

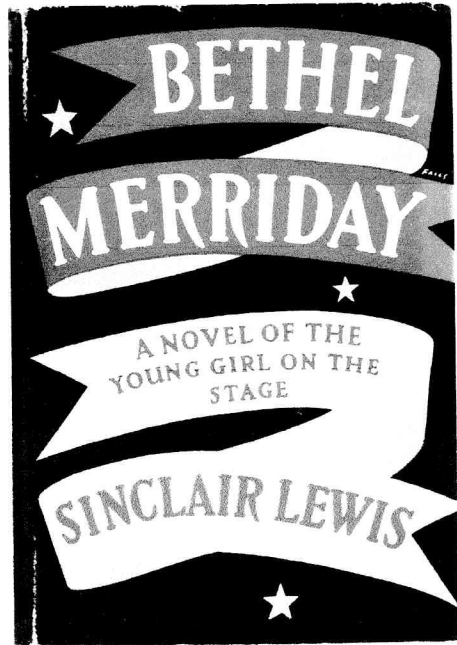
**“SHE WAS A WORKER IN THE THEATER”:
BACKSTAGE INDUSTRY AND THE
STAGE-STRUCK GIRL IN
SINCLAIR LEWIS’S *BETHEL MERRIDAY***

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A thousand stage-struck girls from all sections of these United States invade New York every spring and summer, determined to win success upon the stage [and hoping] to [enter] what they believe to be a charmed world of enchantment.

Of course we all know that these young women should remain at home.

This stern warning from William A. Page, published in a 1916 issue of *Woman’s Home Companion*, can be counted as just one stitch in the vast discursive sampler of anti-Stage-Struck Girl literature circulating in the Progressive Era and extending into the interwar years. Social reformers and psychiatrists joined journalists like Page in framing “Stage Fever” as a dangerous symptom of young women’s vanity, rather than as a legitimate desire for economic advancement and self-determination in New York and other theatrical



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urban centers. Ann Folino White notes of these perceptions: “On their own in the city . . . stagestruck girls’ lack of experience and single-mindedness unwittingly invited moral hazard, economic ruin, and a miserable end” (39).

Not to be convinced by these arguments was Sinclair Lewis, who celebrates the ambition and industry of the Stage-Struck Girl in his 1940 backstage novel *Bethel Merriday*, marketed as “a Novel of the Young Girl on the Stage.” The book belongs to a fascinating chapter in Lewis’s career, when the “avowedly stage-struck” (“Play Lewis Backed”), Nobel Prize-winning, leftist author became infatuated with the American theater. Lewis spent four years, from 1936 through 1940, consumed with his stage work, primarily as an actor in summer stock as well as on tour in the Midwest. From these experiences, Lewis created *Bethel Merriday* as a “light-hearted and entertaining Valentine to the American theater” (Poore 23). Contrasting with his 1935 dystopia *It Can’t Happen Here*, *Bethel Merriday* idealistically posits the theater as a model and rehearsal plan for a better America. In *Bethel Merriday*, written between the end of the New Deal and prior to the United States’ entrance into World War II, Lewis frames theatrical collaboration as his ideal for staging American society, describing the theater as “the sincerest democracy in the world” (87).

At the same time, Lewis offers a vigorous rebuke to misogynistic attitudes about the Stage-Struck Girl. In the novel, the “good, efficient, earthy” (5) Bethel triumphs over numerous naysayers—many of them closely echoing Page’s warnings about the “pitfalls” of the stage—to become a professional actress. In Lewis’s sly subversion of the “Star is Born” narrative and his reframing of the American success myth, the



democratic values of competence and professionalism are presented as Bethel’s goals, rather than the “charmed world” of stage celebrity. Bethel strives for a life and work that is “good enough”: a phrase that Lewis repeats multiple times throughout the novel, as Bethel rejects both domesticity and her Yankee provincialism. Bethel eventually does earn her stripes as a veteran “trouper.” As Lewis concludes his

satiric valentine of a backstage novel: “So Bethel had come home, and it was good” (390).

