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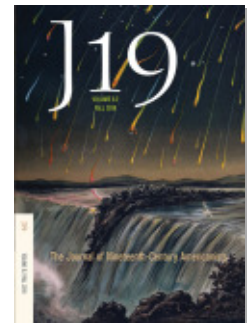
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Theater; or, Looking beyond Plays and Places

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Alas: some readers, having read nothing but my title, are already annoyed with me. This is because many US theater practitioners, professors, and aficionados have surprisingly strong opinions about how “theater” should be spelled. The subject comes up perennially and persistently in articles, blog posts, and conference panels.¹ It seems the spelling debate gained considerable rigor in 1962, when the *New York Times* quietly changed its editorial policy to use *theater* instead of *theatre*—even going so far as to “correct” the names of theaters that called themselves *Theatres*.² But the dispute can be traced back to 1789, when Noah Webster advocated for a pronunciation-based approach to US spelling in his *Dissertations on the English Language*. Observing that the spelling of French words had been retained even though they were pronounced differently in English, Webster complained, “Ought [the Americans] at once to reform these abuses, and introduce order and regularity into the orthography of the AMERICAN TONGUE?”³ He answered his own call in the *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), offering postcolonial alternatives to the spellings of many British (*cum* French) words. When Chauncey A. Goodrich revised Webster’s *Dictionary* in 1847, he formalized this orthographic philosophy by proclaiming in the preface that the *re* in *centre*, *metre*, and other “words of this class” should be transposed.⁴ But in contrast to *centre* and *metre*, the debate over *theatre*’s ending is far from over. As director and theater historian Francis Hodge once observed, “There is an emotional context that surrounds this word that has made and will continue to make a shift to the *-er* spelling difficult.”⁵ Further

complicating the matter is the insistence by some that theatre and theater are not merely variant spellings but actually two different words, with the former referring to the art form (and, concomitantly, the body of work it generates) and the latter referring to a place where plays are performed.⁶

I rehearse this history not because it is interesting but because it is revealing: the theater inspires fervent passion, intense loyalty, even cliquish elitism in those who love and study it. Proponents of the idea to embrace both spellings—theatre as play, theater as place—illustrate this most clearly. As architecture and activity, edifice and event, refuge and recreation, the theater is deeply beloved. However, we need more definitions when looking at the nineteenth century, when “the theater” was also a performance practice, a form of labor, and a community. By attending to these connotations, the chaotic complexities of nineteenth-century US theater culture can be seen more clearly: the eclectic amusements staged in playhouses, the diverse work and workers involved in theatrical enterprises, and the dynamic camaraderie that sustained theater/s. Such nuances expose enduring biases in historiography—among them, a tendency to privilege literary legibility over quotidian praxis; a continuing emphasis on the rich, white, and famous; and a benign neglect of the communal processes that shaped nineteenth-century US cultural production.

The literature most closely associated with theater is the so-called legitimate drama: narrative-based plays that were professionally produced and/or published. Yet records of actual performances, such as promptbooks marked up by actors and stage managers, suggest that scripts served merely as starting points. Promptbooks exhibit a wide range of alterations—scenes rearranged, large swathes of dialogue omitted, or entire characters removed to meet the needs of a company. Managers frequently reduced five-act plays to four, three, two, or even one act, depending on what the evening’s bill would accommodate or what the audience would tolerate. Even promptbooks cannot fully capture what happened on stage. Actors added personal flourishes or “points” to impress the audience, and often, they were “imperfect” in their parts due to last-minute casting changes and the limited time they had to memorize lines. Their improvised dialogue is undocumented, except for scattered anecdotes in diaries and autobiographies. Additionally, many scripts have been completely lost, for the simple reason that they were never intended to be kept. Sassy parodies; saccharine patriotic skits;

slapdash dramatizations of novels; repertory staples retitled, repackaged, and redone: these dramatic dregs, formulated to assuage spectators' thirst for novelty, suggest that the "literature" of the theater was as provisional and ephemeral as the performances themselves. Their remains exist only in playbills, newspaper advertisements, and cast books kept by stage managers. By reading these quirky remnants in tandem with other sources, we could gain a more nuanced understanding of the content and craft of theatermaking during the 1800s.

