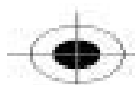


EARLY AMERICAN DRAMA

EDITED WITH
AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
JEFFREY H. RICHARDS



PENGUIN BOOKS



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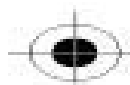
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PENGUIN CLASSICS

EARLY AMERICAN DRAMA

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INTRODUCTION

Until recently, American drama before the Civil War was largely scorned by critics and historians as subliterary. There are many reasons for this, but none is stronger than prejudice—old prejudice against the American stage of the period, as well as its successor entertainments, film and television, for its lowbrow popularity; and another, more broad-based, against anything “melodramatic.” Once merely a descriptive word for a stage entertainment with music, *melodrama* came to mean to a later era a play with excessively sentimental speeches; stereotyped characters; obvious, moralistic plot; and acting that bore no relation to actions and speech in “real life.” By the early twentieth century, to call something “melodramatic” was to deride it as cheap and vulgar, popular at its most derogatory, and distinctly not worth any serious critical or historical discussion. Thus, whole centuries of American playwriting activity were abandoned by critics in the rush to embrace the new, and presumably nonmelodramatic, theater of O’Neill, Anderson, Williams, Miller, and Albee. Only recently have theater and literary scholars been able to take a fresh look at early American plays and inquire, if they were so bad, why so many people went to experience them.

The plays in this volume have been selected as examples of dramas by American writers that were performed in their time but also have texts that will still reward the careful reader. To appreciate them fully, however, one must first historicize them; in other words, make some attempt to imagine the social and theatrical conditions that made them possible. Antebellum drama was, primarily, popular culture, not the retreat of the elite. In recognizing our own responses to the popular culture of the present, we may be able to recover something of the expectations of audiences from the past. In this introduction, I intend first to provide a brief history of American drama before the Civil War and to lay out some of the problems and preconceptions facing audience and writer alike in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the same time, I will consider the difficulties facing modern readers in encountering these texts.

Playwrights and the Theater in Early America: A Brief History

Although many histories, such as those by Quinn and Meserve, have been written about the development of theater and the drama in English-speaking America, its place in the culture has still not been explained fully. Early European settlers and explorers came from societies that made theater a significant element of public experience. The major colonial powers—Spain, France, and England—were establishing their authority in the New World at the same time that their national dramas were growing in importance. Lope de Vega, Corneille, and Shakespeare were creating some of the greatest plays in the history of the West while colonists were busy exploring new territory, cutting down forests, or crushing Indian resistance. That is to say, the very shaping of the ideology of conquest was in some ways tied to a theatrical view of life, the notion of the *theatrum mundi* or world as a stage. As people like Captain John Smith saw the New World as a theater on which to play their roles in history, theatergoers in Madrid, Paris, and London viewed the stage as a world in miniature, a microcosm. Ironically, at least in English-controlled territory, actual playhouses or theatrical performances were

few or absent altogether. Thus it seems that before there were theaters in America, there was theatrical thinking (Richards, *Theater*, 61-84).

The first play known to have been performed in English-speaking America was *The Bear and the Cub* (or as it was written down in the court records, *Ye Bare and Ye Cubb*), acted in a tavern in Pungoteague, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, in 1665 (Meserve, *Emerging*, 16). No theater building is known until the early 1700s, when it seems that Williamsburg, Virginia, and New York City built or converted buildings to theater use (McNamara; Young). By the late 1740s, professional actors from England via Jamaica—Walter Murray and Thomas Kean's Company of Comedians from Virginia—began to play in American cities. The Hallam family of actors arrived in Virginia directly from England in 1752 and played brief seasons in a number of cities (Wright, 31-33; Highfill). At the time of the Revolution, New York, Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and Charleston had active theater seasons, and by the turn of the century, many other cities, including Boston, Baltimore, Richmond, Norfolk, Wilmington, and Savannah, had buildings to accommodate plays—and patrons to view them. With the movement west, further theaters came to Mobile, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis. With the advent of the Civil War, plays were being acted throughout the East and Midwest and as far west as San Francisco. In brief, the theater went from a few scattered sites and performances to become the dominant cultural medium of the United States.

From the beginning, attitudes toward theater were varied and contradictory. The early adventures in Virginia were people steeped in Elizabethan and Jacobean cultural attitudes; Captain Smith not only used stage language in his writing, but also fought a running battle in London with those who would mock his American exploits on the stage. Yet, in a sermon preached to colonists embarking for Virginia, one cleric, William Crashaw, told them to keep out “the players” if they wanted to have a successful enterprise. Although, in general, attitudes in the Anglican-dominated South were less rigid about what constituted legitimate entertainment, and southern cities were more sympathetic to theater than many in the North, wealthy landowners like William Byrd II still had to feed their desire for playgoing by living in London for long stretches. No one found that operating a theater in the South would produce much in the way of fame, profit, or locally written drama during the 1700s.

