



# **That Furious Lesbian: The Story of Mercedes de Acosta (Theater in the Americas)**

*Robert A Schanke*

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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's observation, "Say what you will about Mercedes, she's 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.

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