

A COMPANION TO
TWENTIETH-
CENTURY *AMERICAN*
DRAMA

EDITED BY **DAVID KRASNER**

A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama

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For
Don B. Wilmeth
and
Thomas Postlewait
Pioneers in the Field

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Foreword

Molly Smith, Artistic Director of the Arena Stage

Theatre is a place of ritual, a place of wonder, a place we come together as a community to experience stories, to sit and really listen to another person's predicament, join in their pain and joy and agree or disagree with the choices they make in their lives.

In the same way we gather in stadiums and churches, we gather in theatres for the heat of connection. In America, there is certainly no shortage of heat. Arguably the most culturally and racially diverse country in the world, America is, as Mark Twain put it, a "loud, raucous, cacophony of voices." I believe the best American plays are like the mountains in Alaska – huge and dangerous and full of God. Audiences love to laugh, are desperate to feel, need to get angry, are driven to think – and through these American voices, which are brave, ugly, sweet, bitchy, sensual, and hot blooded, we bring the world into human scale and recognize our own humanity.

Over 50 years ago visionaries like Zelda Fichandler of Arena Stage in Washington, DC decided that wonderful theatre could happen outside of New York – indeed, that resident theatres could be born in all corners of America that would serve and sustain the individual passions and needs of each community. The resident theatre, not-for-profit movement was born. Theatres like the Guthrie in Minneapolis, the Alley Theatre in Texas, the Seattle Repertory Theatre, the Mark Taper Forum, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival were created. Today more than 350 large theatres and a few thousand small theatres populate the landscape of America. But very few of these theatres focus on American plays. Why?

I think we have a chip on our shoulders about American writers. When I talk to my colleagues, they are always looking to England to see what's new instead of investigating our own backyard. Look at Broadway – huge numbers of plays come from Europe before the Tony Awards, with our own American writers desperately trying to get an off-Broadway house. There is something wrong with this picture.

What other country has so many diverse dramatic writers? Poetic writers like Langston Hughes, Tennessee Williams, Gertrude Stein, Nilo Cruz, Zora Neale

Hurston; musical writers like Lerner and Loewe, Kander and Ebb, Rogers and Hammerstein and Frank Loesser; master storytellers like Arthur Miller, David Mamet, Marsha Norman, August Wilson, Clifford Odets, Wendy Wasserstein, Edward Albee, Beth Henley, Eugene O'Neill, Sam Shepard; political writers like Tony Kushner, Neil LaBute, Paula Vogel, Lillian Hellman, David Henry Hwang, Suzan-Lori Parks. These authors are as varied as the American landscape, our writers reflecting our dynamic heritage.

Maybe our respect for European art over American art comes from America's history as an emerging nation when Europe and other parts of the world were in full flower. But America is now in full flower. Just as we have branded and proudly exported our homegrown democracy, shouldn't we brand, proudly produce, and export our homegrown American drama?

... yes I said yes I will Yes.

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David Krasner

Introduction: The Changing Perceptions of American Drama

David Krasner

For too many critics and historians American drama is still American literature's unwanted bastard child, the offspring of the whore that is American theatre.

Susan Harris Smith (1997: 10)

Molly Smith maintains that her aim as director of the Arena Stage in Washington, DC is “to produce huge plays about all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit” (2003: 45, emphasis in original). Yet, as she makes clear in the Foreword to this book, her goals are not completely shared by others; very few American theatres, on Broadway, off-Broadway, or regional theatres, emphasize American drama. Smith’s jeremiad has a long history in American dramatic criticism. In fact, American drama has struggled since its inception with a reputation of inferiority. For instance, in 1889 drama critic Brander Matthews inveighed against what he called the “decline” of American drama. American drama, he lamented, was “shabby in structure and shambling in action,” nor had its practitioners “taken the trouble to learn [their] trade” (1889: 930). In 1954 drama critic John Gassner wrote that, despite the “seed of a vigorous democratic art,” the century preceding Eugene O’Neill found American playwrights “of no importance whatsoever to the world” (1954: 632). The sorry state of affairs appeared intractable. Drama critic Susan Harris Smith, in her book *American Drama: The Bastard Art*, described American drama as having “always suffered from a bad reputation” (1997: 23). The “widespread discrimination” of American drama, she contends, “is of long standing,” representing “the sour leitmotif in American publishing, academic or commercial, highbrow or low, where drama in general is slighted to a great extent but American drama virtually is erased” (29–30). Today, however, perceptions are beginning to change.

This book seeks to examine the vitality and broad scope of American dramatic literature by focusing on as many twentieth-century American dramatists and dramas as possible. The anthology is meant for students, scholars, and practitioners of theatre and American literary history alike, assisting them in discovering a richer and wider perception of American drama than has heretofore been acknowledged. In order to reveal the range of American drama, we will illuminate the history of playwrights both well known and not so well known. Particular attention is given to the institutions in which the dramas have been performed (the theatres, venues, and directors who assisted the playwrights), dramaturgical analysis of the plays, background to the playwrights, and the relationship between dramatic literature and broader historical continuities and social transformations. The history of a national literature inescapably concerns itself with questions of national identity. Literary history is neither social nor political history, but an historical understanding of dramatic literature cannot be separated from cultural influences, political movements, and social change. Directly or indirectly, American drama reflects the American social milieu.

Subjects are arranged within three categories: time periods, popular playwrights, and themes. Chapters examine the timeframe of particular dramas, focus exclusively on major playwrights and their works, or shed light on thematic relationships between playwrights. Every attempt has been made to distribute the research broadly in an effort to weigh the significance of the plays and their importance to the history of American drama. The contributors attempt at every instance to provide proportional emphasis given the diversity of dramas.