In the North, New York was an early home to actors and theatrical entertainments. By the 1730s there must have been sufficient interest in playgoing among Manhattanites that immigrants sought jobs as actors. Young Elizabeth Ashbridge, who would later gain fame for her spiritual autobiography, arrived in New York in 1732 from Ireland and tried her hand at acting before eventually turning to preaching in her adopted religious community, the Society of Friends. In fact, another congenial home to theater was the Quaker city, Philadelphia, which had the honor of producing the first tragedy known to have been written by an American, *The Prince of Parthia* (1759) by Thomas Godfrey, Jr. The production of Godfrey's play in 1767 would be a good yardstick of how the theater would operate later. Originally on the bill was another homegrown play, a comedy by Thomas Forrest called *The Disappointment*, but its slang-laden, ethnically inscribed dialogue and its satiric bite caused the managers to fear reprisals. They opted for the safe, turgid drama of events and people far removed from midcentury Philadelphia. Even in the eighteenth century, the dread of lost revenues would often be the standard by which plays and entertainments would be written and produced.

Yet, Philadelphia, too, like nearly all cities where theatrical entertainments appeared in the 1700s and early 1800s, had many people who resisted the planting of theater at all, often on religious grounds. The most vehement opposition to the institutionalizing of theater came from Massachusetts. English Calvinism early set itself in opposition to the theater for several reasons, but two are noteworthy: the first is that theaters drew criminals (and experience with pickpockets and prostitutes

in the theaters south of the Thames in England showed this criticism had its merits); the second asserted that acting was merely a form of hypocrisy, a pretending to be someone a person was not, and therefore only encouraged youth to imitate bad behavior. The latter criticism proved to be the most lasting one. Dancing masters, displays of sword prowess, and anything that smacked of frivolous entertainment were proscribed by civil authorities under sway of the old Puritan beliefs. Not until 1794 would Boston have its first professional theater season.

But it was not only Puritans who objected to the stage. When Lewis Hallam and David Douglas brought professional troupes to American shores, they encountered some hostility in nearly every venue. This led to the practice of turning plays into “lectures,” whereby scenes from *Othello*, for instance, could be passed off as a lecture on jealousy. During the Revolutionary War, Washington, a great supporter of the theater who sometimes used plays like Joseph Addison’s *Cato* to encourage morale, had to bow to the will of the Continental Congress when it banned plays in patriot-controlled territory in 1778 (Rankin; Brown). Thereafter, only those places the British occupied could hold plays, and since New York was the one American city of note held by the British for the entirety of the war, it was the only venue in the new republic that was fully prepared after the war to launch ambitious new seasons. Consequently, the supporters of a revived theater in other places had to counter not only the continued religious antagonism to theater but also a political-cultural one: theater was the province of our late enemy, the British. Therefore, to admit it as a legitimate entertainment would be to sink the new country into corruption and frivolity when the work of nation-building had only just begun. The challenge for potential actors, playwrights, managers, and spectators was how to create a institution that could provide plays yet satisfy the moral and cultural criticisms leveled at the stage.

Even before mounting plays on the stage was a real possibility, many writers used dramatic form. In some respects, closet or tacit drama had been a part even of Puritan literary culture. The English Calvinist John Foxe had written religious plays for university production in the mid- 1500s, before Puritan cultural critics like Philip Stubbes in *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) began to denounce the stage. Yet, we see that American Puritans still read plays—Samuel Sewall relaxed with a drama by Dryden, for instance, and Increase Mather owned volumes by classical playwrights (Richardson, *Theater*, 101-93). By the 1700s, plays became vehicles for political commentary or satire. The royal governor of New York, Robert Hunter, penned a satiric play, *Androborus* (1714), that took swipes at his political enemies. An opponent of Massachusetts governor Jonathan Belcher in 1732 circulated a play that condemned Belcher’s method of coming to power and painted the governor as a designing villain who uses dishonesty to get his post (Robert E. Moody). That same strategy would be used by America’s first female playwright, Mercy Otis Warren. In a series of three linked satiric dramas, *The Adulateur* (1772), *The Defeat* (1773), and *The Group* (1775), Warren would excoriate the regime of the later Massachusetts royal governor, Thomas Hutchinson, and his Tory cronies (Richards, *Warren*, 8-120). Some of America’s early closet playwrights took the high road, seeking for heroes or tragically noble figures. Robert Rogers’s *Ponteach* (1766) was the first English-language play by someone resident in America to feature a Native character as the focus (Meserve, *Emerging*, 53-55). Other playwrights looked to the American Revolution for material. Battles at Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, and at Quebec lie behind dramas by John Leacock (*The Fall of British Tyranny*) and Hugh Henry Brackenridge (*The Battle of Bunkers-Hill* and *The Death of General Montgomery*). But closet drama was not limited to supporters of the Revolution. Such Tory vehicles as Jonathan Sewall’s *A Cure for the Spleen* or the anonymous *The Battle of Brooklyn* were used to roast the Whiggish patriots. These political plays were written not for the actual playhouse but, as Leacock suggests, the stage of the world on which the real-life events referred to were being acted. American authors would

have to wait for the war's conclusion before the small stage would be available as a space on which display their work (Richards, *Theater*, 247-51).

Later playwrights, who were more likely to get their works on stage, followed the lead of the pioneers in looking to American history for material. One of the plays in this volume, William Dunlap's *André* (1798), proved that an author could have some success on stage with a serious examination of the complexities of a historical moment—in this case, the capture and execution of the popular British officer John André, in 1780. In that sense, then, the closet and satiric dramatists of the eighteenth century paved the way for those who would have real theaters to write for.

