Performing the American Frontier, 1870–1906

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Adobe Caslon 10.5/13pt *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Hall, Roger A.
Performing the American frontier, 1870–1906 / Roger A. Hall.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in American theatre and drama)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 79320 3
1. American drama – 19th century – History and criticism. 2. Frontier and pioneer life in literature. 3. American drama – 20th century – History and criticism. 4. American drama – West (U.S.) – History and criticism. 5. West (U.S.) – In literature. 6. Pioneers in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PS338.F76 H35 2001 812′.409355 – DC21 00-065138

ISBN 0 521 79320 3 hardback

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> Perhaps, after all, these Bowery playhouses were the "cradles of the American drama," though the hands that rocked them were very crude.
>
> George C. D. Odell, commenting on *Silver Knife; or, The Hunters of the Rocky Mountains* at the Bowery Theatre in New York in September 1859.

Celluloid preserves the images of the early movie cowboy heroes. Even in the twenty-first century, students of cinema know William S. Hart, "Bronco Billy" Anderson, Tom Mix, and Hoot Gibson through their film exploits. They are lionized as the pioneers of a new industry and a new art form, and the products they created are still visible. Later cowboy heroes such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers parlayed their movie and television success into enormous wealth, emerging as virtual icons of twentieth-century society – one as an owner of a baseball team, and the other with his name in restaurant lights from coast to coast.

The full-blown frontier images that these actors depicted, however, did not spring magically onto movie-house screens. Those images developed throughout the nineteenth century, with pockets of border drama in the 1830s and 1850s, and, from 1870 on, a constant stream of frontier plays. Artists such as Frederic Remington and Albert Bierstadt provided visual images of the frontier. Writers and poets including Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and Joaquin Miller celebrated the people of the plains, the mining towns, and the west coast. Pulp writers Prentiss Ingraham and Ned Buntline translated western events into the popular literature of the dime novel, and Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister supplied later upscale literary depiction. Still, words and pictures were not the only means of transmitting a vision of the American frontier. There was also action: the action of the stage.

In the winter of 1872, William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody arranged a hunting trip for the Grand Duke Alexis, the third son of Czar Alexander II. The previous year he had hosted a similar outing for an illustrious group of Americans that included James Gordon Bennett, editor of the *New York Herald*; Charles L. Wilson, editor of the *Chicago Evening Journal*; and other notables. These outings provided a variety of frontier experiences for the visitors. They met Indians and watched the natives hunt and dance. They themselves hunted elk and buffalo. They interacted with scouts and military heroes. They witnessed and participated in horse races and stagecoach runs. They viewed authentic western outfits and experimented with a variety of frontier firearms. They encountered first-hand the majestic western landscape. Through their activities and the trophies and memorabilia they brought home with them, these famous gentlemen purchased and assumed ownership of a piece of the West.

Ever since early New York settlers purchased Manhattan, the advancement of the frontier involved ownership and possession. Hunters and trappers wanted to capture skins, trophies, and pelts. Settlers wanted to own land. Miners wanted to acquire gold and silver. Those who moved into the frontier wanted to possess it, to own it in some way. Meanwhile, those who remained behind in the cities of the East could hardly assert ownership in the same way. They had no claim to the minerals, to the pelts, or to the soil.

There were, of course, other means. Not everyone could go west to be a scout, a soldier, or a miner. Not everyone could afford to hire guides to teach them the intricacies of the frontier. But in the late nineteenth century various opportunities existed for those who were not wealthy businessmen or foreign nobles and who wanted to buy a piece of the frontier. Anyone could own a vicarious parcel of western life through the writings of Harte or Twain. Young people could purchase a slice of border adventure through a dime novel. But reading, no matter how entertaining, had its limitations. For one, it was a solitary activity, without the intrinsic comradeship and interaction exhibited by an Indian tribe, a company of soldiers, or a wagon train. Furthermore, it lacked the primal sounds of horses' hooves, guns firing, and war-like yelps. It lacked the raw scents of gunsmoke and animals. Except for the occasional drawing, it lacked the visual exhilaration of scenic vistas and distinctive apparel. It lacked the reality of actual human beings engaged in live action. Theatre provided those sensory elements in a distinctive phenomenological experience, and the citizens of the East could stake their claim to a portion of the frontier simply by purchasing a ticket.

Readers of the *New York Herald*, for example, could follow the progress

of the Modoc War in 1873 and thus participate in the campaign as a solitary reader, but they were not physically engaged with the troop of soldiers who seized possession of the lava beds at Tule Lake. However, when those same patrons bought tickets to cheer Donald MacKay and the Warm Springs Indians reenacting the capture of Captain Jack and his band, they became actual group participants in the victory. Through the production, they claimed ownership of the territory; together with Donald MacKay they celebrated the seizure of the land. Frontier drama became, in essence, a contract between the playwrights and performers, as vendors, to sell to the audience, as buyers, a segment of the frontier experience.

But what kind of experience did that audience purchase? Here the waters become rather murky, for the late nineteenth century produced an outpouring of drama about the American West that provided an enormously wide range of possible experiences, from the chauvinistic to the sublime, and from the martial to the romantic. The plays placed on stage vivid pictures of the western landscape, sometimes quite realistically presented, and they adorned those pictures with the garments and the paraphernalia of the region. Within those pictures, they brought to life the cowboys, outlaws, natives, horses, and gunfire of the border lands.

