

Introduction

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For theatre historian Arthur Hornblow, writing in 1919, American drama had virtually ceased to exist by 1870. In its place, he insisted, had come foreign imports, a characteristic lament of American critics from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Nor, according to Henry James, did the theatre have a direct and organic relationship to American society in the way that, for example, the novel did. It was the source of distraction, entertainment, and amusement but not of a cogent engagement with the values and experiences of a nation in other respects so concerned with its own exceptionalism. Writing in 1875, he remarked that

If one held the belief that there is a very intimate relation between the stage, as it stands in this country, and the general cause of American civilization, it would be more than our privilege, it would be our duty . . . to keep an attentive eye upon the theatres. . . . But except at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, [the public] does not go with the expectation of seeing the mirror held up to nature as it knows nature – of seeing a reflection of its actual, local, immediate physiognomy. The mirror, as the theatres show it, has the image already stamped upon it – an Irish image, a French image, an English image . . . !” (Quoted in Moses and Brown, 122)

To James’s mind, the fault lay in large part with audiences who seemed to show little interest in work of subtlety, of aesthetic or social value. The public at large, he insisted, “is very ignorant.” And as far as he was concerned, it was likely to remain such if the native theatre chose to refuse any engagement with the realities of a country emerging from a civil war and encountering the reality of modernity.

Just over a decade later, William Dean Howells, like James a frustrated playwright, was equally despairing: “[W]e are talking now about the American drama, or non drama; for, in spite of theatres lavishly complete in staging, and with all the sanitary arrangements exemplary – the air changed every fifteen minutes, and artificially refrigerated in the summer – we still have no drama” (quoted in Moses and Brown, 132–33). It may have been a familiar complaint but it remained true that whereas the American writer had adapted the novel to a new environment, producing superior work that even at the time was acknowledged to engage anxieties about national identity, the relationship of the individual to his society, and the tensions and ambiguities of an expanding country, the theatre seemed very much the poor relation.

Poetry had its Emerson, Whitman, Longfellow, Whittier, and Lowell, and Cooper, Irving, Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau explored aspects of their own society through prose, looking for a central metaphor to capture the essence of a new world of fact and imagination. But for the most part all the theatre could boast, besides foreign imports, translations and adaptations, was melodrama.

It is, however, worth asking ourselves exactly what Europe had to offer at this time. For there, too, poetry and the novel flourished while drama, until comparatively late in the century, played a far from dominant role. Ibsen's career did not begin until the mid-1860s, Strindberg's and Chekhov's until the 1870s.

The truth is that it was not only Americans who lamented the state of their drama. Shelley saw its decline as a mark of "the corruption of manners" and "an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life" (quoted in Steiner, 109). Until the final decades of the century what mattered was less the play than the player. This was a theatre dominated by spectacle and by the actor, a romantic figure. It was not for nothing that Lord Byron admired Edmund Kean, who appeared in his play *Sardanapulus*, or that William Macready maintained Byron's *Werner* as a regular part of his repertoire. The actor was an embodiment of a certain romantic posturing just as, later, he could be seen as an aspect of bourgeois individualism and an icon of success. And the actor was fully aware of his or her centrality and frequently behaved accordingly. The French were perhaps not wrong when they called star actors, *monstres sacrés*.

The argument that the heyday of drama corresponds with periods of national energy, which seems persuasive when applied to the Spanish, English, and French theatres of the seventeenth century, would seem to suggest that nineteenth-century America should have generated a drama commensurate with the energy unleashed by settlement and appropriation. It did not, although the level of theatrical activity greatly expanded. (One might, however, plausibly argue that what Henry Luce called "the American century," that is, the twentieth century, did.) What dominated was melodrama, a form that, through the gothic novel, already had a purchase on the American sensibility. Indeed, viewed in one way, melodrama can be seen as an aspect of the romance, itself a central dimension of nineteenth-century prose, with its fondness for heightened effects and scenes of emotional intensity.