Given the astounding diversity of nineteenth-century amusements, we must stretch our definition of theater to incorporate what seems "illegitimate," too. Read the *New York Clipper* for a period of time and this becomes obvious. Advertisements for tragedies, comedies, and melodramas abut announcements of magic shows, presentations of extraordinary bodies, entertainments based on audience participation (public hypnotisms, laughing-gas demonstrations), lectures accompanied by paintings or panoramas, and performing animals. Not all theatergoers saw everything, but many saw a wide range of things, either by sampling different venues or visiting all-in-one facilities like museums and pleasure gardens.⁷ Furthermore, theater managers spiced up their bills with short, interstitial entertainments between dramas, ranging from popular songs and Irish dances to conundrums and acrobatics. It would be a mistake to view these amusements simply as seasoning, because some of the century's most celebrated performers launched their careers by developing such bits. T. D. Rice's infamous Jim Crow song-and-dance, which helped popularize the highly problematic genre of blackface minstrelsy, began as a number staged between dramatic acts. Frank Chanfrau is commemorated in theater historiography for his portrayal of Mose the Bowery B'hoy, a stock character that appears in a number of mid-nineteenth-century plays. But before he became popular for Mose, he gained notoriety for his humorous impressions of famous actors, including Edwin Forrest. In essence, the closer one looks at actors and theaters perceived as "legitimate," the less legitimate they appear.

Furthermore, the omnipresence of music and dance on nineteenth-century stages suggests that a focus on drama obscures how theatrical performances were typically crafted and experienced. As Michael V. Pisani has shown, music played a vital role in the amusements offered at melodramatic theaters, augmenting and shaping audience reception.⁸ When the musicians weren't paid, they often refused to play, forcing the actors to fill the gap with their own musical talents.⁹ When that wasn't

feasible, managers changed the bill—crowding it with entertainments that were less dependent on musical accompaniment—or canceled the show altogether. Because music was so important to their livelihood, theater owners inventoried their collections of sheet music with as much care and caution as their collections of scripts, scenery, costumes, and props.¹⁰ In addition, managers knew audiences expected to see good dancing at their theaters, so they usually hired one or more dancers when putting together a company. Stashed among the papers of Henry Lee Jr., a shareholder in the Boston Theatre during the 1850s, is a list of requirements for establishing a theater. The list includes “a first class Danseuse, Male Dancer, or ballet master, and six well drilled ballet girls.”¹¹ As Alison Piepmeier observed, nineteenth-century images and discussions of “flaming ballet girls”—ballerinas whose costumes caught fire from the footlights—attest to both the ubiquity of dancers on stage and the public’s fascination with these spectacular bodies.¹² Some performers, including Rice, William Henry Lane (known as “Master Juba”), and John Diamond, built entire careers on dance.

By considering the many forms of labor involved in theatrical production, we can incorporate into our histories folks who were less visible but who sustained nineteenth-century US theater culture in important ways. Their stories are difficult, but not impossible, to recover. Marvin McAllister, for example, has investigated how enslaved and free African Americans performed in “whiteface” in theaters and extratheatrical venues. Naomi J. Stubbs has studied the essential but mostly overlooked labor of African American workers in pleasure gardens catering to white audiences. Heather S. Nathans has painstakingly tracked the labor of Jewish theater practitioners in the antebellum United States, and Peter Benes has researched the lives and labor of itinerant performers.¹³ My own research centering on the diary kept by US actor, playwright, and theater manager Harry Watkins (1825–94) has persuaded me that the experiences of workaday laborers provide crucial insights about the rhythms and routines of theatermaking during the 1800s.¹⁴ Watkins was neither great nor incompetent, but somewhere in between; he is exemplary of what theater historian Derek Miller has called the “forgotten middle.” As Miller asserts, “Theater history can (and I think must) begin to account for the many productions and careers that pass without notice, that are not outstanding either in their glory or their failure, but were born and died decidedly average.”¹⁵ Our histories of the nineteenth-century theater should incorporate more stories about the decidedly average, the obscure, and the marginalized.

