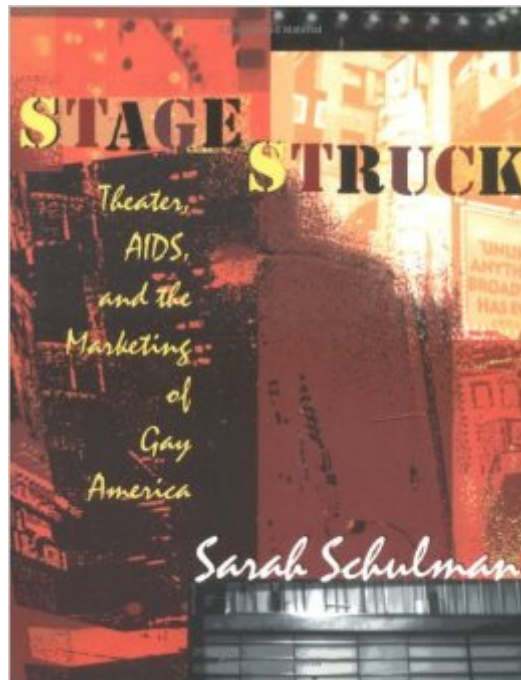


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Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, And The Marketing Of Gay America



Synopsis

In *Stagestruck* noted novelist and outspoken critic Sarah Schulman offers an account of her growing awareness of the startling similarities between her novel *People in Trouble* and the smash Broadway hit *Rent*. Written with a powerful and personal voice, Schulman's book is part gossip narrative, part behind-the-scenes glimpse into the New York theater culture, and part polemic on how mainstream artists co-opt the work of "marginal" artists to give an air of diversity and authenticity to their own work. Rising above the details of her own case, Schulman boldly uses her suspicions of copyright infringement as an opportunity to initiate a larger conversation on how AIDS and gay experience are being represented in American art and commerce. Closely recounting her discovery of the ways in which *Rent* took materials from her own novel, Schulman takes us on her riveting and infuriating journey through the power structures of New York theater and media, a journey she pursued to seek legal restitution and make her voice heard. Then, to provide a cultural context for the emergence of *Rent* "which Schulman experienced first-hand as a weekly theater critic for the New York Press at the time of *Rent*'s premiere" she reveals in rich detail the off- and off-off-Broadway theater scene of the time. She argues that these often neglected works and performances provide more nuanced and accurate depictions of the lives of gay men, Latinos, blacks, lesbians and people with AIDS than popular works seen in full houses on Broadway stages. Schulman brings her discussion full circle with an incisive look at how gay and lesbian culture has become rapidly commodified, not only by mainstream theater productions such as *Rent* but also by its reduction into a mere demographic made palatable for niche marketing. Ultimately, Schulman argues, American art and culture has made acceptable a representation of "the homosexual" that undermines, if not completely erases, the actual experiences of people who continue to suffer from discrimination or disease. *Stagestruck*'s message is sure to incite discussion and raise the level of debate about cultural politics in America today.

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Customer Reviews

I find Schulman's story completely fascinating: what it must have been like to summarily ignored and dismissed by people from several communities in and around the RENT phenomena is nothing short of amazing. I also find her radical politics incredibly invigorating. Schulman really puts herself out on a limb, seemingly careless of whom she might offend. However, Schulman's tone (I just can't think of a better word for it) throughout the book creates a great amount of distance between author and reader (well, at least this reader). While reading, I couldn't help but think: "No wonder no one came to your defense---you're completely annoying." Now, that might sound pithy (or even personal if I actually knew her), but Schulman simply doesn't make it easy for me to empathize with her. Furthermore, she tends to contradict herself at it suits her particular argument. When discussing critical responses to lesbian theatre/performance, she complains of a period in time when there were no papers hiring lesbian critics (who would, ostensibly, be truly qualified). The next page (the VERY next page) sees Schulman complaining that when papers sent lesbian critics to lesbian theatre/performance, they were invariably "marginalizing" her work and the work of other lesbian artists. I applaud Schulman for her brave text, but I ultimately feel that the work as a whole is contradictory, lacks specificity (examples would help the section on marketing immensely), and suffers from her (though entirely justifiable) wronged/angered/violated tone.