With the reopening of theaters after the Revolution and the demand for new buildings, American writers saw the possibilities of a local theatrical tradition. Even so, it was a battle for recognition that would take many decades. The postwar theater managers did not rush out to demand new American works; instead, they trotted out the old prewar favorites, or imported new hits from London. Shakespeare, Sheridan, Farquhar, and O'Keeffe were far more likely to be shown than anything American. Not surprisingly, then, enterprising American playwrights had to confront the realities of audiences and managers. The politics of America may have been new for the world, but the theatrical forms would remain thoroughly tried, if not always true.

When a soldier-lawyer-poet named Royall Tyler came to New York in March 1787, he sized up the situation with a practical eye. Playing at the John Street Theater, a prewar stage that had been reopened in 1786, were two British plays: the main feature was Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, a comedy of manners; the light piece was called *The Poor Soldier*, by John O'Keeffe, starring the popular comic actor Thomas Wignell. Whether Tyler had been working on the play before he came to town is not entirely clear, but, at any rate, the manuscript he presented to the John Street managers was formally speaking a combination of the bill he had seen plus several other plays that had been performed by the Old American Company. His play *The Contrast* was a comedy of manners with a farcical role, the Yankee Jonathan, that matched the skills of Wignell, who took the part; cobbled together from what was currently popular, the play was accepted in time to be mounted in April. As a play, there was nothing in Tyler's work to challenge the sensibilities of the audience.

Nevertheless, the production of this comedy, the first by an American to be presented at professional theater, marks a key moment in American dramatic history. As the playwright himself announces through a poetic prologue, the audience will not find the usual subject, the lords and ladies of London. Rather, it is "native themes" that he portrays. Set in New York among a well-to-do class of postwar Americans with too much time on their hands, *The Contrast* could make comic hay out of the American desire for fashion and luxuries and mores from Europe. Through the noble, if somewhat dull, characters of Colonel Manly and Maria, Tyler points toward an American virtue that at once resists corruption from Europe without rejecting entirely the cultural inheritance of the Old World. Negotiating between complete capitulation to the Anglophiles in the audience—New York, we recall, was occupied by the British during the whole of the war—and total denunciation of the perversions on the stage, Tyler steers a middle course that in essence says, Theater is good for America as long as it affirms virtue. The old demand that theater be didactic if it be admitted at all had not yet died away.

If the English comedy of manners provided Tyler with a model, another imported form, the "melodrama," would prove wildly popular for nearly a century on American stages. Originating in France as a play with music to accompany dialogue, melodrama acquired its combination of extravagant plot and large gestures in the French Revolution. In his essay "Melodrama, Body, Revolution," Peter Brooks has argued that beginning with Boutet de Monvel's *Les victimes cloîtrées* (1791), the combination of revolutionary fervor and the drama created a form that was in its origins of and for the

people. Both moral and democratic, melodrama was a suitable dramatic type for people who sought some verification of their desires. Made popular in France through the numerous plays of Guilbert de Pixérécourt and brought to England in November 1802 through Thomas Holcroft's loose adaptation of Pixérécourt's *Coelina ou l'Enfant du mystère*, melodrama quickly crossed the Atlantic. Holcroft's play *A Tale of Mystery*, classified as "A Melo-Drame in Two Acts," appeared on the New York stage by early 1803, reaching Charleston later that year and Richmond in 1804. One of the first American productions to use the French expression for a play with music was Philadelphian James Nelson Barker's *The Indian Princess* (1808). Barker called his play an "Operatic Melo-drame," one of the many hybrid plays that approximate what we might now call light opera. Part comic stereotyping, part romantic love story, part historical high drama, *The Indian Princess* not only propelled melodrama along on its sure path, but also inaugurated a taste for Indian plays.

One of those Indian plays, *Metamora, or The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829), was written for a competition held by the rising American actor Edwin Forrest. Seeking vehicles for his star status, Forrest sought to encourage local writers to provide him with new material, which he appropriated from the authors upon payment of prize money. While people like John Augustus Stone, the author of *Metamora*, or another Forrest prizewinner, Robert Montgomery Bird, often struggled financially, the man of the people, Forrest, made thousands of dollars from his portrayal of the tragic Indian chief Bird's Roman gladiator. Forrest's acting—muscular, loud, sometimes criticized as "rant"—brought him wildly enthusiastic partisans, especially among the mechanic classes and the street denizens of lower Manhattan, the b'hoys. Though Forrest usually acted in Shakespeare, his prize plays, and other stock dramas of the time, his audience might also see on the same bill with their hero other plays with lesser-known actors—farces, sketches about firemen, or, beginning in the 1840s, black-faced white performers in minstrel shows. In any event, Forrest tapped into a well of enthusiasm for theater that likes of which we might only see now at rock concerts and athletic events.

