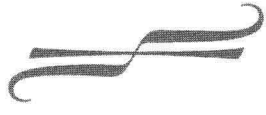
THE *Portable Theater*

American Literature & the Nineteenth-Century Stage

ALAN L. ACKERMAN JR.

THE PORTABLE THEATER

American Literature & the Nineteenth-Century Stage



Alan L. Ackerman Jr.

The Johns Hopkins University Press
BALTIMORE & LONDON

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Johns Hopkins University Press
2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363
www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
will be found at the end of this book.
A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-8018-6161-6

FRONTISPIECE: Edwin Forrest's last appearance
in New York, Steinway Hall, 1872.

O! who'd believe where yet is heard
The screaming of the frightened bird, . . .
Yes—now where late the forest stood,
In Nature's wildest solitude,
Where all was but a Prairie sod
Which human foot but seldom trod—
We hail the Drama's spotless page
And breathe its pathos from the stage.
—from an address, written by Judge Thomson, spoken by Mr. Forbes, on the opening of the New Theatre, Market Square, Texas and Texas Register, *27 February 1839*

We are continually acting a part in
a more interesting drama than any written.
—HENRY DAVID THOREAU
A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

Preface

THEATER, Tocqueville laments in 1840, is inherently democratic. The spectator at the theater has no time to consult his memory or the judgment of his betters. Moreover, the spectator's betters sit above him or even beside him, equally "surprised" by the impression conveyed by the performance. Thus, "at the theatre men of cultivation and literary attainments have always had more difficulty than elsewhere in making their taste prevail over that of the people and in preventing themselves from being carried away by the latter. The pit has frequently made laws for the boxes" (1990, 79–80). Spectators at the theater, according to Tocqueville, do not seek the pleasures of the mind but the keen emotions of the heart; they do not want to be educated but to hear something that concerns themselves. For this reason in particular, "no portion of literature is connected by closer or more numerous ties with the present condition of society than the drama" (83). The drama may be a kind of literature, but, in the unruly space of the theater, subjected and responsible to the immediate reactions of a social body, the drama cannot be "literary."

Theatergoing Americans, Tocqueville then argues, tend to manifest the propensities that he has described, but, he cautions, as of the 1830s, there is yet curiously little evidence of a thriving theater in America. Americans, from his limited range of reference, seem to indulge in theatrical entertainments only with the greatest reserve, a fact Tocqueville attributes both to the influence of Puritan ancestors and to his sense that there are "no dramatic subjects in a country which has witnessed no great political catastrophe and in which love invariably leads by a straight and easy road to matrimony." Americans seem concerned primarily with making money and going to church on Sunday. While there is a deep element of truth in Tocqueville's claims about theater and democracy, his sense that theater did not, and could not, thrive in the United States is a function of both narrowness of scope and his bias against a cultural form so immediately susceptible to popular demands. Theater was not institutionalized or publicly subsidized in America, as it was in France, where, most notably in the Théâtre Fran-

çais, dramatic standards were developed and practiced rigorously. Tocqueville complains that the number of authors, spectators, and theatrical representations in a democracy will be composed of "elements so different and scattered in so many different places" that they will not "acknowledge the same rules or submit to the same laws." Yet he is unable to follow the implications of this insight.

Theater in mid-nineteenth-century America was, in fact, a pervasive form of popular culture and an important forum for public life. Historians stress the congregation and interaction of diverse social classes particularly in the antebellum theater.[1] American theater, they argue, was a barometer of the culture's concerns and a microcosm of American democracy. In *The Guide to the Stage,* a handbook for would-be actors first published in 1827, Leman T. Rede lists well over eighty permanent theaters scattered across America. "Wherever emigration builds up a town or city," Rede concludes, "there rises up a Temple of the Drama, to hold the mirror up to nature" (17). Crews of strolling actors followed or, more aptly, shared the westward trails of the pioneers. One company bought a broadhorn and floated down the Allegheny River playing songs from *The Beggar's Opera* at solitary cabins. As Constance Rourke has argued in *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931), "Americans had . . . emerged as a theatrical race" (106–10). But Rourke makes a clear distinction between the "theatrical" and that which constitutes the "drama." And in *American Drama: The Bastard Art* (1997) Susan Harris Smith has documented the way in which "American drama historically has been the most devalued and overlooked area in American literary studies" (10). Most literary critics persist either in following Tocqueville's lead and disparaging theater for being unliterary and anti-intellectual or ignoring its cultural significance altogether.[2]