With the immediacy that only live theatre can offer, these productions not only told stories of the border, but also showed them taking place. Here was Jesse James' horse escaping through the window of a house – the actual sights, sounds, and smells. Here – live on stage – was a frontier marksman shooting through the rope of an innocent man about to be hanged. Here were a horse and rider plunging from a bridge as it collapsed twenty feet above the stage floor. The jolting crack of rifles and revolvers and the authentic smell of gunsmoke permeated the theatres. For that reason, this study is not limited to textual analysis. It seeks to examine the whole dramatic experience, including elements of scenery, performance, and staging, as well as the written words.

The drama of the frontier as it was presented to eastern audiences in the late nineteenth century was certainly fictional, even when it sprang from actual events. It both perpetuated myths and provided realistic images. Theatrical presentations reinforced popular but misleading images of white settlers as victims of native populations, responding with violence only when provoked by savage atrocities. What is more, the theatre offered its images in a particularly compelling manner in that the elements it employed were so tangible – genuine heroes, horses, guns, and natives.

This study has several goals. A primary objective is to demonstrate the

great variety of subject matter and style represented by frontier drama, as well as the contradictory sets of meanings the frontier expressed. The American frontier was an area where the encroaching European culture confronted native populations and natural elements. This meeting of European culture with unfamiliar circumstances produced numerous conflicts, and not only that of whites versus native tribes. European settlers encountered earlier European settlers – especially the Spanish of the Southwest and the west coast – and their differences generated animosity. The encroaching culture also faced natural hazards in the vast and barren landscapes and severe weather conditions, as well as psychological and emotional factors including fear, anxiety, and loneliness spawned by those conditions. Most frontier plays, at least in the late nineteenth century, were set in the West, but since the frontier broke like a wave from the east coast to the west, authors set frontier or border plays – the terms were used interchangeably – in Virginia, New York, Tennessee, and anywhere else in the United States where a frontier had once existed.

Stuart Hyde, in his research into the representation of the West in drama, cites twelve hundred frontier plays written between 1849 and 1917, including Indian plays, mining plays, and cattle plays.[1] The works contained an extraordinarily broad cast of characters: not only cowboys and Indians peopled the landscape, but also soldiers, gunfighters, trappers, traders, scouts, guides, homesteaders, ranchers, lumberjacks, Mormons, miners, Chinese, gamblers, outlaws, Mexicans, dudes, law officers, wagon masters, stage drivers, and numerous individuals just looking for an opportunity or a second chance. The list included those bringing elements of eastern civilization to the border areas, especially teachers, shop owners, and preachers – representatives of the onrushing society set among the wilds of the frontier.

Although a few of the frontier plays were comedies, and some even satirized the conventions of other frontier plays, melodramas constituted the majority of the works. The primary characters in traditional melodrama included the hero, the heroine, the villain, and the comic. Naturally those leading lights had their supporters – the sidekick to the hero, the henchmen of the villain, and the confidante of the heroine, for example. The comic elements, sometimes connected to the main story but just as often staunchly extraneous, provided contrast and entertainment. While the stories of melodrama regularly and dynamically interlocked the hero, heroine, and villain, emphasis on the three was not necessarily equal, which led to vast differences in the tone of the plays. Some frontier melodramas placed

primary emphasis on the battles between the hero and the villain, while others focused on the burgeoning affection between the hero and the heroine.

Perhaps the most common image of a frontier play involves a hero brandishing a firearm and shooting menacing villains, usually natives. Those plays did exist, and, in fact, they formed one of the main threads of the genre. The category ranged from jingoistic plays featuring victory over native tribes to exhibitions of shooting stunts and the development of Wild West shows. While not all such plays included Native Americans, they all featured frenetic action, appeals to patriotism, and powerful displays of artillery. Many employed "red fire" – an impressive display of red-tinted gas flames used at climactic moments to represent a burning prairie or the torching of a settler's cabin. These "red-fire" plays seldom addressed the problems that the westward movement created, and they gave scant attention to the role of social institutions or of women, save as hostages. Rather, through vigorous and violent action, they signified victory over perceived threats to outposts of white society, and they confirmed the rightness of America's westward momentum and the dominance of white European male culture. Most such plays contained demonstrations of frontier skills including trick shooting or roping, and many incorporated animal stunts. In those plays that included Indian characters, white renegades frequently incited the indigenous peoples, or the "Indians" turned out to be whites in disguise. The natives almost always attacked whites and just as invariably came to a bad end. They constituted, for the most part, objects to be shot at like moving targets in a shooting gallery or, even worse, caricatures to be laughed at.

In most frontier plays, however, the main characters had little or no contact with native populations, and numerous frontier dramas employed gunfire sparingly, if at all. Such plays focused instead on a romantic and sentimental story between hero and heroine, which happened to be set on the frontier, and those plays constituted the second major thread in the development of frontier drama. The heroes were usually simple, rough, goodhearted men. The heroines were typically better educated and more refined. Heroes and heroines alike existed as morally outstanding individuals beset by compulsively evil villains. As the genre developed, some of the main characters exhibited flaws, including drinking, swearing, lying, and fornicating. Their basic moral strength, however, remained firm. Likewise, a few of the villains acquired redeeming traits – a sense of honor among thieves or a willingness to change their sinful ways. A few daring dramas pushed

the edges of convention and produced endings where a bad man reformed and got the girl; a fallen woman married and attained a happily-ever-after future; or a white married a Native American or Hispanic.

The romantic melodramas regularly addressed significant problems of ethnicity and race-consciousness, but they invariably found ways to avoid the implications of the issues or to sugarcoat the solutions. While they raised social questions, they ultimately confirmed white, European models just as the more flagrantly chauvinistic thrillers did.

