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Review of "Mary Martin, Broadway Legend." By Ronald L. Davis

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Mary Martin, Broadway Legend. By Ronald L. Davis. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. xvi + 312 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$26.95.

Mary Martin has not been as well treated in biographies as her sometime colleague Ethel Merman, the subject of two fine books in the past year. So Ronald L. Davis's volume is a welcome addition to lore about the stars of the Golden Age of the Broadway Musical.

Ronald Davis got interested in Martin in part because of her Texas connections (she was born and raised in Weatherford, Texas). A historian with interests in oral history and show business (he has written books on John Wayne, John Ford, and Linda Darnell), Davis interviewed Martin before her death as well as a number of people who knew her well. His personal research has been enhanced by reading the memoirs of others whose lives touched hers.

This is a detailed, uncompromising book. Davis gives us the facts of Martin's early career, from Texas dance instructor to Hollywood starlet to Broadway star, then gives detailed backstage accounts of the hits and flops of Martin's career on Broadway and on the road, along with chronicling her television career. Martin hated Hollywood, which never found an appropriate image for her, and loved live theater, particularly the adulation she received from audiences. For almost twenty years, she went from show to show, sometimes playing the same role for years. Unlike most divas, she was willing to tour, even in roles created by other stars. For a brief period in the 1950s her television appearances were special events that drew enormous audiences. One learns a lot about all of Martin's work from this well-researched book.

The “backstage” story Davis tells is of a performer of somewhat limited talent, immense charm, and fierce ambition. He is uncompromising in narrating Martin’s marriage to her manager, sometime producer and alter-ego Richard Halliday, who ran Martin’s career and was bad cop to her good cop. Halliday was as ruthless as Martin in seeing that everything in a show focused on her. There is a telling moment during the turbulent rehearsal period for *The Sound of Music* when Halliday screamed at Richard Rodgers and coproducer Leland Hayward, “All you think about is the show! You don’t care about Mary.” Halliday was at best bisexual, and Martin is rumored to have had affairs with women: the marriage centered on Mary’s career. Yet Halliday’s alcoholic tirades soured their relations with a number of collaborators and alienated Larry Hagman, Mary’s son from a brief teenage marriage. The subtext of this book, as well as the two recent biographies of Ethel Merman, implies that a woman had to be either personally ruthless, as Merman was, or have a ruthless partner, as Martin did, in order to survive as a star in show business.

Mary Martin, Broadway Legend is a lively, fascinating book about an important figure in the history of musical theater. It is also an important addition to histories of the way women had to negotiate their careers in the last century.

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