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## The State of the Art: The American Theatrical Scene in the 1880s

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American dramatic realism has consistently been about twenty years behind fictional realism in its development, but when theater historians look back, they generally chart the first impetus toward realism from theatrical and dramatic trends that developed during the late 1870s and early 1880s. During the eighties literary realism took its place as the dominant force in American letters. This was the decade of *A Modern Instance* and *Portrait of a Lady*, *Life on the Mississippi* and *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Bostonians*. It was also the decade that accounted for Edwin Cady's title for the second volume of his William Dean Howells biography, *The Realist at War*. The serialization of Howells's *Modern Instance* and Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* in 1881 established both authors as major novelists in the realistic mode. Howells's article "Henry James, Jr." in the November 1882 *Century* linked the two writers firmly together in the minds of the public. By 1883, "James-and-Howells" had become the "Siamese Twins of Realism,"<sup>1</sup> and James complained that articles attacking them were "as thick as blackberries."<sup>2</sup> Both writers were well-known and outspoken literary critics, and both were under fire – Howells for having said that realistic fiction was a "finer art"<sup>3</sup> than that of Dickens and Thackeray, and James for having been the object of his praise. Although Howells remained the more aggressive spokesman for realism, James was a finer articulator of its aesthetic principles. Both men are known best for their fiction and their writing about fiction, but both were also prolific, though commercially unsuccessful, playwrights and incisive critics of the theater and drama.

Henry James's drama criticism began with a review from Paris in 1872. Throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties, it emerged in a steady stream from London, New York, and Boston, as well as Paris, and it was eventually collected by Allan Wade into a volume called *The Scenic Art* (1948). Although Howells's drama criticism has not been published in a body, it is more abundant than James's. Beginning with his

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long essay on “Recent Italian Comedy” in 1864, Howells’s writings on the drama include more than sixty essays and reviews. When he began writing his columns for the Harper magazines in 1886, he included regular reviews of the New York theater season – reviews liberally interspersed with theoretical discussion of the drama from a consciously realistic point of view.

The study of American literary realism’s connection with American drama begins naturally with these two writers, who were the chief spokesmen for, as well as practitioners of, realism in both fiction and drama, and it begins naturally during the early eighties, when they were forced to articulate realism’s aesthetic principles. To understand what the realistic critics were saying about the plays they saw during the eighties, and about the acting and stagecraft used in mounting the plays, it is important for us, at a century’s remove from the theater that lived for them, to consider the context carefully. Their critical standards about everything from the play’s structure to the set’s furniture were tied to their own experience in the theater. James’s standards were particularly complicated by his early exposure to the Théâtre Français and the London theaters, as well as those of Boston and New York.

As a base from which to begin, then, the New York stage during the 1879–80 season has clear advantages. New York is, of course, the central focus for American theater historians, and a wealth of information is available both on its theaters and on the plays produced in them. The year 1879–80 was not only the beginning of that crucial decade for literary realism in America, it was also a season that proved crucial for the introduction of realism in the theater. It was the season when Steele Mackaye’s *Hazel Kirke*, recognized by theater historians as a watershed in the development of American dramatic realism, was first produced. It was the season when Mackaye’s technically advanced Madison Square Theatre opened and when Augustin Daly began his reign as manager and promoter of realistic ensemble acting at Daly’s Theatre. It was the season when James A. Herne (The “American Ibsen”) made his first appearances in New York. Finally, the 1879–80 season marks a convenient midpoint between James’s first review of a New York season (1875) and Howells’s (1886). An overview of the New York theater in this season should yield a good understanding both of what the realist expected and of what he hoped for from the American theater as realism was about to become the artistic standard for American letters.