This new popularity of the stage meant larger theaters, with capacities in the low thousands. From narrow boxlike theaters in the eighteenth century, architects began to design and managers to build larger, wider structures with a proscenium stage, wide pit, and three tiers of box seats and galleries. Pricing for theaters was fairly uniform, with gallery seats the cheapest, often at 25 cents, pit seats going for 50 cents, and the boxes up to \$1.00 per seat. By the 1830s and 1840s, classes of patronage emerged in the decorum of seating. Single men, unmarried women with escorts, and critics sat in the seats in front of the stage, the pit. Apprentices, servants, slaves, and others of lower income inhabited the gallery in the rear of the theater, with some cities restricting gallery seating further in sections by race. The fashionable set held the first tier of boxes lining the sides of the house; respectable middle families sat in the second tier; and the third tier, ironically, given the moralism of many of the plays, welcomed prostitutes and their clients. Indeed, the third tier had its own special entryway that allowed the streetwalkers early access, well before the plays began—and convenient exit, as the women took their customers to local boardinghouses or hotels for assignations during the show (Johnson). Thus parents could take young people to the theater and ignore, in Victorian fashion, the selling of bodies going on just above their heads.

To be sure, despite the success of plays featuring American themes and subjects, the early nineteenth-century stage still presented large numbers of costume dramas about the long ago and the far away. Retread versions of Pixérécourt melodramas, or new melodramatically tinged tragedies, like the hits from the British writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton (*The Lady of Lyons*, *Richelieu*), continued to prove popular with audiences and actors alike. One could find buried in Bird's *The Gladiator* the language of radical democracy or see in Mowatt's *Fashion* a gentle tweak at the parvenu class, but f

the most part, American playwrights stayed clear of engaging controversial subjects of the day head on.

By the 1840s, however, some subjects were becoming unavoidable. One of those was temperance. After rather modest beginnings before 1820, by the mid-1830s, several societies made stopping the public thirst for alcohol their priority. Appeals to fear of drunken immigrants were coupled with the dread of domestic instability in the middling classes brought about by alcohol abuse. Temperance preachers and organizations galvanized millions of Americans into forswearing the evils of drink as the act of repudiation was known, “taking the pledge.” When the actor-manager W. H. Smith saw that temperance played big with the same class of people who came to his theaters in Boston, he knew he had hit material on his hands. Indeed, after a fitful beginning, his drama *The Drunkard* launched a minor industry—the temperance play. Even so, the play itself was not politically very controversial. No one with a public reputation to maintain was in favor of drunkenness. Although topical, *The Drunkard* and its sister plays did not really confront a radicalizing theme.

All that changed when the stage took up the problem of slavery. One of the first authors to sensationalize slavery was black autobiographer, novelist, and playwright William Wells Brown. Having in an earlier book given Harriet Beecher Stowe the idea for a slave woman crossing an ice floe to freedom, Brown published a novel, *Clotel* (1853), that implicated Thomas Jefferson in the fathering of a child by a black slave. In 1858, his play, the first to be published by an African American, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom. A Drama in Five Acts*, appeared in Boston. Unfortunately, because the white-dominated theater of the time was not receptive to original work by black writers, other authors had already claimed the slavery field. Neither the novelty of its being written by an African American nor its subject was enough to earn the play more than a short run.

The real confrontation with slavery in the popular mind began with the publication of Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). With a rhetoric at once evangelical, satirical, and sentimental, Stowe’s text ripped through the American reading public—in the words of David Crockett’s “A Pretty Predicament”—“like a pint of whiskey among forty men.” That a work which forced Americans to face up to slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act could generate huge sales was not lost on playwrights. Even before the novel was finished (it was first published serially), playwrights were already at work on stage versions. One of the most successful and most faithful to Stowe’s text was George L. Aiken’s play; with a run of over three hundred nights, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* stimulated playhouse owners and actors alike to see that topicality could pay off.

Other playwrights than Aiken could see gold in American issues. The Irish playwright Dion Boucicault, with a string of London successes behind him, came to New York in 1853 to try his luck in the United States. With *The Poor of New York* (1857), an Englished and Americanized version of the French urban melodrama *Les Pauvres de Paris* (1856), by Eugène Nus and Edouard Brisebarre, Boucicault hit his stride. Combining the usual domestic plot with an exposé of urban poverty, adding a thrilling sequence of scenes that culminates in a spectacular fire of a rooming house in Manhattan, and bringing on those city favorites, the firemen, Boucicault showed his skill at adaptation to American circumstances.

Boucicault again absorbed the topical when he mounted his own slave melodrama, *The Octoroon*, in 1859. With a splendid cast that included his wife, Agnes Robertson, and the future star of *Rip Van Winkle*, Joseph Jefferson, as well as himself, Boucicault borrowed elements from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, minstrel shows, and his earlier pyrotechnic hit to fashion a story about a doomed young woman. One-eighth African by blood, the character Zoe came to embody one of the stock figures in literature by this time, the tragic mulatta. As tensions concerning slavery had grown to the rabid pitch of the late

1850s, Boucicault knew his play would be controversial. As a man of the theater, however, he also knew that he could not afford to alienate one-half of his audience—and New York had a large number of pro-slavery inhabitants and visitors in its borders. As Jefferson later described it, the play tried to please both abolitionist and antiabolitionist adherents, but in fact was “noncommittal” (214).

Thus, even in embracing the topical, antebellum American playwrights refused by and large to make their plays vehicles for political position or ideological commitment. No longer just an amateur activity, theater in America was business—big business. The kind of overt partisanship seen in the Revolutionary closet dramas could not be maintained on stage even a few years after the war. Fear of customer defection led to a consumer-driven dramatic culture. In a world swirling with contentious political rhetoric, financial panics, and controversies of all kinds, the mainstream stage saw its bread buttered in appealing to the subpolitical, “universal,” desire among theater patrons to laugh or cry—to be entertained.

