



Ghost Light: A Memoir

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.

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