Melodrama, though, was not an American invention. Its origins lie in France, where it was born out of a democratic spirit. The playwright René Pixérécourt wrote, he explained, for those who could not read. He staged the collision between good and evil in such a way that the moral universe was presented purged of ambiguity. Melodrama was a dramatic form that pur-

ported to peel off social deceits and expose the polarities of human nature. The very broadness of its appeal was its philosophic and financial justification. Perhaps that accounts for the enthusiasm with which the form was embraced by American audiences. It is democratic in its assertion of the moral superiority of the powerless. Melodrama implies, finally, that it is possible to tell the counterfeit from the real and that the illiterate playgoer can understand the text as clearly as anyone. This became important in an immigrant society, such as America.

Melodrama offers a heightened world in which emotions are amplified, gestures exaggerated, social roles polarized, and moral qualities distilled into their pure essence. Its characters exist through their emotions, reducing complex experiences to simple conflicts. Virtue and vice are spun off in pure form. The confusing and deceptive surfaces of experiences are scoured away to expose the truth of human nature, itself reassuringly unchanging in a changing world.

Melodrama exists in and through a theatricalized environment in which verbal and physical gestures are conventionalized. It can seem conservative in its implicit defense of normative values, in pieties paraded as the logic of experience, in social roles regarded as archetypal functions. The vulnerable heroine, cast out in the snow by a vengeful landlord, pursued by a rich man attracted by her virtue, tempted by drink, drugs or prostitution, is, admittedly, a theatrical construct, but she hints at a vulnerability that is real enough. Such was the drama of a society in which the crude forces of money, social power, and sexual inequity were as much defining qualities as were expanding frontiers and growing cities. Yet if conservative in one sense – in that it celebrated received values – melodrama nonetheless reflected a widespread and democratic suspicion of those who exercised undue power: the landlord, the businessman, the domestic tyrant. So, melodrama could be seen as dramatizing opposing impulses in the culture. It acknowledged the potential collapse of social form but stressed the virtue of continuity. Like the gothic, it was a natural product of a period of change and yet was self-consciously archaic. In a sense, what could have been better suited to an increasingly polyglot and immigrant society, aware of the danger of dissolution as well as the necessity for transformation, nostalgic for the fixities that had been relinquished, yet conscious of the inequities of the New World no less than of the Old?

What melodrama did was insist that the essential life was domestic, the perfect social unit a marriage, and hence that any challenge to such a union carried with it the threat of a greater collapse of order – and this at a time when America had so recently faced the violence of political dissolution. Western melodramas, meanwhile, reflected a situation in which everything was indeed reduced to essentials, social niceties being displaced by other

exigencies. Like the Hollywood Western they in part spawned, melodramas had more distant and mythical roots, staging, as they did, a morality tale in which a damaged society is restored to itself through the action of a hero. But here was drama that satisfied both the East's fascination with the West and that desire for drama commensurate with the country, so often expressed throughout the nineteenth century. Melodrama, then, was more adaptable and more expressive of a changing world than may at first have been apparent.

In 1870, America was five years removed from the Civil War, a war that marked, as clearly as anything else, the loss of a particular notion of American innocence. The City on the Hill was stained with blood. The dark side of technology, exposed by that war, had hinted at a future alternative to that compounded out of spiritual quest wedded to material dream. The assassination of a president who had proposed a version of brotherhood that would, at least retrospectively, validate a national rhetoric of freedom and equality, seemed to imply that there was to be no move back toward Eden, no prospect of a New Jerusalem. And, indeed, America was changing. Though it would be twenty years before the frontier was declared closed, the city was already a central fact of American experience, as the rhythms of technology began to replace those of a natural world increasingly seen as a simple resource to fuel those population centers in which the individual could no longer credibly lay claim to iconic status.