Reading Early American Drama

While the early American theater may not have taken the lead in facing the difficult subjects of the day, its documents and history provide a rich source of insight into American culture then and now. For twenty-first-century readers of plays from the period before 1860, however, access to the nuance and signification of elements in the texts may not be easy. When plays from the period are revived they are often played in a camp style. I recall from my own childhood, through cartoons like “Dudley Do-Right of the Mounties” and television shows like *Fractured Flickers*, how gestures and plots associated with melodrama (which silent films carried on to a large degree) were routinely held up to ridicule. Over years of exposure to that kind of mockery, we come to assume that audiences from the late 1700s or 1800s were simpletons, with no aesthetic sensibility, and that actors were no better than clowns, without method or ability other than that connected to exaggeration. As for the playwrights, their work for decades was considered too awful, or too unintentionally funny, to be rated as literature. Yet, at the same time, we admire the poetry and fiction of people like Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and James—all habitués, at one period or another in their lives, of the stages that mounted the plays in this volume.

In fact, one of the points I wish to make is that to understand the rest of American literature, one has to understand its drama and theater. Of all entertainments, theater was perhaps the closest to a universal experience for most Americans. Plays and players were everywhere, from the cities to the towns and villages to frontier saloons. Though both men traveled widely and appeared before audiences over much of the United States, Edwin Forrest was far better known to the public than Ralph Waldo Emerson. When a transplanted New England woman wrote to her friend in Massachusetts in 1839, she felt that her new home of Mobile, Alabama, was, in the eyes of many, “barbarous country,” but all that would change next week: “[W]e are to have Forrest and it is the first time he ever played in Mobile, the inhabitants are preparing for quite a sensation” (Lydia Emerson could cause a stir at Harvard Divinity School and send Poe into a froth, but as for exciting bright and culturally active people like Lydia, Edwin Forrest would be much more likely in 1839 to carry the day.

Actors

Long before the star system reigned in Hollywood, it dominated the American theater. If Forrest was the first of the big American stars, imported actors had played that role much earlier. As we note above with Royall Tyler, playwrights learned to write with stars in mind. *The Contrast* can be said to feature the best-developed stage Yankee character to date, Jonathan, but Jonathan's particular dimensions take their shape from the comic gifts of the actor for whom the role was designed, Thomas Wignell. While we as readers may be tempted to see Jonathan as low relief in a comedy of upper-class manners, contemporary audiences mostly remembered Jonathan when they thought of the play late in the century. Short, pugnacious on stage, and well known, Wignell could exploit his comic persona fully in the figure of the naïve waiter to Colonel Manly. Tyler even assigned the rights of the play to Wignell, and after its first New York appearance in 1787, it was Wignell's play.

But we also need to remember that Wignell was British by birth. In other words, in the late eighteenth-century theater, characters that we might view as quintessentially American might be acted by persons whose commitment to America was more monetary than anything else. There are always ironies in any theater when actors play roles nothing like themselves, but at a time when national sympathies were tender, the casting of a Brit to play Jonathan, a "true-blue son of liberty," has special resonance. For many American theatergoers, "lately played in London" meant "worth going to see." And while one might expect during the colonial period that the first professionals would be immigrants or visitors, as was the case, this trend does not stop with independence. Charles Mathews, another comic actor, also perfected a Yankee persona that he played to great applause both in the United States and in England during the 1820s (Hodge, 60-77). George Frederick Cooke, Edmund Kean, Charles Kemble, Fanny Kemble, Junius Brutus Booth, John Durang, Ellen Tree, and William Macready are some of the actors from the British Isles or other parts of Europe who came to conquer the seemingly provincial stages of America. Some stayed to form family dynasties, as with Booth. Others fled for their lives, as Macready did after his rivalry with Forrest led to the bloody Astor Place Riot in New York in 1849. Thus, even in the 1830s and 1840s, when American actors were getting a foothold on fame, foreign plays and actors still carried the cachet of quality for American audiences.

Not surprisingly, some American theater people saw travel in the other direction as the key to fame. John Howard Payne, an actor and playwright whose first drama, *Julia*, was performed when he was not yet fifteen, journeyed to England and stayed for many years, writing plays that appealed to British taste. Like his contemporary, friend, and sometime collaborator, the prose writer Washington Irving (who likewise gained fame first overseas, then reimported it to his native country), Payne designed his texts with English audiences in mind. In Payne's case, that meant English actors as well. Thus, we have the situation of an American writer constructing a play, *Charles the Second, or The Mercurial Monarch* (1824), for the London theater, from where it could be brought to New York a few months later and presented as having been successful overseas. But for a rising generation of American playwrights, Payne's could only be a transitional strategy (Meserve, *Emerging*, 280-90).

