

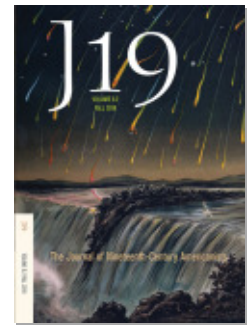


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"Performance"

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Introduction: “Nineteenth-Century” “American” “Theater” and “Performance”

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When Vice President Mike Pence took his family to see *Hamilton* on Broadway not long after Pence and his boss, Donald Trump, had improbably won the White House, he was no doubt expecting to be entertained by Lin-Manuel Miranda’s free-styling hit musical. Instead, Brandon Victor Dixon, playing Aaron Burr in this production, used the occasion of Pence’s visit to rebuke the new administration, delivering an improvised monologue at the end of the show. “We, sir—we are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights,” Dixon stated. “We truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us.” As he did, and continues to do pathologically as president, Trump took to Twitter, denouncing the cast of *Hamilton* for what he felt was a wrongheaded move. He chastised them for “harass[ing]” Pence and for being “very rude,” but he also made a bolder claim about the cultural work that theater *should* be doing: “The Theater,” he quipped, “must always be a safe and special place.”¹ This explanation deftly channels what Pence and family, and many Broadway-going patrons, expect: a show that reconfirms the nativist virtues of God, guns, and home runs. Theater, in short, should not be dangerous.

To be sure, *Hamilton* is an edgy musical sensation, especially compared to less challenging offerings such as *Mamma Mia!* (1999) or *Jersey Boys* (2005), and so we might characterize it as a production that is not “safe.” Yet, for any theater aficionado, *Hamilton* is far tamer and “safer” than many other plays being staged in New York. Take a stroll

through Manhattan, and you would encounter La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in the East Village and its absurdist, poststructural entertainments, or, moving west, you would stumble across the Wooster Group's latest avant-garde production. *Hamilton* is not even the most provocative play focused on pre-1900s American racial politics: Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins's astonishing 2010 *coup de théâtre*, *An Octoroon*, retains that honor, by my lights. My point is not to trash *Hamilton* as a middlebrow, neoliberal reflection on racial identity but rather to suggest that what was wrongheaded about Trump's comment is how "unsafe" theater has always been.

This idea of the theater as an "unsafe" institution, of course, has a long history that predates *Hamilton*, stretching, as Jonas A. Barish's classic *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* illuminates, from Plato's famous exclusion of theater from his ideal republic onward.² And so it should come as no surprise that in the incipient phases of American nationhood, the theater was banned for reasons that seem consonant with the ones rehearsed by Trump. To be sure, as theater historians have argued, the theater was also banned because proto-Americans did not want the citizenry wasting money on frivolous entertainments,³ but this kind of moral finger-wagging merely reinforced the idea that theater should be safe, or in other words, aligned with the efforts of nation-building, and thus, we stumble across the Trumpian lament again. Yet, the theater *did* thrive, and part of its success stemmed from the way that theater is always already a shifting, unstable—and thus dangerous—mode of aesthetic engagement. Theater is always about emulation, always about "surrogation," as Joseph Roach calls it in a different context,⁴ and thus, theater is always about the almost-but-not-quite-safe ways that we beg, borrow, and steal to create that thing called the American nation.

Perhaps it is the very sinuousness of the term "theater"—is it a form, a text, a space, all three or none of these?—that explains the rather remarkable phenomenon that as dangerous as theater was in the nineteenth century, and as vital as it was to negotiating identity politics from the inception of the nation to today, it has been overlooked far too often in our critical histories of the nineteenth century. As evidence, perform the following thought experiment: name your top ten favorite authors from the nineteenth century. That list may or may not line up perfectly with the list Maurice Lee generated when he asked many of us to name the authors we regularly teach in our surveys of nineteenth-century literature, the essay discussing which appeared in *J19* in Spring 2016,⁵ but I am guessing that figures such as Melville and Douglass, Whit-

man and Jacobs, might indeed be on your list. Now, list your top ten playwrights from the nineteenth century, or to be even more generous, those who were actively writing before Eugene O'Neill. Or name your top ten plays from the nineteenth century. How about your top five? Three? We know that as popular as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was in the nineteenth century, fifty times as many people *saw* a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on stage as read it,⁶ and yet, not to be too puckish about it, most of us would be hard-pressed to name but a smattering of plays or the occasional playwright from the nineteenth century.

In some ways, we can hardly be faulted for having overlooked nineteenth-century American theater and performance. It is virtually absent from all anthologies. The most recent McMichael, Heath, and Norton anthologies of American literature, the ones that cover the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that include novels, poems, and narratives interlarded with sermons, oral histories, tracts, and treatises, contain, among them, just one play *qua* play, Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787). But even that play is an eighteenth-century work, and it is made to represent the *full* history of American theater from its beginnings to the turn of the twentieth century, with nary a play from the *entire nineteenth century* lurking in any of these anthologies' pages.

