

Kitty Marion: Actor and Activist

VIV GARDNER AND DIANE ATKINSON (EDS.), 2019

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This is the previously unpublished autobiography of Kitty Marion (1871–1944): actor, music-hall performer, suffragette and birth control activist, covering the period from her middle-class childhood in Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm in the 1870s through to the late 1930s in New York. It is a fascinating insight into this period, expertly edited and annotated by Viv Gardner and Diane Atkinson whose commentary usefully unpicks and contextualises Kitty's account of her remarkable life.

Kitty's reflections on her relatively privileged but less than idyllic upbringing by her stepmother and authoritarian father pinpoint moments she recalls connecting her own childhood hardships with greater injustices; a hint of the activist she would later become. Travelling alone from Germany to London aged 15, her self-reliance and resilience are quickly established as she resolves to make a career on the stage. Biographies of performers commonly trace the rise to fame of well-known stars; here we are given unusual access to the day-to-day grind and professional realities for a single woman as she navigates the fin de siècle UK gig economy. For the performance historian, there are invaluable details here of Marion seeking work, rehearsing, touring and performing. The description of her first music-hall performance to a vocal Bermondsey crowd at The Star Music Hall in the late 1880s is one of kind. Photographs, playbills and sketches complement the memoir and the editors' accompanying light-touch annotations provide translations and pertinent biographical and historical notes throughout without interrupting the narrative flow of this fascinating life story. Their expert commentary as scholars of performance and women's history both fills the gaps in Kitty's account and extends the significance of the interconnected events and people she mentions for the 21st century reader.

The recollections of sexual harassment within the theatrical profession are depressingly resonant. Kitty recalls fighting off the sexual advances of one agent at his London office when he told her she 'would never succeed on the halls' (p.43) if she did not accept such behaviour. Her distinctly feminist voice, though at times enraged by what she describes as 'this vile, economic and sex domination over women' (p.106), is never self-pitying and she writes in a relentlessly chipper, witty and very readable style. The memoir traces her steady politicisation as she joins

performers' campaigns for fair treatment under the monopolies of theatrical syndicates and then the fight for women's suffrage. In her characteristically straightforward prose she recounts multiple actions including trespass, smashing windows and arson attacks, followed by arrests, imprisonment, hunger strikes and forcible feedings and repeated cycles of release and re-arrest under the Cat and Mouse Act of 1913. Here the significance of this account as a contribution to the historical record of the period is reaffirmed as it charts her transformation from 'ordinary' woman - drawn into political struggle through her experiences working in an industry in which men held all the power and too regularly abused it - to radical activist and hunger striker. Gardner and Atkinson append prison medical records and letters between suffragette hunger strikers written on prison toilet paper. These augment Kitty's detailed descriptions of the many forcible feedings she endured and starkly catalogue the impact of the women's mistreatment on their physical and mental health. Though terrified by the forcible feeding, Kitty's devotion to women's suffrage is clear and her delight both in the sense of sisterhood shared by the suffragettes and in repeatedly outwitting the police is palpable.

Though she has an impressive memory for details, Kitty rarely divulges information about her personal life and there is little of the mundane or her private happiness or dissatisfaction. Rather, this is a record of action, focusing on her thoughts or concerns as they directly relate to her causes. There is no false modesty either, she is immensely proud of her work and of her unshakeable devotion to her beliefs. A few disappointments are evident, notably her sorrow at the widespread anti-German sentiment in England during World War One which led to her enforced emigration to the US and the disillusionment of being snubbed on the street in New York by her great feminist heroine, Emmeline Pankhurst.

In the US, Kitty took up another feminist cause and was arrested multiple times for flouting laws against promoting birth control by selling the *Birth Control Review* on the New York streets where she became a familiar figure in all weathers, educating and debating the importance of birth control for individual women and families and for 'the emancipation of humanity' (p.222). While her cheerfulness is unrelenting, at moments, a steely and determined outrage emerges and occasional outbursts of political ranting are wittily and pithily written. Her voice is open and thoughtful and it is evident that all her joy and sense of self-worth came from her political action. Her convictions were lived and acted upon daily and she had unwavering belief in the righteousness of the causes she devoted most of her life to. Though telling one woman's story, the scope of interest of this book is broad and it is recommended for the contributions it makes to theatre and performance history, women's history, and the histories of the suffragette and

women's rights movements. It reveals not only details of the life a performer and campaigner, but **also** uncommon insights into the shifting mind set of a working woman at a pivotal moment in women's history.

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