The first type of melodrama, featuring sensational action, dominated the stages of the 1870s and early 1880s. Through the 1880s, however, romance and sentiment emerged as the more influential strain in theatres while action-packed frontier displays transferred to outdoor arenas. At the turn of the century, the most complete and sophisticated of the frontier plays successfully combined martial and romantic threads, suggesting in the process that the violence and social unconventionality inherent to the frontier are not only justifiable but necessary tactics for consummating the romance of the hero and heroine. Through this steely amalgamation of violence, rebellion, and romance, the hero and heroine achieve success and ensure the transmission of European culture.

The frontier landscape, while it did not influence every play, supplied a recurring motif for border dramas with its suggestion of beauty and majesty on a divine plane; it also suggested natural and psychological dangers.[2] In the less artistic romances, the dramas simply employed conventional melodramatic devices and placed the plot and characters in a border locale that had little apparent impact on the characters. In more complex romances the frontier setting meshed intrinsically with the characters and their actions and suggested that the freedom of the western setting generated anomalous situations that were reasonable even though they violated accepted social conventions. Occasionally the physical environment even engendered a thematic cleansing of past wrongs, serving as a purgatory from which characters emerged, their sins burned away in the fire of difficult circumstances. Although some touring productions used only what scenery was available at the theatres where they performed, many of the productions featured carefully designed sets that provided the audience with graphic visions of frontier locales. In addition, characters painted landscape pictures with words, referring almost hypnotically to the grandeur of the terrain.

The main characters of frontier drama were Americans of northern European descent. While the red-fire and revolver plays were predominantly male, in the romance category love affairs provided the central inter-

est, and females regularly played major roles. The productions treated nonwhites and foreigners in extremely conventional – that is to say, highly negative – ways. Many plays contained a Chinese man – never a Chinese woman – who usually washed laundry and appeared primarily to generate laughter. Although fodder for comedy, the Chinese were generally depicted as hard-working and honest, and occasionally they played a significant role in resolving the plot. Blacks – again, generally male and, of course, played by whites in black makeup – were also employed for comic effect or for musical interludes. They were usually portrayed as slow-witted and afraid of the dangers of their western surroundings. The Irish – males and females – were played for comedy, and the Irish males almost always drank excessively. The English were typically portrayed as effete, snobbish, and cowardly objects of comedy and ridicule, or, occasionally, as conniving villains.

Indians were dramatized more frequently than any other minority group in the plays, and they displayed a range of attitudes. Most commonly they were the attackers, often abducting white women, which allowed for rescues later in the plays. Frontier dramas utilized the capture–pursuit–rescue scenario over and over – often several times within the same play. The scripts usually furnished the natives with some rationale for their attacks, most often a general statement of defending their lands. In numerous instances, however, a white man pretended to be a friend of a tribe and incited actions for his own ends. A few plays depicted the Native Americans as genuinely aggrieved parties. In those cases Indian characters were trapped between contending forces such as sympathetic and antagonistic settlers or belligerent and peaceful tribe members. Occasional plays showed natives who lived among whites. In early plays such characters were usually drunk and pitiable, as though their animal natures could not rise to the challenge of existing within the more elevated white society, or, conversely, as though whatever primitive nobility they once possessed had been contaminated by contact with sin-infested whites. Later works at the turn of the century, however, examined with some degree of complexity the limbo of a person floating between two cultures. Indian women were confined to a narrow range. Just as Pocahontas and Sacagawea provided historical icons representing a female native helping whites, so, too, frontier dramas created numerous young Indian maidens who loved and assisted whites, and that became their conventional role.

Of all the ethnic groups depicted in frontier plays, Mexicans were the most vilely caricatured. Mexicans were almost always portrayed as dirty, villainous, and deceitful, much like the then current stereotype for southern or

Mediterranean Europeans. Mexicans were seen as racial degenerates, mixed between Spanish and Indians, and hence worse than either.[3] Whereas Native Americans were at least understood to be defending their lands, Mexicans were given little rationale for their base behavior. They seemed rather a dramatic version of evil incarnate. The Spanish of the Southwest and California fared somewhat better. Authors provided them with a more regal, aristocratic bearing, and, like the Native Americans, they were usually portrayed as unfortunate victims of the westward march of history known as "manifest destiny."

There are so many frontier dramas – the genre became such a mainstay of American entertainment – that only by oversimplification can they be given one definitive reading. As this book examines the whole range of plays, it will also demonstrate the complexity of meanings that reverberate through them. In his incisive *Melodrama and the Myth of America*, Jeffrey Mason asserts, "Melodrama of the West is doomed to fail" because "[it] enforces a stability that runs counter to the restlessness and transience . . . characteristic of the postbellum West." Mason continues: "Indeed, the paradox of the westward movement . . . is that the 'happy ending' . . . required that the immigrants rob the West of the wilderness that supposedly drew them out in the first place."[4] By attempting to read the message of frontier melodrama in one particular way, Mason sees paradox as failure, rather than reading paradox itself as the message. This review of frontier drama will show that it is exactly the unresolved tension, which to Mason "dooms" western melodrama, that in fact kept melodrama of the West continuously alive on stage for thirty-five years, and vibrant through various media for over a hundred consecutive years.

Forrest Robinson postulates a similar ambiguity in certain classic western stories where authors recognize painful social problems and then retreat from their significance through a process he calls "having things both ways."[5] Most frontier plays lacked such complexity, pressing instead an agenda of having it *one* way only. Some of the later plays, however, evolved the "simultaneous acknowledgement and denial, seeing and not seeing," that Robinson refers to, especially as they addressed significant questions and then found ways to dodge the implications of those questions. Still, the border plays were so numerous that they approached the subjects and issues of the frontier from a variety of perspectives, which led to inevitable contradictions and paradoxes.

