that are not outstanding either in their glory or their failure, but were born and died decidedly average. One of the discipline's most pressing challenges is to honor average art in a way that makes meaning both of that work and of the other works we already hold dear.¹⁵

Several theater scholars have recognized the value of the middle, mining it for rich insights about US entertainment culture. For example, David Savran, in *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (2010), proposes the "middlebrow" as way to complicate the lowbrow/highbrow binary that tends to dominate conversations about performance and culture. More recently, Debra Caplan, Anita Gonzalez, and Brian Eugenio Herrera have explored what lesser-known laborers and less-than-successful ventures can reveal about nineteenth- and twentieth-century entertainment culture.¹⁶ But arguably,

¹⁴ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Gavin Jones, *Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Theater scholars who have studied failure include Barbara Wallace Grossman, *A Spectacle of Suffering: Clara Morris on the American Stage* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009); Mechele Leon, "Corpsing Molière: History as Fiasco," in *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, ed. Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 177–185.

¹⁵ Derek Miller, "Average Broadway," *Theatre Journal* 68, no. 4 (2016): 529, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2016.0105>.

¹⁶ David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Anita Gonzalez, "Maritime Migrations: Stewards of the African Grove," *Theatre Research International* 44, no. 1 (2019): 64–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883318000962>; Brian Eugenio Herrera, "The Many Middling Failures of Virginia Calhoun," *Theatre Topics* 28, no. 1 (2018): 75–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2018.0010>.

the subjects of their studies are not altogether common or ordinary. In her excavation of forgotten Yiddish theater-makers, Caplan argues that her subjects should be remembered, in part, because they influenced important avant-garde theater practitioners in Europe and elsewhere. Gonzalez has investigated laborers affiliated with the African Grove, a venue that has a significant presence in theater historiography. And contemporaries of the early twentieth-century US actress and writer Virginia Calhoun (Herrera's subject) seemed to relish her spectacular failures as a performer. Given the modest recognition Watkins received during his lifetime, it is not quite accurate to call him "ordinary," either. Perhaps what we learn from the forgotten middle is that everyone is unusual in his or her own way; or, maybe, that the concept of the "ordinary" reinforces and privileges the extraordinary—often, to the detriment of the actual majority.

One argument for the "value" of studying Watkins's diary (albeit a relatively conventional one) is that the aggregated details in his chronicle augment and complicate what we already know about the history of US theater. Watkins's writings allow us to look at well-known aspects of the nineteenth-century theater through the perspective of an actor who made a living but whose career was barely above average. For example, the diary reveals how theater artists leveraged other entertainment media, such as story papers and dime novels, to attract audiences. Watkins writes about myriad dramatizations of popular novels—suggesting a symbiotic relationship between theater and print that has been understudied, perhaps even misunderstood. In addition, he discusses the plays spectators saw most frequently (not over the course of weeks or years, but over a lifetime), most of which have been forgotten, not unlike Watkins himself. We also learn from him that an actor's success depended not only on talent but also on the support, endorsements, and generosity of colleagues and spectators.¹⁷

But the most important revelation I have gleaned from Watkins's lackluster is this: His life and career reveal how he and other middling professionals advanced themselves despite their "white mediocrity," to employ Koritha Mitchell's apt phrase. In her article "Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care," Mitchell notes that the history and ongoing influence of White supremacy culture in the United States has resulted in different thresholds of excellence for people, depending on their racial identity and conditioning. She observes,

¹⁷ I discuss these and other findings in my forthcoming book, *An Actor's Tale: Theater, Culture, and Everyday Life in Nineteenth-Century us America* (under contract with University of Michigan Press).

U.S. culture celebrates the success of straight white men—regardless of whether they embody merit—but discourages, diminishes, and/or destroys everyone else’s achievements, while insisting that evidence of their merit never existed.

Emphasizing the systemic nature of this phenomenon, Mitchell notes,

This is more of a social problem than a personal one; it’s about American society’s low expectations and how those low expectations shape behavior. The culture is constructed to ensure that white people can be mediocre (or worse) and still benefit.¹⁸

When viewed through this lens, we can see how Watkins and his workaday peers not only embodied White mediocrity but also perpetuated the subtle violence that lies at the heart of it. From him, we learn that to secure lucrative positions as Low Comedians in stock companies, actors had to become expert in the racist conventions of blackface minstrelsy. We learn that nineteenth-century approaches to authorship, which involved copious cooperation and collaboration, differ markedly from our contemporary ideal of the dramatist who writes alone. We also learn how malleable, inconsistent, and contingent the definition of “star” really was—causing many theater practitioners to abandon collaborative production processes in favor of sole proprietorship, entrepreneurship, and property protections like copyright. By the end of the 1800s, Watkins and other theater-makers, like pretty much everyone else in the United States, had embraced the myths of meritocracy, individualism, and the “self-made man” that continue to permeate the national imagination.¹⁹

Today, many US Americans continue to accept and perpetuate these myths despite overwhelming evidence that cultural and economic barriers prevent many people—especially Black, indigenous, and other people of color—from achieving upward mobility. As Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, Jr. observe,

¹⁸ Koritha Mitchell, “Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care,” *African American Review* 51, no. 4 (2018): 258, 256, <https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2018.0045>.