Lewis’s own sense of homecoming, as a “worker in the theater” (53), provides vital context about the creation of

Bethel Merriday. Lewis had been involved on and off with the Broadway stage since the early 1920s, including working on stage versions of *Main Street* and *Dodsworth*. Then, in 1936, he co-adapted *It Can’t Happen Here* for the Federal Theater Project, launching a much more committed theatrical involvement during a troubled period in which Lewis struggled with writer’s block, his alcoholism, and a stormy marriage with journalist Dorothy Thompson. From 1937 to 1940, during the heyday of American summer stock, he acted in some dozen theaters, primarily in New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine. Among his roles, Lewis played the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, Nat Miller in Eugene O’Neill’s *Ah, Wilderness!*, and Doremus Jessup in his own *It Can’t Happen Here*. In 1938, he also starred in a Midwestern tour of his own play, *Angela Is Twenty-Two*. Lewis both sardonically owned and disclaimed these experiences as the basis for *Bethel Merriday* in the preface of his novel:

I declare vigorously that the Nutmeg Players of Point Grampion, in my tale, are not drawn from the Stockbridge, Cohasset, Ogunquit, Provincetown, Clinton or Skowhegan companies, and that the tour of a *Romeo and Juliet* company here chronicled is not the history of my *Angela Is Twenty-two*. And Sladesbury is not Hartford or Waterbury, but the county seat of Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. (vii)

“The romance between Sinclair Lewis and the stage is an open scandal,” Charles Poore wrote in the *New York Times*, “and his ardor makes his book eloquent” (23). Complicating this romance with the stage was his real-life romance with Marcella Powers, an eighteen-year-old actress he met during a 1939 production of *Ah, Wilderness!* at the Summer Theatre in Maplewood, New Jersey. Despite the very considerable age gap and unequal power dynamics, the 54-year old Lewis became romantically involved with Powers in an affair that lasted through the mid-1940s. As biographer Richard Lingeman describes her, Powers was an energetic and ambitious “stage-struck girl” at the time she met Lewis. Lewis wrote to Marcella that when he first saw her, she was one “who had never been much of anywhere physically, but who had been everywhere, in her imagination” (qtd. in Lingeman 439). Lingeman also observes of Powers: “Lewis discerned in her a seeking mind, combined with a certain native shrewdness and practicality” (441). These characteristics—combined with

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Lewis’s own Puritan upbringing and profound industry—can be clearly discerned in *Bethel Merriday*’s title character. Bethel is a “Connecticut Yankee” hailing from the midsize industrial town of Sladesbury (a sort of East Coast sister city to Lewis’s frequent Midwestern setting of Zenith).

Throughout *Bethel Merriday*, Lewis frames his heroine’s journey as a picaresque pilgrimage through the stages and backstages of American theater in the late 1930s. At the same time, he creates rich intertextual parallels with several key narratives focused on the New Woman and on the Stage-Struck Girl. At various points in the book, Bethel performs roles in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*; Stanley Houghton’s 1912 English drama *Hindle Wakes*, in which a Lancashire mill girl declares her financial and sexual independence; and Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman’s 1936 play *Stage Door*. Lewis also parallels Bethel’s journey with a fictional backstage movie melodrama entitled *The Heart of an Understudy*. Echoing the plot of this film, Bethel eventually understudies the role of Juliet in a midsize touring company and lives out a less glamorous version of the star-is-born narrative in *The Heart of an Understudy*.

Evoking the mythology of the Stage-Struck Girl, Lewis represents *The Heart of an Understudy* as the film that seals young Bethel’s resolve to become an actress. Bethel goes to see the film at the local Connecticut Palace Motion Picture Theater with her school friend, Alva Prindle. Lewis laces his description of the backstage melodrama with shades of *42nd Street*:

There was, it seems, a woman star, beautiful but wicked, and jealously devoted to ruining the fine young leading man. . . . This lady fiend had an understudy, a poor foundling girl. . . .