A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama embodies the work of a generation of scholars who have collectively and to a large extent defined the field, as well as that of a new generation who have contributed wide-ranging and useful insights. The authors come from various branches of American intellectual traditions, including theatre, drama, and performance studies; literary and American studies departments; and comparative literature.

The importance of this work is difficult to overstate. American drama may lag behind; however, it is far from being the “bastard child” it was once considered. Indeed, American dramatic literature is beginning to secure its place as representative of American art and culture. By attending to the various historical traditions and influences of American drama, as well as analysis of plays themselves, this work provides an overview of American drama and its place in twentieth-century American literary tradition.

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American Drama, 1900–1915

Mark Evans Bryan

The drama of the modern United States before World War I was in many ways not a *modern* drama at all. In the years before the Little Theatre Movement gave rise to a generation of American playwrights who experimented with European realisms and anti-realisms, and the “new stagecraft” made metaphoric space of theatre production, American drama existed much as it had since the Civil War. Literary and theatrical modernism in Europe was a response to the changing circumstances of modern life. Though the American social and political landscape was transformed by the same cultural forces, the American drama of the first 15 years of the twentieth century reflected instead a theatrical business structure that resisted new forms and a literary culture that produced few new works of drama, however much a series of uniquely American responses to modernity occurred.

The spectacular 1899 premiere of *Ben-Hur* in New York City typified the American drama of the turn of the twentieth century. Adapted by William Young from the best-selling novel by Lew Wallace, the six-act religious melodrama was a popular and critical success and the grandest stage spectacle that New York audiences had yet seen. Incorporating eight horses and two chariots running at a gallop on massive treadmills, a moving cyclorama background painting, and wind machines, the climactic chariot race of *Ben-Hur* is far more representative of the American stage at the beginning of the twentieth century than, for instance, the Boston premiere, nine years before, of the realist drama *Margaret Fleming* (1890) by James A. Herne, arguably the first modernist American drama.

In his 1886 column on literature, William Dean Howells, the arbiter of American realism, praises the work of vaudevillian Edward Harrigan. In Harrigan’s short comedies of working-class Irish and German immigrant life in New York, Howells discerns “the actual life of the city...from laborers in the street to the most powerful of the ward politicians.” Harrigan, Howells observes, “writes, stages, and plays his pieces; he has his own theatre, and can risk his own plays in it, simply and cheaply” (Howells 1886: 315–16). The business of American

theatre, Howells adds, places a conservative stranglehold on the development of the drama:

there has been so little that is fresh, native, and true on the stage for so long that the managers might not know what to make of [an innovative] piece; and it is to the manager, not the public, that the playwright appeals. . . . It costs so much to “stage” a play in these days of a material theatre but no drama, that [a manager] can only risk giving the old rubbish in some novel disguise. . . . With the present expensiveness of setting, a failure is ruinous, and nothing really new can be risked. So much money has to be put into the frame of the picture that only the well-known chromo-effects in sentiment, character, and situation can be afforded in the picture. (315)

The transformation of the theatre industry reflected massive changes in American culture. The years before the turn of the century were characterized by rapid economic development and the growth of national industries. In the Progressive Era (ca. 1890–1900), limited-liability corporations became the norm in American business and antitrust legislation was passed to reign in the power of American enterprise. Scientific management transformed the practices of the urban factory. Market instability, immigration from Europe, and agricultural crises in the Midwest and South produced a surplus of unskilled workers in American cities. Before 1890, the economy had depended largely on capital goods, but after the deflation of the 1880s, American capitalists directed their investments toward consumer goods (ready-to-wear clothing, leisure items, household goods, etc.). For the first time, the production of such goods became dominant, as the small trading store transformed, for example, into the department store, moving from proprietary to corporate capitalism.

American theatre “business” responded to the centralizing and corporatizing strategies of new American industry. The difficulties of touring in the United States before the Civil War were demonstrated by limitations for elaborate productions to profit from more than local audiences in the major theatre centers. The innovation of the combination company, which allowed large-scale productions to tour in their entirety on the nation’s growing rail routes, made the production of theatre a potentially profitable enterprise for national touring corporations. Large producing and booking agencies for drama and vaudeville emerged in the metropolitan Northeast; as a result, American dramatists produced new plays in large numbers from the 1880s to the 1920s as demand, and copyright protections, increased.¹ Auditoriums that accommodated touring productions replaced local stock companies, regional “local color” writing in the theatre disappeared, and the American theatrical world fell under the influence of a relatively small number of producers. By the time of the writing of Howells’s 1886 column, combination-touring companies from New York City dominated the popular theatre in the East. A decade later, the most powerful of these producing cartels was founded: the Syndicate, a booking and producing monopoly effectively controlling the “legitimate” American stage until the early 1910s, when

the rival Shubert organization wrested control of it with its own growing monopoly. “I tell you,” the playwright Clyde Fitch once wrote, “there will never be *good* American dramatists till there are good American producers!” In the Syndicate, Fitch found producers; indeed, perhaps no dramatist benefited from the producing monopolies as much as he did. But even Fitch lamented the power of Syndicate producer Charles Frohman: “what a state it is, when there is only *one man* to whom one can offer a play and expect to have it in any 1/2 adequate way presented” (Fitch, *Letters* 1924: 117).