Yet it would hardly be fair to lay all the blame for our neglect of nineteenth-century theater and performance at the feet of anthologies. Part of the reason for this neglect, I suspect, comes from our orientation to nineteenth-century artifacts, the way we attend to and negotiate the fungible, slippery, and, dare I say, dangerous relationships between what Diana Taylor calls the "archive" and the "repertoire." As scholars, we benefit from the archive, but these archives, Taylor argues, are organized around "supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)." What she calls the repertoire—"spoken language, dance, sports, ritual"—remains harder to catalog much less to assign accession numbers.⁷ And yet the cultural work that theater did remains tied to its repertoire. How actors performed; how audiences reacted; how plays were produced and interpolated into the cultural fabric—these are fundamental to the real work that theater did in the nineteenth century, and yet many of these vital aspects slip between or around or through the written documents that archives house.

The issue, it seems to me, is that our training as scholars in close reading and textual analysis, the way we translate everything we encounter into a text, facilitates our appreciation of the archival even as it neglects the repertoire—the range of nonverbal ephemera that, in Taylor's

words, "both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning." As the performance theorist and ethnographer Dwight Conquergood notes, "Only middle-class academics could blithely assume that all the world is a text because reading and writing are central to their everyday lives and occupational security."⁸ Less acidly, I might suggest that studying the rich abundance of nineteenth-century theater and performance offers an opportunity to retrain ourselves, to reorient ourselves to the artifacts we explore, in order to discover new repertoires of meaning lurking beneath, behind, and around the texts we study. To my eyes, therefore, our training as literary scholars and cultural historians has blinkered our ability to see the fascinating work that nineteenth-century theater and performance has done, even as new developments in digital humanities, historical materialism, and the history of the book, to name a few, point up the way that this is the perfect moment to begin to think differently about our objects of study and to recover the fantastically strange and fabulously dangerous repertoires of nineteenth-century theater and performance.

This brings me to the charge of this Forum, as I see it. Needless to say, part of the work that Heather S. Nathans, Douglas Jones, Amy E. Hughes, and Joseph Roach have done is to recover what should never have needed to be recovered. Their work does not so much brush history against the grain, as Benjamin would have it, but rather raises the grain itself, giving the long nineteenth century a theatrical texture as a provocation for further study. Yet the insights generated by these scholars do more than point to the overlooked history of an American artistic institution that, like Poe's "Purloined Letter" (1844), has been hiding in plain sight all along. What each of these scholars reveals, in fact, is exactly how "unsafe" the theater has been in the United States, beginning to generate both an archive and repertoire of a dangerous institution whose *modus operandi* has been to crack open the carapace of "truths" that are often deemed "self-evident" in this country, and to expose the contradictions that we call "America."

To get at the pith and marrow of this unsafe artistic enterprise, each of these scholars has focused independently on one of the seemingly unremarkable terms locked within the phrase, "nineteenth-century American theater and performance." Nathans puts pressure on the term "nineteenth-century" to suggest the way that Native American, Jewish, and black nineteenth-century performative practices on stage and beyond limned not simply alternative histories of the nineteenth century but also "fractured, folded, carnivalized, and disjointed" understandings of temporality itself. Jones traces a history of the "American" quality of

the theater in the nineteenth century to suggest that as the theater, with its audiences and producers, began to multiply and diversify, the notion of what it meant to be “American” became dangerously unstable. Just as Nathans sees a proliferation of temporalities behind the term “nineteenth-century,” and Jones recovers alternative American identities that trouble the very notion of “American” theater, Hughes uses her contribution to show how multivalent the term “theater” was in this period. As Hughes highlights, in fact, the only thing really consistent about nineteenth-century “theater” is its inconsistency, its rhizomorphic ability to sprout up in the most unexpected places, in the most fugitive forms conceivable, and at the most vital times imaginable. Taking up the final term, “performance,” Roach suggests that while drama “arranges events in a sequence,” performance “answers their prompt” in an astonishing number of ways in the nineteenth century. Every answer is marked by its difference from each other, and so whether we call it “ghosting,” as Marvin Carlson argues, “scenarios” as Diana Taylor suggests, or “surrogation” as Roach himself explains,⁹ performance is dangerous because even when it “answers” the same “prompt,” it is always answering it in different ways. While each essay offers tremendous insight by itself, what one gains from reading them in one sitting is a richer understanding of the vascularity and peculiarity of this aesthetic institution, its protean but no less profound means of shaping and reshaping both the nineteenth century that we are all drawn to and the twenty-first century in which we all want to thrive. To return to *Hamilton* once again, this idea of the theater is what makes Trump’s tweets about theater being a “special place” and “safe” so wrongheaded. As the contributors for this Forum have expertly shown, what makes the theater such a “special place” is precisely the way it has always been, and continues to be, so “unsafe.”

Notes

1. Christopher Mele and Patrick Healy, “‘Hamilton’ Had Some Unscripted Lines for Pence. Trump Wasn’t Happy,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2016.

2. Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

3. For more on early American antitheatrical prejudice, see Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and Heather S. Nathans, *Early National Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

4. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2–3.

5. Maurice S. Lee, “Introduction: A Survey of Survey Courses,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 125–30.

6. See Kendra Hamilton, “The Strange Career of Uncle Tom,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 19, no. 8 (6 June 2002): 22–27.

7. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

8. *Ibid.*, 20; Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 147.

9. See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 2–3; Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 28–30; and Roach, *Cities*.