It was Forrest who would provide a catalyst for a more peculiarly American style of drama. Meanwhile, he was also a star, in competition with British leading actors for the large purses that awaited the successful. Behind the curtain, the balance of power in the 1830s favored the star actor whose name alone was a draw, and, often secondarily, the manager, who controlled the purse strings. The whole style of acting in the period put the star always in the limelight or gaslight. Much of the production relied on the star's ability to achieve *points*. Those points were certain gestures

enunciations of certain words or phrases that would gain the most applause. Indeed, stars were used being applauded in the middle of a scene, not just at intermission and the end of the play. To score point, the actor would move to center front stage, speak lines or emote directly to the audience, and essence form a bond with the customers more than with the player's colleagues on the stage (Booth 125). These points were part of the actor's *business*—that is, the peculiarities of playing a role, often inherited from other successful interpreters of the same role. The power of the star, the insistence that a play have several opportunities for points, and the inclusion of other actor-inspired stage business put the writer of the play into eclipse.

But the playwright was not the only person of the theater left out in the cold when the house receipts were tallied. The star system worked terribly to the disadvantage of the subordinate actors. Most urban theaters had house casts who filled all but the leading roles. The stars traveled about, coming in town to play *Virginius*, for example, while the local cast would round out the parts. Often, the house cast was uneven in quality, and plays were edited by actors or managers to feature the star at the expense of the others onstage. The idea of ensemble acting was rarely used. Thus, the star, especially if egocentric, would virtually ignore the rest of the cast; instead, he or she would face the audience and intone or emote or gesticulate, leaving the others in a rear tableau as if they were no more than props. What seem to us now as flat characterizations in the minor roles of nineteenth-century dramas are, by design, to enable the star literally to stand out from the crowd.

If the house cast was often overshadowed by the star, the remainder of the corps were plunged into dingy obscurity. Every large theater had, in addition to its regulars, who took named parts, a group of *supernumeraries*, who took the anonymous roles of “citizens, soldiers, etc.” Paid only a minimum wage, the “supers” were often forced to take additional employment backstage as carpenters, scenery painters, seamstresses, and the like. Despite their loyalty to the theatrical life, and no doubt the hope of some to graduate to the house cast, the supernumeraries most probably lived in grinding poverty made the more apparent by contrast to the splendid style in which the stars traveled.

Also forced to endure wretched conditions was another theatrical underclass, the ballet girls. The young women would be used in the airy productions, the pantomimes and light entertainments designed to alleviate any gloom that the main play might inspire. If a major play called for fairies or sprites, the manager would ask his or her corps de ballet to fill those roles. The women who danced the corps not only struggled against poverty, but also exposed themselves to a variety of dangers. Often hoisted by ropes and wires in simulated flight, ballet girls could be caught in the machinery or burned by gas lamps, even killed in doing their part. At the same time, they suffered more than other actors in general a reputation for sexual profligacy. In George Lippard's novel *The Quaker City* (1845), one cynical member of a private men's club devoted to sensual pleasures speaks loosely about ballet girls and actresses he can blackmail into having sex. Lippard's readers would understand this characterization of Buzby Poodle not only as an exploiter but also as one who traffics in the kind of flesh peddling tied to the low reputation of this class of theatrical personage.

The particular problems faced by the young women in the ballet corps reflect difficulties faced by actresses in general on the early American stage. Although they had been allowed on stage in England since the reopening of the theaters in the Restoration (1660) and were never formally banned from American stages, women—like the theater in general—often had to struggle for a good reputation. Even to the end of the period covered by this volume, the position of women was never so secure that an actress could assume her professional expertise would be enough to wipe away entirely the prejudices held by the public against women in the theater.

One way to counter the prejudice was for actresses to use only their married title and the

husbands' names. Frequently, actresses were married to actors; in the playbill, one would see "Mr. C. Germon" in the list of male characters at the top and "Mrs. G. C. Germon" in the list of female characters below. This obliteration of name served the purpose of keeping the married actress above suspicion of looseness, for her life's interests would be seen as absorbed in the figure of her husband. For unmarried women, the situation was potentially more precarious, as we have seen with the ball girls. However, this was often overcome by the creation of the *ingenue*, the childlike woman whose innocence was so palpable to the audience that the "Miss" in front of her name in the cast list could only connote unassailable purity. The persona projected by the silent film actress Lillian Gish is directly connected to a long history on the nineteenth-century stage of such female roles.

Not all actresses were bound by this narrow definition. One of the great actresses of the period was Charlotte Cushman, a versatile and powerful performer who could play heroines and *breeches* parts—cross-dressed as Hamlet or some other male character. But Cushman's international fame, financial reward, and ability to choose roles were more the exception than the rule. More typical of the lot of the actress was Eliza Arnold, a touring professional at the turn of the century. Slight of build, with a passable, sweet singing voice—in other words, projecting that image of girlish innocence so cultivated by the insecure stage of the time—Eliza proved a favorite in many of the cities her company visited. The itinerant life, however, forced a woman to have to choose an actor or other theatrical person as a spouse, for reasons of travel, money—she could offer no dowry to a marriage—and reputation. In Eliza Arnold's case, she settled for a David Poe, a strolling player like herself but with less acting ability. After he disappeared, fleeing catcalls and domestic responsibilities, she was left in charge of her two children. Vulnerable to sickness and exhaustion, Eliza Poe died during a tour in Richmond—an event probably watched by her two-year-old son, Edgar—one more casualty to an often grueling and unforgiving profession (Shockley; Silverman).