The link between land and democracy, between the isolate existential self and society, was broken. Literature, in the forms of the naturalistic novel and the melodramatic play, increasingly offered a pathological account of social process and human development. The American hero, standing out against the flaming skies of the prairie or the lowering mists of the ocean, morally intact, exemplary, gave way to the self as an expression of determinism, as product of an environment that was man-made but not made for man. For a society that had invested so much in the future the modern came, at first, as a shock, a shock that would be registered in the moral dislocations of melodrama or the disturbing realities of works that did little more than document a threatening urban environment or, occasionally, a bleak rural version of a Darwinian struggle, for these works could not yet be accommodated to the rhetoric of American liberal values. Thus Clyde Fitch and James A. Hearne confronted America with an image of itself at odds with its expansive myths. And for his part, David Belasco lovingly re-created the tactile facticity of ordinary life rendered extraordinary only by its presentation on a stage. Previously two-dimensional scenery had offered a correlative for characters and language themselves self-consciously theatrical and hence removed from the business of daily experience.

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The same documentary impulse was strong in the naturalistic novel and for good reasons. If the individual was in part a product of his or her environment, then the re-creation of that environment was a vital part of the character presented. And what was true of the novel was true, too, of the theatre. It was an impulse that would lead from Clyde Fitch's *The City* (1909) to Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* (1929) and Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End* (1935). And it is worth reminding ourselves that the naturalistic presentation of character, event, and setting was in itself a first response to the modern, even if it eventually gave way to a more radical revisioning of experience. As influences on the American avant-garde, André Antoine's Théâtre Libre (1887) and Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne (1889), in Paris and Berlin, respectively, were both, in fact, dedicated to naturalism, just as Bernard Shaw, Granville Barker, and John Galsworthy were, on the whole, writers of realism, and the Moscow Art Theatre, in turn, was dedicated to the realism of Chekhov.

Perhaps the greatest shock to a somewhat self-satisfied theatre came from outside the country in the form first of the work of Henrik Ibsen and then that of his enthusiastic proponent, George Bernard Shaw. At first what was seen as Ibsen's relentless pessimism, so much at odds with American values, was softened by judicious rewriting. Thus, *A Doll's House* opened, in 1883, as *Thora*, with a conventional, if unconvincing, happy ending. America's moralists were not fooled. They recognized the contagion of pessimism when they saw it and, to a remarkable degree, it was the language of pathology they deployed to welcome the new realistic and socially engaged drama. For critic William Winter, "Ibsen is not a dramatist, in the true sense of that word, and Ibsenism, which is rank, deadly pessimism, is a disease, injurious alike to the Stage and to the Public, – in so far as it affects them at all, – and therefore an evil to be deprecated" (quoted in Moses and Brown, 94). To his mind, Ibsen and his followers had "altogether mistaken the province of the Theatre in choosing it as the fit medium for the expression of sociological views, views, moreover, which, once adopted, would disrupt society." Since when, he inquired, "did the Theatre become a proper place for a clinic of horror and the vivisection of moral ailments?" (the word "vivisection" perhaps being a conscious reference to Zola, who at a lecture had called for the writer to be as cold as a vivisectionist). The actress Mrs. Fiske was denounced for forsaking her normal repertory in favor of this dour Scandinavian when she possessed "a good repertory of old plays," and had previously exhibited "judgement and taste" in choosing new ones (Winter, quoted in Moses and Brown, 95–96).

Bernard Shaw was predictably welcomed in much the same way. The *Sun* newspaper characterized his work as "a dramatized stench," and the *New York Herald* contented itself with observing, of *Mrs Warren's Profession*, that "the play is morally rotten." Even with certain lines excised, "there was a superabundance of foulness left." It "glorifies debauchery," readers were told,

“It besmirches the sacredness of a clergyman’s calling” (Moses and Brown, 163, 166). Arnold Daly, who staged the play in 1905, was forced to offer a defense reminiscent of that made by those who confronted American Puritanism more than a hundred years earlier. It was, he claimed, not so much an entertainment as a dramatic sermon and an exposé of a social condition and evident evil.

