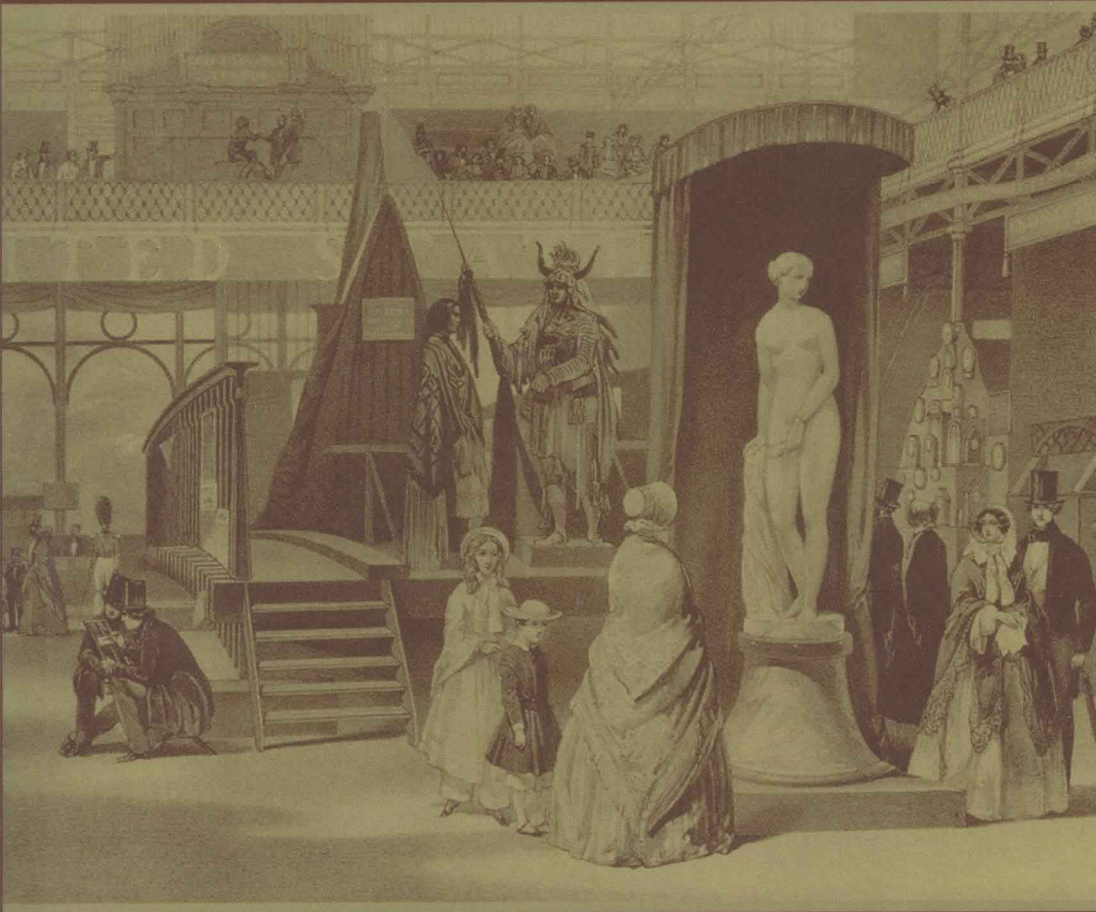


Theatre Culture in America, 1825–1860



Rosemarie K. Bank

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ROSEMARIE K. BANK

Kent State University



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Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860

Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860 examines how Americans staged their cultures in the decades before the Civil War, and advances the idea that cultures are performances that take place both inside and outside of playhouses. Americans imaginatively expanded conventional ideas of performance as an activity restricted to theatres in order to take up the staging of culture in other venues: in issues of class, race, and gender, in parades and the visits of dignitaries, in rioting and the denomination of prostitutes, and in views of the town, the city, and the frontier. Joining up-to-date historical research with a firm and clear-headed grasp of contemporary critical theory, *Theatre Culture in America* offers a wholly original approach to the complex intersections of American theatre and culture.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research, yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

The primary aim of this series is to set up a forum for important and original scholarship in and criticism of American theatre and drama in a cultural and social context. Inclusive by design, the series accommodates leading work in areas ranging from the study of drama as literature to theatre histories, theoretical explorations, production histories, and readings of more popular or paratheatrical forms. While maintaining a specific emphasis on theatre in the United States, the series welcomes work grounded in cultural studies and narratives with interdisciplinary reach. *Studies in American Theatre and Drama* thus provides a crossroads where historical, theoretical, literary, and biographical approaches meet and combine, promoting imaginative research in theatre and drama from a variety of new perspectives.

