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978-0-521-03362-6 - The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque

Mark Fearnow

Frontmatter

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The American Stage and the Great Depression

The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque proposes a correlation between the divided “mind” of America during the depression and popular stage works of the era. Theatre works such as Jack Kirkland’s comic-horrific adaptation of *Tobacco Road*, Olsen and Johnson’s “scream-lined revue” *Hellzapoppin*, and successful plays by Robert E. Sherwood, Clare Boothe Luce, and S. N. Behrman are interpreted as theatrical reflections of depression culture’s sense of being trapped between a discredited past and a nightmarish future. The author analyzes the America of the 1930s as an era of the “grotesque,” in which the irreconcilable were forced into tense and dynamic coexistence, and by examining these works of theatre as products of particular historical circumstances, argues for a strong connection between cultural history and theatre history.

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The Pennsylvania State University



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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

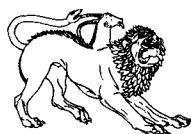
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction: Loving the Grotesque	i
1. The Grotesque and the Great Depression	15
2. The Political Analogy; or, “Tragicomedy” in an In-Between Age	51
3. Misery Burlesqued: The Peculiar Case of <i>Tobacco Road</i>	105
4. Chaos and Cruelty in the Theatrical Space: <i>Horse Eats Hat</i> , <i>Hellzapoppin</i> , and the Pleasure of Farce	127
<i>Appendix: Cast and Staff Information for Principal Productions</i>	155
<i>Notes</i>	175
<i>Bibliography</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	207

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03362-6 - The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque

Mark Fearnow

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of Illustrations

- | | | |
|----|---|---------|
| 1. | Jesting with the horrific: Hitler (Berni Gould) and Stalin (Harry Clark) were spoofed in “Five Little Angels of Peace” from the 1939 edition of Labor Stage’s <i>Pins and Needles</i> . | page 11 |
| 2. | Robert E. Sherwood’s “escape mechanism” in action: Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt in <i>Reunion in Vienna</i> (1931). | 29 |
| 3. | An enchanted circle of survivals: the Vanderhoff household and guests in Kaufman and Hart’s <i>You Can’t Take It with You</i> (1936). | 31 |
| 4. | The fear of unwilling transformation: Bela Lugosi’s hypnotic gaze in a publicity still for the film <i>Dracula</i> (1931). | 41 |
| 5. | The beast overthrows an exhausted culture: Humphrey Bogart and Leslie Howard in Sherwood’s <i>The Petrified Forest</i> (1935). | 63 |
| 6. | “An amusing kind of horror”: Fontanne and Lunt on Lee Simonson’s “streamlined” set in Sherwood’s <i>Idiot’s Delight</i> (1936). | 65 |
| 7. | Harry and Irene face the bombers near the end of the Guild production of <i>Idiot’s Delight</i> (1936). | 71 |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03362-6 - The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque

Mark Fearnow

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

List of Illustrations

8. Killing Hitler, with wit: Otto Preminger confronted by Bramwell Fletcher in Luce's *Margin for Error* (1939). 77
9. The crisis distilled to the drawing room: Osgood Perkins, Ina Claire, and Doris Dudley in S. N. Behrman's *End of Summer* (1936). 87
10. The anxious comedian: Laurence Olivier in Behrman's *No Time for Comedy* (1939). 91
11. The original monster at play: Boris Karloff (Jonathan) prepares to operate on Allyn Joslyn (Mortimer) in Kesselring's *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1941). 98
12. The alternative monster captured: Bela Lugosi as Jonathan Brewster, with Jack Whiting as Mortimer (on stairs) in Kesselring's *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1942). 99
13. Fear resolved by mockery: Henry Hull and Ruth Hunter in *Tobacco Road* (1933). 111
14. Sex sells: Ruth Hunter (Ellie Mae) and Dean Jagger (Lov) in *Tobacco Road* (1933). 119
15. Joseph Cotten rehearses his ascent into the flies for the Labiche–Michel/Welles–Denby *Horse Eats Hat* (1937). 135
16. From the strange cast of *Hellzapoppin* (1938): Harry Rieso, George Mann, Peggy Baldwin, Dewey Barto, Happy Moore, and Stormy Birch. 141
17. *Hellzapoppin*: The audience is blasted with air as a voice informs them that spiders have escaped into the theatre. 143
18. *Hellzapoppin*: The first of many attempts to deliver a plant. 146
19. *Hellzapoppin*: As the audience leaves the theatre, the delivery man still calls out for "Mrs. Jones." The plant is now grown to the size of a tree. Meanwhile, Theodore Hardeen is still straitjacketed, the result of an earlier gag. 147
20. *Hellzapoppin*: Chic Johnson forces an audience member to accept a "prize," which in this case was a toilet-training chair. If faced with resistance, Johnson would insist, "You'll take it and like it." 149

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978-0-521-03362-6 - The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The turn lasted about fifteen minutes and during this time Riley and Robbins told some twenty jokes, beating Lem ruthlessly at the end of each one. For a final curtain, they brought out an enormous wooden mallet labeled “The Works” and with it completely demolished our hero. His toupee flew off, his eye and teeth popped out, and his wooden leg was knocked into the audience.

At the sight of the wooden leg, the presence of which they had not even suspected, the spectators were convulsed with joy. They laughed heartily until the curtain came down, and for some time afterwards.

Our hero’s employers congratulated him on his success, and although he had a headache from their blows he was made quite happy by this. After all, he reasoned, with millions out of work he had no cause to complain.

– from the final chapter of
Nathanael West’s *A Cool Million*, 1934