Even so, some women worked to expand possibilities for their sex on stage. Anna Cora Mowatt, fresh from her success as a playwright, launched a career as an actress in 1845 from financial necessity. Although she, like her predecessor Eliza Arnold Poe, projected the image of the slight and sweet young woman, she brought to the profession her social position and an ability to articulate what sort of role it was proper for a woman to play. Her greatest success was her first role, as Pauline Deschappelles in Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons*, which she played with dignity, modesty, and naturalistic restraint. While the vehicles available for women often called for fainting, shrieking, and hand-wringing passivity, Mowatt in her acting sought to redirect the audience's attention to a woman's real strength rather than playacted weakness. If dramas to suit her style did not come readily from playwrights, she at least paved the way for a differing conception of woman on stage in later generations of actors and writers.

It is important to recognize that when playwrights set out to pen works that could be acted, they were bound by the reigning ideas of what images actors and actresses should project; the personalities of the popular actors of the period; and a complex system of hiring in theaters that defined actors by type. Thus, a stock company would hire actors to fit these types, as listed by Dion Boucicault:

A leading man, leading juvenile man, heavy man [who played villains], first old man, first low comedian, walking gentleman, second old man and utility, second low comedian and character actor, second walking gentleman and utility, leading woman, leading juvenile woman, heavy woman, first old woman, first chambermaid, walking lady, second old woman and utility, second chambermaid and character actress, second walking lady and utility walking lady. (Booth, 126)

This is not the end of it, but one can see how restrictive such a scheme would have been for actors

and playwrights alike. For the actor, one could get a position not by being “a good actor” but by being “a walking lady” role—someone attractive enough to be the friend to the leading lady but one who would not steal her thunder or tears. For playwrights, the construction of the drama must be forged to meet casting realities. Thus we cannot realistically expect from dramas in the period covered by this collection to find more than one or two developed characters in each play—acting companies would not have had the personnel or the personalities to allow such a thing.

Managers and Audiences

The American theatrical system functioned in ways very similar to its English counterpart. There was really no “artistic” director—rarely was the term *director* used. Instead, power was vested in stars, actors, in managers, and in the audience. Theater owners did not necessarily involve themselves with actual production; that was left to the lessee, the manager. Sometimes the manager was also an actor, but the basic responsibilities assumed by the manager would now be parceled out to several people. *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, what Michael Booth describes for the British theatrical manager of the period applies as well to the American:

He chose actors and cast them in each play; he selected key administrative, backstage and front-of-house staff. He was responsible for the weekly salary bill for all personnel before and behind the curtain. . . . He decided which plays were to be performed and scheduled them, frequently cutting and rearranging the texts to suit the exigencies of production and the acting capabilities of his company. He usually superintended rehearsals, and if he were an actor performed leading roles in a part of the repertory. A myriad of major and minor matters, both artistic and administrative, occupied his attention. He read plays, dealt with rejected authors, interviewed acting applicants, kept an eye on the door-keepers and the box-office staff, machinery, and auditorium. (28-29)

Depending on seniority in the business and degree of financial backing, the manager could be little more than a conduit for stars or a petty tyrant. At any rate, the manager was above all a person of business, whose job was to run a profitable enterprise and, by extension, please the customer.

When assessing the theater of the nineteenth century, historians have often looked for someone or something to *blame* for it. Actors, managers, and audiences all receive their share of the blame. Certainly, the theater was guided by market forces; without patrons or sponsors, those responsible for mounting plays had to acknowledge the taste of the day. For the scrupulous manager, this need to keep an eye on the bottom line while at the same time trying to promote the development of the drama in America led to difficult choices. The great managers of the time—William Wood, William Henry Smith, Francis Courtney Wemyss—were, in fact, sensitive to the artistic dilemma that an art governed by appeal to mass taste implied.

In a letter of advice to a newer counterpart, a seasoned manager in 1830 expressed the problem thus:

It is evident that the predilection for the Drama has declined in this country, and that Theatrical taste is getting exceedingly bad. The former is doubtless owing to the scarcity of *stock* talent at any one establishment, consequent upon the *undue increase* of Theatres, and the latter (the bad taste) attributable to the frequent introduction of pieces “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”

please those who are fond only of “inexplicable dumb show and noise,” and who in consequence of the present low price of admission to the Theatres form much the largest portion of an audience.

For this manager, the question came down to the theater’s role in the creation of taste. Are theaters only passive instruments, feeding an “*existing* taste” that is demonstrably low? Or ought the stage be elevating that taste, seeing the appeal to “*vulgar*” taste as only “*temporary*”?

His response to his own questions—too long to be printed or even summarized in its entirety here—shows at least one future direction for the theater: while providing such entertainments as keep customers coming to the playhouse, the manager must cultivate a new audience “whose taste is yet to be formed . . . the young of the middling orders of society.” In other words, while the present demands the broadest possible appeal, the future looks to the rising bourgeoisie, the new middle class, to keep the theater afloat. The manager’s advice to his counterpart hinges on the principle that it is “much more difficult . . . to satisfy an individual of refinement with a low representation than it is to please a generally vulgar man with a chaste performance” (W.). As Bruce McConachie explains in *Melodramatic Formations*, audience power during the period 1820 to 1870 gradually shifts from the “gallery gods,” as the cheap-seat occupants were called, to those who were willing to pay more to make the theater a shrine to their own rising socioeconomic status. That change in taste and power from audiences from broadly popular to more narrowly middle class would by the end of the Civil War have been nearly complete.