When this European influence showed signs of contaminating American drama itself, critics denounced this as well. Langdon Mitchell’s *The New York Idea* (1906) was greeted by James Metcalf, of *Life*, as a baleful influence on “unsophisticated minds,” and its mockery of fashion, he insisted, risked stirring up anarchy. James A. Herne’s *Margaret Fleming* (1891) was similarly indicted for portraying life as “sordid and mean” and for its effect on sensitive minds, which was presumed to be “depressing.” It would, readers were told, “be a stupid and useless thing if such plays as *Margaret Fleming* were to prevail” (Moses and Brown, 143).

It is easy to mock such assaults on those we now regard as laying the foundations of modern drama, but the attacks tell us something both of the state of theatre and its presumed function in a society itself undergoing radical change. For in many ways the old virtues were under assault, and writers and critics were fully aware of this.

Though presented and defended by its proponents as the ultimate triumph of individualism, the spectacular growth of combinations, trusts, and monopolies, as capitalism organized itself to exploit newly discovered resources, low-cost labor, and the mechanical organization of work, was further evidence of the collapse of that Jeffersonianism ideal that had turned on an endlessly replicated yeoman ideal. It was a growth that affected the theatre no less than the oil and steel industries as the benefits of scale and the power of monopoly capitalism, along with the manifest virtues of rational organization, were employed to turn the loose system of discrete companies, scattered throughout the country, into a powerful and efficient theatrical circuit. The newly formed Syndicate had the virtue of perceiving a national market and organizing itself accordingly. It had the vice of creating a monopoly that shifted power from the actors and managers of individual theatres to those at the center of the new system.

The author and critic Sheldon Cheney saw the Syndicate as destroying the repertory system, consolidating the power of New York, undermining experimentation, and weakening all aspects of theatre, from writing to acting and direction. The playwright, in particular, was now required to produce work that could find a ready audience around the entire country. In other words, theatre was at risk of becoming part of a system of commercial production that thrived on a standardized product. The Syndicate thus had a certain

symbolic force as well as a practical reality. That was certainly how theatre historian Arthur Hornblow saw it: “[T]he triumph of the Syndicate meant the end of honest competition, the degradation of the art of acting, the lowering of the standards of drama, the subjugation of the playwright and the actor to the capricious whims and sordid necessities of a few men who set themselves up as despots” (320).

Scarcely equivocal, such a statement tells us as much about the new enthusiasms of early-twentieth-century criticism as it does of the realities of the Syndicate era, for Hornblow was writing at a time when commitment to a new theatre, drawing on European models but reanimating a domestic drama, was at its height. In fact the virtue of “honest competition” had often concealed dismaying disorganization and exploitation, and the supposedly elevated art of acting and the implicit high standards of drama had not always been apparent. Indeed, Hornblow himself, in the very same study, lamented aspects of both. However, the Syndicate was a reminder that the theatre was a business subject to the same forces that were then in the process of transforming America.

The Syndicate was challenged by the Shubert brothers, and though they were at first welcomed on the democratic grounds that they were “of humble origin” and the pragmatic grounds that they challenged a monopoly, all they succeeded in doing was creating a duopoly with too many competing theatres to sustain high standards. Hornblow saw this development in apocalyptic terms as the surrender of art to Caesarism, but, then, apocalypse was in the air, as attested Oswald Spengler’s hugely influential study *The Decline of the West*, whose thesis was that the nadir of the historical cycle was marked by the dominance of money and power and the subordination of art. But for Hornblow, beginning with the last decade of the nineteenth century,

the theatre in America already showed signs of a marked and steady decline. . . . The making of money became the one and only aim of every effort. Of the great actors, not one remained. The stage was engulfed in a wave of commercialism that gradually destroyed the art of acting, elevated mediocrities to the dignity of stars, turned playwrights into hacks, misled and vitiated public taste, and the drama, from an art, became a business. (318–19)

Each generation of theatregoers in America thus lamented a decline from a golden age that had in turn been unfavorably compared to previous ages by a succession of critics convinced that they lived at a time uniquely inimical to the production of distinguished drama.