#### THE PLAYS

The American theater during the nineteenth century was the nation’s major form of popular entertainment. The “legitimate drama” was a minor enterprise among the vast array of popular entertainments

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available in New York theaters during the 1879–80 season. There were minstrel and vaudeville shows, circuses, burlesques, and “happy parties,” which exhibited the specialties of the variety troupes. The peculiarly American genre of the “extravaganza” (a combination of ballet troupe and chorus with a slim plot and as much “stocking” as American prudery would allow) shared the audience with Gilbert and Sullivan and Offenbach. These popular shows were as lavish as they were plentiful. Although they could not be considered in the same light as the legitimate drama of the time, they were enough of a presence in the theater for Howells to write a lengthy article bemoaning “The New Taste in Theatricals” for the *Atlantic*,<sup>4</sup> and he referred to them regularly in his reviews of the more serious drama.

Nearly as evident as these ephemeral popular shows were such perennial adaptations from French, English, and German melodrama as *The Two Orphans*, *Paul and Virginia*, *Louis XI*, *The Hunchback*, *Richelieu*, and *The Lady of Lyons*. There was a selection of standard comedies, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *The School for Scandal*, *London Assurance*, and *Our American Cousin*, as well as Dion Boucicault’s “Irish” plays, *The Shaughraun* and *The Colleen Bawn* (and a number of Irish-American imitations). There was also plenty of Shakespeare. Theater-goers in 1879–80 could see the likes of Edwin Booth and Adelaide Neilson in a range of Shakespeare from *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet* to *The Merchant of Venice*, *Cymbeline*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*.<sup>5</sup>

Historians and literary critics who are not specifically interested in American drama tend to assume that these foreign imports and adaptations accounted for all the literary drama in nineteenth-century American theater. Like most clichés, this notion has some truth to it. Until the International Copyright Law was passed in 1891, it was always more profitable for a manager to pirate a European play than to buy one from a native dramatist, particularly after 1865, when Congress passed a law giving the American playwright, “along with the sole right to print and publish the said composition, the sole right to act, perform, or represent the same.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, between 1865 and 1891, a manager could pirate a European drama but would have to pay for an American one, and because audiences generally were thought to prefer European sophistication and exoticism, the European play was usually the manager’s first choice. Consequently, there was little incentive for Americans to write plays. The offerings of the 1879–80 season show, however, that many American playwrights were simply spurred by the copyright situation to act and manage as well as write. Playwrights who were also managers, and actors when need be, during this season included Dion Boucicault, Denman Thompson, Edward Harrigan, Steele Mackaye, Augustin

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Daly, and James A. Herne. These managers and others also produced a surprising number of American plays. In all, approximately half the legitimate offerings in the ten most respected New York theaters for 1879–80 were American plays.

The American plays of the period, which reflect both American drama's history and its potential for development, fall naturally into six categories: the one-character vehicle; the play based on American history, legend, or literature; the melodrama; the local-color play; the Western play; and the drama of contemporary life. The first three types had a long history in America before 1880. The last three were somewhat younger and had not yet reached their full development. Each of the six has a direct bearing on the form literary realism was to take in American drama.

The one-character vehicle – the play written for a particular actor's portrayal of a particular character – has been a perennial presence in the American theater since the 1830s. It was then that the famous “Yankee” characters of James H. Hackett and George Handel Hill were created from the Yankee original of the type, Jonathan, in Royall Tyler's *Contrast* (1787). During the 1870s and 1880s, the most famous character role was Joe Jefferson's Rip Van Winkle, which he played for fifty years in a loose and constantly changing adaptation of Washington Irving's story. Other examples in the season were E. A. Sothorn's Lord Dundreary, based on the character in Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin*, Denman Thompson's Joshua Whitcomb, and Neil Burgess's Widow Bedott, all descendants of the “Yankee” character, although Burgess's was a female. None of these plays had any literary pretensions, but for the realist critics, even they presented some signs of hope for realism in the theater. They represented character types that were specifically American, and their popularity was evidence that America wanted to see itself represented on the stage, even at its most eccentric.