So the wicked star also persecuted the understudy, till the glorious night when the star fell ill . . . and the understudy went on, and played so radiantly, so competently, that the critics . . . wrote reports . . . “Miss Dolly Daintree Greatest Theatrical Find of Years: Unknown Girl Thrills Thousands at the Pantaloon Theater.” (11)

At the end of the film, which both girls find “wonderful,” Alva praises “That dress the star had on,” which “must of cost a thousand dollars.” Alva excitedly informs Bethel of her plans to go into the movies. By contrast, Bethel responds: “I’m not

going to Hollywood. I’m going to be a stage actress. And be able to *act*, like that understudy” (12).

The next sequence of the book finds Bethel gradually acquiring the stage “competence” that she admires in Dolly Daintree. The fifteen-year-old Bethel gets to know the players of the “Caryl McDermid Stock Company of Broadway Actors” (15) who set up a season of summer stock in Sladesbury. McDermid, the troupe’s matinee idol, encourages Bethel to embrace her “professional stage virus” (28), even as character actress Maggie Sample warns her against it. Lewis again evokes anti-Stage-Struck Girl discourse: “When you grow up, child . . . you try to squirm into prison, or get a nice job hustling hash, or even get married, or anything to avoid going on the stage” (29).

Yet Bethel perseveres. In her senior year at a Connecticut women’s college, she lands the role of Nora Helmer in *A Doll’s House*. She overacts the part—but demonstrates enough dedication to convince her drama teacher to invite two directors of Connecticut summer stock companies to come see the production. Scouted as an acting apprentice with the Nutmeg Players, in the seaside town of Grampion Center, Connecticut, Bethel becomes a versatile and highly disciplined “worker in the theater.” “I just want to be able to do *anything* in the theater” (146), Bethel explains, as Lewis channels his own ardor for the stage. However, Bethel struggles to give a credible performance as mill girl Fanny Hawthorne in a scene from *Hindle Wakes*.

You were “ba-a-a-d!” (89) she is bluntly told by her acting teacher.

Determined to improve, Bethel works steadily at her performance in *Stage Door* with which *Bethel Merriday* has close thematic parallels. Cast in the small supporting role of Bernice Niemeyer, “the pest of the theatrical boardinghouse” (111), Bethel earns praise for her character work: she “knew that if she had not been brilliant, she had not been bad” (120). Here, Lewis reinforces his heroine’s determination by inviting comparisons to Terry Randall, the stage-struck, Hollywood-averse heroine of *Stage Door* (played by Margaret Sullavan on stage, and then by Katharine Hepburn in the 1937 film adaptation). As Terry remarks in *Stage Door*:

“But you see . . . I’m stagestruck. The theater beats me and



**Robbing
The Cradle For Stars**
*Margaret Sullavan on the cover
of Photoplay magazine 1934*

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starves me and forsakes me, but I love it” (659). Bethel echoes Terry’s unquenchable love for the stage, and for the craft and labor of acting, despite its rigors. At the end of the Nutmeg Players season, Bethel proclaims: “I want training. Professional training. The hardest kind. . . . I want to have some real hard-boiled director give me the devil. I want to do one-night stands. I want to act twenty different roles in a year” (153).

In the final sequence of the book, Bethel fulfills the narrative arc that Lewis has set up with her spectatorship of *The Heart of an Understudy*. She moves to New York after the close of her season with the Nutmeg Players. After a period of struggle, Bethel is able to convince Andy Deacon—the stage-struck society heir who had been the producer of the Nutmeg Players—to cast her in his touring production of *Romeo and Juliet*: a production in modern dress, if with a somewhat muddled concept. Here, Lewis satirically evokes two famous Shakespeare productions of the period: Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier’s *Romeo and Juliet* (produced on Broadway in 1940), and Orson Welles and John Houseman’s Mercury Theatre production of *Caesar* (1937), which reframed the play as an anti-Fascist allegory. For Deacon’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Bethel is hired to speak the prologue and epilogue, and to understudy Juliet, played by a doyenne of the English stage, the imperious Mrs. Lumley Boyle.

