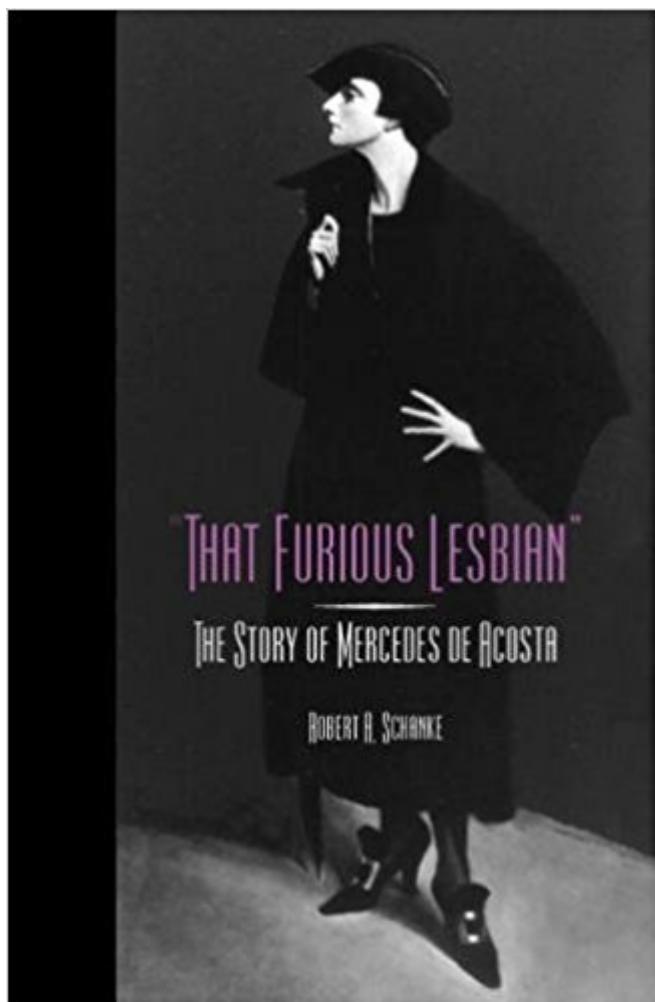


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# That Furious Lesbian: The Story Of Mercedes De Acosta (Theater In The Americas)



## Synopsis

In this first book-length biography of Mercedes de Acosta, theatre historian Robert A. Schanke adroitly mines lost archival materials and mixes in his own interviews with de Acosta's intimates to correct established myths and at last construct an accurate, detailed, and vibrant portrait of the flamboyantly uninhibited early-twentieth-century author, poet, and playwright. Born to wealthy Spanish immigrants, Mercedes de Acosta (1893-1968) lived in opulence and traveled in the same social circles as the Astors and Vanderbilts. Introduced to the New York theater scene at an early age, her dual loves of performance and of women informed every aspect of her life thereafter. Alice B. Toklas' observation, "Say what you will about Mercedes, she had the most important women in the twentieth century," was well justified, as her romantic conquests included such internationally renowned beauties as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Isadora Duncan, and Eva Le Gallienne as well as Alla Nazimova, Tamara Karsavina, Pola Negri, and Ona Munson. More than a record of her personal life and infamous romances, this account offers the first analysis of the complete oeuvre of de Acosta's literary works, including three volumes of poetry, two novels, two film scripts, and a dozen plays. Although only two of her plays were ever published during her lifetime, four of them were produced, featuring such stage luminaries as John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, and Eva Le Gallienne. Critics praised her first volume of poetry, *Moods*, in 1919 and predicted her rise to literary fame, but the love of other women that fueled her writing also limited her opportunities to fulfill this destiny. Failing to achieve any lasting fame, she died in relative poverty at the age of seventy-five. De Acosta lived her desires publicly with verve and vigor at a time when few others would dare, and for that, she paid the price of marginalized obscurity. Until now. With "That Furious Lesbian," Schanke at last establishes Mercedes de Acosta's rightful place as a pioneer and indeed a champion in the early struggle for lesbian rights in this country. Robert A. Schanke has edited a companion to this biography, *Women in Turmoil: Six Plays by Mercedes de Acosta*, also available from Southern Illinois University Press.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