An attention to labor also illuminates the wide range of work performed in theaters, by professionals and nonprofessionals alike. Today, theater practitioners tend to pursue a single specialty, thanks to the formation of unions and trade associations and the inclusion of practical training in educational institutions. In contrast, nineteenth-century theater people were jacks of all trades, developing skills as writers, actors, musicians, producers, and marketers in order to sustain themselves. Actors such as John Brougham, William E. Burton, and Anna Cora Mowatt (among many others) composed plays to serve as proprietary vehicles for themselves. Although primarily known as a playwright, Dion Boucicault performed in his own dramas. Producers like A. H. Purdy and Moses Kimball essentially became dramaturgs when they acquired plays for their theaters, editing and altering texts as they deemed appropriate or necessary.¹⁶ Moreover, nonprofessionals played important roles in nineteenth-century theater culture. Eileen Curley and Michelle Granshaw have investigated how amateur theatricals in parlors and basements allowed aficionados to not only experience the excitement of theatermaking but also shape the dramatic canon.¹⁷ Amateurs infiltrated professional spaces as well. Dramatic clubs regularly staged shows in theaters, and individuals who could promise a packed house sometimes persuaded theater managers to allow them to perform.¹⁸ These labors of love from an earlier century bear striking similarities to today's community theaters.

And indeed, "community" is another keyword we must keep in mind when considering the nineteenth-century theater. We still have much to learn about how theaters served as epicenters of social networking. Like taverns, lyceums, libraries, and Masonic lodges, playhouses served as community centers, providing opportunities for socializing and politicizing. This is somewhat difficult for us to imagine today, when the long run is the sought-after ideal in the commercial theater, and most theatergoers seek out shows rather than venues. In contrast, during the early and mid-nineteenth century, spectators tended to affiliate with specific theaters because they preferred the repertory, the location, the acting company, the audience, or some combination thereof.¹⁹ At the playhouse, they forged and maintained friendships, fostered romances, and relaxed with neighbors. These relationships likely extended beyond the confines of the auditorium.

It seems that to some degree, norms of comportment were relaxed in theaters, because spectatorial communities expressed themselves in a wide range of ways. Audiences regularly signaled their admiration,

affection, and displeasure about actors and management by cheering, throwing things, or simply staying away. Even so, it was generally understood that the right to have a say at their theater went hand-in-hand with the responsibility to patronize it. Spectators sustained theater companies by paying admission, of course, but also supported them in other ways. They advanced actors' careers by offering praise and gifts (ranging from flowers and money to silver goblets and swords) and attending benefits (when a member of the company received a share of the evening's profits). Indeed, a well-staged, well-attended benefit hinged on the benevolence of everyone in the theatrical community. The manager had to offer a good date and a fair share of the receipts; the press had to offer puffs in advance and praise afterward; and the patrons of the theater had to show up. Occasionally, audiences' reactions went to extremes. Fights and riots, which always go down in theater history, remind us that theaters have perennially served as forums for expression.²⁰

As a community, US theater people continue to engage in debate—about politics, aesthetics, and (yes) spelling. Why do they defend the theater (or *theatre*) so passionately? Arguably, their defensiveness has roots in the long nineteenth century, when politicians, clergy, and concerned citizens routinely disparaged theatermakers.²¹ As Matthew Rebhorn notes in his introduction to this Forum, antitheatricalism in the United States has ebbed and flowed, but it has never completely subsided; many an outsider, up to and including Donald Trump, has accused the theater of being "unsafe." And indeed, it often is. It fosters controversy, rewards innovation, pursues affective efficacy, and inclines toward acceptance and inclusion. Trump's declaration ("The Theater must always be a safe and special place") is all too familiar to theatermakers who strive to do more than merely entertain. When Trump further complained that his future VP was subjected to a "theater lecture" at *Hamilton*, he invoked the elitism and exclusivity that has, alas, become associated with the theater today.²² Now, black mirrors animated by film, television, and streaming video serve as our main source of shared culture and amusement. Perhaps this, above all else, constitutes the biggest difference between our current moment and our nineteenth-century past.

Notes

1. To cite just a few examples: Remarks by Marvin Carlson and Joseph Roach, "Pepys' Progress: Marvin Carlson's *10,000 Nights: Highlights from 50 Years of Theatre-Going*" (curated panel), American Society for Theatre Research Conference, November 17, 2017, Atlanta, GA; Rob Weinert-Kendt, "Re: the 'Re' in Theatre," *The Agenda: From the Editor* (blog), *American Theatre*, July 20, 2015, accessed September 14, 2017, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/07/20/re-the-re-in-theatre>; Anthony Chase, "You Write 'Theatre,' I Write 'Theater,'" *ArtVoice* 12, no. 6 (Feb-

ruary 7, 2013), accessed September 14, 2017, <http://artvoice.net/issues/v12n6/theaterweek.html>; Marianne Combs, "Arts 101: Theater vs. Theatre," *State of the Arts* (blog), Minnesota Public Radio News, May 21, 2010, accessed September 14, 2017, <https://blogs.mprnews.org/state-of-the-arts/2010/05/theater-vs-theatre>. Many thanks to Russell Dembin, Garrett Eisler, William Houck, and Daniel Venning for alerting me to these and other essays on the subject.