In this book I consider the relationship between theater and literature in nineteenth-century America. I have chosen five authors who represent important aspects of theater in diverse genres and in different generations. Other major figures in American literature could well be included, but Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, William Dean Howells, Louisa May Alcott, and Henry James most clearly exemplify the range of ways in which American theater has been *displaced.* In a society in which "legitimate" theater is a weak institution, various genre distinctions may be blurred, and theater may still play an important role in intellectual life and literary production. Theater in America represented an important point of intersection for various

cultural forms, including not only oratory and opera but also novels, poems, and essays. Therefore, key changes within American culture in general and in American literature in particular can better be appreciated by attending to changes in theater, both in dramatic theory and in theatrical practice.

Theater in nineteenth-century America played a crucial role in the process by which men and women imagined their relations as individual subjects to a public, "objective" reality. Unlike other modern cultural forms with literary content, such as novels, poems, or essays, theater *only* happens in the presence of other people. A theatrical event, therefore, is necessarily social, but the form of the social experience in different kinds of theater may range widely, from a feeling of community to a sense of isolation, from antagonism to complacency. For this reason theater, studied in its relation to literary history, can foreground questions about the public or private nature of literature. Although dramas tend to be consumed in different ways than novels or poems, their performance and mode of consumption are commonly represented in other kinds of literature. The significance of these representations may be both thematic and formal, both aesthetic and ethical. In all of these ways, from the poetry of Whitman to the fiction of James, theater has conferred its benefits on genres other than drama.

In the following chapters I describe how two distinctive dramaturgies both pervade thinking about theater and shape notions of social life from roughly 1830 to 1900. The first of these is melodrama, an artistic mode and worldview in which the individual is understood to be the locus of a play of cosmic forces, particularly moral forces, that are transindividual. Melodrama, as a result, is highly ostentatious, gesturing through various media, including verbal language and the material body, at truths beyond the immediate context of either language or the body. In being gestural and transindividual, melodrama is inherently public. In the second half of the nineteenth century notions of dramatic realism developed which relocated dramatic interest in interior states of consciousness and processes of individual psychology. Action in the realist theater shifted to domestic situations and became self-consciously private. In the exceptionally theatrical culture of nineteenth-century America, theater raises questions about the parameters of selfhood, origins and authenticity of character, and the concern of many to designate space for moral action, especially in regard to the responsibilities of audience.

The relationship of theater to ethical questions, as well as evidence of

theater's widespread popularity, is clearly manifested in the intensity of contemporary debates about it, debates that also indicate the privileged status of theater as a cultural form. In *Acting Naturally: Mark Twain in the Culture of Performance* (1995) Randall Knoper vividly describes the immediacy of theatrical performances in the world of Mark Twain, in which "the oppositions between staging and realization, posing and expression, broke down" (2). Twain himself emphatically defended the theater's capacity for combining amusement with instruction. Writing for the *Galaxy* in 1871, for example, Twain spends his fury on a minister who refused to bury an actor: "This minister's legitimate, recognized and acceptable business is to *tell* people calmly, coldly, and in stiff, written sentences, from the pulpit, to go and do right, be just, be merciful, be charitable. And his congregation forgets it all between church and home. But for fifty years it was George Holland's business, on the stage, to *make* his audience go and do right, and be just, merciful, and charitable—because by his living, breathing, feeling pictures he showed them what it *was* to do these things, and *how* to do them" (128). The theater's moral power, in this portrait, resides in the fact that it not only represents but *presents* reality. Whether antagonist or advocate, all seemed to agree that the theater presented a reality that was somehow more real than real life, a curious deviation from the Platonic tradition of antitheatricalism.[3] Moncure D. Conway, an early go-between of Emerson and Whitman and, in 1857, a Unitarian minister in Cincinnati, claims that, though the clergy anticipated the theater's "entire destruction . . . yet God does not side with them, but rather it would seem with the theatre."[4]