&#147;[A]n entertaining biography. . . .&#147;New York Times Book

Review&#147;Drawing on countless hours spent with de Acosta&#147;s personal correspondence and unpublished writings, Schanke puts together a compelling portrait of a woman whose confidence in herself is striking, particularly because she stood tall in an era when women were taught to do the opposite. . . . Although de Acosta&#147;s writing is largely neglected, Schanke&#147;s well-crafted, deeply-researched biography makes her live again, gliding down the streets of New York to show other women how it should be done.&#147;ForeWord

A Professor Emeritus of Theater at Central College in Pella, Iowa, Robert A. Schanke is the editor of the international journal *Theatre History Studies* and the Southern Illinois University Press series *Theater in the Americas*. His five other books include *Eva Le Gallienne: A Bio-Bibliography* and *Shattered Applause: The Lives of Eva Le Gallienne*, a finalist for both the Lambda Literary Award and the Barnard Hewitt Award for theatre research.

There is lots of interesting information in this biography of a somewhat forgotten woman, but it reads more like a dissertation than an engrossing story. The challenge for a biographer is to bring his or her subject to life, and unfortunately the facts are not enlivened in this volume.

Perfect

I just love this woman and wish that in the next world I will get to meet her. I have since also bought *HERE LIES THE HEART*, her life memoir which I could not put down. Now I have ordered her

WOMEN IN TURMOIL, a book of six plays by her. Mercedes was a brave champion for women who choose to love both sexes in both a sexual and nonsexual way. She further promoted and lived equally with men in careers that were formerly dominated by men. She loved beauty in all people, nature and artwork.

Schanke's previous book on the stage actress Eva Le Gallienne was a knockout, and this one suffers in comparison. Perhaps the character of Mercedes was just too hard to pin down, and this may not be Schanke's fault. Acosta's work seems slight and dated, and no amount of cutting and pasting is going to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. This leaves her as a curiosity, a woman who must have been something in her prime, when so many gorgeous women succumbed to her; and then as a victim of what we would now call "erotomania," desperately clinging to the hope that someday Garbo would smile on her again, even though she must have known that "outing" Garbo in her insipid memoir "Here Lies the Heart" (which Le Gallienne heatedly called, "The Heart Lies and Lies and Lies") wasn't the way to curry favor with such a private individual. The last chapters of the book are pathetic in extremis, it's almost hard to believe Mercedes stayed alive from week to week she was so poor and abject, having no money of her own and totally dependent on charity from others. She was like Job in every way except, of course, genetically. But then again Job was probably pretty annoying too. Schanke does a fine job putting together the pieces of a fabulist's life, jigsaw pieces from many different puzzles.

De Acosta has long needed an biography since her own autobiography "Here Lies the Heart" often feels fictional. While Schanke gets the facts and corrects some of the autobiography's inaccuracies, he does not ever convince one that this was a story worth telling. The vitality and outragousness of her own book makes de Acosta a compelling figure, but the recitation of facts in this one does not. This book has a hard task: telling the life story of a mediocre writer best known for who she had sex with. And while the book does not make a strong case for de Acosta being worth the attention, it is quite facinating for anyone interested in gay history. In addition, the figures arround Mercedes (such as her sister, Garbo, Poppy Kirk) emerge as intriguing in a way that de Acosta does not.

I guess it took the Roman Church 500 years to rehabilitate, integrate, and neutralize a troubling voice from the past. Mercedes de Acosta had no such qualms and reincarnated Jehanne in the person of Eva le Gallienne in the 1925 production of Jehanne d'Arc. Robert Schake's "That Furious Lesbian": The Story of Mercedes Acosta is a sustained effort to peel away the recurring labels that

obliterate the magnificent other that was Mercedes. Schanke's re-creative efforts, stemming in large part from Mercedes' poverty driven sale of her "Aspern Letters" to the Rosenbach Library, are well worth the attention of those still capable of amazement before those bolides which burst through Victorian conventions into a new century.

This is an interesting account of her life. I found that there is even more information at the author's website - take a look and you'll learn more about this woman...There is a paperback coming out soon so check out the site and come back to get the paperback![...]

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