The tour takes *Romeo and Juliet* to dozens of midsize and small towns in the Midwest. Lewis parallels Bethel’s growth as a stage “trouper” with her growing exposure to the breadth of the United States. Making stops in towns in the Midwest and the Plains, including Sioux Falls, Bethel comes out of the tour “not a Yankee but an American” (300). If Bethel grows less provincial while trouping, she also learns a professionalism that extends beyond her new Equity card. The actor playing Friar Laurence, Doc Keezer, assesses her chances at stardom: “I know you’re a serious student—maybe you’ll never be a great actress, but you’ll be a dependable one, if the luck runs with you” (254).

Tellingly, Bethel does not become a star by the end of the novel, subverting the destiny of Dolly Daintree in *The Heart of an Understudy*. Zed Wintergeist, the Orson Welles-like stage prodigy cast as Mercutio, predicts to Bethel that she will make a great hit when she finally gets the chance to go on for Mrs. Boyle: “Now, you’ll have your chance, Beth,” he says. “Tonight, a new Star is born!” (347). Instead, Bethel freezes up in her Kansas City performance as Juliet. She gets valiantly through the performance, only to earn a smattering of polite applause. “She was not Juliet revealing love and fear; she was a Miss Bethel Merriday reciting lines” (353).

Yet Bethel’s professionalism carries her through. Although

Andy posts a closing notice for the struggling tour, he recasts Bethel as Lady Capulet after Mrs. Boyle’s premature, stormy departure. Here, Bethel is “good enough,” as Lewis writes of her character work, playing Lady Capulet in the final tour stops of Topeka and Dalesburg: “She had been alive and competent as Lady Capulet; no amateurishness and no languishing” (372). One local critic praises “Miss Bethel Merriday, who turned Mrs Capulet from the ordinary stuffed shirt of hackneyed theatrical tradition into a darling, fussy old lady” (373). By the end of the novel, which jumps forward some months in time, Bethel has married Zed and joined him in a New York production of a new comedy. She has also claimed her self-sufficiency as a trouper and a “real actress,” as Lewis points to the war clouds on the American horizon, and the vital roles of stage professionals as workers, artists, and contributors to the national morale. Zed tells Bethel: “Now’s just the time when every artist has got to take even his tiniest job more seriously than ever, so that civilization may have a chance to go on” (389).

At the same time that he glorifies the American actor, Lewis subverts the “pejorative conceptualization of stagestruck girls” (Folino White 35). Lewis bites his thumb at such attitudes throughout the novel, as Bethel persistently combats anti-Stage Struck Girl rhetoric. This comes at her from a variety of sources, including from fellow actors who have themselves endured the hardships of stage life. However, she hears it primarily from patriarchal figures who—echoing William A. Page—seek to keep her at home. Her high school suitor, Charley Hatch, now a burgeoning Babbitt, vaguely warns her against the New York stage being “full of pitfalls” (24). When Bethel asks him to clarify what he means, Charley falls into tabloid clichés about “Managers and all like that, that betray young girls.” The predatory behavior of Broadway’s gatekeepers, however, is of less of concern to Charley than Bethel’s virtue: “It ain’t ladylike,” he chides her. “You don’t want to be immoral and bohemian, do you?” (24). Likewise, Wyndham Nooks, an actor in the company, extends his dislike of stage-struck girls to female theater directors and producers, who had gained considerable influence in the 1930s:

It’s a hard life, the drayma, and now that it’s in the hands of the vicious commercial managers on the one hand, and on the other, upstarts like the Group Theater and Cheryl Crawford and Antoinette Perry and Margaret Webster—women directing and managing—!