Rosemarie K. Bank, in her *Theatre Culture in America*, notes that two familiar and contradictory narratives – the supportive, nurturing hand of

Pocahontas and the unexplained disappearance of the Roanoke colony – provide the foundation for frontier literature. Thus, the frontier, from its beginnings, offered polarity, contradiction, and paradox. Bank expresses "the futility of defining [the frontier] in terms either of heroic images or national sins, since such binary readings deny the complexity of the ideological content depictions of the frontier contain."[6] Similarly, Richard Slotkin, writing of the defeat of George Custer at the Little Bighorn River, calls attention to the culture's "contradictory impulses of ambition and nostalgia, racialism and sympathy for the victims of injustice."[7] Such sets of contradictions are given theatrical shape in frontier drama.

One contradiction involves violence. Gary A. Richardson is right when he asserts in his study of American drama that violence in frontier plays is presented as "a normal element in the life of the characters" rather than as "a cultural anomaly, a momentary aberration" as in other melodrama. Even in the more pacific, "romantic" strain of frontier drama, violence remained a significant component. The guns, knives, and rifles typically carried by the characters furnished a fundamental aspect of their bearing and provided a measure of what set them apart from city dwellers. Photographs of actors in their costumes and illustrations of the plays usually show a gun or rifle prominently displayed, and virtually every play included theft, murder, or lynching.[8] Hence, violence employed to confront violence becomes one of the paradoxes evident in frontier melodrama from the plays of the nineteenth century to the movies of Sergio Leone a hundred years later.

Americans perceived the West as a cornucopia of economic opportunity offering a seemingly endless bounty of land, water, and timber. Moreover, it rendered up gold and silver free for the taking by those industrious enough to claim it. In Richardson's words, "The well-known pattern of western development made the linkage of western lands to individual labor and wealth readily apparent to the audience."[9] Possession of the land and its resources figures prominently in the plots of many border plays: settlers battle native tribes over control of the land; whites threaten and kill one another over ranches and gold mines.

The frontier provided moral as well as economic opportunity. It was an unspoiled Eden – a place for second chances. After Michel de Montaigne met three Brazilian natives in 1562, he formulated the idea that the indigenous peoples of the "New World" possessed a natural sense of culture, dignity, and beauty superior to their European conquerors, whom he regarded as barbarians. That notion of natural goodness passed through John Locke's sense of people born with inherent rights to Jean-Jacques

Rousseau's assertion that human beings in a primitive state were naturally good until corrupted by societal greed and aggression. Those ideas undergirded the concept of the American frontier as a second Eden. Yet, as numerous writers have pointed out, that paradise was paradoxical. As settlers moved in, the West became an archetypal symbol both for civilization and for savagery. It offered, in Bank's words, "equal potential for salvation or for damnation – in material terms, success or failure." It was equal parts "civilized" and "savage," what the author called "simultaneously 'in here' and 'out there.'"[10] Another paradox. Just as a detective cannot investigate a crime without altering the crime scene, so settlers could not move to the promised land without affecting it in the process. And, as the settlers themselves inadvertently carried corruption into the Garden, violence and greed became the snakes of their temptations.

Yet again, paradoxically, all is not lost, for, as Bank writes elsewhere of the western society, "those who possess the gifts of civilization – education, culture, know-how – are the best equipped to lead that society toward an affirmation of good and away from evil." Moreover, "Combining the evils of the 'civilized' frontier environment with the positive value given to 'civilized' heroes and heroines yields a somewhat schizophrenic portrait of the frontier in melodrama in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth."[11] In other words, the western Eden – Rousseau's primitive state – is destroyed by the encroachment of settlers, but, evil having once entered, the sin is best exorcized by the other, positive forces of civilization – Thomas Hobbes' Eden of social responsibility. In the plays, this new utopia involves a more personal, internalized state of grace, a sense of individuals reconnecting with primal life forces and establishing their own identities within that landscape, especially in such works as David Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West*, William Vaughn Moody's *The Great Divide*, and Rachel Crothers' *The Three of Us*.[12] Schizophrenic? Indeed. And illustrative of the paradoxical elements that tumble through the frontier melodramas.

Yet another contradiction involves the person who is often one of the chief perpetrators of violence: the frontier hero. If the West is an Eden, then the western heroes usurp the place of Montaigne's naturally superior natives. Experts in the elemental skills of the wilderness, they are in touch with the world around them. Nature speaks to them. Richard Nelson writes that "there is something unique to the American character that allows profound innocence and cold ruthlessness to inhabit the same being."[13] That combination applies directly to border heroes and heroines. In them, child-

like innocence and naivete combine with a relentless drive to succeed, and, once crossed, with a ruthless desire for what could be described – again paradoxically – as justice or vengeance. The heroes and heroines of frontier drama establish their own moral codes, often violating society's normal conventions in the process. Yet they retain an essential goodness and an unerring sense of which rules and rights are most important.

The hero and heroine in frontier plays were especially important in late-nineteenth-century American society, for they were, in effect, defining post-bellum approaches to masculine and feminine behavior. The male role during the Civil War was easy to gauge, but after that conflict, with the pace of industrialization accelerating, ideals of masculinity underwent stark reevaluation.

