



Ghost Light

Frank Rich

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There is a superstition that if an emptied theater is ever left completely dark, a ghost will take up residence. To prevent this, a single "ghost light" is left burning at center stage after the audience and all of the actors and musicians have gone home. Frank Rich's eloquent and moving boyhood memoir reveals how theater itself became a ghost light and a beacon of security for a child finding his way in a tumultuous world.

Rich grew up in the small-townish Washington, D.C., of the 1950s and early '60s, a place where conformity seemed the key to happiness for a young boy who always felt different. When Rich was seven years old, his parents separated--at a time when divorce was still tantamount to scandal--and thereafter he and his younger sister were labeled "children from a broken home." Bouncing from school to school and increasingly lonely, Rich became terrified of the dark and the uncertainty of his future. But there was one thing in his life that made him sublimely happy: the Broadway theater.

Rich's parents were avid theatergoers, and in happier times they would listen to the brand-new recordings of South Pacific, Damn Yankees, and The Pajama Game over and over in their living room. When his mother's remarriage brought about turbulent changes, Rich took refuge in these same records, re-creating the shows in his imagination, scene by scene. He started collecting Playbills, studied fanatically the theater listings in The New York Times and Variety, and cut out ads to create his own miniature marquees. He never imagined that one day he would be the Times's chief theater critic.

Eventually Rich found a second home at Washington's National Theatre, where as a teenager he was a ticket-taker and was introduced not only to the backstage magic he had dreamed of for so long but to a real-life cast of charismatic and eccentric players who would become his mentors and friends. With humor and eloquence, Rich tells the triumphant story of how the aspirations of a stagestruck young boy became a lifeline, propelling him toward the itinerant family of theater, whose romantic denizens welcomed him into the colorful fringes of Broadway during its last glamorous era.

Every once in a while, a grand spectacle comes along that introduces its audiences to characters and scenes that will resound in their memories long after the curtain has gone down. **Ghost Light**, Frank Rich's beautifully crafted childhood memoir, is just such an event.

Ghost Light Details

Date : Published October 9th 2001 by Random House Trade Paperbacks (first published 2000)

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Author : Frank Rich

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Tom Spann says

THE book for theatre lovers. Ghost Light has a special meaning for me for I worked at The National Theatre in Washington about the same time Rich did. In my teen years I worked as an usher, ticket taker, stage doorman, and office boy. Rich and I were about the same age. Our paths just missed crossing. Rich absolutely captures the spirit of a young boy being introduced to the stage and being captured at once by its magic. It was love at first sight and look where it carried him. I too remember saving ticket stubs as souvenirs, saving Playbill from every show I saw, playing original cast albums over and over at home in my bedroom, and on occasion meeting stars at the stage door as they exited the theatre after a show. Rich recalls with absolute accuracy the excitement of anticipation as the house lights dimmed and the stage curtain rose. I have no doubt these feelings never diminished for him year's later as Drama Critic for The New York Times.

Daniel says

This was well written (one would expect no less from a New York Times writer) but I constantly asked myself, "Who cares?"

And that would be the one problem with this memoir. Why is anyone interested in the memoir of a theatre critic? Has he made a name for himself in any other way?

I did find the development of his theatre interest quite interesting, but his family life less so. He managed to know many of the important figures of Broadway during his early days, but the book NEVER tells us how he went on to become a theatre critic. Why not a playwright? An actor? A stage manager? A theatre manager? How was it that he became a reviewer? This memoir leaves us wondering, and instead, knowing a little too much about his interest in girls as a teenaged boy (does he think he's different than 90% of male youth?).

An interesting read, but not really worth the trip.

Tia says

This is a beautifully written book. I had no prior knowledge of Frank Rich, I'm not a theatre person, and I wasn't alive during the 50's - my parents weren't even alive then, so I've never been told personal stories about it.

Yet, I felt like I HAD been there with every turn of the page. I was there, in the theatre with Frank, in the 1950's. The real world faded away as I became engrossed in this, and I understood his passion for theatre. It was the same as my obsession with novels had been. It was our escape, our only escape as children trapped in a living situation we had no control over.

Why did I give this 3 stars instead of 4? Because it dragged on at the end, becoming painfully dull & a chore to finish, after such a promising beginning. Nothing exceptional happens to him as a teen. His mom & stepdad stay together, their fighting more of the same. There is no longer a story arc. I kept wondering what

would happen next, but nothing did. He just described more shows he went to, and day to day life, almost like a twitter feed - but not brief enough.

Ronni says

This book is a MUST for any theater fan. Rich, the former theater critic of the NY TIMES, details how theater literally saved his life during a rather unhappy childhood. His excitement and gratitude to the practitioners of the art form are palpable, and his writing is impeccable.

Pat says

A year ago I declared a memoir moratorium because I strongly felt I wasn't learning much reading most of them. But when my oldest niece recommended "Ghost Light" (2000) by Frank Rich I decided to temporarily suspend my pledge. An additional factor convinced me to lift the freeze - Rich has been a favorite columnist for years.

Aside from the supple writing and ample humor ("The persistent though never consummated daily struggle of her huge breasts to escape the captivity of her tight bathing suit was more dramatic than most of our rehearsals"), when Rich describes how his passion for theater took hold at seven years old, I found myself nodding, having been similarly possessed by music almost that young. If you've had a lifelong love affair with an art form, this is a memoir to savor.

And, I did learn something reading this book - how to be a better long form writer.