¹⁹ For more on these myths, see (for example) Daniel W. Bromley, *Possessive Individualism: A Crisis of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); John Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Martin Klepper, “‘From Rags to Riches’ and the Self-Made Man,” in *Approaches to American Cultural Studies*, ed. Antje Dallmann, Eva Boesenberg, and Martin Klepper (London: Routledge, 2016), 123–131; Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America’s Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019); Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, *The Meritocracy Myth*, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014); Heike Paul, *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 367–407; Bryan S. Turner, Nicholas Abercrombie, and Stephen Hill, *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism* [1986] (London: Routledge, 2015).

Americans cling to the historical legacy and language of free enterprise and the entrepreneurial spirit even though it no longer accurately describes the circumstances of the vast majority of the labor force that now works for somebody else.²⁰

Furthermore, the racist and sexist underpinnings of neoliberal capitalism have become increasingly visible as “Trumpism” digs deeper roots into working- and business-class White communities in the United States. Bruce Baum observes that in 2016, Donald Trump secured an electoral-college win for the US Presidency by embracing a “fusion of white nationalism, quasi-democratic populism, and business class elitism” as well as an “exclusionary, meritocratic version of civic equality.” Trump attracted supporters by promoting the myth of meritocracy: the idea that “all full-fledged American citizens [can] rise (or fall) as far as their talents and efforts take them.” This myth willfully ignores and erases the ongoing realities of settler colonialism, racism, nativism, sexism, ableism, homo- and transphobia, ageism, and other strategies of marginalization. Disavowing the privileges of his inherited wealth, Trump presented himself as a self-made man, invoking a powerful ideal popularized during the nineteenth century.²¹

These myths circulate in contemporary theater culture, too, sustaining a host of inequities. According to the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC), during the 2018–19 theater season one hundred percent of artistic directors at New York City’s major non-profit theaters were White. That same season, most actors cast in leading roles in Broadway musicals (eighty percent) and plays (almost ninety percent) were White. Only one fifth of the directors, one fifth of the playwrights, and one quarter of the designers of shows presented in NYC’s theaters identified as Black, indigenous, a person of color, or a person of mixed race. This marked lack of racial and ethnic diversity was most noticeable at the top: the gatekeepers (leaders and decision-makers for Broadway productions and board members of non-profit theaters) were nearly ninety-four and eighty-eight percent White, respectively. The authors of the AAPAC report, Pun Bandhu and Julienne Hanzelka Kim, note that these leaders

²⁰ McNamee and Miller, *Meritocracy Myth*, 18.

²¹ Bruce Baum, “Donald Trump’s ‘Genius,’ White ‘Natural Aristocracy,’ and Democratic Equality in America,” *Theory & Event* 20, no. 1 Supplement (2017): 10 (quotations) and 14–15; see also Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 60–61.

made almost all of the hiring decisions within the entire theatre eco-system. How else to explain that almost every single person who has power in NYC theatre is a White person if not by a process of systematic exclusion of people of color?²²

How indeed?

Calls to transform the entertainment industry into one that includes, serves, and celebrates the people who comprise the global majority have become louder and louder. In June 2020, in the wake of multiple murders of Black Americans by White vigilantes and law enforcement (Ahmaud Arbery, Dominique Rem'mie Fells, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and too many others), hundreds of US theater-makers who identify as Black, indigenous, and/or a person of color came together and created the We See You White American Theater collective (WSYWAT).²³ The collective's members refuse to participate in the culture of celebrity and genius that currently dominates US theater culture—specifically, the myths of individualism and meritocracy that Watkins and his workaday peers adopted more than a century ago. Indeed, the collective explicitly rejects such ideologies: “This is a movement about anonymity. Not stardom, credit or viability of craft and craftsmanship,” reads one tenet in its list of guiding principles. Another tenet insists, “This is about service over everything. Not personal agenda or individual passion. Collectivity over individualism.”²⁴ The collective demands that theatrical producers, managers, unions, commercial trade organizations, and boards of trustees take swift action to create change in every aspect of the industry.

WSYWAT reminds us that in the United States, most theaters have been, and still are, predominantly White institutions. Nevertheless, artists and audiences in marginalized communities have always made and attended theater despite myriad cultural, legal, and bodily threats. During the nineteenth century, enslaved and

²² Pun Bandhu and Julienne Hanzelka Kim, *The Visibility Report: Racial Representation on NYC Stages, 2018–2019*, Asian American Performers Action Coalition website, June 2021, 9, 19, 22, 28, http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/3/5/7/135720209/aapac_report_2018-2019_final.pdf. For more on the history and continuing impact of systemic racism in the US performing arts, see Tobie S. Stein, *Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Performing Arts Workforce* (London: Routledge, 2019).