I often read a book and then, once I've seen the author read from his own stuff, had to go back and read it again with a different tone of voice. That applies to this book. It's much funnier and rueful than I realize the first time. It's also not recommended unless you have a dark sense of humor, and understand that it's not about Rent or Broadway really, but about some of the subtle ways that history gets revised by the winners. It's a brilliant book and I often had those moments of recognition where I got goose bumps reading a paragraph. Then I would laugh at the next paragraph. I think that people who read this ONLY because they are fans of Rent will be mystified or offended. Rent is a moving show, but it IS sort of odd for urban gays - it's kind of like reading a Hitler biography devoted solely to his being a wonderful father and compassionate family man. . . It may be true, but you

have to scratch your head and wonder how the author managed to completely avoid mentioning the holocaust even once in 1000 pages, and just what was his agenda in doing so. It is clear that Ms. Schulman's book was completely stolen by Larson. However! As she points out, the theft of the plot is not really a problem, cause plot borrowing and character theft is common practice; what she regards as the sore spot is that, in stealing those elements, Larson inadvertently did the same thing that bigots and the media often deliberately do to gays and lesbians: in the same way that the winning side of a war gets to decide what version of the war goes down in history as the TRUE version, Jonathan Larson's made-up version of the AIDS epidemic will be written on most people's hearts as the true version, when in reality it is a powerful distortion of who and what actually happened - unfortunately wrapped in some excellent theater so it is more likely to burn into people's brains as the truth. I didn't expect so much humor from a book that makes those sorts of points. I laughed repeatedly when reading this book, starting with the introduction. Also, as I've come to expect with her books, Ms. Schulman manages to find the words to explain things I've always sensed but not been able to articulate. The section on marketing to gays (who, as she puts it, are still struggling with post-traumatic stress as a result of being raised in this society) was brilliant, and funny. An instance where she really stopped me in my tracks: when she compared gays and lesbians to a older relative of hers who was freed from a Nazi concentration camp and shortly afterwards had a small breakdown when trying to choose what color drinking glass to buy from a shelf of glassware that came in too many colors, sizes and shapes. My advice to potential readers: Schulman is more like Sondheim than the Sound of Music. If you're a Broadway boy with a good heart and not much critical faculty, don't read it and you'll live happy. If you're a Broadway fan with a brain, you'll find it's not really about Broadway but rather an interesting tap dance on the subject of how things get twisted around. If you've got a political sensibility of any type, and maybe you're much older and wiser -- and you read the book with a tone of voice that's rueful and ironic much more than just angry, you'll love it. It brings out all the humor, which appears on every page, and makes me laugh even in public places. People in Trouble were not one of my favorite novels of hers, but having read stage-struck, I now enjoyed it much more. Empathy is her funniest novel, but most experimental, and Rat Bohemia a truly angry ranting novel (and I mean it in the best Victor Hugo-if-he-were-a women sense of the word). I'd recommend Shimmer as a more 'traditional' linear story line sort of novel - it's quite beautiful. I give this book 4 stars not because it's not wonderful, but because I liked Empathy better and so needed to keep one star extra if I ever review that book online. :-)

Sarah Schulman is a pioneer in the world of lesbian fiction. Schulman has written countless articles, novels, and non-fiction, yet still maintains her edge. It doesn't matter whether or not *RENT* was taken from the pages of "People in Trouble." I think that is beside the point, even for Schulman. She uses her own personal experience to discuss the broader issues that face our society, and the gay movement as a whole. Looking for "proof" for what Schulman suggests in her text? Proof can be found in our own lives as gay people: from the patriarchal system of gender roles and power that dominate our society, to the pandering for gay votes and gay money. Further proof exists in the writings of such scholars as Gayle Rubin and Urvashi Vaid, among others. Schulman's book should be used as a jumping off point for other things. The book itself is a call to re-examine our inner homophobia, our subconscious desire to be "normal," and our ability to be manipulated by the mainstream. If one cannot recognize these things in one's daily life, then one is not looking. Schulman shares TRUTH and, although that is hard for some to deal with, who's going to do it, if she doesn't.

Who gets to tell our stories and how? And why? Don't agree with everything Sarah writes but I'm glad she forces me to question and rethink my assumptions and worldview. *RENT* is extremely troublesome, and she helps to unravel why here.

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