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## **Book Review: Eve Golden, with Kim Kendall Campbell, *The Brief, Madcap Life of Kay Kendall* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001)**

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Eve Golden, with Kim Kendall Campbell, *The Brief, Madcap Life of Kay Kendall* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. x–185, ISBN 978-0-8131-8073-1 (pb), £18.00.

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Kay Kendall, the British actor who died of leukaemia in 1959, never had the chance to try out early retirement. Two-thirds of the way into Eve Golden's newly reissued biography, is the suggestion that she would at least have liked to try: 'I've had too many years of rushing around from hotel to hotel and... waking up alone in the morning. I've had too many hundreds of years of being by myself' (114), she told the *New York Times*, two years before her death at the age of thirty-two.

As much as such insights into the life of their subject can be a gift to the biographer, they can also hamper the biography itself. As a genre, the actor biography would seem, in principle, to be premised on the reputation of the artist's work. This is no less the case with Kendall, a star in her mid-twenties on the back of *Genevieve* (1953) and *Doctor in the House* (1954), and who would gain Hollywood plaudits playing alongside Gene Kelly in *Les Girls* (1957). Yet the abiding image of Kendall in Golden's biography is of a star discontent not with the material benefits of fame – Kendall's short life was one lived richly, and to the full – but with the job of movie acting itself; a source, the book often suggests, of boredom, exhaustion, and frustration.

In turn, Golden's book is sometimes caught in the celebrity-biography bind of recounting a life removed from the reasons for its telling, focusing more on her amorous and other adventures rather than the actor's work. This is not without justification, of course: Kendall's stardom, like many actors', was a composite of her performances on screen and the coverage of her performances off it, and it often makes for fascinating if sometimes uncomfortable reading. The sizeable coverage given in the book to Kendall's affair with Rex Harrison, and their subsequent marriage, might be sensationalist, were it not for the light it sheds on the poignancy of the actor's last years: in particular, how Harrison, even *before* their marriage, kept Kendall's terminal diagnosis a poorly-kept secret from his wife until the day she died. Less interesting, and by far the weakest aspect of the book, is what effectively amounts to an account of Kendall's social diary: a litany of holidays, parties, and (in Golden's words) the actor's 'lazy, casual life or socializing and shopping' (116).

Written in collaboration with Kendall's surviving older sister, the book affects an intimacy with 'Kay', as Golden familiarly calls her, supported by its wealth of personal detail. It's slightly disappointing, then, how little we actually hear about Kendall's performances, or more specifically, the process of creating them. But such was the actor's apparent force of personality, that there seems an abiding sense that her screen-acting persona was little more than a version of her screwball self, captured on film. As Golden recounts, it wasn't a view the self-effacing Kendall, describing film acting as 'making faces at a camera' (137), seemed that keen to deny.

Should we buy into this, though? Golden, at revealing moments, admits that Kendall's version of her life was one of embellishment, if not occasional fantasy. Just as the actor, towards the end of her life, was misled by almost everyone she knew, how much guarantee can the biography give us that it, too, is telling the whole truth? By this same token, Golden's narrative of a largely discontented star, wanting to give up on movie acting because she wished for a quieter life, seems only half the story. If Golden's book does not exactly provide the other half, it leaves enough gaps and questions to make for intriguingly suggestive reading.

Golden points out that Kendall, poised somewhere between British post-war glamour and its cinematic repertoire of light comedy and musicals, was becoming an outdated kind of movie actor by the end of the 1950s (138-39), soon to be replaced – following the 'New Wave' turns in British and wider European film – by a new kind of female star. And yet, as hinted in Golden's account, the flippancy with which Kendall described her job possibly masked a disappointment with the limited professional opportunities she had been given. Kendall's troubled relationship with J. Arthur Rank was to bear little fruit, and in its place, a fair amount of mutual acrimony, with the actor turning down most of the parts offered to her (Rank, unaware of Kendall's illness, sued her for breach of contract three months before she died). Kendall also appeared to be haunted by her own defining screen image as 'that drunken lady who played the trumpet' (112) in *Genevieve*: a scene that fixed her emerging star image, but one which she was perennially and predictably expected to revive throughout her career. The reader is left wondering what might have been, given different circumstances, and better parts. One also asks what Kendall might have done in a subsequent age of the actor-producer, freed from the constrictions of contract-playing.

Just as the book sheds light on the limitations of actor agency at that point in time, in other ways, it throws into relief the kinds of injuries female actors of the time seemed to suffer or inflict upon themselves; from the sexual advances of directors (originally written in 2002, and pre-dating #MeToo, the book gives this less commentary than it might receive), to the 'tad silly-looking' nose-job that Kendall, perennially uncertain about her looks, felt obliged to get at the start of her film career (44). Like other actors of the era, too, before regional accents came into favour, Kendall – the child of a husband-and-wife dance act, and whose itinerant upbringing had left her with an accent that was 'part Cockney, part Yorkshire' – worked tirelessly to re-shape her voice into the 'perfectly modulated' norms of the English the light-comedy actor (27-28). What these acts of self-reconstruction really meant for Kendall remain some of the unanswered questions posed by the book.

In the end, *The Brief, Madcap Life of Kay Kendall* stays true to its title: at 157 pages, cut up into twenty-one snippet-like chapters, it is a breezy account of a brief but often brilliant life; and via its subject, a sometimes revealing record of this transitional period in film, sandwiched between the Golden Age of the 1940s and the transformations of the 1960s. While it might leave the reader asking more questions than it can answer, Golden's book, and the image of Kendall it leaves, remains a testament to a great-but-fleeting talent, and a snapshot of how hard it often was to be a star, and also a woman, in the cinema of the 1950s.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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