²³ WSYWAT has much in common with earlier social justice movements in the arts, especially #OscarsSoWhite, launched by writer and attorney April Reign in 2015; see Reggie Ugwu, “The Hashtag That Changed the Oscars: An Oral History,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2020 (updated September 9, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/movies/oscarssowhite-history.html>.

²⁴ “Tenets of the Movement,” We See You White American Theatre website, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://www.weseeyouwat.com/about-1>.

free Black Americans performed in “whiteface” in theaters and extra-theatrical venues; Chinese immigrants staged and attended Cantonese operas in the “global California” that coalesced during the 1850s Gold Rush; and Mexican Americans performed in amateur and professional Spanish-language theaters in Texas, New Mexico, and elsewhere.²⁵ Most of the time, their success and solidarity did not go unpunished. To cite just one example, on multiple occasions in the summer of 1822, White actors and spectators assaulted Black performers and instigated riots at William A. Brown’s African Grove theater in New York City; in 1826, Brown’s theater was destroyed by a fire that was almost certainly set by the White manager of a competing venue.²⁶ White theater-makers could not abide Brown’s success. Discussing the long history of White violence against marginalized people, Mitchell points out, “*violence pursues them* because they accumulate achievements, and American culture is designed to remind everyone that accomplishment is meant for straight white men.”²⁷ For two hundred years, artists of color have established theatrical spaces for themselves and their communities not because of, but *despite*, the violence and oppression they endure. Meanwhile, mediocre White folks—the Harry Watkinses of the past and present—resist, suppress, or simply ignore these acts of solidarity, believing instead in meritocracy and individualism, and placing those myths at the center of Whiteness itself. Watkins’s frustration about his lack of visibility suggests that he viewed mediocrity as a stigmatized state of being, even a form of abjection. This stigma, I argue, is one reason why White supremacy culture insists that ordinariness—itsself a form of mediocrity—remain unmarked and unremarked upon.

Watkins and his experiences not only illuminate how White mediocrity works, but also deepen our understanding of the insidious, continuing impact of the American Dream. His cyclical highs and lows bring into focus the cultural forces that shape our aspirations, the commonplace challenges we regularly experience, and the triumphs and failures that define our relentlessly ordinary

²⁵ See, for example, Marvin McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Lei, *Operatic China*; Kanellos, *A History of Hispanic Theatre*; Ramírez, *Footlights across the Border: Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre*. Naomi J. Stubbs describes the essential but mostly overlooked labor of African American workers in pleasure gardens catering to White audiences in *Cultivating National Identity through Performance: American Pleasure Gardens and Entertainment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 99–106.

²⁶ Marvin McAllister, “‘Hung Be the Heavens with Black’ Bodies: An Analysis of the August 1822 Riot at William Brown’s Greenwich Village Theatre,” in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards, Renée Alexander Craft, and Thomas F. DeFrantz (New York: Routledge, 2019), 34–38; McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave*.

²⁷ Mitchell, “Identifying White Mediocrity,” 253–254 (her emphasis).

lives. Watkins aspired to join the upper echelons of his industry, and every time his career faltered, he despaired. He vowed many times to give up the theater altogether, but he never did. Instead, he willfully and repeatedly ignored the obstacles in his way: his relatively narrow talents and abilities, his lack of connections, his status as a US-born actor in an industry that favored English performers. He habitually blamed others for his lack of advancement, viewing their success as arbitrary or unearned. As Halberstam observes in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “Believing that success depends on one’s attitude is far preferable to Americans than recognizing that their success is the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class, and gender.”²⁸ Watkins’s frustration mirrors that of many US Americans (of all genders, ethnic identities, embodiments, and citizenship statuses) who have doggedly pursued the American Dream despite social and cultural obstacles that are beyond their control.²⁹

As someone who identifies as White, I recognize myself and my ancestors in this history. I see the many ways we have been complicit in its unfolding, as well as the many ways we might dismantle it. Rendering visible the complex history of White mediocrity—embracing the lackcluster, in other words—is a necessary step toward repair, because accountability is impossible without recognition. Studying Watkins’s life has forced me to grapple with a host of discomfiting questions. Why do we remember, commemorate, and celebrate the extraordinary—especially given that definitions of the “extraordinary” are inexorably shaped by Whiteness? Is it because we are always feeling, and always fleeing, our own mediocrity? Is it the quotidian itself from which we run whenever we deprioritize a person like Watkins? (Even his name, with its short vowels and aspirant consonants, seems like an onomatopoeia of insignificance.) He—like me, and perhaps like you—experienced his life as a series of meaningful developments, each one precious and grave. Halberstam observes, “We are all used to having our dreams crushed, our hopes smashed, our illusions shattered, but what comes after hope?”³⁰ To disregard him is the easy thing to do. The harder, more unbearable thing is to recognize how much he and we are the same.



²⁸ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

²⁹ Important cultural histories of the American Dream include Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Calvin C. Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); McNamee and Miller, *Meritocracy Myth*.

³⁰ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 1.

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