The career of Clyde Fitch exemplifies the changing role of the dramatist in the United States at the turn of the century. Though he was one of the most commercially successful playwrights in American history and a favorite of Frohman and the Syndicate, Fitch was also admired by figures in the theatre as disparate as the literary critic Howells, the anti-Syndicate producer and playwright David Belasco, and the playwright Rachel Crothers. Brander Matthews suggested that *The Truth* (1907), Fitch’s serious comedy of manners about an upper-middle-class married couple besieged by the pathological honesty of one and the pathological dishonesty of the other, “bid fair to achieve the cosmopolitan popularity of Ibsen’s ‘Doll’s House’” (1926: 43). Fitch encompassed both models of the American dramatist in the new twentieth century: the literate, professional writer, whose experience of the theatre was dominated by collegiate theatricals, the study of the classics, and, for some, the seminars of George Pierce Baker at Harvard; and the professional theatre artist, whose experience of the theatre began with professional theatre production and whose career in playwriting complemented a career as a director, producer, or performer. A graduate of Amherst College, a budding novelist, and a young playwright who had been invited to speak before George Pierce Baker’s drama club at Harvard, Fitch had produced only three full-length plays before he began his long association with Charles Frohman in 1892.

Fitch’s popular melodramas, plays such as *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902) and *The Woman in Case* (1905), were episodic dramas of vice, blackmail, and violence, with Syndicate-required happy endings (Meserve 1994: 164).² A deft and observant comic writer as well, his comedies ranged from the realistic detail of *The Truth* to *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines* (1901), in which the title character, the clumsy and unsuccessful military character made popular in the song “Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines” (ca. 1868), wagers one thousand dollars that he can woo a beautiful opera singer. Falling in love with her instead, the bet becomes public and Jinks nearly loses his love. The play ends with the lovers together, a happy toast, and the singing of “Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines.” The comedy mixes romantic farce with political commentary: although the “Captain Jinks” song was popular in military circles, the figure of “Captain Jinks” was utilized by anti-imperialists who opposed the Spanish–American War (1898) and the nationalist, expansionist policies of the United States. Prominent anti-imperialist Ernest Crosby published his satirical, anti-war novel, *Captain Jinks, Hero*, the following year.

The plays of Clyde Fitch portrayed a modern world; they explored urban life, the pathologies of modern culture, and the new social structures of the industrializing age. His characters, if lacking depth, had detail. Rachel Crothers praised the complexity and moral ambiguity of the central character in *The Truth*: “I think you’ve done the most difficult of things,” wrote Crothers to Fitch, “given us all sides of a human being, and made her intensely appealing in spite of very grave faults – a very complex and interesting study. . . . It makes the commonplace element extremely dramatic” (Fitch, *Letters* 1924: 332). Fitch’s melodramas of contemporary society bridge the gap between the tradition of American romantic melodrama and social realism. In a 1904 speech, Fitch calls for a “real melodrama” that portrays the “truth” of the urban condition:

the incidents, the events of everyday life in a big city are more melodramatic than anything that was ever put upon the stage. . . . [It is] a daily life which is blood and iron mixed with soul and sentiment – melodrama of the ancients, pure and simple. . . . Realism is only simplicity and truth. (*Plays* 1930: xli–xlii)

Fitch’s last play, however, illustrates the playwright’s ambiguous distinction between “real melodrama and the false.” *The City* (1910), “a modern play of American life,” is a traditional melodrama that appropriates the hallmarks of stage realism (443). It is located in the morally ambiguous urban world of social realism, using naturalistic dialogue and suggesting the role of heredity in its characters’ lives. But *The City* is not a story of “everyday life in a big city.” The death of George Rand, Sr., the scion of a rural New York family and the victim of blackmail at the hand of the melodramatic villain, Hannock – a “drug fiend,” convicted felon, and Rand’s illegitimate son – prompts the Rand family to move from rural “Middleburg” to New York City (478). Years later, George Rand, Jr. has climbed the social ladder as a businessman and likely gubernatorial candidate, becoming wealthy and successful, though corrupt. Hannock secretly marries Cicely Rand, his half-sister, but when George learns of their liaison, he attempts to end it by divulging the secret of Hannock’s parentage. Hannock murders Cicely but is prevented from shooting himself by his half-brother, though he threatens to destroy George’s political career with the scandal. In the end, George decides to “make a clean breast of it all! . . . no matter what it costs,” withdraw from public life, and repent for all his crimes of action and inaction, while beginning a new life (618).

Although structurally melodramatic, *The City* is a commentary on the city itself, the stultifying nature of rural life, and the transformation of American urban culture. Fitch’s career coincided with perhaps the most significant changes in the geopolitics of American society. The pastoral American past collided with industrial, urban America; the rapid industrialization had repercussions throughout American culture (Trachtenberg 1982). American theatre audiences embraced entertainments that appealed to nostalgia for an oftentimes fictional past, a premodern American landscape expressed in melodrama, minstrelsy, and the entertainments of the increasingly

popular vaudeville stage. Fitch, however, a modernist in spirit if not in execution, directed his final play to question idyllic versions of rural life and extolled the possibilities of the new urban century: “Don’t blame the City,” George Rand, Jr. implores after the death of his sister and the end of his political career: “It’s not her fault! It’s our own! What the City does is bring out what’s strongest in us. . . . *She* gives the man his opportunity” (627–8).

