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Introduction

In the historical development of the nation-state, various forms of cultural expression have been instrumental in helping to construct notions of national identity. Recent works on cultural nationalism (such as Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*) have analyzed this process, but to a large extent they have undervalued the role of theatre. For example in *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson highlights the influence of print journalism and literature in establishing the concept of the nation, but hardly mentions the stage. This book attempts to widen the discussion on cultural nationalism by demonstrating the importance of drama and theatrical performance in having contributed to and in continuing to influence the process of representing and challenging notions of national identity.

Theatre has often acted as a site for staging national history, folklore and myths and for formulating national ideology in many parts of the world. With its rhetorical and semiotic features, theatre has offered a particularly effective means of conveying notions of what is national and what is alien. Furthermore, because plays purporting to express national values can be performed in the actual presence of the community (in a public theatre), they can serve not only to make claims for a national identity, but they can also gain immediate communal support or rejection for that assertion.[1] Unlike the solitary reader of a novel or a newspaper who reacts in isolation, the theatregoer is part of a community of spectators who can express their approval or disapproval to the performers and to each other. As Stephen Greenblatt has shown, theatre "is a collective creation," both as "the product of collective intentions" and also because it "addresses its audience as a collectivity."[2] But theatre is, moreover, a place for interaction between performers and audience. In a manner consonant with Renan's notion of

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the nation as a "daily plebiscite,"[3] the theatre can act as a public forum in which the audience scrutinizes and evaluates political rhetoric and assesses the validity of representations of national identity. The theatre can serve as a microcosm of the national community, passing judgement on images of itself.

In the late eighteenth century, Goethe and Schiller wrote of the potential of theatre to galvanize the nation. After the French Revolution, Schiller went so far as to argue that the theatre could help not only to establish national values but also to create a new German nation. "If a single characteristic predominated in all of our plays; if all of our poets were in accord and were to form a firm alliance to work for this end; if their work were governed by strict selection; if they were to devote their paintbrushes to national subjects; in a word, if we were to see the establishment of a national theatre: then we would become a nation."[4]

In Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, plays and theatre performances became important sites for expressing notions of national identity both in established nation-states and in emerging nations. German Romanticism (including the work of Klopstock, Goethe, Schiller, Kleist and Wagner) encouraged the rise of nationalist drama and opera in various European countries, such as the work of Oehlenschläger in Denmark, Victor Hugo in France, Katona and Kisfaludy in Hungary, Pushkin in Russia, Alfieri, Manzoni, Niccolini and Verdi in Italy, Ibsen[5] and Bjørnson in Norway and Yeats in Ireland.[6] Writing of the theatres in Northern and Eastern Europe, Laurence Senelick has emphasized the counter-cultural nature of much of this type of work. "Most national theatres arose in reaction to a dominant culture imposed from without; they were a means of protest as well as of preserving what were considered to be salient features of the oppressed group. Theatre was a catalytic factor in the formation of its identity."[7] Moreover, Marvin Carlson has suggested that this kind of nationalist theatre affected most of Europe. "Few of the emerging national/cultural groups of the post-Romantic period neglected to utilize the drama as a powerful tool for awakening a people to a common heritage and, not infrequently, encouraging them through an awareness of this heritage to seek both national identity and national liberty in opposition to the demands of dominant and external political and cultural influences."[8]

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson emphasizes this notion of "awakening from sleep"[9] as a common trope for nascent nationalism, i.e. that the people of the nation are awakened to the call of their "natural" national allegiances. In the nationalist drama and the work of many national theatres

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from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century, one can see the attempt to awaken the nation to its natural sense of nationhood. But how natural are these notions of nationhood? To what extent is the nation's history fabricated? How common is the heritage? In how many ways might it be configured? Which voices are suppressed in order to create a national (and possibly univocal or homogenous) discourse? One could argue that notions of national identity are continuously being contested by different vying groups within the nation, seeking to assert or impose their own cultural values at various points in time. Andrew Higson has suggested that, "The search for a stable and coherent national identity can only be successful at the expense of repressing internal differences, tensions and contradictions – differences of class, race, gender, region, etc." Higson also notes the importance of "historical shifts in the construction of nationhood and national identity; nationhood is always an image constructed under particular conditions."[10] Thus, one could propose that notions of national identity are constantly being reformulated, revised and reasserted in an ongoing battle to assert and maintain a hegemonic notion of the nation. Likewise, subaltern groups have confronted the homogenous image represented by the dominant group in asserting a more pluralistic or counter-hegemonic identity.