One actress who fell foul of the battle between the Shuberts and the Syndicate was Sarah Bernhardt. Her farewell tour of 1905 was to be produced by

the Shuberts. She was, accordingly, banned from all Syndicate theatres, a move that forced her, on occasion, to perform in such venues as a skating rink and a swimming pool–auditorium. For some of the tour, however, the problem was solved by the construction of a huge tent, seating six thousand people, in which, as Stephen M. Archer has indicated, “no one past the tenth row could hear a word, and those who could hear did not understand French.”¹ Like audiences at a pop concert, people went not to hear but to be there. Theatre was an event, and the stars icons, images of celebrity, in a society that supposedly despised social distinctions but in fact canonized the successful. In Kansas City Bernhardt played to an audience of more than six and a half thousand. On occasion, as Archer points out, she would abuse her audiences for their ignorance but, because she did so in a language they did not understand, was rewarded with wild applause. The 206 performances grossed a million dollars, and this for an oversized actress in her sixties, portraying a young consumptive woman (the play was *Camille*) while speaking a language that meant nothing to those who watched, sometimes from a distance of more than a hundred and fifty feet.

The constituent identity of Americans was and remains, in some sense, problematic. Indeed, it is the provisional nature of that identity that unlocks the social energy of a country whose definition is endlessly debated and deferred, if confidently asserted. Each wave of immigrants brought with it a taste for its own cultural expressions as well as for its own food and social customs. Thus, plays were performed in Yiddish, German, and Italian, languages equally to be heard on the street and in the factory. The editor and drama critic Norman Hapgood even suggested that German-language theatre represented America’s primary claim to high achievement in drama. Yet there was a counterimpulse, a desire to plunge into the new linguistic and social world, to embrace its prejudices, its values, and its symbolic forms. If people could cling to the reassurances of the familiar in ethnic theatres, they could also come together as Americans to share experiences that, as with the performances of Sarah Bernhardt, might not be wholly understood but that communicated on more levels than the merely linguistic. Thus they watched minstrel shows, visited circuses, vaudeville, and burlesque, and explored the paratheatrical world of Barnum and Bailey. In doing so they bought into a classless and, it should be said, a racist and sexist society that democratized art and thumbed its nose at convention but that managed, in the process, to conform to myths of America’s good-natured and essentially adolescent spirit.

As far as serious drama was concerned, however, this exuberant confidence was lacking, or at least seemed to be to those who charted its accomplishments or, more frequently, insisted on its failures, and by now it must be

apparent that the history of American theatre is in some degree a history of jeremiads by its critics. Somehow, to their eyes, it never seemed to live up to its possibilities. It either shamelessly copied feeble European models or fell so far short of classical theatre as to mock its own pretensions. Yet not only was European theatre itself frequently overrated, and the native product correspondingly denigrated, but American drama was itself changing. Hornblow acknowledged the rise of playwrights such as Clyde Fitch and Augustus Thomas but suggested that they could do little in the face of the evils identified. William Winter, in 1908, likewise insisted that theatre had fallen into the clutches of sordid, money-grubbing tradesmen, who degraded it into a “bazaar” and captured it for “the Amusement Business.”