Many of the social melodramas that held the stage during the career of Clyde Fitch explore the temptations, dangers, and possibilities of the new city. The American tradition of social satire and domestic comedy, however, was equally successful in portraying modern urban life. Changing social mores and upper-class urban culture are at the center of *The New York Idea* by Langdon Mitchell, who had grown up in the closed social world that he satirized. Arthur Hobson Quinn included *The New York Idea* with *The Great Divide* by William Vaughn Moody, *Jeanne d’Arc* by Percy MacKaye, and Crothers’s *The Three of Us*, all of which premiered during the 1906–7 season in New York, as “the advance guard of the new drama” (Quinn 1927, vol. 2: 4).

The New York Idea is a comedy of manners, an indictment of upper-middle-class American culture, and a drama of society and marriage, not unlike English sentimental comedies of the eighteenth century, but placed in the new context of the burgeoning American divorce culture. (The rate of divorce in the United States rose sharply between the end of the Civil War and the writing of *The New York Idea*. In 1880, less than one half of 1 percent of all marriages ended in divorce; by the beginning of World War I, that rate had climbed to over 10 percent.) On the eve of the wedding of Philip Phillmore, a divorced Manhattan judge, and Mrs. Cynthia Karslake, a divorced heiress, the lives of a small group of the New York social elite are thrown into disarray as they couple and uncouple, forming fleeting unions rooted in love, spite, or social pressure. Cynthia has agreed to marry Philip, despite her desire to be “a free woman,” because “a divorcée has no place in society” (Mitchell 1956: 140). The “society” to which Cynthia refers is a closed social world. The characters are “persons of breeding” (a series of horse metaphors and sexual innuendo begins with this Act 1 utterance), who “winter in Cairo” and inherit millions of dollars (124–6), and who own famous racehorses and consider bankruptcy to be “the next thing to” death (136).

The New York Idea satirizes upper-class mores, but it also charts society and social space in the changing New York (one of several horses mentioned in the play, in fact, is named “Urbanity”). The play reflects the increasing divisions in the United States in 1906: between the wealthy and the working, as well as the urban and the rural. Indeed, when Philip’s sister, Grace, complains that the nineteenth of May is “ridiculously late to be in town,” she renders invisible the majority of the more than four million people in the city of New York in 1906. It is an echo of the descriptions of the city in the summer in Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth* (1905), in which New York is described as “a dusty deserted city” or as simply “deserted” (Wharton 1984: 224, 250). (The stage adaptation of *The House of Mirth*, by Wharton and Clyde

Fitch, premiered one month before Mitchell's play.) *The New York Idea* – that “a woman should marry whenever she has a whim for a man” – indicates an uneasiness in the conservative elite in an age where civil unions no longer guaranteed the inheritance of fortune and status (202). “I feel as if we are all taking tea on the slope of a volcano!” observes the first Mrs. Phillmore, as the characters of *The New York Idea* teeter on the edge of their new century (145).

The melodramas of Edward Sheldon are more explicitly ideological, exploring urban life, corruption, and racism. A graduate of George Pierce Baker's Workshop 47 at Harvard, the first-of-its-kind workshop in dramatic writing in the United States, Sheldon wrote melodramas in the nineteenth-century tradition about twentieth-century social problems. *Salvation Nell* (1908) is a melodrama of the urban condition that follows Nell, a working-class woman, as her life is nearly destroyed by her criminal lover. Nell is, at root, a traditionally melodramatic woman in distress, but she is the central character of a play set in believably realistic working-class surroundings. *Salvation Nell* was produced by Harrison Grey Fiske, an admirer of Henrik Ibsen, in a production that Quinn hailed as “as realistic a picture of slum life as can be imagined” (1927, vol. 2: 86).

In *The Nigger* (1910), Sheldon combines melodrama and social critique. Produced by Winthrop Ames during the debut season of the New Theatre, *The Nigger* was both a reconstruction of the “tragic mulatto” melodramas of the mid-nineteenth century and a response to the political and business climate of early twentieth-century America.³ Set among the corrupt business and political leaders of an unidentified state in the South, *The Nigger* follows Philip Morrow, a white racist governor controlled by a powerful business monopoly, a corrupt media, and the secret of his African heritage. But even as the play relies on traditional melodramatic devices, it is a commentary on the undermining of America's Reconstruction (ca. 1865–76, which attempted to “reconstruct” the South by, among other things, incorporating newly freed slaves into the social fabric of American life). In the play, however, law, society, and Morrow himself are dominated by the will of industry and Southern racism, which cannot overcome attempts at racial reconciliation. Government in the post-Reconstruction South, Sheldon's play observes, was subsumed by the darkest elements of modern society: the anti-democratic power of industry; the primitive backwardness of American regions not fully engaged in the urban, modern world; and the legacies of American chattel slavery, the root source of American market successes in the nineteenth century. Although *The Nigger* is indeed a racist drama (as its title suggests), it is in many ways the modern incarnation of a genre of racial melodrama popularized in such plays as Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859) and Bartley Campbell's *The White Slave* (1881). The play is a rebuff to the post-Reconstruction literature of reconciliation that united Northern and Southern whites at the expense of African Americans. *The Nigger* repudiates the perception of the Civil War as a nonsectarian heroic struggle and the myths of the benevolence of the antebellum agrarian South that gained currency in the period onstage and in fiction (as in the novels of Winston Churchill and Thomas Dixon,

and D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, based on Dixon's racist bestseller).⁴

The Boss (1911), Sheldon's realistic melodrama of American business, follows the marriage of Michael Regan and Emily Griswold, whom Regan acquires as the settlement of a business arrangement. Regan has "swindled and blackjacked and knifed his way" to near dominance of the city's shipping industry and threatens to devastate the Griswolds' grain business by using the local press to expose their illegal financial dealings. He exhorts his only daughter from James Griswold; she selflessly accedes to the agreement, although for Emily, their marriage is indeed a "deal": it "stops at the door of the church" (Sheldon 1953: 885, 896). Emily's brother, Donald, incites a general strike among Regan's labor. When he is nearly successful, Regan prepares to move the grain shipping contracts out of the city ("the major reason this city has for existing") and Donald is nearly killed by Regan's thugs. In a jail cell, awaiting prosecution for the attack on Donald Griswold, Regan repents out of love for Emily and, in turn, Emily decides that she loves Michael Regan: "I've never told you," she tells her husband, "because I never knew it until now" (885, 924).