Several currents buffeted the concept of masculinity, and not all of them were congruent. One set of values that materialized in the second half of the nineteenth century identified men with their primitive animal instincts in a positive, almost social-Darwinian manner. The ideals of impetuosity and primitivism extolled by the Romantic poets further contributed to this view. Self-assertiveness and a competitive spirit were judged valuable commodities in the business world as well as in the emerging sphere of individual and team sports. Strength and a physically fit body suddenly became important concerns. Perhaps as a holdover from the war, the idea of male bonding in teams, clubs, and associations took on great significance. The mastery of skills – especially outdoor skills – gained new prominence, and cleverness became a worthwhile attribute. This notion of animal spirits included an appreciation of boyish charm, which could be translated into jokes and pranks, but it also extended to a tolerant view of aggression, even of violence.[14]

As with aggression and violence, however, many of these qualities needed correctives, and another set of values supported by a traditional moral framework retained prominence. These included such standbys as thrift, industry, bravery, and duty. They championed a disciplined control of the animal nature and preached quiet humility mixed with stoic endurance. Patriotism retained a powerful appeal, as did the idea of self-sacrifice, especially the notion that men should shield and protect women, who were regarded as weak and dependent creatures.

Over all these ideas of maleness reigned the concept of freedom, and as city dwellers turned into wage earners and lost the autonomy of farms and small businesses, the ideal of freedom of movement and action became even more important. And where better for a young man to identify with a paragon of masculine freedom than in a frontier drama?

Although there were not as many frontier heroines, their role as models at a time when women were beginning to demand equal rights was significant, and they, like their male counterparts, exhibited almost a split personality. Within the frontier landscape women enjoyed opportunities for independence, and plays reflected that. Female characters operated bars, ran hotels, and owned gold mines. Although moral sanctions still applied, the frontier provided women with less rigid sexual restraints, which the plays dramatized. In addition, female frontier performers demonstrated physical skills such as riding and shooting. Although nineteenth-century society still viewed education for women with suspicion, many of the female frontier characters were educated. While the degree of their erudition was sometimes inversely proportional to their ability to handle the challenges of the frontier, their education nevertheless stood as an outward signal of their independence and self-sufficiency. In several theatrical situations women disguised themselves as men and performed masculine tasks, and in several other productions actresses assumed male parts, declaring, in effect, that women could perform male "roles" both on stage and in life. Still, these same female characters and performers maintained or were forced to maintain typical feminine patterns. Within the plays, female characters ultimately wanted or needed a man, and actresses who displayed masculine skills on stage emphasized feminine talents off stage.

In the late nineteenth century, approximately five to ten percent of all the touring productions in the United States were plays about the frontier. Many of those plays gained enormous popularity, packing theatres in all the major cities, and some toured for as many as ten, twenty, or even thirty seasons. Despite their undeniable popular appeal, critical examination of frontier dramas, of their productions, of their audiences, and of the ways in which they fit into their society has been meager both in their own time and since.[15]

Another objective of this study, therefore, is to examine the critical response to border plays. The modern perspective toward popular culture is vastly different from the attitude that existed in the nineteenth century. Critics today are inclusive when it comes to art. Almost anything from a conception to a life-style is "art" to someone, and writers scrutinize the most popular forms of expression from television programs to tabloids not only as products, but as statements about the society that produces them. Such examinations of popular art within the context of its society had no place in the nineteenth century.

In the 1800s, art was a pinnacle to be achieved. In theatre, Shakespeare's

plays, certain other classics, and a few new but worthy pieces from Europe represented that pinnacle. Anything that was not at the pinnacle was necessarily a lower, inferior work, which perhaps did not even attain the stature of art at all. Critics treated American plays as an afterthought in comparison to their European counterparts, and they relegated frontier plays to the lowest level of that secondary rank. Those who practiced in such lower depths were, naturally, lesser artists, or perhaps not even artists at all. And if those performers did not at least *aspire* to Shakespeare and the other classics, then they represented a direct threat to the collective cultural judgment, personified most conspicuously by newspaper critics. Moreover, if the lower-level dramatic work happened also to be immensely popular, then that work posed a particular threat because the approbation of the general populace undermined the accepted cultural norm as well as the very status and authority of the critics themselves. Hence, it is no wonder that reviewers reacted to popular performances of frontier drama like police controlling street riots: at first they patronized, and then they turned vicious. "Rot," "trash," and "heart-sickening" are merely three of the pejoratives critics flung at popular frontier plays in their attempt to suppress what they considered the "unworthy." As Lawrence Levine demonstrates in his book on the emergence of cultural hierarchy, the critics' placement of themselves as guardians of the cultural mantle led to "denigration of popular audiences and [a] propensity to blame them for the low state of the drama."[16]

The critics' sense of superiority does not mean that they never said anything good about the frontier plays. Critics, too, enjoyed their contradictions. Some reviewers genuinely wanted to promote home-grown drama – so long as it conformed to the proper European rules and did not threaten accepted standards. Several border plays were labeled "the best American play" by one or another writer. In almost all of the reviews, however, qualifications abounded. If a reviewer liked a play or a production, the writer reminded the readers that "it's the best *of its kind*," or added some similar phrase relegating the play to a lower artistic plateau. In addition, critics often praised individual performers while criticizing the material they performed. Those reviews followed a pattern: "Such and such an actor or actress is a remarkable performer. It's too bad his/her efforts aren't being put to use in material more worthy of his/her abilities." Gerald Bordman in his book on nineteenth-century American drama points out that truly native drama – "American plays on American themes" – really developed at the theatres that the critics usually ignored. That so few American plays were performed at more highly regarded theatres, he notes, could be a function

of "the pretensions of more affluent, knowing playgoers or the works' inherent weaknesses."[17] Or, he might have added, "the pretensions of all-knowing critics."

