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978-0-521-79320-9 - Performing the American Frontier, 1870–1906
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Introduction: conditions and contradictions

> 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.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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-

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est, and females regularly played major roles. The productions treated non-whites 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

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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

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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

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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-

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