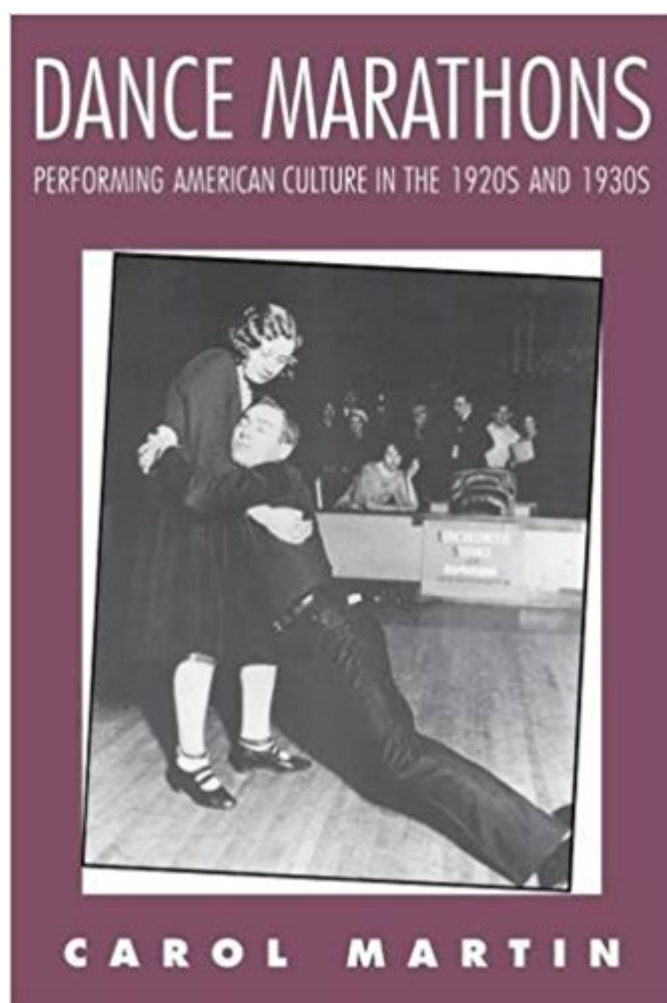


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Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture In The 1920s And 1930s (Performance Studies Series)



Synopsis

This penetrating analysis of one of the most extraordinary fads ever to strike America details how dance marathons manifested a potent form of drama. Between the two world wars they were a phenomenon in which working-class people engaged in emblematic struggles for survival. Battling to outlast other contestants, the dancers hoped to become notable. There was crippling exhaustion and anguish among the contenders, but ultimately it was the coupling of authentic pain with staged displays that made dance marathons a national craze. Within the well-controlled space of theatre, they revealed actual life's unpredictability and inconsistencies, and, indeed, the frightful aspects of social Darwinism. In this grotesque theatrical setting we see also a horrifying metaphor for the ailing nation grappling with difficult times.

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Customer Reviews

As part of an expanding scholarly movement to convert popular amusements into cultural studies, dance marathons are depicted here as a symptom of America's troubled times between the wars. An assistant professor of drama at New York University, Martin's premise is a stretch at best, and detracts from what is otherwise a worthy and nostalgic glimpse at a national craze. Claims that endurance contests mirrored post-WW I optimism, and later, the despair of the Great Depression, are less than convincing. Statements such as, "modeled on a radical version of social Darwinism, where the fittest would not just survive, but triumph and win cash prizes" slow the book down.

Beyond the academic probing is an engaging behind-the-scenes look at the genre's evolution. Originating in a time when feats of endurance, such as flag pole sitting, were considered patriotic, dance marathons were never regarded as legitimate entertainment. The monotony and unprofitable practice of watching endless hours of dancing were alleviated by shrewd promoters. Dramas such as mock weddings and torturous elimination races were played out on the floor--"the popularity of marathons rested on their gladiatorial displays." Dance marathons were under constant scrutiny by health and government officials and were sometimes banned. Though theoretically weak, in the end, this becomes an absorbing account of a fad that captivated millions. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Martin, a drama professor, was curious about why dance marathons are still "alive" in our imaginations decades after their abrupt rise and fall. After discovering a lack of accurate information about these spectacles, she set out to document the invention and culmination of this quintessentially American craze from logistical, economic, social, and artistic perspectives. Dance marathons evolved out of the passion for absurd record-breaking activities that erupted in the 1920s, but they soon became an outlet for anger and fear during the Depression when people were willing to pay to see others suffer. Martin monitors the mood of the country as she describes, in impressive detail, all the promotional machinations and controversies associated with this odd form of performance. She also explains the quirky mix of the staged and the spontaneous that captivated audiences and profiles promoters and professionals, such as Red Skelton, who ensured a certain level of crowd-pleasing theatricality. Martin discovered that women played a prominent role in ensuring the popularity of dance marathons. It was a woman, in fact, who set the first nonstop dancing record in the U.S.: Alma Cummings danced for 27 hours in 1923. Donna Seaman --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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