In his *Melodramatic Formations*, Bruce McConachie identified the "republican revolution of the people against aristocratic oppression" as one of the characteristics of what he called "apocalyptic drama."[18] Frontier drama contains little sense of a political order exerting force on the community or an aristocracy oppressing the settlers. Indeed, people journeyed to the frontiers to avoid such forces. Most of the evils in border melodramas arise from individuals within the frontier communities, and most of the decisions are made by individuals, small groups, or the entire community meeting together. The strongest impression of regulation by outside forces in frontier plays is that affecting the native populations, whose lives are circumscribed by settlers, Indian agents, and the army.

The eastern theatres, however, were another matter. There the aristocracy of the critics derided the citizenry for turning out to see their beloved frontier melodramas. As Susan Harris Smith observes regarding the critical reception of America drama, "any deviation from the approved model would be excluded, castigated, or, at best, marginalized and positioned as an anomaly by the dominant critical voices."[19] Critics conveniently marginalized audiences at frontier plays by labeling them "ignorant," "ingenuous," and "unwashed." Drawing the conflict in those terms, frontier drama represents not the *theatrical* revolt of the oppressed against their aristocratic oppressors, but the *actual* revolt of the "ignorant" audiences against the strictures of the elite critics. Through the frontier drama, the marginalized public seized control of their own entertainment. They went to what pleased them until, finally, frontier drama resulted in the ultimate conquest of the "lowbrow" over the "highbrow." Frontier drama, therefore, represents the victory of the wilderness over the city, of the unlearned over the educated, of the popular masses over the critical establishment, and of the democracy of the "unwashed" over the aristocracy of the well-dressed. By the end of the century the lowbrow triumphed so convincingly that they dragged the highbrow – virtually kicking and screaming – along with them until the highbrow legitimated the frontier subject matter by adopting it for their own.

Unquestionably, later frontier plays demonstrate advances in playwriting skills and thematic depth. Such plays as *The Great Divide*, *The Three of Us*, and *The Girl of the Golden West* confirm the emergence of sophisticated thematic motifs, and this study documents how playwrights adapted the local-

color detailing of Bret Harte and other writers to the stage to create a cast of vivid frontier personalities. However, in many ways turn-of-the-century border drama exhibited simply a more elaborately produced version of older forms. Certainly the moral contrivance of a play like *The Squaw Man* was little different from similarly concocted moral dilemmas in a raft of earlier border fare.

What really changed near the turn of the century was the social acceptability of frontier drama, and, with that, the reception accorded by the critical establishment. At that time, prominent producers and writers including Charles Frohman, Augustus Thomas, and David Belasco began to mount frontier plays. Writers who were products of elite eastern society, such as William Vaughn Moody, Owen Wister, and Henry C. DeMille, composed frontier scripts. Commentators lavished extensive coverage on their productions and hailed them as vast improvements on the efforts that preceded them.

If critics regarded the frontier plays with a contempt born of superiority, they treated the performers in those plays with nearly equal disdain. Usually the performers were patronized. Often they were castigated. Reviewers regularly reminded them that their skills were slight and their products worthless.

Whether the performances were good or not, whether the frontier plays were valuable or not, one thing is certain: the productions, being a part of the ephemeral world of theatre, are gone. Except for a few scripts, the drama that brought the frontier to life for late-nineteenth-century audiences has vanished. Unlike the early movie cowboys, the actors and actresses who labored in border dramas in theatres throughout the country are, with the two exceptions of Frank Mayo and William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, forgotten. Oliver Doud Byron. McKee Rankin. Louis Aldrich. Annie Pixley. Frank Frayne. James H. Wallick. Fanny Herring. All of them were famous stars – the John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Roy Rogers, and Dale Evans of their time – yet not one of them would earn more than a passing reference in any general history or encyclopedia of American theatre. They did not exactly labor in obscurity. All were enormously popular. Several acquired great wealth. But the characters and the dramas they created have long since disappeared. No celluloid documents their achievements. Only a few scripts remain, and those are painfully deceptive, for the words on a page are but one ingredient of frontier drama, and not always the most prominent ingredient at that.

"Buffalo Bill" Cody is one of the two exceptions of the forgotten band.

Cody's genuinely adventurous life, his stage career in plays, and his extraordinary success with his Wild West show have been well documented. Similarly, Frank Mayo, who played Davy Crockett for more than three thousand performances over twenty-two years, has received fair credit, and the play in which he starred, *Davy Crockett; or, Be Sure You're Right, Then Go Ahead*, is generally regarded as a highlight of the genre.

The rest of the men and women of nineteenth-century frontier drama have achieved only occasional notice. Several of them were related to well-known artists – the sister, granddaughter, or father-in-law of this or that noted star – but their work is virtually unknown. Their performances were critically discredited in their own times, their products have disappeared, their significance to other developments has been ignored, and, if they achieved any wealth at all, many of them saw it vanish like their productions.