In the meantime, however, the letter-writing manager makes clear who *he* thinks has power: the lowbrow audience (Levine). While managers may have felt obliged to provide British productions because they carried the cachet of having been popular in London, they also had to meet the taste for variety. With frequent changes of bill the norm in the earlier part of the period, managers were by necessity forced to consider American products (Grimsted, 144-45). Perhaps it is fair to say that popular demand inspired managers to provide both the latest hit from London (which was often a translated version of the latest hit from Paris) and a steady diet of sketches, pantomimes, and plays by American authors. The real tension was not so much British versus American plays as between a manager’s accepting audience taste or trying to influence or alter it by playhouse policy and practice.

Construction of Plays

Although writers and critics alike deplored the taste of their own time, the plays of the period often reflect a consistent aesthetic with common features. One important dimension of play construction during the period was the *scenery*. Tyler’s *The Contrast* was staged in New York with only a few props—chairs, a table—and *flats*, painted scenery that could be slid into place from the sides or *wings*, with a background painting. As a comedy of manners, the play focuses on character interaction, soliloquies, and comic business associated with Jonathan. Later plays demanded increasingly complex stage materials—which often took audience interest away from character and dialogue. Machines that raised or lowered characters to show flight; more sophisticated use of trap doors, as in Boucicault’s famous lateral trap used in the ghost scene of *The Corsican Brothers*; construction of hills and mountains; water effects, including the ice floe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; and, finally, safer and more elaborate pyrotechnics, as in the burning of the ship in *The Octoroon*—all of these technical developments worked to shape what playwrights would or could do in the construction of their plays.

Music is a second component of almost all productions during this period. In *The Contrast*, Mar-

sings the well-known air about the noble Indian Alknomook, and, of course, in *The Indian Princes* nearly every major character sings a song or duet. But the common use of music in ordinary play especially after 1800, was to heighten mood, introduce character, or otherwise add to the sensual effects of the production. The use of mood music in modern films is directly traceable to the stage practice, developed in France in the late 1700s, of layering scenes with music that underscored what was happening or being said, not as accompaniment for song. Silent films continued the tradition of having a live orchestra or organist interpret the visuals; indeed, the power generated by a well-crafted silent film and a seriously rendered live musical score indicates for us how superfluous the dialogue must have been for many of the more spectacular productions of the nineteenth-century stage. Thus, when we read the texts written for the early American theater, we need to imagine other sounds than the voices of actors.

Even though playwrights wrote for a theater that demanded increasingly elaborate visual and aural effects in production, a third element, *dialogue*, was still the stuff around which the best plays were constructed. As many authors discovered, however, their texts were often chopped into unrecognizable bits during the reading rehearsals or were altered *ad libitum* by actors who had some business to do or points to gain by going outside the text. Even Shakespeare's dramas suffered the indignities of butchered dialogue for the sake of acting or scenic effect. Given the realities of production, playwrights constructed dialogue frequently as *declamation* rather than interaction. This style suited the star actor's need to intone to the audience, but it also matched the reigning notion that plays gained seriousness by being Romanized. The opening of Bird's *The Gladiator* shows the stylized Phasarius speak three long passages, ostensibly to his interlocutor Ænomaiis, but really to us, to sustain the scene. Ænomaiis's lines are little more than a prompt to his longer-winded companion, but no one in the audience expects anything different. When the hero, Spartacus, enters chained later in act 1, and apparently talks to Lentulus and Bracchius, the latter says, "Observe him.—He mutters to himself." Particularly in tragic or highly melodramatic plays, we can expect many of the major speeches spoken as if the character is unaware that other figures inhabit the same stage space.

In plays with more contemporary settings or with comic scenes, the dialogue often involves the kinds of jokes popularized in the twentieth century by people like Abbott and Costello or those still heard in sitcoms. Indeed, the vaudeville traditions of straight man and jester go back to the minstrel shows and well before. In *The Contrast*, for instance, Jessamy, the servant imitator of his rake master Dimple, plays straight man to the naïve Jonathan, feeding him setup lines for Jonathan's famous misinterpretations of meeting the prostitute, courting Jenny, and attending the play. In a later social comedy, Mowatt's *Fashion*, much of the dialogue plays into Mrs. Tiffany's malaprop French, with bad puns and tortured expressions in abundance. As in Tyler's play, she has a servant imitator, in this case, the clever but befuddled black servant Zeke (rechristened Adolph), who also provides the sort of linguistic humor found in the minstrel shows. Those latter productions, originally a semicircle of white men in blackface, developed a style of comic dialogue whereby the straight man, the *interlocutor*, would create opportunities for the *end men*, called Tambo and Bones, to tell jokes or mispronounce something. Both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon* owe some of their comic dialogue to the minstrel shows. Occasionally, playwrights will use quick repartee, as in the comic *stichomythia* between Charlotte and Letitia in *The Contrast*. But, overall, the dominant comic dialogue style in American drama is based on use of slang, folk speech, mispronunciation, and double entendre.

A fourth element is *plot*. The same basic considerations for comedies or tragedies still apply to plays in those forms. In the comedies of manners, vice is corrected or nonviolently expelled, virtue rewarded through marriage or other affirmation of a social institution. In tragedies, the protagonist

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