But Hornblow and Winter were in recoil from something more than the theatre’s embrace of Mammon (into whose grasp most people involved in it had been rushing with every sign of enthusiasm for centuries). They were reacting against the world identified by Mark Twain in *The Gilded Age*. They were reacting, in other words, against a betrayal of values that went far beyond the supposed corruption of the theatre. They were also evidencing a dislike for the taste of the new mass public, which showed a predilection for the kind of large-scale spectacles that Spengler was to see as evidence of the degraded taste of a jaded society. In 1879 David Belasco staged Salmi Morse’s *Passion Play* at San Francisco’s Grand Opera House, with James O’Neill as Christ, together with a cast of four hundred actors and two hundred singers. The *Massacre of the Innocents* alone required a hundred women and babies and a flock of real sheep. Members of the audience, reportedly, fainted at the sight of O’Neill dragged off to crucifixion while, more alarmingly, and beyond the doors of the theatre, Jews were attacked in the street as Christ killers. Cecil B. DeMille was not far away.

The fact is, however, that spectacle offered a scale commensurate with a nation still in awe of its own potential, still celebrating a redefined sense of size, distance, and possibility. The technology of theatre mirrored that of a society prepared to amaze itself with inventions, innovations, and novelties. Theatres were to be large because, in America, size meant significance. It was theatre’s claim to its own importance. When the New Theatre opened in New York in 1909 it seated twenty-five hundred people. The actors were all but inaudible, but how could anyone doubt that the theatre should be seen as part of a modern world of which New York was emerging as a central symbol, a city that celebrated its skyscrapers as an image of the new. And, indeed, that skyline was synonymous with futurity for more than its own citizenry. European modernists, too, responded to its implied suggestion that art and architecture could not only define the space within which people lived their lives but make those lives products of a new sense of expanding possibility.

Meanwhile, the cinema brought another sense of scale to drama, projecting its images onto a screen so large as to dominate the sensibility of those who watched. Predictably, Hornblow saw this new art as appropriating the theatre's buildings, seducing its actors, and buying up its playwrights. Beyond that, he saw it as appealing to the "sensual and the vicious," thus initiating a debate that was to accompany the development of American cinema throughout the twentieth century.

Yet in another sense modernism was a reaction against the large scale. The diminutive in the so-called Little Theatre movement (small, often amateur theatres playing brief plays) was an aesthetic statement no less than an admission of financial stringency. The scale was in some sense a guarantee of authenticity. Even the preferred dramas were small scale – one-act plays, by definition unprofitable for Broadway to stage. In the context of a commercial imperative, for which the theatrical was synonymous with the elaborate, the rhetorical, the factitious, the amateur actor, appearing in a small theatre to perform plays whose purpose seemed to lie in poetic truth or psychological reality, offered a new account of drama's potential.

These were theatres that did not aim to reach large audiences. Broad effects did not interest them. The poetic drama, the social play, and the experimental work attracted actors drawn to the theatre not as a profession but as an extension of their aesthetic, social, and political commitments. Such people were committed to acting but not as a means to commercial success. Indeed, when George Cram Cook, co-founder of the Provincetown Players, realized that the group was achieving a genuine popular following, he began to suspect that their work might be tainted and withdrew to Greece, there to revivify classical drama with its organic connection to the community and its roots in myth. Indeed, it was precisely the trappings of commercial theatre, itself part of a suspect social system, that he despised and rejected (and Cook, like many of those who founded and sustained such theatres, was a radical in more than an aesthetic sense). So it was that a decrepit wharf in Provincetown, a small brownstone on MacDougal Street in New York, or its equivalent elsewhere across the nation, was to be the site of theatre offering a poetic vision, self-consciously expressing, or even satirizing, the new, celebrating the subversive, elevating the New Women, the New Negro, the socially marginal to center stage.

Perhaps the greatest proponent of the Little Theatre movement was Maurice Browne, whose Little Theatre in Chicago (which lasted only five years) employed both amateur and professional actors. Seating a mere ninety-nine people, it was well named. Its repertoire was heavily European, with plays by Yeats, Schnitzler, Strindberg, Shaw, and Dunsany. Soon, however, such theatres began to generate their own plays, the Washington Square Players and