Evan Casey says

A fantastic memoir from the man who was the foremost theatre critic in the country for many years . When I picked up the book I was expecting a recounting of THOSE years and all of his theatre experiences during that time, when Frank Rich was the chief theatre critic at the New York Times. However, what I got instead was a beautiful and touching look at the positive power and influence that live theatre can have on the formation of a child growing from boyhood to young adulthood. You get a candid and honest look at Rich's family and social life, and how he became involved, engrossed, and in love with the world of theatre, and how it guided him through his young life and helped shape him as a young man.

Tim Pinckney says

This book has been on my shelf since 2000, the year it came out. I have no idea why it took me so long to get to it. I'm glad I did. Not quite Act One, but filled with the same love of the theatre and a good story of growing up.

Lori says

A little slow to get into but then a really wonderful read. Ended a little abruptly, I'd love to read a second memoir although I understand this one was meant to be for a certain period. A must read for theatre lovers.

Mikaela says

Solid memoir.

Studvet says

Loved this book. Very sensitive and eloquent and one can see he had a true and abiding love of American Theatre from an incredibly young age. Obviously incredibly knowledgeable. Like others I was expecting tales of his Butcher of Broadway years, but it is the story of his teenage years and he holds nothing back. Loved it.

Jim says

An excellent memoir of youthful obsession, in this case with the theater, that laid the groundwork for one of the country's best-known theater critics. I always admired those who found their passion early and created a work life that encompassed that passion, from literature to medicine, art to even such passions as farming. I wish I had found a similar passion. The memoir is well written and engaging, and I think anyone who lived through the sixties and had any interest in theater will find it worthwhile. Although some of the personal experiences, especially his relationship to his stepfather, are difficult to read about, his descriptions of his love affair with the stage are most enjoyable.

Aaron says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this, especially as a theatre person living in DC for the summer. 3.5 stars would be appropriate here, but I couldn't give it a 4. One does not need to be involved with theatre to understand or appreciate Rich's story, it is beautiful and tragic no matter who you are.

Two reservations I have: 1) Rich occasionally comes across as a racist; though he notes the numerous marches and rallies he attended as a child, he uses the term "Negro" throughout the book. This may not have been intentional, but for me it marred an otherwise well written and corrected directed passionate account of a love for theatre.

2) I know that the story functioned well with Rich focusing just on his childhood, but I would have liked to hear more about his professional career at the Times. I would be interested to know if his relative animosity towards DC had changed. New York is great, and undeniably the theatrical mecca of the known world, but as an out of town tryout location DC was not too shabby in the days of Rich's childhood. I understand that his

disdain for the city had deeper ties to his family life, but I love DC and wonder if Rich became an uppity New Yorker after moving on from DC.

I might also take issue with the details a grown man can hash out from his boyhood years of 11 or 12. At the end of the book, Rich mentions the rigorous research and countless human resources used in shaping the narrative. I don't doubt the legitimacy of his work, and I guess that's a potential problem with any sort of autobiography.

Rj says

First I read his memoir *Ghost Light: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2000), which I have to admit bored me to tears and had me wondering if indeed it was the same person who wrote the book and the columns. Sometimes authors can carry their voice across different formats like Vidal, shifting seamlessly from editorial, essay to memoir and fiction, but Rich is not one of those writers. His forte is definitely the short op-ed piece where his writing remains concise and pithy. So when I picked up the rather hefty *Hot Seat* after trudging through *Ghost Light* I was more than a little apprehensive. But Rich cut his teeth on theatre reviews and they do not disappoint. The reviews are short and sweet and filled with valuable insights about each production he reviews. In a very short space they give the information required to understand the piece under review while also contextualizing the pieces in the larger world of theatre. Rich's memoir made me realize what a vast repository of knowledge he has for the theatrical world and how far back his memory (and collection of Playbills) will allow his memory to go making him a valuable cultural critic.

Diane Lybbert says

This is an excellent memoir. Frank Rich, renowned theater critic, recounts his stormy childhood. Growing up in the 1950s, he was a child of divorce when divorce was rare and frowned upon. His mother remarries, and he and his sister endure the abuse their stepfather is already heaping on his own children. But, Frank discovers the escapism of theater at an early age, and while his stepfather is abusive, he also encourages Frank's love of theater and provides show tickets. As Frank grows into his teens, he is given the freedom to walk the theater districts in Wash. DC and NYC to buy his own show tickets and see whatever he wants. He collects playbills, and reconstructs theater sets using old shoeboxes so he can recreate and relive the plays. He has few friends, but the ones he has are important to his growth and maturity. For me, this is what a memoir should be. We learn about a person through his own experiences, gaining his insights into his life, finding out how he got from a shy, ostracized, abused child to a confident theater critic, making a living doing what he loved. I highly recommend this book.

Jeb says

This memoir of former NYT theatre critic Frank Rich reads more like a novel than a memoir. It traces his childhood living on the "wrong side of town" in Washington DC through his first year of at Harvard, telling how his tumultuous home life led him to escape to the theatre. The first chapters of his elementary years were a little too sappy for my taste (maybe I identified too much with the little boy's crazed hunger for the theatre), but I kept reading and eventually found myself engrossed in the story of this teenage boy's

maturation with an abusive stepfather. Since his teen years were in the '60's, young Frank watched the first productions of "Hello, Dolly!", "Fiddler," "Forum," "The Music Man," and countless other music theatre masterpieces, during his first discoveries with girls and dating, all set against the backdrop of Washington DC in the '60's (including JFK's election and assassination, MLK's assassination and the DC riots, etc.). A great read.