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*To my father, Julius Bank,
who sought his hope in the West and never went back;
to my mother, Anna Damm Bank,
who gave the dream a home; and
to my sister, Barbara Julianne Bank,
who keeps faith with the hope and the dream.*



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I have sometimes thought the long process of writing a book-length manuscript most aptly described by the old saw about war: long passages of tedium punctuated by periods of extreme terror. I write these acknowledgments at a time of reflections, of claiming and letting go the long, arduous, and horrible military and personal sufferings left in the wake of the Second World War. It is a history that has profoundly shaped the historical consciousness of the generation of scholars forged by the decades since 1945 and who now face the end of this century and a new millenium. There is no aspect of the historical project that has not been changed in these decades, from a deep cynicism regarding the humanist project as mirrored in the fires of Auschwitz, Dresden, and Hiroshima, to an abiding faith in human ability, given the will, to build a better world from the ashes and lessons of the past. Without the latter, the victims of the former will have suffered in vain. The antebellumites of the nineteenth centu-

ry endured their own holocausts, fiery trials, and despairs but also generated a culture constituting the very hopes and differences of all America's peoples. In the certain knowledge that nothing dies that is remembered and that dreamers move mountains, I dedicate the hard work of this book to their remembered struggle, to their hope, and to the difference their difference has made.



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Prologue

Universal Spaces

"The preface is ruled out, but it must be written."

– Jacques Derrida, "Outwork, prefacing" (1981)

"She said: 'What is history?' And he said: 'History is an angel being blown backwards into the future.' He said: 'History is a pile of debris, and the angel wants to go back and fix things, to repair the things that have been broken. But there is a storm blowing from Paradise, and the storm keeps blowing the angel backwards into the future. And this storm, this storm is called Progress.'"

– Laurie Anderson, "The Dream Before (for Walter Benjamin)," from *Strange Angels* (1989)

"I am Odysseus. I have returned from Troy."

– Tadeusz Kantor, *The Return of Odysseus* (1944)

IN "THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS," Jorge Luis Borges eloquently describes "an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe" conceived (in contrast to Newton) without belief in a uniform, absolute time. Instead, there are "infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times," embracing every possibility. We live and die, he writes, unaware of most of these coexisting universes, inhabit some but not others, utter words in one and silently haunt another, while in some worlds we do not exist. Borges's elegant evocation of simultaneous universes resonates with physics' recent explorations of parallel universes and at the same time echoes a vastly older Na-

tive American view: that what has happened in a place is always happening. In this study of antebellum America, two sets of terms – spatial history and theatre culture – attempt to operationalize these senses of history.¹

Borges's elastic universes of time and quantum physics' anisotropic space have much in common with the quest in American historiography for ways to escape an evolutionary and totalized view of the past, usually called "positivist." Focusing upon history as spaces collected in but not wholly governed by time facilitates writing in the peoples and experiences American historical writing has too often written out. One way to work against the grain of positivist historiography is to allow subjects to circulate, to view them as relationships rather than things. By foregrounding these relationships, a subject can be seen as simultaneously occupying multiple spaces. Operationalized in the present study, gender, to take one example, features in Chapter 1's discussion of the city and fashion, Chapter 2's consideration of work and class, and Chapter 3's recontextualization of prostitutes in antebellum theatres.²

Spatial history takes time to locate and describe. Accordingly, the chapters that follow discuss many things in addition to theatre. There are two dispositions that influence the structure of this book and its winding road to and from the playhouse. One seeks theatre in a larger social context, to make historical connections (as theatre scholars have ably done in recent work) between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and abolitionist sentiment, for example, or *The Drunkard* and the temperance movement. This larger context also takes in more indirect relationships of interest to me: how knowledge circulates, for example, or locating investments in and redistributions of culture. The second disposition influencing the structure of this book grew from a restlessness with the view of cultures primarily as reflections of (and so always behind or in front of) the societies producing them. Theatre, within this view, functions as a subject or mirroring of something either before history or outside itself. This book attempts to evade examining theatre as antehistorical or as solely reflective by working the concept "theatre culture," the notion that the peoples in a culture stage themselves and perform multiple roles. In this larger sense of performance, of theatre outside of playhouses as well as within them, culture is not only or even exclusively metaphoric, a figure standing for something else, but is itself taken as constitutive of the relationships that we find circulating in and among the many universes of antebellum America. Operationalized in the present study, the performance of, say, gender promotes considering how,

in antebellum America, women's volunteer associations, the Bowery G'hal, the call to regulate prostitutes in playhouses, or the publication of etiquette manuals are productive of each other.³

The meditations in Borges's garden of forking paths yield many reflections that are important to a spatial history of theatre culture. Like Borges's author, cultural historiography has accepted incompleteness, viewing culture, as Joseph Roach recently put it, as "not general and universal but local," neither neutral nor transcendent, but partisan, material, and historical. This incompleteness, like Borges's garden, is a far move from the Eden of facts, rules of causality, chains of being, modes of distributing evidence, certainties, accumulations of knowledge, "scientific" hypotheses and pristine methods that were once the stuff of (theatre) historical theory and practice. A nostalgia for completeness is the perhaps inescapable legacy of a subject as evanescent as performance, for while, as Roach observes, "few contemporary historians succumb to vulgar positivism" (of the sort set opposite Borges's garden in the preceding sentence), "some remain more alert than others to its more subtle reappearances – such as in the masking of ideologies as impartial conclusions or the passing off of contested events as historical facts." What constitutes a "fact" about antebellum America is further complicated by what Joyce Flynn identifies as a "complex causality of neglect" that has left American theatre history of the nineteenth century without such "traditional" studies as economic histories (allowing, for example, systematic comparisons of wages between antebellum theatre workers and others or of ticket prices to audience income), day-books of theatrical activities in all of America's major antebellum cities chronicling who did what when; considerations of touring circuits in these decades clarifying where they were, who traveled them, when, and how often; or even publication of scholarly histories of antebellum star actors and managers.⁴