This book demonstrates that theatre in the United States has often been used to define or challenge national values and the notion of the nation. The North American tradition of this type of drama predates German Romanticism. It was already manifest in the earliest drama of the English colonies, and it continues until today. Particularly at times of national crisis, the theatre has served as a political and ideological tool to help reconfigure the nation. The purpose of this book is to investigate important examples of this process from the eighteenth to the twentieth century in order to illustrate the role of the theatre and live performance in reformulating concepts of national identity.

Rather than focusing on hegemonic nationalism, however, *Theatre, Society and the Nation* concentrates as much on counter-hegemonic and subaltern discourses. For example, it analyzes plays and performances that formulated a positive identity for marginalized or oppressed groups in society and that posited an identity for the nation that privileged rather than minimized the position of such groups. Divided into chapters relating to specific political and social movements, the book discusses representative plays and performances that emerged out of those movements. In addition to examining theatrical events and the printed text of plays and the messages implicit or explicit therein, it considers the audience and critical

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response (both of the dominant and oppressed groups in society). In general the strategy of *Theatre, Society and the Nation* is, rather than seeking to cover every drama or theatrical performance within each social or political movement, to analyze a few of the more illustrative plays and performances in depth.

The image of the United States has been evolving since the republic was founded in the eighteenth century. As in other countries, the concept of the nation has responded to social change and times of stress. Theatre and other media have contributed to the changing discourse about national values and national identity. As J. Ellen Gainor has written, "Our culture is always constructing and representing itself to itself."[11] Before the development of film, radio and television, theatre and live performance played an important role in staging the national character in front of a live public audience which could immediately indicate their acceptance or rejection of such images, for example by applause or booing or other forms of intervention. In the first century of the republic, the discourse that was circulating in other media (such as newspapers, novels, magazines and public speeches) could be converted for stage presentation. Equally, plays and performances could introduce new ideas and images that could take hold of the popular imagination, and be reinforced through their dissemination in other media. Unlike public speeches and literature, the theatre often works through live visual images that carry sub-textual or symbolic messages, and so the rhetoric is not only conveyed in the verbal dialogue and written text. More recently, the theatre and live performance have competed with radio, television, film and other media in this enterprise. This book does not try to cover the wide range of media but concentrates on the changing ideologies evident in drama and live performance that have presented various notions of national identity over the course of three centuries.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish, British, French and Dutch colonies were established on land belonging to American Indian tribes on the East Coast of North America that would later become part of the United States. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the British colonies dominated the territory that would encompass the initial expanse of the United States of America. Furthermore, although there were immigrants from different countries and of different religious faiths, the English-speaking white Protestant had gained a dominant position by this time. In 1740, an Act of Parliament enabled settlers in the American colonies to become British citizens after seven years of residency and after taking a Protestant oath. Jews and Quakers were exempt from the oath, but Catholics

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were excluded. Non-English-speaking immigrants such as Germans were expected to learn English and their children to attend English-speaking schools.[12] Enslaved Africans were imported as laborers and American Indians were pushed westward. Gradually the other competing European colonial forces were displaced by the British in much of North America. The Dutch colony of New Amsterdam was taken over by the British and renamed New York in 1664, and the Spanish Floridas and French Canada were acquired under the Peace of Paris in 1763. (Other colonies would be acquired by the United States after it became independent such as the Louisiana Purchase from the French in 1803, the Spanish colony of Florida which had reverted to Spain after the War of Independence in 1819, and much of the Spanish territory in the west including Texas and California in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.) Thus, an English-speaking Protestant identity gained ascendancy in the territory that would form the first thirteen states of the new republic.