Set in "one of the Eastern lake-ports," *The Boss* reflects the extraordinary changes in cities that grew as national transportation hubs between the West and the Atlantic coast in the nineteenth century (the "lake-port" city of Sheldon's native Chicago, for instance, expanded rapidly after the Civil War as a center for distributing agricultural products). The play portrays the rising power of ethnic "bosses" in Eastern cities (as Harrigan had done in his Mulligan plays) and recalls the period of widespread labor insurrection that preceded the turn of the century. Although the play fails to portray a realistic representation of American labor, it does reflect the increasing power of the business elite in cities centered on single industries and the influence of the Catholic Church in working-class communities in the industrial East. However, despite its portrayal of labor militancy, *The Boss* is an essentially pro-business play, assigning power finally with Regan and not with Griswold or his loosely banded union.

The massive changes in the character of Eastern labor were only part of the transformation of modern life reflected in the dramas of the twentieth century's first 15 years. Americans in the final decade of the nineteenth century witnessed the closing of the Western frontier. Westward expansion had characterized the age, but the rapid growth of rail lines beyond the Mississippi River after the Civil War opened up millions of acres of new land and, by the close of the nineteenth century, the end of the frontier was in sight. Popular American literature and entertainment reflected romantic associations with the disappearing "wild" American West. The "Wild West" shows of P. T. Barnum and "Buffalo Bill" Cody delighted audiences in the East and frontier melodramas surged in popularity in the Gilded Age with the plays of Bartley Campbell, Joaquin Miller, and Frank Murdoch and continued into the early twentieth century in such melodramas as Augustus Thomas's *Arizona* (1899) and William C. de Mille's *Strongheart* (1905). The "western" historical romance novel conquered the popular fiction market and stage adaptations were numerous; the stage version of Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, the best-selling novel of 1902, for instance,

ran for over 100 performances on Broadway in 1904 and was revived the following year.⁵

The closing of the frontier in 1890, observes historian Richard Slotkin, “provided the basis” for Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” (1994: 532). Turner advanced his theory, linking the idea of the frontier to the development of American culture, in a paper delivered at a meeting of historians in 1893 at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Two years later, William Vaughn Moody, early American drama’s most eloquent poet of the frontier in the American imagination, accepted a teaching position at the University of Chicago, built around the midway of the Columbian Exposition. Moody admired the work of European modernists Ibsen, Yeats, Shaw, and Maeterlinck, though he found some of Shaw’s work “pigheaded” and the realist writings of Ibsen too romantic.⁶ He detested the commercial theatre, calling the central offices of the Syndicate, “the den of Apollyon” (343) and Broadway, “a monster of great incalculability of taste, wont to eat alive a playwright a day” (299). “For five years,” wrote Moody in 1904, “Frohman and his gang [the Syndicate] have been ramming fustian down the good people’s throats... [with] their patched-up French farces, their pick-me-up Clydefitcheries” (188). But in 1906, *The Great Divide*, Moody’s dark, metaphorical drama of American character, culture, and region, became one of the most popular plays in the United States.

The Great Divide is a drama of the frontier and Eastern society, but its narrative and themes have little in common with the frontier plays of the age. In a rustic cabin in Arizona, described by one of the characters as an “unholy place,” a transplanted Eastern woman, Ruth Jordan, is left alone by her family and menaced by three rough villains (1995: 269). They break down the door, subdue Ruth, and taunt her while they prepare a game of chance to determine who will win the “sole and exclusive rights... to love and cherish on the premises” (274). Moody does not, however, provide the expected male hero to save her from sexual assault, a conventional action in the melodrama. Instead, Ruth bargains with one of her attackers. As they roll the dice to decide her fate, she “looks wildly about, shrinking from [Ghent], then with sudden resolution speaks”: “Save me, and I will make it up to you!... Save me from these others, and from yourself, and I will pay you – with my life” (273–4). Stephen Ghent agrees to the contract, buying “free field” with Ruth from one desperado with a string of gold nuggets and besting the other in an off-stage pistol duel. When conscience precludes Ruth from shooting the now-wounded Ghent and from killing herself, either of which might have suited the melodrama, she pleads with him to be merciful and release her from her bond. But instead of attacking or escaping from the man who had, moments before, come to her home to rape her, Ruth bathes and bandages his wound and leaves with him in the night.

