

Native Performers in Wild West Shows: From Buffalo Bill to Euro Disney

Linda Scarangella McNenly

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Thousands of spectators around the world enjoyed the exciting performances of Native Americans dressed in authentic-looking garb at popular Wild West shows during their thirty-year reign, from the late 1800s to the early 1900s.

But few in the stands actually knew who these real characters were, or the stories of how they arrived in these stadiums. Wild West shows catered to the curious in American cities who had only read about the West and to those on different continents eager to catch a glimpse of this rough, untamed culture. Entrepreneurs, such as Buffalo Bill Cody and the Miller Brothers, gave these audiences what they wanted and did so with the assistance of Native Americans as fully costumed, paid performers.

In this scholarly study, the author ferrets out obscure information from archival sources, newspapers, programs, and even passports, about the performers, their world, and the reasons that brought them to this realm of traveling entertainment.

McNenly, a doctoral lecturer in anthropology at the University of Toronto, traces the cultural evolution of these shows to their current stage, the Wild West Show at Euro Disney, near Paris. The chapters address the family lives of the performers as they toured the world, the financial hurdles of operating such a massive entertainment enterprise, and the challenges of finding a cultural balance that portrayed conflicts of westward expansion but also showed Native American life in a compassionate way.

The text deals extensively with the cultural issues generated by these shows during the early years, including the argument by government agents that negative stereotypes were being perpetuated and that Native performers were at risk of remaining “savages” by continuing in their old ways. The performers argued that these shows were a way out of the confines of their low-income reservations, allowing them to experience firsthand other cultures and to live independently.

Today, McNenly finds that the Native American image at Euro Disney “perpetuates stereotyped and ‘Disneyfied’ understandings of westernness and Nativeness in its reproduction of the American frontier, but Native performers are also active agents with their own agendas and intentions.”

Some of the more scholarly terminology may be daunting to the average reader. “Transculturation,” for example, is a reference to the “process of negotiation and incorporation” by Native performers interacting with the dominant, mainstream culture.

The book’s text is heavily footnoted, with more than thirty pages of source material and numerous archival photos, plus thirteen pages of citations of publications and scholarly works.

KARL KUNKEL (Winter 2013)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed

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