2. Some academic presses and magazines affirmed the *Times's* decision by favoring *er*, but the majority of theater companies and academic programs remain committed to *re*.

3. Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas, 1789), 394 (emphasis in original), *Archive.org*, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/dissertationsone00webs> (emphasis in original). See also 393 (note) and 400.

4. Chauncey A. Goodrich, "Preface to the Revised Edition," in Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, revised and enlarged by Goodrich (New York: Harper, 1848), vi, *Google Books*, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://books.google.com/books?id=0GBGAAAYAAJ>. In "Theat-*re* or Theat-*er*: Samuel Johnson or Noah/Merriam Webster?" *Theatre Survey* 9, no. 1 (May 1968): 36 and 37, Francis Hodge states that the assertion regarding *-re* words was first made in the 1852 edition, but this seems to be an error. See also David Micklethwait, *Noah Webster and the American Dictionary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 255–71.

5. Hodge, "Theat-*re* or Theat-*er*," 44.

6. Weinert-Kendt, "Re: the 'Re' in Theatre."

7. Hoping to attract patrons who avoided "theaters," Moses Kimball and P. T. Barnum (of the Boston and American Museums, respectively) dubbed their in-house stages "lecture halls" or "exhibition rooms."

8. Michael V. Pisani, *Music for the Melodramatic Theatre in Nineteenth-Century London & New York* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

9. Harry Watkins, Diary (hereafter *HWD*), December 1, 1856, Skinner Family Papers, 1874–1979, box 17, MS Thr 857, Houghton Library, Harvard University. See also Amy E. Hughes and Naomi J. Stubbs, eds., *A Player and a Gentleman: The Diary of Harry Watkins, Nineteenth-Century US American Actor* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), and <http://www.harrywatkinsdiary.org>.

10. See, for example, Inventory of wardrobe, music, scenery, machinery, and properties (ca. 1843), Tremont Theatre Collection, 1839–1843, box 1, folder 8, MS Th. 4, Special Collections, Boston Public Library.

11. "Suggestions for the Management of the Boston Theatre, September 1, 1851," Lee Family Papers, 1535–1957, microfilm P-345, roll 6, box 6, folder 2, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

12. Alison Piepmeier, *Out in Public: Configurations of Women's Bodies in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 20–21.

13. Marvin McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Naomi J. Stubbs, *Cultivating National Identity through Performance: American Pleasure Gardens and Entertainment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), particularly 99–106; Heather S. Nathans, *Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans: Performing Jewish Identity on the Antebellum American Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), particularly 111–36; Peter Benes, *For a Short Time Only: Itinerants and the Resurgence of Popular Culture in Early America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).

14. See note 9.

15. Derek Miller, "Average Broadway," *Theatre Journal* 68, no. 4 (December 2016): 529.

16. *HWD*, December 29, 1852; Bruce A. McConachie, "H. J. Conway's Dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: A Previously Unpublished Letter," *Theatre Journal* 34, no. 2 (May 1982): 149–54.

17. Eileen Curley, "Parlour Conflagrations: Science and Special Effects in Manuals for Amateur Theatricals," *Popular Entertainment Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 26–41; Michelle Granshaw, "The Mysterious Victory of the Newsboys: The Grand Duke Theatre's 1874 Challenge to the Theatre Licensing Law," *Theatre Survey* 55, no. 1 (January 2014): 48–80.

18. *The New York Clipper* (1853–1924) regularly included an amateur theatricals column. Watkins complains about one-night-only appearances by amateur actors in *HWD*, January 10 and April 4, 1851; and April 1, 1854.

19. Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 121–22; Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.

20. See, for example, Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Random House, 2007).

21. See, for example, Claudia Durst Johnson, *Church and Stage: The Theatre as Target of Religious Condemnation in Nineteenth Century America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008).

22. Daniel Politi, "The President-Elect Can't Stop Criticizing 'Overrated' *Hamilton*, Insists on Apology," *The Slatest* (blog), *Slate*, November 20, 2016, accessed September 15, 2017, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2016/11/20/the_president_elect_can_t_stop_criticizing_overrated_hamilton_insists_on.html.