The play based on a subject in American history or American literature was also a long-familiar fixture on the American stage. Much of the earliest drama was based on the Revolution, and the Civil War was to figure in some of America's most important nineteenth-century drama. Bronson Howard's *Shenandoah* (1888), William Gillette's *Held by the Enemy* (1886) and *Secret Service* (1895), and James A. Herne's *Reverend Griffith Davenport* (1889) prepared the way for Augustus Thomas's *Copperhead* (1918) and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). The turn of the century saw a particular vogue of such historical pieces as Clyde Fitch's *Nathan Hale* (1898) and *Barbara Frietchie* (1899), but the 1879–80 season featured only “literary” dramas of this type: *Wolfert's Roost, or A Legend of Sleepy Hollow*; *Rip Van Winkle*; and America's most produced play, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Again, it was the particularly Ameri-

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can quality of these pieces that became important to the realists. They represent not only American literature but American life as well.

Melodrama was still the standard fare of the American theatergoer in 1879. With its conventional characters, its oversimplified personifications of good and evil, its contrived plot, its cultivation of the exotic, its sensationalism in staging, and its overall attempt to make the false seem true, the melodrama became the *bête noire* of the realist theater critic. His target was usually the foreign import, but there were plenty of native products as well, and Howells in particular became adept at separating the elements of realism from the old melodramatic conventions in these American plays, to praise the one and excoriate the other. The 1879–80 season saw productions of Boucicault's proven melodrama *The Octoroon* (1859), as well as his new *Rescued, or A Girl's Romance* and Bartley Campbell's *Fairfax* and *The Galley Slave*, none of which had anything to contribute to the development of realism. Steele Mackaye's *Hazel Kirke*, however, was the event of the theatrical season, eventually completing a two-year run of 486 performances. Although *Hazel Kirke* cannot be called anything but melodrama, its lack of a conventional villain, its attempt at natural dialogue, and its treatment of "ordinary" people distinguish it from the typical example of its genre.

*Hazel Kirke* is perhaps most interesting for the important place theater historians have given it in realism's development, for it offers little that seems realistic today. Its plot is certainly melodramatic. Dunstan Kirke is a miller who has been saved from financial ruin seven years before the events of the play by the local squire, Aaron Rodney. Out of gratitude, both Kirke and his daughter Hazel, then fourteen, agreed to an arrangement whereby Hazel has been educated and prepared to be Aaron's wife. As the play opens, Hazel, now twenty-one, has fallen in love with Arthur Carrington, Lord Travers, whom Kirke has saved from drowning in the millpond and who has now spent six weeks "recuperating" with the Kirkes. Arthur returns Hazel's love but conceals both it and his noble birth out of respect for Hazel's betrothal to Aaron Rodney and his own promise to his mother that he would marry Lady Maude, whose fortune his father has "wrongfully used and lost."<sup>7</sup> Aaron is beginning to suspect Hazel's and Arthur's affection for each other when the pleasantly demented Pittacus Green, who just happens to have saved Arthur's life on a tiger hunt in India a few years previously, arrives at the mill, falls in love with Hazel's cousin Dolly at first sight, and after hearing Hazel's story from her, declares, "I'm tempted to play a new rôle, turn dramatist in real life! We've only to manage a little to make the play what we please. There's the stern father, Dunstan Kirke; the heavy villain, old Rod; the pretty victim, Hazel Kirke; the scheming cousin, that's you [Dolly]; the good-natured idiotic busy-body [Pittacus himself]" (444).

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This dialogue reveals Mackaye's ironic attitude toward his melodramatic conventions, but he was a popular playwright who knew well how to "manage a little to make the play what we please."

