

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2009

Review of *Buffalo Bill on Stage*. By Sandra K. Sagala

Robert Bonner
Carleton College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Bonner, Robert, "Review of *Buffalo Bill on Stage*. By Sandra K. Sagala" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1239.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1239>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Buffalo Bill on Stage. By Sandra K. Sagala. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. xi + 307 pp. Photographs, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

Of the twelve (!) serious historical or biographical studies devoted to Buffalo Bill Cody so far this century, two of them we owe to Sandra Sagala. The title under review here is a revision of her self-published book from 2002 titled *Buffalo Bill, Actor*, where she set out to follow Cody as he put together a career on theater stages across the country playing himself in a series of dramas and creating a name as an entertainer in the years prior to his famous Wild West show. This new book does not follow Cody's itineraries as closely as the first one did, but a reader interested in detailed information about Cody's stage career will not be disappointed. Much of the text of the 2002 book survives unchanged in this handsome new volume.

The first book was organized principally to communicate information. The revision takes on some responsibility to interpret the information, assessing the place of these years in Cody's life and the function of his stage performances in the history of the American stage. Although these undertakings make the book more interesting to read, they do not succeed very well.

Sagala argues that it was almost a seamless transition from the stage to the Wild West; on stage Cody discovered the "innovative and authentic" narrative he wanted to tell, and

then moved it to the Wild West arena when the stage cramped him. She also asserts that Cody's later dramas represent an evolution toward realism in the American theater that would have satisfied Emile Zola, a claim that betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the principles of realistic drama.

Louis Warren's 2005 biography of Cody, surely the most important of our dozen new titles, makes no appearance here. This is unfortunate, for Warren's discussion of Cody's stage career is subtle and convincing. He shows that Cody, rather than producing realistic drama, made a fetish of authenticity while he practiced his particular brand of frontier imposture. Warren also examines very closely the origins of the Wild West, tying the spectacle to the prevalence of western mythology in the broader culture and to Cody's particular history with Native Americans. He presents a complex understanding of Cody's ranch life in Nebraska as a contributing factor in the formation of the Wild West, while Sagala presents a straightforward origin narrative derived from old books by Don Russell and Nellie Yost. Weaknesses in scholarship compromise the book's value, but Sagala's research on Cody's stage career remains useful.

ROBERT BONNER
Department of History, Emeritus
Carleton College