One objective of this book is to offer those performers a small mead of remembrance and to grant them a grain of the serious consideration they seldom received. After all, in live theatre, performers *mean* just as scripts do. Patrons buy not only the text of a play, but also the text of the performer. In musical theatre in the late twentieth century, purchasing a ticket for *The King and I* purchased a ticket for Yul Brynner, the prototype Siamese king and also the actor fighting cancer. In the realm of frontier drama, one could hardly separate Louis Aldrich from *My Partner*, Frank Chanfrau from *The Arkansas Traveller*, Annie Pixley from *M'liss*, or numerous other stars from the vehicles in which they appeared. A patron buying a ticket to Frank Mayo's *Davy Crockett* after it established its reputation was purchasing a ticket to see a frontier icon AND a theatrical icon. They were buying a piece of American mythos AND a theatrical experience – rather like seeing venerable Jimmy Stewart in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* or watching James Arness age over the years in *Gunsmoke*. The meaning the performer carried could, of course, change with time, just as it did with Brynner. Anyone buying a ticket to see McKee Rankin in *The Danites* in its early days bought a dashing romantic figure within a well-received play based on stories of Mormon outrages. Later, a patron of the same play bought an overweight, scandal-plagued miscreant. In that context, this book will examine the texts of performers as well as texts of scripts and productions.

This study of the drama of the frontier on American stages begins in 1870, with the emergence of three popular productions that ushered in a wave of border plays. There had, of course, been other plays set on the frontier, including a spate of such dramas in the 1830s and several more in the 1850s. But when *Across the Continent* opened in 1870, twelve years had

elapsed since *Nick Whiffles* and a trio of plays about the Mormon conflicts – the last previous notable border dramas – had played in New York. From the debut of *Across the Continent* on, however, a virtually unbroken line of frontier plays regaled audiences across America into the twentieth century.

Several factors contributed to that surge of frontier drama, and as this study explores the breadth of frontier melodrama and the contradictions inherent in the material, it also seeks to locate the plays in the context of their time. A theatrical production is, after all, a function of numerous factors including economic realities, politics, social structures, prevailing aesthetic criteria, and contemporary discourse, and several of those ingredients contributed to an increase in popular entertainment in general and to a surge of frontier drama in particular in the last third of the nineteenth century.

A population explosion that nearly doubled the number of Americans from 1870 to 1900 meant more people to buy tickets. Furthermore, the population was moving to the cities, where theatres abounded.[20] Advances in communication provided a second factor crucial to the swell of popular entertainment. The first transcontinental telegraph line, completed in 1861, drew the east and west coasts together. The telegraph dramatically increased the speed of news reporting, and other newspaper innovations including faster and larger presses contributed to the popularity and significance of newspapers. Advertising, reviews, and news reports publicized the theatre while theatrical trade journals disseminated professional information and promoted business transactions.

The importance of the railroad to late-nineteenth-century troupers can hardly be overemphasized. The driving of the golden stake at Promontory, Utah, completing the transcontinental railroad signaled not the culmination, but an acceleration of railroad construction. Railroad mileage, which consisted of just over 30,000 miles of track in 1860, crisscrossed the land with 192,000 miles by the end of the century. Furthermore, the railroad was not simply a mechanical device, for it represented a force of nature and of God, extending civilization into the wilderness.[21]

As major advances in transportation and communication made theatre more accessible, the post-war economic boom, which put discretionary money into the pockets of prospective patrons, allowed them to take advantage of the diverse opportunities. Even with the financial panic of 1873 and the depression that followed, the national wealth doubled between 1865 and 1880, and, despite another panic in 1893, it doubled again by 1900.[22]

Another factor that contributed to the flowering of popular entertainment was a rapidly changing moral climate. America's post-war attitude

accepted entertainment as a valid and worthwhile pursuit, a distinct change from the Puritanical, pre-war moral code, and that attitude prompted audiences to go to see what they *wanted* to see rather than what critics or preachers told them they *should* see.[23]

The expansion of opportunities in popular entertainment coincided with an explosion of interest in the American frontier generated by the lure of riches, frequent warfare, and enhanced travel and communication – factors that particularly aided the development of frontier plays. The California gold rush of 1849 attracted rapt public attention to the western territories, followed a decade later by the rush to Pike's Peak, but that interest was interrupted by the Civil War. After the war, additional gold and silver discoveries in the Northwest and the Black Hills of Dakota reignited the public's imagination.

As riveting as the lure of gold, a string of conflicts focused attention on the struggles of western Indians to retain hunting grounds and freedom of movement. A series of battles with the Sioux in the central plains culminated in the epic events of Custer's Last Stand in 1876 and the Ghost Dance and the Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. In the Southwest, Kit Carson destroyed the livelihood of the Navajo in the 1860s, and battles with the fierce Apache Indians, which lasted until 1900, made the names Geronimo and Cochise famous. Smaller but widely publicized skirmishes included the Black Hawk War in Utah in 1865–68, the Modoc War in northern California in 1872–73, and the Nez Perce flight in 1877.

Other contemporary border events such as the deeds and misdeeds of the James brothers furnished additional dramatic material. Many plays featured as performers individuals who had participated in notable or notorious frontier episodes, including "Wild Bill" Hickok and "Texas Jack" Omohundro. Even when the plays were not directly connected to newspaper articles, current events often fashioned the background. As frontier plays featuring Indian and Chinese characters entertained audiences, for example, legislators debated laws to move indigenous populations and restrict immigration.

The same communication and transportation advances that brought theatre to audiences promoted frontier drama by spreading the word about events in the West. Before the transcontinental railroad, a stage coach took three weeks to travel from St. Louis to San Francisco. A wagon train from Nebraska to the coast lasted four months. With the completion of the western railroad, however, the Union Pacific could advertise a seemingly miraculous travel time of less than four days for the seventeen-hundred-

mile trek from Omaha to San Francisco. With Chicago just five days from the west coast and New York seven, the western frontier was closer than ever before.[24]

The telegraph, with its almost instantaneous transmission of news, also reduced the distance between East and West. Newspapers used the telegraph to record western exploits with day-to-day regularity, even sending reporters out with army troops. The roll of men who died with George Custer at the Little Bighorn, for instance, included reporter Mark Kellogg.

