Medicalizing Talent.

Theatre, Opera and the Medical Sciences in the Nineteenth Century

For nineteenth-century doctors, actors and singers were both patients of choice and objects of study. At the crossroads of the history of theatre and medicine, how are we to examine the medicalization and publicization of the nineteenth-century actor? How are we to analyse the clinical gaze focused on actors and singers, and their passion for new therapies and techniques?

Descriptions of stars of the theatrical or lyrical stage — such as Giuditta Pasta, Rachel or Charles Kemble — were based little on the observation of theatrical savoir-faire, but rather prioritized the study of an actor’s identity as both artist and person. Italian actors in particular, unquestionably the most exported of the period, were of particular interest to the medical profession. By way of spectator accounts, images, treatises and periodicals, we will see how prior theories of the humors, climates, physiognomy or mechanicism, mingle with research on electricity, phrenology or the nervous system in order to explain actors’ innate or acquired dispositions, their pathologies and effects on their audiences. There thus emerges the paradoxical case of a being at once exceptionalized or normalized, magnetic or deviant, and of its place in the moral reform of society.

Céline Frigau Manning

Monday, Sept. 21 - 4:30pm-7:00pm

Zimmerli Art Museum

Lecture and Reception — open to all

Céline Frigau Manning is Associate Professor in Italian and Theatre Studies at Université Paris-8. A graduate of the École Normale Supérieure, she was a researcher at the Bibliothèque-musée de l’Opéra and resident scholar at the Villa Medici. After working on opera singers’ acting practices (Chanteurs en scène. L’œil du spectateur au Théâtre-Italien, 1815-1848, Paris, Champion, 2014), her current research focuses on the upheaval brought about by medicine and the sciences on the 19th-century stage.

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