Theater was understood less as a particular space than as a set of conditions. Plays were staged in churches and museums and on steamboats, but there was also a strong sense that even the wharves and the streets themselves could function as a kind of theater.[5] For example, when Dion Boucicault arrived in New York in 1853, he found that "it was not a city. It was a theatre. It was a huge fair. Bunting of all nationalities and of no nationality was flaunting over the streets" (Fawkes 78). As the period's leading playwright, Boucicault's use of theater as a metaphor may be unsurprising. There is an appropriateness in describing New York and America itself as a theater, rather than merely "theatrical." Theater, and particularly *the* theater, implies a certain type of designated and delimited social space. American public life, however, is remarkable for its continual deconstruction of the notion that that (or any) space is limited. Of course, this reappraisal of

theatrical space is in part a function of the fact that America itself was a space not thought to be delimited. "The world is a fit theatre to-day," writes Thoreau in 1840, "in which any part may be acted" (*Journal* 1:129).

But what are the defining characteristics of this theater, and precisely *where* is theater if it is not in *the* theater? Recent work in American theater history, as in the burgeoning field of "performance studies," has increasingly focused on patterns of behavior and modes of human action outside of playhouses and of the arts in general. The application of the metaphor of theatricality to forms of social experience that appear highly self-conscious, imitative, or self-reflexive has been characteristic of widely ranging critical studies in the humanities and social sciences for the past fifty years. In *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) Kenneth Burke coined the term *dramatism* to describe his study of human motives: "Being developed from the analysis of drama, [the dramatistic method] treats language and thought primarily as modes of action" (xxii). More recently, theater historians, like theorists of "performativity," speak of "performing" gender, race, and class.[6] In *Theatre Culture in America, 1825–1869* (1997) Rosemarie K. Bank explains, "Theatre culture displays historical spaces of production, consumption, change and appropriation, but also insists upon class as a performance, ideology as a creation, and the 'authentic' as the most compelling deception of all" (8). As richly illuminating as such studies often are, they tend to confront two principal problems: first, though the subject matter may be historical, the historicity of the scholar's terminology is often neglected; second, since there is no space outside the operation of theatricality or performance, the status of theatrical art is either diminished or unaccounted for.

The present study seeks to adhere rigorously to historically contingent theatrical idioms, that is, to a language derived from the actual theaters of nineteenth-century America and employed recognizably by the authors who enjoyed performances there. In this regard I am deeply indebted to Stephen Greenblatt's notion of a "poetics of culture." In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) Greenblatt reads literature as functioning within a concrete historical situation in three interlocking ways: "as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes" (4). I also investigate five aspects or constitutive features through which American theater manifests itself: (1) the forms taken by the drama (the written play-text), (2) the human voice or "utterance," (3) the gestural body, (4) mise-en-scène,

and (5) audience (understood broadly as a set of economic, social, and artistic relationships). This book thus departs from previous studies, such as Richard Poirier's *The Performing Self* (1970) or Joseph Litvack's *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (1992), which are less concerned with historical specificity and which seem only tangentially interested in actual theater. As the extraordinary Russian playwright, scientist, and man of letters Nicolas Evreinoff wrote in *The Theatre in Life* (1927), "Each epoch has its own theatrical characteristics, its own wardrobe and scenery, its own 'mask' " (100).[7]

The following chapters interrogate a dynamic relationship of reciprocal exchange, transference, and, often, identification between the theater of nineteenth-century American life, the theater of staged play-texts, and the self-conscious use of dramaturgical idioms and strategies in the project of literature. Fundamental changes in the structures of thought in late-nineteenth-century America are indicated by changes in the theater and the drama. Tocqueville remarks that "the drama of one period can never be suited to the following age if in the interval an important revolution has affected the manners and laws of the nation" (83). Judging by substantially altered theaters, a revolution in manners did occur in nineteenth-century America. Thus, in considering the theatrical, I return continually to the theaters themselves and, specifically, to the theaters frequented by the authors who are the subjects of this study.

Acknowledgments

VERSIONS of chapters 4 and 5 have appeared previously, and I gratefully acknowledge permission to use them here: first, to *American Literary Realism* for permission to reprint "The Right to Privacy: William Dean Howells and the Rise of Dramatic Realism"; and, second, to Manchester University Press, which published "Theatre and the Private Sphere in the Fiction of Louisa May Alcott," in *Reading Nineteenth-Century Domestic Space* (1999), ed. Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd. I am generally indebted to the faculty of the Harvard English Department, where I wrote most of this study. And I greatly appreciate a Mellon Grant received in 1995 and Connaught Grants in 1998 and 1999. I thank the staff at the Harvard Theatre Collection for their assistance in procuring many of the illustrations for this volume; the illustrations are reprinted here courtesy of the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Houghton Library. And I gratefully acknowledge the material support of the English Department and the Drama Program of the University of Toronto, which have contributed to the completion of this book.

