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0521847478 - Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words

Julia A. Walker

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Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre

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 re-defined playwriting from a theatrical craft to a literary art form, heralding the birth of American dramatic modernism.

JULIA A. WALKER is Assistant Professor of English and the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has published articles in the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, *Nineteenth Century Theatre*, and the *Yale Journal of Criticism* in addition to several edited volumes.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521847476

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First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84747-6 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84747-8 hardback

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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.

Many other thanks are due, especially to those institutions and individuals who contributed directly to the book’s composition. At Duke University, where this book began as my dissertation, I received crucial early feedback from my director, John Clum, as well as committee members Jane Gaines, Kristine Stiles, and Neil Blackadder. Joel Pfister also generously read and commented on an early version of my O’Neill chapter, for which I am especially grateful. At the College of William & Mary, I received two

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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summer research grants which assisted me in the initial revisions of my dissertation research. A Mellon Foundation Grant for a one-month residency at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas – Austin allowed me to complete my research on Elmer Rice. At the University of Illinois, I received a Humanities Released-Time Fellowship for a semester of research and writing support, along with an Arnold O. Beckman award for a research assistant as the typescript neared completion.

The preparation of this book required me to visit many archives and special collections where I was given helpful assistance by, among others: Jean-Claire Van Ryzin at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center; Jeremy McGraw at the New York Public Library's Billy Rose Performing Arts Collection; Raymond Wemmlinger at the Players' Club Library; the staff of the Morris Library at the University of Southern Illinois where I consulted the "John Howard Lawson Papers"; Shan Sutton and Jerry Dickey of the University of Arizona who assisted me in my research on Sophie Treadwell; the staff of the Beinecke Library at Yale University; and, at the University of Illinois, Kathleen Kluegel (English Library), Thomas Mills (Law Library), Bruce Swann (Rare Books Room), and Desiree Yamtoob (Main Stacks), all of whom helped me excavate the library's labyrinthine riches. To these names must be added Ellen McWhorter, my research assistant, Brad Campbell, Josh Eckhardt and Dan Yezbick – all graduate students in the English Department – who directed me to sources that strengthened various aspects of the book.

Here, at the University of Illinois, members of the American Literature Reading Group provided essential commentary and criticism: a special thanks to Nina Baym, Robert Dale Parker, Trish Loughran, Nancy Castro, and Mark Christian Thompson. Thanks, too, to my colleagues Cary Nelson, Joe Valente, Ramona Curry, Jed Esty, and Zack Lesser, who served as critical interlocutors and/or provided valuable advice.

Special thanks go to Jeff and Susan Lawson, who graciously granted me permission to quote from their father's materials; to Selma Luttinger of the Robert A. Freedman Dramatic Agency, for permission to quote from the plays of Elmer Rice; and to Berlinda Parra of the Diocese of Tucson, for permission to quote from the plays of Sophie Treadwell.

At Cambridge University Press, I owe a huge "thank you" to series editor Don Wilmeth for guiding the manuscript through the review and revision processes, to the anonymous readers for their insights and suggestions, to Vicki Cooper, Becky Jones, and Liz Davey for overseeing the book's

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production, to Audrey Cotterell for carefully editing the typescript, and to Mike Leach for preparing the index.

And, finally, an expression of gratitude is due my family, whose encouragement and support throughout the many years of this book's composition allowed me to integrate it into my life. To my parents, Evelyn and Oreon Walker, to Sarah, Liz and Louis Moore, to Carolyn Rieger and Bill Maxwell, Sr., and to Stephanie, Jeff, Anna and Lizzie Binder – many, many thanks. But thanks most of all to my husband, Bill Maxwell, who not only served as the book's primary editor, but played Clark Gable to my Zita Johann, giving me the "spiritual harmony" necessary to write it. To him, our dog Elvis, and our son Bix (who is due even as I write these words), this book is lovingly dedicated.