



The First Actresses: From Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons

Gill Perry, Joseph Roach, Shearer West

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Women first appeared on the legitimate stage in England following the Restoration in 1660, heralding a major change in British theater. *The First Actresses: From Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons* explores the vibrant and sometimes controversial relationship between art, gender, and the English theater in the 18th century. The richly illustrated book combines both well-known and seldom-seen portraits with fascinating essays that explore the ways that actresses used portraiture to enhance their reputations, deflect scandal, and increase their popularity and professional status.

The featured works include paintings by major artists such as Johann Zoffany, Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, and Thomas Lawrence.

Created to accompany the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition of the same name, *The First Actresses* provides a vivid spectacle of femininity, fashion, and theatricality from Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons, during a period when portraiture became an important vehicle for the expression of concerns about female sexuality, social status, decorum, gender, and celebrity. The authors also chart the commercialization of the spectacle of the actress, as well as the connections between the 18th-century "star system" and modern celebrity culture.

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