Many people at Johns Hopkins have contributed to the appearance of the manuscript in book form. Doug Armato, Linda Tripp, Kim Johnson, and Elizabeth Gratch have fostered the publication of this work and contributed to its final shape. I have also been ably assisted by Ian Carpenter, Bob Land, and Alexa Selph.

It is a great pleasure for me to acknowledge many of those without whom the writing of this book would not have been possible. To Elaine Scarry, whose brilliance as a reader is unsurpassed, I owe a primary debt. I am deeply grateful to Lawrence Buell, who has had a shaping influence on this work. Anthony Kubiak profoundly influenced the direction of this book in its formative stages through his intellectual generosity and warm friendship. Among those who have contributed to various aspects of the book by reading chapters and through conversations on relevant topics, I am especially grateful to Douglas Stewart. Philip Fisher, Michael T. Gilmore, Stephen Greenblatt, and Werner Sollors have also read chapters and provided much

helpful commentary. And I have richly benefited from many conversations with Kirk Williams on the subjects of theater and history.

My greatest debts are to those whose gifts are too large to be defined. To Alan Ackerman Sr. and Barbara Ackerman, this book is dedicated. I can only begin to acknowledge the sustaining influence of Peter Ackerman and Elizabeth Kaiden. And, finally, last but certainly not least, I thank Andrea Most, for her critical insights, unflagging support, patience, and love.

Abbreviations

AR	*American Realism and American Drama*
CP	*The Complete Plays of W. D. Howells*
CPJ	*The Complete Plays of Henry James*
CW	*Walt Whitman and the Civil War*
GF	*The Gathering of the Forces*
GSW	*Great Short Works of Herman Melville*
GTD	*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*
Letters	*The Letters of Henry James*
LLJ	*Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*
MF	*Melodramatic Formations*
ML	*The Melville Log*
P&P	*Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (of Walt Whitman)
Prose	*The Complete Writings* (of Walt Whitman)
RT	*A Realist in the American Theatre*
SA	*The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama*
SW	*Antonin Artaud: Selected Works*
SDC	*Selected Drama Criticism*
TWC	*Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States*
T&D	*The Theater and Its Double*
UPP	*The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*
Workshop	*Walt Whitman's Workshop*

Contents

ONE

SETTING THE STAGE

Representing Nineteenth-Century American Theater

If you would judge beforehand of the literature of a people that is lapsing into democracy, study its dramatic productions.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*

"I may have been meant for the Drama—God Knows!" writes Henry James, "but I certainly wasn't meant for the Theatre" (*Letters* 1:226). The purity of the drama, as James imagines it, and the aesthetic it involves cannot escape the contamination of a medium so gross and palpable as the theater. The distinction that he stresses here, between the drama and the theater, comes at the end of a century in American letters for which this distinction is a truism, and James's failure represents a peculiar culmination of the divorce. In fact, there is a sense in the nineteenth century that drama can be, and is, displaced from theater. William Dean Howells laments:

> The real drama is in our novels mostly. It is they chiefly which approach our actual life, and interpret so far as it has yet been represented to the vast majority of our intelligent public . . . The theatre is the amusement of the city, of people whose lives are crowded with pleasures and distractions. And if the drama, with all our lavish love of the theatre, cannot hold its own there, and prosper and advance, as the novel has prospered and advanced, in spite of the unfriendly literary conditions, it simply proves that the drama is an outworn literary

> form. It cannot be willed back to life by criticism, censured back, or coaxed back. It must take its chances; it must make them. (SDC 29–30)

The meaning of *the drama* is unstable in this passage, for the term is used both metaphorically and literally. But Howells strongly conveys his sense that drama is a kind of migrant worker, homeless and bereft. The drama need not prosper in the existing theaters of New York or Boston, but it does not seem to be at home in the novel. Theater is another one of (or set of) those unfriendly literary conditions which makes the lives of contemporary novelists and poets such rough going.