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Nooks advises Bethel that “I do hope that after this little fling at play-acting, you’ll be able to settle down with a nice husband” (293).

One can argue that, in certain ways, the character of Bethel Merriday upholds the binary values embedded in Stage-Struck Girl discourse. A satiric rather than psychological creation, she epitomizes the Protestant Work Ethic to an extreme degree and also rejects personal vanity (a “feminine” trait decried in many descriptions of Stage-Struck Girls). In this sense, the novel can be viewed as a kind of pro-theatrical Pilgrim’s Progress through the American theater landscape of the mid-to-late-1930s. Lewis also creates a number of female foils to Bethel, including school friend Alva Prindle and the luxury-craving young actress Iris Pentire, whom Bethel (somewhat condescendingly) considers a “gold digger.”

Yet at no point does Lewis suggest that these women don’t belong on the stage. He portrays the theater, and particularly summer stock and touring companies, as exemplary places for young women to realize their dreams both individually and collectively within the “democratic comradeship of the theater” (115). Bethel’s “passionate seeking”—despite later repackaging of the story as a pulp romance—focuses on the theater. Lewis places Bethel Merriday in a line of female characters, such as *Main Street*’s Carol Kennicott and the title character of *Ann Vickers*, informed by his socialist and feminist convictions. Defined by her resourcefulness and self-reliance, Bethel exemplifies the Stage-Struck Girl, but also defies the stereotypes of her coming to “moral hazard, economic ruin, and a miserable end.” When invited to be a guest on Ted Gronitz’s radio show in the town of Belluca, to publicize the *Romeo and Juliet* tour, the “Indiana Walter Winchell” (227) asks her if she wouldn’t prefer to get married to a “handsome young fellow with lots of money.” When Bethel responds emphatically, “I would not!,” Gronitz follows up: “What’s your advice to the girls that would like to get on the stage?” Bethel responds: “Work and wait, I guess.” (231). This, too, can be viewed as a satiric rebuff to the many published interviews with noted stage celebrities, including actresses, who advised young women to stay at home. The title of one 1908 interview with a celebrity actress simply read: “Maxine Elliott’s Advice to Stage-Struck Girls: ‘Don’t’” (Elliott 202).

In fact, Lewis can be compared to his indomitable heroine more than his exalted literary stature in 1940 might suggest. After several years of dedicating himself primarily to his stage work, Lewis had not had much success. He was described by various critics as a “clumsy” actor and a “stilted” playwright (Lingeman 434). Brooks Atkinson wrote, in reviewing Lewis’s

direction of the 1940 drama *Good Neighbor*, which featured Marcella Powers and lasted one performance on Broadway: “The theatre is no respecter of persons. After a seven-year wooing, she has given Mr. Lewis an icy rebuff” (Atkinson 26). Yet, as Richard Lingeman notes, the work was the ends as well as the means for Lewis, as he devoted himself to the stage: “His enthusiasm for the theater remained almost as fresh as that of a starry-eyed ingénue, despite all the setbacks” (435).

In *Bethel Merriday*, Lewis projected his imagination and experience into the adventures of a not-so-starry-eyed ingénue. In his backstage novel, Lewis used the trope of the Stage-Struck Girl to affirm his belief in the American theater as a vision of collaborative art and labor, in which women play a vital role. He observed: “I believe that America is at the dawn of one of the most exciting theatrical eras in history, and I am proud to try, as a writer and player, to be part of this dramatic explosion” (qtd. in Lingeman 435). In *Bethel Merriday*, Lewis redefines the American success myth by celebrating the fulfillment of creation within an ensemble over purely individualist aspiration. He proposes that the actor—and actress—be hardworking, ready to go on at a moment’s notice, and with the expansive curiosity of the trouper, to expand their vision from the stage into the nation. Or, as Bethel says, as a stage-struck girl admiring Dolly Daintree, to “be able to *act*, like that understudy” (12).

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