The legacy of incomplete images bequeathed to the present study by an understaffed and fragmented theatre research archive will be evident in every universe it explores. As a result, attention is skewed in the direction of the northeastern quadrant of the United States and, among urban centers, favors New York over the other large cities of that era. Antebellum cultural studies have also posited a world of largely male and white northeasterners. In all these, theatre participates in the general state of studies of American literature before the Civil War, as a 1992 assessment of its scholarly history by MLAA makes clear. Still (lest this rehearsal of inade-

quacies legitimate a nostalgia of its own), just as recent work in gender history challenges the hegemony of the white male subject, so recent theatre studies have reclaimed a host of subjects – little-known antebellum house playwrights, for example, circus, magic and medicine shows, popular performers, and the tastes and behaviors of worker audiences. The campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s to pluralize subjects have not been unsuccessful, though they remain short of their goals. Taken together with the postpositivist historiographies of the 1980s and 1990s, these theatre studies both yield cultural histories of subjects once considered beyond the pale of theatre history and theorize them in ways that satisfy the cognitive needs of theatre scholars on the threshold of the twenty-first century.⁵

Theatre culture, as developed here, is constitutive of multiple, simultaneous relationships. Chantal Mouffe has cast this interaction against a larger canvas, arguing that

each social agent is inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations – not only social relations of production but also the social relations, among others, of sex, race, nationality, and vicinity. All these social relations determine positionalities or subject positions, and every social agent is therefore the locus of many subject positions and cannot be reduced to only one.

In this view, as Janelle Reinelt has observed, “individuals and social groups are constantly involved in competing and often contradictory positions.” These multiplicities and inconsistencies not only frustrate the great historical narratives and their underpinning “myths” (as Jeff Mason characterizes these [hi]stories) but also problematize the location of hegemonies, structures, and formations. For American cultural history, as Homi Bhabha has put it,

The grand narratives of nineteenth-century historicism on which its claims to universalism were founded – evolutionism, utilitarianism, evangelism – were also, in another textual and territorial time space, the technonologies of colonial and imperialist governance. It is the “rationalism” of these ideologies of progress that increasingly comes to be eroded in the encounter with the contingency of cultural difference.

Given the building up and wearing down of these contingencies, a number of antebellum subjects in this study – class, gender, work, and race, for example – are positioned so as to respond to Roach’s sense of “con-

tested events” rather than “historical facts,” a locating that risks a number of indeterminacies.⁶

The exploration of antebellum America’s stagings of culture begins with two events in 1825 that stand as prologue to the chapters that follow. These events – General Lafayette’s triumphal return to the United States as “the nation’s guest” and the opening of the Erie Canal – collect antebellum political, cultural, and cognitive significations. They do so, importantly, in a context of economic surplus in which the excess necessary to celebrate is itself celebrated. In Lafayette’s case, that celebration is reified and appropriated city by city as he makes what amounts to a royal progress around the America that lay between the Atlantic and Caribbean Oceans, the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, and the Great Lakes. In the waning days of his visit, Lafayette traveled the Erie Canal, whose grand opening would be held less than a month after the general’s departure for France. The look backward in Lafayette’s return and the projection forward in the opening of the Erie Canal offered many opportunities for earlier nineteenth-century American culture – with all its exclusions, resistances, commodifications, and displacements – to stage itself. These stagings yield a topography, a spatial history of what were considered universal American values, the cultural oxymoron identifying the one (“universal” = Euro-American Enlightenment values) and the many (“American” = democratic “refinements” of these).

The two celebratory events (the general and the canal), which serve as a preliminary discourse to the cultural performances that follow, reify the ferment of these decades and its production of mutually constitutive yet conflicting cultures. Chapter 1 engages the locution (movement, mobility) of the oxymoron “universal American” in three antebellum “spaces of representation”: the village, the city, and the frontier. These spaces constitute what T. J. Clark describes as “a battlefield of representations.” The colonization of scholarship by myths – of individuality, transcendentalism, of America as an empty paradise, and the like – has the effect, Cecelia Tichi has argued, of voiding a sense of America as developing through historical, contextualized change. At the same time, while these “stable stories,” around which a sense of American cultural history (and an academic year) could be organized, no longer lure contemporary historians as they once did, they have also – as the story of “manifest destiny,” for example, makes painfully clear – been constitutive of history. In such contested spaces, Foucault observed, authority is bestowed and provisional; hence what con-