The Jordan family, the audience learns in the opening moments of *The Great Divide*, have come to Arizona from Boston to profit from local industry. But only Ruth appreciates the desert frontier. “I think I shall be punished for being so happy,” she tells her sister-in-law. With the Jordan family came Winthrop Newbury, an educated Easterner, whom Ruth rejects because he is “finished” (269). She wants

a mate who “isn’t finished . . . a sublime abstraction – of the glorious unfulfilled – of the West – the Desert” (271). When her family discovers Ruth again, in Act 2, she is married to Ghent, living in another cabin, this one overlooking the silver mine that has made him wealthy. She both hates and loves her husband, describing him as two creatures, standing side by side: the Ghent who “heard [her] prayer to him . . . and led [her] out of a world of little codes and customs into a great new world,” and the “hateful” Ghent, the man who purchased her life and forced himself on her, “the human beast that goes to its horrible pleasure as not even a wild animal will go” (287–8). Secretly, Ruth has purchased the very string of gold nuggets with which Ghent bought her in order to buy her freedom and the freedom of their unborn child, leaving Ghent and the West. When Ghent arrives in Ruth’s Boston home six months later, he argues that his wedding to Ruth was a “Second Birth.” Resolving to leave Ruth and their child, Ghent meets her one last time. He offers his love, describes his suffering, and releases her from their contract: “Done is done, and lost is lost, and smashed to hell is smashed to hell.” But before he leaves, Ruth declares her love for him, blaming “an angry Heaven” for her compulsion to drive him away and “cleanse” herself “the only way [her] fathers knew – by wretchedness, by self-torture” (297).

The Great Divide rejects both the predestination of melodramatic constructs as well as the predestination of Calvinist New England Christianity. The eschatology of melodrama is overturned by Ghent, who enters the play as a theatrical reprobate, but becomes a kind of hero. Similarly, within the narrative, Ghent is allowed an opportunity for radical repentance, but instead he becomes the embodiment of an alternative to the “self-torture” of Ruth’s ascetic Protestantism. Moody’s play offers another version of Turner’s “frontier thesis”: the American West and “Almighty Nature” as a “God” for Americans in the modern world. Although the language in *The Great Divide* is often florid and its melodramatic touches (the duel and Ghent’s secret patronage of the Jordan family through the guise of a distant uncle) are perhaps the reason it proved so popular, it embraces a modern conception of female sexuality and challenges the conservative dramaturgy of the nineteenth-century melodrama, creating particularly complex figures in Ghent and Ruth. The play also challenges the corporate, progressive image of the West in sources like Wister’s *The Virginian*. Unfortunately, like the racism of *The Nigger* and the sexual politics of *The Boss*, Moody’s play marginalizes Ruth and portrays Ghent’s Western masculinity as the ideal, minimizing the specter of Ruth’s probable rape as part of masculine vitality and, perhaps, suggesting a metaphor of conquest that advocates American imperialism.

Moody rejected an offer from the Syndicate to produce his next work. The poet and playwright, whose final work, *The Faith Healer* (1909), was a commercial failure, had long since decided to join with Broadway’s “Independents”: Lee Shubert and his growing organization; Henry Miller, who had produced *The Great Divide*; and E. H. Sotherne, the producer, classical actor, and former Frohman apprentice. Perhaps the most independent theatre artist in New York, however, was not among Moody’s

select allies, former Syndicate producer David Belasco, whose own drama of the frontier, *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905), had delighted Broadway audiences the year before. Producer and playwright, Belasco exemplified his own dictum that a drama could only be written “with a thorough technical knowledge . . . of so complicated and treacherous an instrument of artistic expression as the stage” (1919: 41). His career is the model of the playwright as theatre professional. Having been a child actor in his native San Francisco, Belasco produced theatre in New York for the Frohman brothers and the Syndicate before, in 1902, he became an independent producer and playwright, bringing dozens of plays to the New York stage prior to 1930. He was a technical innovator, self-consciously realistic – sometimes naturalistic – in stage setting, and famous in his day for the uses of electric lighting effects in his productions.

“Both as a playwright and producer I am a realist,” David Belasco once wrote, “but I do not believe in harrowing audiences unnecessarily” (52). Clyde Fitch struggled with the same distinction when he contrasted “real melodrama and the false.” “With two thirds of the general public,” Fitch argues in the essay, “‘realism’ means something ugly, or horrible, or puerile” (*Plays* 1930: xlii). Belasco was, however, an innovative realist producer. He was also a meticulous researcher and, at times, an advocate of stark naturalism on the stage. In 1913, while preparing to produce *The Man Inside*, by Roland Burnham Molineaux, Belasco “went down near the Tombs Prison at 2 A.M. to listen to the sounds in the vicinity” and hired a “Bowery denizen” to guide him “on a slumming tour among Chinese opium-joints” (Belasco 1919: 52–3). For the scenography of his 1909 production of *The Easiest Way*, by Eugene Walter, Belasco

went to the meanest theatrical lodging-house [he] could find in the Tenderloin district and bought the entire interior of one of its most dilapidated rooms – patched furniture, threadbare carpet, tarnished and broken gas fixtures, tumble-down cupboards, dingy doors and window-casings, and even the faded paper on the walls. (77)

Indeed, Belasco’s production of *The Easiest Way*, a sentimental melodrama with a psychologically complex central character, is a significant event in the history of realism on the American stage, yet the play itself is a melodrama of the urban condition.

Although David Belasco was a “realistic” producer-director well known for his detailed sets, his plays are romantic melodramas. Like Fitch, Belasco’s great talent was for “appeal[ing] to the public’s constantly changing taste” (44). *Madame Butterfly* (1900) and *The Darling of the Gods* (1902), for instance, two of the plays produced by the partnership of Belasco and John Luther Long, are romances set in Japan; they capitalize on the growing significance of Pacific Asia to the United States. *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905) is a frontier melodrama. *The Return of Peter Grimm* (1911), a melodrama of the supernatural, was a platform for Belasco’s technical innovation. Peter Grimm’s ghostly return in Act 2 was achieved by inverting the traditional

solution; instead of creating a special light for the actor portraying Grimm, Belasco directed his technicians to light around him, illuminating the living and cloaking the dead in darkness. Belasco was ultimately the producer of brilliantly staged events, rather than writing plays, and few of his dramas were produced later in the twentieth century.