The drama is the literary form predicated, if only in imagination, upon the theatrical structure of performance and audience. Through the drama theater maintains its claim to being, if not literature, literary. Keir Elam defines *drama* as "that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ('dramatic') conventions" (2). Proceeding further than Elam, Richard Schechner shows how modern drama has privileged verbal language as a central feature of the theatrical experience. He calls drama "a written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map. The drama can be taken from place to place or time to time independent of the person or people who carry it" (72). Schechner argues that, while "patterns of doing" have always prefigured performance events, it is only recently in the West (concomitant with the rise of literacy) that the active sense of a basic code of the events has been replaced by drama. Thus, the doings of a particular production have become, in mainstream theater, the way to present drama in a new way. Language has been privileged, and "communication [has] replaced manifestation" (71).

The importance assigned to the literary text in mid-nineteenth-century American theater ranges from virtually none, as in the spectacular pantomimes performed at Niblo's Garden and the Bowery, to primary importance, as in Fanny Kemble's drawing-room readings of Shakespeare (see fig. 1). Theater texts of the period established a relation to the literary tradition ranging from parodies of Shakespearean language to the adaptation of contemporary novels. Dion Boucicault, one of the most prolific playwrights of his generation, had the greatest confidence in his own ability to "hold my audience with my pen," but he relied heavily on contemporary novelists. In fact, he was not unlike the literary gentleman in *Nicholas Nickleby* "who had dramatized in his time two hundred and forty-seven novels as fast as they

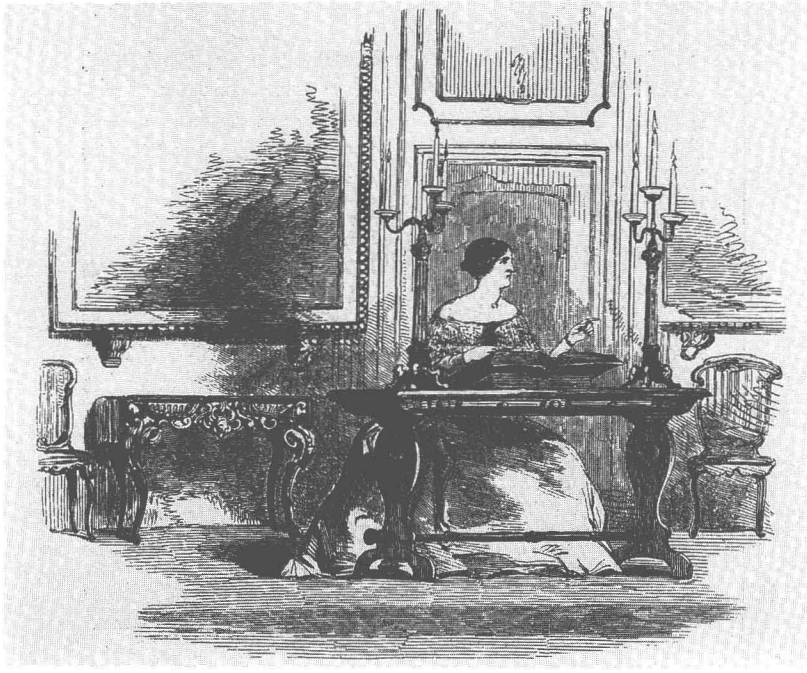


FIG. 1. Engraving of one of Fanny Kemble's famous readings of Shakespeare. The extra-large volume and book stand are compelling props.

had come out—some of them faster than they had come out—and *was* a literary gentleman in consequence" (726).[1] One scholar notes of Boucicault: "He took a lease of Scott and Dumas père . . . He treated these authors precisely as people treat a house they rent furnished" (Felheim 82). To many Americans Boucicault's name became synonymous with plagiarism. The intensifying debate over plagiarism later in the century indicates the heightened tension between a "literary" view of the drama and a view of drama shaped by the exigencies of producing theater (see figs. 2 and 3).

American theater borrowed much from theaters across the Atlantic as well. American borrowing from the French in particular illustrates how little emphasis was placed on the originality of the play-text in the overall production process. A manager could go to Paris, see a first-rate comedy, and be relatively assured of its success if, for a minimal sum, he could find a translator of the barest proficiency. An original piece by an American, on the other hand, would cost him at least ten times the price of a transla-