A Native American performance tradition existed in North America long before European settlement. With the advent of Spanish, British, French and Dutch colonies, European styles of drama began to appear in North America including religious performances in the Spanish colonies as early as the 1520s.[13] Because of the emphasis on national identity in the United States, this book begins with the period shortly before independence when the North American English colonies were manifesting their loyalty to the British Crown.

The first chapter examines the period prior to independence from Britain, and the plays that either promoted a Loyalist or a Patriot stance. Until the Stamp Act of 1765, the few dramas written in the British colonies of North America supported British colonial policies and promoted the image of settlers as being loyal to the Crown. With the rebellion over the Stamp Act, colonial drama engaged in the debate about the identity of the settlers. Some dramas demonstrated continuing loyalty to the Crown while others expressed a new sense of national identity. These early plays, which were mainly written to be read rather than performed, presumably appealed to a literate elite rather than a mass audience.

With independence, a new national identity was legally defined along racial, gender and class lines. The rights of citizenship were generally restricted to white property-owning males.[14] In drafting the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the founders of the new nation-state ignored the natural birthright of African Americans and American Indians, and in the 1790 Act of Congress made it clear that only white immigrants ("free white

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person[s], who shall have resided within . . . the United States for the term of two years") could gain citizenship.[15]

The Federalists argued for a strong central government as opposed to a loose confederation of states, and following the election of Washington as the first President, they favored their kinship and neocolonial-mercantile ties with Britain in formulating national values and a foreign policy. Anti-Federalists argued for states' rights and accused the Federalists of trying to ape British aristocratic values. Partly to suppress dissent, the Federalists introduced more stringent legislation in the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 that limited immigrant rights and freedom of speech, defined who was an alien and indicated on what basis immigrants could be deported. This legislation further determined who was to be included in the nation-state and who was to be excluded (e.g. those with pro-French and anti-Federalist sympathies.)

The second chapter looks at the period in the 1790s, when the theatre became increasingly a site of confrontation between the two rival political factions. These groups staged performances that reflected partisan values (such as attitudes about class and social status and about loyalties to particular foreign governments), while endeavoring to posit these values as national and in the national interest. Federalists defended class distinctions and promoted strong links with Britain, while Democratic Republicans supported close ties with France and advocated the more egalitarian values of the French Revolution as reflecting the goals of the founding fathers of the American republic. Progressing from an elite to a middle-class art form, the theatre broadened its appeal by presenting more American material. Such performances as John Burk's anti-Federalist *Bunker-Hill* attracted artisans as well as upper-class members of society.

In the nineteenth century Americans increasingly questioned the cultural hegemony of Britain and encouraged American artistic efforts and images. The playwright James Nelson Barker urged his countrymen to support nationalistic plays and warned that otherwise they "must be content to continue the importation of our ideas and sentiments, like our woollen stuffs, from England."[16] Certain overlapping stereotypes of American character began to emerge in the theatre such as the American Veteran, the Yankee and the backwoodsman or frontiersman. These were white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male characters who, although sometimes comic, provided a positive image of an independent American spirit. The Yankee character in such plays as Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), James Nelson Barker's *Tears and Smiles* (1808) and A. B. Lindsley's *Love and Friendship* (1810) spoke with a peculiar