The public showed an almost insatiable interest not only in accounts of actual events of the West but also in lectures and fictional writings about the region, and numerous plays lifted characters and episodes from current literature. Bret Harte's first collection of stories, *"The Luck of Roaring Camp" and Other Sketches*, was published in 1870. Incorporating pieces that had appeared in *Overland Monthly* in 1868 and 1869, it catapulted Harte and his idiosyncratic western characters into national prominence. Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, based on his western experiences in the 1860s, appeared in 1872. Meanwhile, Twain presented his "Roughing It" lecture and Harte his "The Argonauts of '49" speech hundreds of times in major eastern cities from 1869 through the mid 1870s. Joaquin Miller's *Songs of the Sierras* came out in 1871, and his *Life Amongst the Modocs* followed in 1873. Ned Buntline's first "Buffalo Bill" story ran in serial form in *New York Weekly* in 1869. Hordes of imitations and dime novels followed.

The theatre proved an exceptionally able distributor of border tales, for, as Richard Slotkin notes in writing of the mythos of the frontier, "elements that tend to maximize conflict, suspense, irony, and moral resonance may be highlighted at the expense of other no-less-factual elements that do not so palpably serve the tale."[25] What better vehicle to highlight conflict, suspense, irony, and moral resonance than dramatic presentation?

The theatre supplied a popular outlet for the public's fascination with border events, and, in 1871, the success of three plays on New York stages established frontier drama as a powerful and enduring influence in American life. The plays overlapped in their New York appearances between March and June and initiated an outburst of drama about the frontier. Significantly, the plays displayed the influence of the railroad, border warfare, and Bret Harte's stories. The first of the three produced in the metropolitan area was *Across the Continent*, by James J. McCloskey, which opened at the Park Theatre in Brooklyn in November 1870, starring Oliver Doud Byron, and played there again in March 1871, before appearing for a run of six weeks, from March 13 to April 22, at Wood's Museum and Theatre

in New York. It featured the transcontinental railroad and a battle with Indians. The second production to appear in New York was *Horizon*, by Augustin Daly, based in part on a Bret Harte story and influenced by news reports of Indian conflicts. It ran for nearly eight weeks from March 21 to May 13, 1871, at New York's Olympic Theatre. The last of the three to play New York, *Kit, the Arkansas Traveller*, by Edward Spencer, T. B. DeWalden, and Clifton W. Tayleure, was actually the earliest of the three, first opening with Francis S. Chanfrau as Kit in February 1869, in Buffalo. *Kit* commenced its four-week New York city premiere at Niblo's Garden Theatre on May 9, 1871. Those three plays ignited an explosion of frontier productions, and, from the time they began their long runs in the spring of 1871 through a variety of touring plays, movies, radio programs, and television series, frontier drama of one form or another was continuously before the American public for the next one hundred years.

Although the western territories had their own flourishing dramatic traditions with professional theatres in New Orleans, the Ohio River valley, and on the west coast, this examination of frontier dramatizations concentrates on plays performed in New York because that city was the theatrical center for the nation. Managers from throughout the country descended on the city to book attractions, and theatre companies hired New York booking agents to schedule their routes. Productions that played New York garnered publicity not only from daily metropolitan newspapers, but from weekly trade publications as well. As a result, major touring combinations with the best-known performers and the most popular dramas routinely scheduled a season in New York to promote their reputations. Moreover, this study seeks to examine the dramatic frontier mythology purchased by those who were not themselves a physical part of the frontier.

This survey could have several end points – 1890, when the Census Bureau declared the frontier officially closed; 1898, when the country fought the Spanish-American War and attention turned from the western borders; 1903, when the movie *The Great Train Robbery* moved frontier drama into a new medium; 1912, when the admission of New Mexico and Arizona as states completed the western territory; or 1917, when America entered the First World War and "Buffalo Bill" Cody, a living symbol of the West, died. The year 1906 has been selected because, in 1905 and 1906, several frontier dramas emerged that marked a culmination of the staging of the frontier. In addition, almost all of those plays were quickly adapted to cinema, and that transition of frontier drama to the new medium of film also constituted an obvious moment of passage.

One could, in summarizing this period, compile a remarkable anthology of dramatic scripts on American frontier themes: *Across the Continent*, *Horizon*, *Davy Crockett*, *The Danites*, *M'liss*, *My Partner*, *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, *Arizona*, *The Squaw Man*, *The Girl of the Golden West*, *The Great Divide*, *The Three of Us*, and more. But such an anthology would exclude a multitude of plays that were not primarily literary vehicles. It would exclude the Wild West exhibitions, the shooting stunts, and the leaping horses. It would also fail to express adequately, even in the plays listed, the frontier drama as a production experience. The contributions of the scenery, the lighting, the music, and most especially the performers would all be diminished. Frontier drama did more than simply generate a body of dramatic literature. It created dramatic experiences that enthralled the senses while intrinsically expressing a series of paradoxes and contradictions. When patrons bought tickets to a frontier play, they were buying more than the words of the script. They were also purchasing the trick shooting, the animal stunts, and the scenic embellishments. They were acquiring proximity to actual participants in the westward movement and access to representations of historic personages and events, as well as to the sounds and the smells of galloping horses, exploding gun shots, and blazing red fire. It is that overall dramatic experience that led to a revolt by the popular audiences against the critical establishment and that eventually transferred to even wider audiences for film, radio, and television.