The events that follow suggest nothing if not sensationalism and contrivance. Kirke misunderstands when his daughter confesses her love for Arthur, and he orders her from the house, thinking his "child avows dishonor." There is a misunderstanding about whether the subsequent marriage in Scotland of Hazel and Arthur is valid, and Hazel runs away in humiliation, having been told by Arthur's mother that it was Arthur who had deceived her about their marriage. Arthur's mother dies on the spot (from the strain) at the end of Act II. Hazel returns to the mill, and, mistakenly thinking that her father refuses to forgive her, tries to drown herself in the millpond. As Act III closes, her father faints because, having been struck blind by grief, he cannot save her. Hazel is saved by a servant boy, who has walked four hundred miles just to be with her, and Arthur, who just happens to be standing on the riverbank at the time. After a letter arrives confirming that the marriage indeed took place in Scotland, that Hazel and Arthur are therefore legally married, and that Arthur's money has all gone to pay his debts to Lady Maude, there remains, in his words, "nothing but my own hands, my own brains, and the endless wealth of my love for [Hazel]" (470). In a final scene, Kirke forgives Hazel; the family is reunited; the union of Pittacus and Dolly, whose humorous courtship has periodically relieved the melodrama, is sealed; and Pittacus declaims an epilogue expressing the moral of the piece:

You guess the lesson we would fain instill,  
That human heart is more than human will. (471)

The only departure from melodramatic convention in this plot is the often cited absence of a villain.<sup>8</sup> As Pittacus reminds us, Aaron Rodney, Arthur's rival for possession of Hazel, is the natural villain. But Aaron does an unexpected turnabout when he learns from Hazel that she loves Arthur. Hazel asks his forgiveness, ending, "You do not hate me, then?" (450). Aaron's reply combines the self-sacrifice that melodrama usually demands only of women with the conventional tempered wisdom of the elderly man: "Hate ye? Aaron Rodney will never live to see the day he can hate ye. No, lass, I love ye still, God help me; love ye too well to ask anything save your own happiness. I only fear for what your father may do; you know how headstrong he is, and how wildly he rages at things he thinks are wrong" (450). Later, when Hazel believes her marriage to Arthur is a fraud, Aaron offers to make an honest woman of her: "I know all ye'd say, child: your heart has been another's – you could never give me a wife's love. Why, Hazel, dear, I do not ask it. If you will but

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marry me, it's only as a beloved daughter I will hold ye, a daughter I shall have the right to cherish and to guard" (466). Aaron could not be farther from the personification of motiveless evil that one expects of the rival in a melodrama, but this paragon of selflessness is nevertheless not much more believable than the melodramatic villain. Mackaye has simply substituted the withdrawing-parent figure of comedy for the villain of melodrama.

But even in this he has taken a step forward. He has dared to violate the conventions of melodrama and thus made his play less simpleminded than the typical melodramatic representations of personified goodness versus personified evil. *Hazel Kirke* does not allow the spectator the option of simply hissing the villain. To confront the impediment to the natural union of Hazel and Arthur is to confront not the personified evil of fantasy but the complicated evil of real life. It is not a single evil force in a community of good people that is at fault here but the evil of character that places the human heart at the mercy of the human will, as Pittacus Green would have it, or the evil of social conventions that allow parents to barter away their children in order to meet their pecuniary obligations and then believe they must hold to the bargain because of a perversely inflated ideal of honor. The slight shift in conventions that Mackaye refers to playfully through Pittacus marks a deeper shift in the drama's thematic focus that is a clear harbinger of the realistic movement soon to follow.

Beyond this shift, however, there is not much about the play that could be called realistic by today's standards. Aside from the absence of a villain, the chief element that critics have singled out is the dialogue, which Arthur Hobson Quinn calls "quiet" and "natural"<sup>9</sup> and Garff Wilson, "a fair approximation of colloquial speech."<sup>10</sup> The passages I have quoted should give an idea of Mackaye's moderately successful attempt to reproduce natural speech patterns. But the play also features an impossibly stogy Irish brogue and Scottish burr, many asides to the audience, and extremely artificial set pieces such as Hazel's soliloquy before her attempted suicide: "All is over; I know the worst now, and I know what I must do. I'll go, and there in the water that has brought so much misery to this home, I'll drown my sorrows and my sins. (*Going.*) Good-bye, old home – farewell, sweet memories, fond hopes – farewell, mother, father, life – life – life!" (467). At its core, *Hazel Kirke* is a sensational melodrama with an elaborately contrived and improbable yet conventionally predictable plot; flat characters in conventional roles; a platitudinous moral, which bears little relevance to the plot; stilted, stogy dialogue; and a setting that happens to be in England but could be anywhere if the plot device involving the Scottish border were not an element. To call this play realistic would be absurd after Ibsen and Shaw,