Quinn's "advance guard of the new drama" included Langdon Mitchell, Percy MacKaye, and William Vaughn Moody, three Harvard-educated dramatists. But it also included Rachel Crothers, an artist whose professional life resembled Belasco's more so than it did any of her classmates in the "advance guard" of 1906. She began her career as an actress and directed many of her plays over her 30 years on the American stage. She was a talented commercial writer, whose facility with popular melodrama was matched by the ideological currency of her feminism. Her dramas explored the changing opportunities for women at the beginning of the twentieth century. The women's movement of the early Progressive Era overthrew the Victorian "cult of true womanhood" and produced a generation of women for whom education and work outside the home became more available and socially acceptable. Crothers's plays challenged longstanding social barriers for women during the period of activism that led to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which guaranteed women the right to vote, in 1919.

Rachel Crothers's first success was the frontier melodrama *The Three of Us* (1906), conventional except in its focus. Narratives of the frontier at the turn of the century tended to be paeans to an explicitly masculine vitality; as different as are *The Virginian* and *The Great Divide*, their male central figures are in many ways indistinguishable from one another. The protagonist of *The Three of Us*, however, is Rhy MacChesney, an unmarried woman and the maternal influence on two younger brothers. Crothers sets the fundamental conflicts of *The Three of Us*, which was a massive popular success on Broadway, in a social sphere. The villain, Berresford, threatens MacChesney's gold mine not with force but with immoral business and personal dealings. MacChesney protects her family and her gold mine from Berresford at the expense of her reputation and the play becomes an argument against the nineteenth-century conception of female honor. Although the narrative is unmistakably melodramatic and the conclusion is ultimately conservative, Crothers's subversion of the familiar form of the frontier melodrama points toward her dramas of the "double standard" for men and women, *A Man's World* (1910) and *He and She* (1911).

A Man's World, directed by Crothers and produced by the Shubert organization, ran for only 71 performances in 1910, but it incited a wide variety of popular responses and, famously, a play, Augustus Thomas's *As a Man Thinks* (1911), a masculinist and racist rebuttal of Crothers's implicit argument against the "double standard" in male and female social and sexual interactions.⁷ *A Man's World* is nominally a domestic melodrama. Although it follows the life of its exceptional female protagonist – Frank Ware, a novelist and social activist, the mother of an adopted son, Kiddie, and the center of a "bohemian" household of artists in New York City – the parentage of Kiddie is the central question of the drama. Acts 2 and 3 are centered on a debate

within the boarding house: Kiddie resembles Malcolm Gaskell, Frank's frequent companion, and Lione, who provides the play its title when she questions the efficacy even of attempts at gender equality, is convinced that Malcolm and Frank are the child's biological parents. The accusation prompts Frank to confront Malcolm, who admits to parenting the child but refuses responsibility.

Although *A Man's World* conforms to a melodramatic construct in its focus on the secret of a character's parentage, Crothers questions the underlying rationale for the device: the economic motivation for the historical oppression of women. In this way, the play – like Mitchell's *The New York Idea* and Thomas's *As a Man Thinks*, which includes a lengthy defense of the double standard as a means to insure inheritance – is a reflection of the renewed oppression of women in an age where social revolution endangered the ruling American business aristocracy as well as the rising managerial class.

He and She continues Crothers's challenge to the double standard, as it relates to familial responsibility, social roles, and art. Ann Herford, a sculptor, is awarded a prestigious commission that everyone, including her daughter and husband, assumed would go to her husband, Tom, also a sculptor. But over the course of the four months between Acts 1 and 2, Ann loses touch with her daughter, Millicent, who has remained at boarding school during the holidays, rather than be ignored. Alone and away from home, Millicent has fallen in love with the school's chauffeur and announces that she intends to marry him. Deciding that she has neglected her maternal responsibility, Ann begs Tom to take the commission and sacrifices her career as an artist to be with her daughter: "I'll hate you because you're doing it – and I'll hate myself because I gave it up – and I'll almost – hate – her. I know. . . . There isn't any choice, Tom – she's part of my body – part of my soul" (Crothers, *He and She* 1995: 335).

He and She, Brenda Murphy contends, is a "discussion play" (1999: 83). But although it is a play that is conspicuously about ideas, it is a realist drama of middle-class life in the United States and is, perhaps, more similar to the work of Ibsen and Chekhov than any play written for the commercial theatre in its time. But *He and She* was not a success when it was written. The play failed in a series of cities and did not premiere in New York until 1920, when a new drama had begun to emerge in the United States.