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American dialect and exhibited a homespun wisdom unsullied by old world (e.g. British) decadence.[17] In some examples, such as Dan Marble in *The Vermont Wool Dealer* (1838) or *The Stage Struck Yankee* (1845), the Yankee character adopted the dress of the figure of Uncle Sam.[18] Of this character, Bruce McConachie has written, "Like several earlier stage symbols of the nation, Yankee stars played a large role in the social construction of whiteness . . . Although accommodating the values of republican simplicity and sentimental virtue, the stage Yankees actually advanced the cultural system of rationality and the whiteness it assumed."[19] Likewise, the rugged frontiersman conquering the American continent, taming the environment and fighting against American Indians in the name of civilization exuded the values of the individualist pioneer. Such plays as James Kirke Paulding's *Lion of the West* (1830) which was adapted by William Bayle Bernard as *The Kentuckian* (1833), Louisa Medina's *Nick of the Woods* (1838), W. R. Derr's *Kit Carson, the Hero of the Prairie* (1850) and Frank Murdock's *Davy Crockett* (1872) helped entrench this mythical hero into the public consciousness. They also promoted the concept of what Sacvan Berkovitch has called the "American jeremiad," the spiritual mission of Americans to conquer the wilderness.[20] The association of the frontiersman with a religious quest, or alternatively as an "American Adam" seeking his fortune in an American garden of Eden,[21] also reflected an ongoing ethnic, religious and gender prejudice in the country that would encourage the notion that the country belonged to a specific type of person and that its fruits were for their benefit and should be denied to others. As Donald Pease has written, "Alongside the nexus of belongingness established for the national community, the national narrative represented other peoples (women, blacks, 'foreigners,' the homeless [and Native Americans]) from whom the property of nationness had been removed altogether and upon whose differences from them the national people depended for the construction of the universality of their norms."[22]

President Andrew Jackson, who acquired the image of the individualist frontiersman and democratic yeoman, encouraged cultural nationalism in the theatre: "It is time that the principal events in the history of our country were dramatized, and exhibited at the theatres on such days as are set apart as national festivals."[23] Dramatists complied by writing melodramas featuring various types of Jacksonian figures in particular for the actor Edwin Forrest, who was closely associated with Jacksonian values, viz., Robert T. Conrad's *Jack Cade* (1835), Augustus Stone's *Metamora; Or, the Last of the Wampanoags* (1829) and Robert Montgomery Bird's *The Gladiator* (1831).[24] The struggle

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for cultural autonomy from Britain was perhaps most clearly displayed in the Astor Place riots of 1849 (in which twenty-two people died) when supporters of the American actor Edwin Forrest clashed with supporters of the visiting English actor William Charles Macready.

With the increase of Irish immigration in the 1830s and 1840s, anti-Catholic prejudice grew and the stage Irishmen and stage Irish immigrant figures emerged as popular comic stereotypes.[25] As slavery became more of a contentious issue, abolitionist groups used the theatre to promote the cause of freedom. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was adapted by many theatre groups and performed throughout the northern states. George L. Aiken's adaptation received an unusually long run in New York and the *New York Spirit of the Times* commented that "the performance of this drama has made converts to the abolition doctrine many persons, we have no doubt, who have never examined the subject, and know nothing of its merits."[26] Other plays addressed the slavery issue, notably *The Octoroon* (1859) by the Irish immigrant Dion Boucicault, and *The Escape; Or, A Leap for Freedom* (1857) that William Wells Brown, as a former slave, wrote from personal experience and read in public to promote the abolitionist cause. In the south, the fear of northerners dramatizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was expressed by the editor of the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*: "The gross misrepresentations of the south which have been propagated extensively through the press, with the laudations of editors, politicians, and pious fanatics of the pulpit, are to be presented in tableaux, and the lies they contain acted by living libellers before crowds of deluded spectators."[27] Southerners counter-attacked with alternative versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that conveyed the superiority of southern life, such as Joseph M. Field's *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or Life in the South As It Is*, Dr. William T. Leonard's *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana* and George Jamieson's *The Old Plantation; or, Uncle Tom As He Is*.[28]

While opposing the institution of slavery before the Civil War, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* continued to be popular as entertainment after the abolition of slavery. As Jim Crow laws followed the newly won freedom of African Americans during the reconstruction era, "Tom Shows" by white actors in black face depicted demeaning stereotypes like the self-effacing Uncle Tom and the uncivilized Topsy. Likewise, other plays and minstrel shows (which had started as early as the 1820s by African Americans or white artists in black face and which toured the country during much of the nineteenth century) created demeaning stereotypes for African Americans, e.g. comic, dancing figures, tragic mulattos, brutes or Mammy caricatures.