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O'Neill and Glaspell, Crothers and Rice, Behrman and Barry. But in the context of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; *The Drunkard, or The Fallen Saved*; and *The Octoroon* the epithet has some meaning.

The fourth type of American drama in the 1800s has been called the local-color play, after the similar development in fiction. The local-color play has a conventional plot structure derived from comedy or melodrama but is set in a specifically American locale with American types as characters. One trend, the depiction of urban lowlife, began as early as 1848 with Benjamin A. Baker's *Glance at New York*, which introduced the character Mose the Fireboy, who became the central figure in more than twenty plays about New York street life.<sup>11</sup> Its successors, such as Boucicault's *Poor of New York* (1857) and Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867), combined sensational adventure (a fire scene in the former, a hero tied to railroad tracks in the latter) with the local color of the street scene as a backdrop for its conventional melodramatic action. The type was represented in the 1879–80 season by several plays of the "Mulligan Series" by Edward Harrigan, who, along with Charles Hale Hoyt, represented New York's lowlife during the seventies and eighties. Howells praised Harrigan for creating ethnic types – Irish, German, Italian, and black – that rang true.<sup>12</sup> But his plots were the hackneyed structures of comedy, and if his characters represented some particular ethnic type on the surface, they represented some conventional comic type at bottom. The local color was laid on rather thin over ancient and well-worn dramatic conventions.

Harrigan admitted using "types and never individuals"<sup>13</sup> in creating his pictures of New York lowlife, but he insisted that they were types meticulously studied from life. Richard Moody reports that Harrigan "sat for hours on park benches, observing characters and copying snatches of dialogue"<sup>14</sup> and that he expended an extraordinary amount of energy to secure authentic costumes for his characters.<sup>15</sup> Howells compared his work to that of the Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni, whose roots were in *commedia dell'arte*, and recognized in it "the spring of a true American comedy, the beginning of things which may be great things."<sup>16</sup> Harrigan was to develop his own theoretical concept of realism a few years later, but a look at the first full-length play of the Mulligan series, *The Mulligan Guard Ball*, shows that he had a long way to go in 1879.

In a sense, it is even more unfair to characterize Harrigan's plays from the printed text alone than those of most other dramatists. Because the Mulligan series resembled a modern television situation comedy, with the same actors in the same parts,<sup>17</sup> a great deal of it depended on characterization, and a great deal of the action came out of rehearsal rather than the script. A sense of the stage business, however, emerges



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from the stage directions for Scene 7 of *The Mulligan Guard Ball*, which depicts the supper of roast pig after the ball:

*Rat works on from L. to R. Puter sings a hymn. Sim joins in. Rat crosses and Omnes pelt at it. Business. . . . All sit and pig business on table, Pig gets down and goes off. . . . Set [for a reel] formed again – Enter Caroline Williams – She attacks Puter – Primrose tackles her and a scrimmage ensues – during which enter Lochmuller and six butchers with cleavers. General melee and curtain.*<sup>18</sup>

“In constructing a plot,” Harrigan was to write ten years later, “I use one that is simple and natural – just like what happens around us every day.”<sup>19</sup> Times change. But what Harrigan referred to, and what Howells praised him for, was his use of real events in the lives of the people about whom he wrote. The play’s plot and business were so much malarkey. But the event of the dance or the picnic or the wake was real and recognizable to the audience. Similarly, despite Harrigan’s protests, his characters were not so much types as caricatures, but they were new to the stage as well as recognizably American.