NOTES

1. David Belasco wrote that new plays "pour down upon [the producer] in avalanches" (1919: 42). The 1891 International Copyright Treaty, which protected American works overseas, and the revision of the American copyright law in 1909 to include a broader definition of "art" and the author's "works" afforded American dramatists a greater degree of control over their own works in publication. Moody, however, suspected that the "barbaric laws" governing copyright might "exist in favor of Frohman,

- Shubert, *et al.*, in order to provide them ampler forage upon the brains of men who are misguided enough to write plays" (*Letters* 1935: 372).
2. In his discussion of Fitch's play *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, Walter J. Meserve notes especially that this melodrama "ends happily." "The happy ending," writes Meserve, "was a requirement of the 'Syndicate School'" (Meserve 1994: 164). Indeed, such an ending is a generic characteristic of the melodrama, a conservative form that achieved tremendous popularity in the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Syndicate controlled theatres throughout the eastern United States, monopolizing touring auditoriums in many cities. Seeking dramas that appealed to the broad audience it had acquired, the Syndicate favored melodramas that were, though ideally exciting and spectacular, not likely to offend audience tastes outside the urban centers of the mid-Atlantic.
 3. The New Theatre, a precursor to the American Little Theatre Movement, was funded by a group of arts-minded patrons but associated with the commercial Shubert organization. *The Nigger* was the only American play in the first season.
 4. Winston Churchill's *The Crisis* was one of the best-selling books of 1901. The historical romance novel was adapted to the stage by Churchill and produced in New York in 1902 and 1908. Thomas Dixon adapted his novels *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1906) into a single play, *The Clansman*, which premiered in 1906. A decade later, D. W. Griffith adapted the stage melodrama based on the two novels into his feature film epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Robert Sklar describes *The Birth of a Nation* as a drama of racist reconciliation: "For that was what his film was about: the creation of a new nation after years of struggle and division, a nation of Northern and Southern whites united 'in common defense of their Aryan birthright,' with vigilante riders of the Klan as their symbol" (1975: 58). Sklar's quote comes from a title card in the film. See also the "Civil War" plays of the turn of the century such as Bronson Howard's *Shenandoah* (1888), Belasco's *The Heart of Maryland* (1895), William Gillette's *Secret Service* (1895), in which he starred through the first decade of the twentieth century, and Augustus Thomas's *The Copperhead* (1918).
 5. Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York: Macmillan, 1902). The novel was adapted for the stage by producer Kirke La Shelle and Wister, the first cousin of playwright Langdon Mitchell, with whom he had once collaborated on an unpublished novel. The twentieth-century "Western," the "fable of conservative values, a cultural equivalent to incorporation," writes Trachtenberg, was "complete" in *The Virginian*. Wister transformed "the implicit egalitarianism of the earlier mode into an explicitly ruling-class vision": "Wister's great tale of the cowboy hero who wants at once the values of personal honor and worldly success, who is prepared to kill to defend both his own reputation and his employer's property, completes the cultural appropriation of the West. . . . Fusing elements of several vocational types in his cowboy figure, including that of 'foreman,' or superintendent, over the band of migrant laborers who performed the cowpunching and herding on the ranches and plains, Wister re-created the cowboy as a romantic knight of the plains. . . . [affording] knightly deference to the aristocratic owner. . . . [and, when necessary, killing] just as defense of private property justifies, indeed demands" (24–5). The novel is dedicated to Wister's friend, President Theodore Roosevelt, whose own *The Winning of the West* made use of the myth of the West, "convert [ing] the history of the Frontier into a myth of origins for the Progressive movement" (Slotkin 1994: 532).
 6. Moody called Shaw "pigheaded" in a letter to his future wife (*Letters* 1935: 345). He called Maeterlinck "a great, sincere, prophetic soul." "I envy him," wrote Moody, "with that kind of envy which between men is the keenest variant of love" (209). And in another letter, from 1907, Moody wondered "how Ibsen ever got the name of a realist. A very debauchee of Romance. And that is really the hold he has over people" (341).

7. *As a Man Thinks*, directed by the author, ran for 128 performances in 1911. Although Thomas's play is clearly a sexist rebuttal to Crothers's condemnation of the "double standard" – at one point, in Act 3, *A Man's World* is referenced ("that woman dramatist with her play was right... It is 'a man's world'") and ridiculed ("it's a pretty wise world") – George Pierce Baker, in the introduction to his 1920 collection in which *As a Man Thinks* appears, neglects to refer to the source text in any way (Thomas 1920: 65).

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Ethnic Theatre in America

Rachel Shteir

Ethnic Theatre: Origins

Ethnic theatre must, first of all, be defined by its perimeters. To be ethnic is to be American, since we are all (notwithstanding Native Americans) originally from somewhere else. Moreover, ethnicity is fluid; from the first settlers arriving on these shores, becoming “American” could take as little as one generation. Thus, defining the history of ethnic theatre requires examining the first generation of theatres these cultures created. Furthermore, it necessitates tracing the development of these theatres, as ethnic groups arrived and faced different challenges. A related responsibility is to specify each ethnic group, avoiding conflating different ethnicities and reducing the category known as “American” to generic terms. Finally, telling the story involves looking closely at the intersection of race along with ethnicity.

Ethnic theatres existed from the late eighteenth century. For the first groups of settlers, such as the French in Louisiana and the Italians in San Francisco, theatre served two purposes: it created a social center and it conjured remembrances of homeland. More than generating new plays, these theatres, for the most part, produced classics such as Molière and Shakespeare. New plays and genres in the ethnic theatre increased during Jacksonian America (ca. 1820s and 1830s), as Irish and German immigrants poured into New York and other locales. These immigrants differed from earlier generations because they formed part of a new working class that demanded entertainment. These ethnic groups created a theatrical genre of “types,” which became a central force inspiring generations of American plays. Unfortunately, these groups also provoked others to create mocking caricatures through ethnic stereotypes. The power of ethnic caricature – primarily the buffoon – was so great that it lasted for decades: whether the type was German, Irish, Jewish, or Chinese, the ethnic buffoon appeared in most varieties of ethnic theatres. The comic caricature was most prevalent in blackface minstrelsy, where the actor, mostly played by Irish actors at first, blacked up. “Blacking up” was a technique whereby actors applied burnt cork