Although often dismissed as a minor offshoot of the better-known German movement, expressionism on the American stage represents a critical phase in the development of American dramatic modernism. Situating expressionism within the context of early twentieth-century American culture, Walker demonstrates how playwrights who wrote in this mode were responding both to new communications technologies and to the perceived threat they posed to the embodied act of meaning. At a time when mute bodies gesticulated on the silver screen, ghostly voices emanated from tin horns, and inked words stamped out the personality of the hand that composed them, expressionist playwrights began to represent these new cultural experiences by disarticulating the theatrical languages of bodies, voices, and words. In doing so, they not only innovated a new dramatic form, but redefined playwriting from a theatrical craft to a literary art form, heralding the birth of American dramatic modernism.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad of shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

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Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre

Bodies, Voices, Words

JULIA A. WALKER
University of Illinois at Urbana – Champaign
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Acknowledgments

When I was growing up, my grandmother, a piano teacher, took me and my sister Sarah to the Windswept Music Workshop in Berea, Kentucky every summer. There, we would take morning exercise classes, known as “body tuning,” in which we would prepare our “instruments” to play for Margaret Allen, the workshop’s founder and director. Margaret’s philosophy, known as “creative motion musicianship,” held that an artistic performance necessarily involved the whole body. Thus, after relaxing our bodies through yoga and yawning exercises in the morning, we would recondition them by moving musically to a piece of music that we had analyzed according to its rhythm and pattern of harmonic balances. In this way, we would be ready to perform the piece we had prepared for our afternoon tutorial with Margaret in an “expressive” manner.

Years later, while reading about the work of François Delsarte and his many followers in the United States, I was struck by a feeling that I was already familiar with it. Creative motion musicianship, it would seem, was simply one of many manifestations of what was once popularly known as the “expressive culture movement.” My grandmother, a lifelong supporter of the workshop, was a sixth-generation Delsartian. I thus begin my acknowledgments with a “thank you” to my grandmother, Evelyn Pickett Walker (1911–1998), for introducing me to one of the subjects of this book.

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