In *The Mulligan Guard Ball* the main characters are Dan Mulligan, Harrigan’s “typical” pugnacious, impecunious, often inebriated Irishman; his wife, Cordelia, gullible but loving; and their son, Tommy, who wants to marry Katy Lochmuller, the daughter of Gustavus Lochmuller the butcher and his wife, Bridget, originally of County Cork. The supporting cast consists of various ethnic types: Sim Primrose and Brother Palestine Puter of the Ancient Order of Full Moons, “de Colored Secret Society, to Prevent de Irish from Riding on Horse Cars” (553); August Snider, the tailor; Mister Rosenfelt, who is in the garment business; and Mister Garlic, who owns Lyric Hall. The plot is as old and as simple as the Romeo-and-Juliet motif and the comedy of Menander. Mulligan and Lochmuller attempt to block the union of Katy and Tommy on ethnic grounds. Despite a discovery scene in the barbershop while the young people are planning their elopement, which is to take place on the night of the ball, they manage to carry it off anyway, and the after-the-ball supper becomes their wedding reception. Several subplots also punctuate the action, such as the rivalry of the Skidmores (the Full Moons’ military association) with the Mulligan Guards and Mulligan’s attempts to beat all the merchants out of their bills.

The play does not bear serious literary analysis, but some of its elements suggest future literary developments and nearly justify Howells’s designation, the “spring” of American comedy. The dialogue is not careful dialect, nor is it expressive of character, nor is it particularly entertaining humor, but it is colloquial. Nowhere in the serious drama of Harrigan’s contemporaries is there a speech with rhythms as natural as

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Tommy's complaint about his father: "The bill is all right, Mother, but what I'm kicking about is this. I fetched Katy up here, and he lights that funnel with navy tobacco, and what's the consequence? She sez, 'Tommy, I want to go home,' before I've chinned five minutes" (550). The settings are straight from the everyday life of the people Harrigan depicts: the barbershop, the dance hall, the kitchen, and the parlor. Although the plot is imposed on the daily lives of the characters rather than drawn from them, it is simple and unobtrusive; its events chiefly involve the tangential action, the shaving scenes and brawls; and the conversations of the characters, rather than the story line, provide the unity for the action. In fact, the play is written in seven scenes rather than the traditional three or five acts. This departure from convention led to A. M. Palmer's objection that Harrigan's plays were mere "prolongations of sketches," a charge that both Harrigan and Howells took the time to answer.<sup>20</sup>

The local-color play, as Harrigan developed it, was clearly a transitional mode for the drama in America. On its face, it is a ridiculous farce about impossible characters. But delve a little deeper and there are the beginnings of natural dialogue, recognizable types, and beyond the contrived plot, the reflection of everyday life in action. The two impressions mitigate each other. Harrigan's representation of life, the structured action of the play, is as old and conventional as one could find. It is so hackneyed, in fact, as not to be noticed, and this does not result from poverty of imagination on Harrigan's part. He took the major conventions for granted and worked at creating an illusion of reality from the drama's performance elements, from sets and clothing and diction. That he did so convincingly enough to impress such an adamant realist as Howells is evidence of the power these elements have, but that the play seems exaggerated and hollow today is stronger evidence of their limitations. Edward Harrigan was a convincing local colorist, but he was not a realist.

A second type of local-color play, the rural New England piece, was growing in popularity and would continue to do so throughout the nineteenth century. An offshoot of the Yankee play mentioned earlier, it had a broader scope and more detailed staging. *Joshua Whitcomb*, Denman Thompson's old-fashioned one-character vehicle, was at one end of the spectrum in 1880, and David Belasco and James A. Herne's *Hearts of Oak* was at the other. Belasco had pirated this play from an English melodrama called *The Mariner's Compass*. Then he and Herne set it in a New England fishing village and combined Herne's genius for small realistic touches in characterization with Belasco's genius for realistic staging.<sup>21</sup> The result was a captivating effect of local color that was to become Herne's hallmark, even in his later plays, *Margaret Fleming* (1890) and