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Other ethnic characters such as Irish Americans and Native Americans were particularly popular in the melodramas and comedies of the time, but the values and culture of Anglo-Saxon Americans remained dominant with members of other ethnic groups often being shown on the stage in comic roles. This became increasingly apparent following the gold rush, industrialization, the building of the railroads, the growth of the cities and the enormous increase in immigration especially from Europe and Asia. The threat to white Protestant hegemony because of immigration entered the subtext of numerous new plays, such as McCloskey's melodrama about the railroads, *Across the Continent*. On the other hand, immigrants brought their own culture and performance traditions with them, and numerous immigrant ethnic groups performed theatre to their own communities usually in their native languages.

Native Americans tried to preserve their cultures and their ways of life in the nineteenth century despite white settlers depriving them of their land, their language and their religions and confining them on reservations. In some cases they were pushed to the extreme and reacted aggressively, but the white settlers, reinforced by the government and the military, continued to insist on their right to take over the country. In early American drama such as *Metamora*, Native Americans were often portrayed as noble savages who were tragically disappearing from the landscape.[29] However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, this image changed as settlers on the frontier wanted Native Americans to disappear more rapidly. For example, when Forrest presented *Metamora* in Augusta, Georgia in 1831 while the Georgians were in the process of evicting the Cherokees, the audience reacted angrily to the sympathetic treatment of Indians.[30] Having been represented in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as proto-Americans and even, in cultural nationalist parlance, as the American "volk,"[31] Indians had become "un-American" or "anti-American" by the mid nineteenth century. Representations of Native Americans as tragic noble savages gave way by the 1850s to ridiculous comic portrayals on the stage as in the burlesques by John Brougham, such as *Metamora; Or, The Last of the Pollywogs* (1847), or to uncivilized and warlike predatory figures as in W. R. Derr's *Kit Carson, The Hero of the Prairie* (1850) or Augustin Daly's *Horizon* (1871). Such depictions provided the settlers with the moral justification to abrogate treaties and deprive the Indians of their lands.

The third chapter explores the response of the Native Americans and more specifically the Lakota to their loss of sovereignty in the western plains. Although Native Americans sometimes performed in Wild West shows and

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were often represented (and sometimes appeared) in playhouses, this chapter does not examine representations of Native Americans in the mainstream theatre or Native American performances for a paying public. It discusses a religious ritual that spread across the country and was interpreted by the Lakota in a particular fashion. The chapter demonstrates that the Lakota rendition of the Ghost Dance was a performative cultural and religious response to their loss of sovereignty and functioned as a demand for an independent Native lifestyle. The Ghost Dance, which spread across the United States, reflected a widespread belief that the millennium was near. The Native Americans were faced with the obliteration of their culture and the extermination of their people, but the Ghost Dance represented a dream that the whole process of white incursion could be reversed. The whites would disappear, the buffalo would return and the Indians would reunite with their ancestors. As such, the Lakota Ghost Dance redefined the notion of the nation that was being promulgated by the white settlers and the government in Washington. The Ghost Dance operated as a form of political theatre, similar in function to the pamphlet plays for the white population in the previous century.

In spite of the increasing diversity of the United States in the nineteenth century with immigrants from many parts of the world in addition to the early white settlers and the indigenous and African American peoples, the dominant notion of the nation remained monocultural and united. This was particularly emphasized following the Civil War as a rhetorical means to express a common and undivided national identity. Unlike the nations of Europe that could claim the organic development of a national spirit through a common history, folklore, literature, ethnicity, language, etc., America's common identity needed to be more artificially constructed because of its diversity of ethnicities, religions, languages and customs. Despite severe social prejudice, a hierarchical social structure and legalized forms of social discrimination, some of the factors that were represented as uniting the country were the English language, the Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, and the common dream of prosperity founded on notions of liberty, equality and free enterprise. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, "To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength . . . that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends . . . that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil."[32] Likewise, David Huntington wrote, "It is a wondrous impulse to the individual, to his hope, his exertions and his final success, [thus] to be taught that there is nothing in his way; – that he stands fair

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