

Reading Context Into Performance: Theatrical Formations and Social History

Bruce A. McConachie

In seeking valid interpretations and explanations, all historians face the problem of relating small events to broader contexts. Mindful that the general trends of a period always limit specific occurrences within it, most historians will also insist that some events lend shape and direction to their age. Theatre historians confront one variety of this dilemma when they attempt to relate performance events to the historical society and culture of which they were a part. Since empirically based research has yet to verify--and may be incapable of ascertaining--the general relationship between performance and society, the theatre historian needs some guidance in framing questions and pursuing leads when dealing with this issue. More than that, he or she needs some definitions and assumptions, since writing history without these foundations is impossible. In the following discussion, I will draw on my own research into nineteenth-century American melodramatic theatre and the orientation of neo-Marxism to suggest one way of approaching--not, I hasten to add, solving--the performance-society relationship problem.¹

Many American cultural historians have adopted a "climate of opinion" model to relate these phenomena. Performance events are understood as part of a general consensus of values and ideas which somehow reflect and express larger and presumably more powerful social arrangements and forces. Orthodox Marxist historians have also reduced culture to a passive expression of other realities, though using a different paradigm to do it. In the work of Lukacs and others, the "base" of economic forces and relations largely determined the "superstructure" of culture--a culture conflicted by class antagonisms, however, not contained by patterns of consensus. Ironically,

Bruce A. McConachie has co-edited *Theatre for Working Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980* and (with Thomas Postlewait) *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Perspectives on the Historiography of Performance*, forthcoming. In addition, he has written widely on American theatre and social history.

traditional liberal and Marxist historians, so antagonistic on most matters, generally agree that the theatre has no active role to play in shaping historical realities.²

Most neo-Marxists begin their critique of these assumptions by drawing on a different definition of culture. Raymond Williams and others sharing this orientation see culture--and within it, the theatre--as patterns of symbolic actions, not as products, texts, or artifacts *per se*. In this sense, theatre is primarily what happens between actors and audiences in performance; it is not playhouses, scripts, or scenic designs, though these objects may, of course, provide the historian with important insight into the patterns of interaction which have defined theatrical culture. Further, cultural interaction, including the theatre, helps to constitute and to shape other historical events and relationships; the theatre is not epiphenomenal, simply reflecting and expressing determinate realities and forces. Relatively autonomous cultural practices like the theatre interact with economics, politics, and a multiplicity of other practices to energize and channel the form and flow of history. In some eras, then, theatrical events may have exerted significant pressure on other historical realities, though the historian is unlikely to discover very many instances of a direct, cause-to-effect relationship between the theatre and other events.³

Rather, the neo-Marxist cultural historian may anticipate that the theatre, like other cultural interactions, shaped history primarily by persuading its participants to accept certain values, ideas, and assumptions as normal and just. Such half-conscious persuasions, promulgated in a variety of cultural interactions, can be viewed in relation to the dominant ideology of a historical society. In the 1820s, for example, elite males in the urban Northeast enjoyed a type of melodramatic performance which legitimated a paternalistic persuasion, an ethos generally congruent with the dominant, though waning, ideology of the era. By the 1840s, native-born working men were applauding a very different kind of play, one which persuaded them to accept the general parameters of a more modern hegemonic ideology, but allowed them to oppose certain of its specific aspects. To use Stuart Hall's terminology to define these examples, the 1820's elite responded within a "dominant" cultural persuasion while the 1840's workers accepted a culture "subordinate" to the hegemonic culture of the period. Interestingly, no melodramatic persuasions current in the popular theatre of nineteenth-century America legitimated an "oppositional" culture, Hall's term for the nexus of assumptions, values, and practices which counter the hegemony of a ruling historical bloc.⁴

Hall builds his distinctions on the work of Antonio Gramsci, a theoretical keystone for most neo-Marxists concerned to join cultural events to historical contexts. Gramsci understood that ruling groups seeking to maintain and extend their power are helped by groups outside the state--the church, the media, the intellectuals, for instance--which, often unknowingly, work to legitimate the hegemony of those in power. Hegemonic culture may involve conscious manipulation and control but more frequently its values, assumptions,

and modes of cognition are so enmeshed in the language and tradition of a people that it is taken for granted and its political effects are accepted simply as "the way things are."

Although Gramsci linked hegemonic culture primarily to historical formations of class, the concept may also be joined to formations based on gender, race, and ethnicity. Native-born, white men and women of the middle and upper classes, for example formed the social base of genteel culture in the northern United States from the 1850s through the early '70s, a dominant culture centered on the values of laissez-faire capitalism and respectable domesticity. Genteel culture, which included widely popular performances of sensational melodrama, influenced subordinate groups (Irish immigrants, working-class women, free blacks, etc.) to accept the authority of those in power.

Gramsci affirms, however, that hegemonic culture, though widely influential, is never omnipotent. Riven internally by confusions, ambiguities, and contradictions, it is also opposed externally by groups with different notions of social justice. In the 1850s and '60s, radical workers and feminists opposed genteel culture which, in its melodramas and elsewhere, concealed significant tensions between its notions of progress and respectability. Like several other formations of genteel culture, its melodramatic theatre worked in part by encompassing the ambiguities and contradictions of that culture's ideology. For Gramsci, then, a cultural persuasion has both cognitive and normative levels. On both, it must be soothing as well as energizing, alleviating fears as well as animating hopes in its participants. On neither level, however, is its persuasive power ever completely successful.⁵

While Gramsci, Williams, and Hall can provide assumptions, definitions, and questions for a general orientation toward cultural history, their point of view runs the risk of collapsing performance events into historical contexts. If performance and context remain wholly separate phenomena in the historian's mind, the practical effect on analysis will be the tendency to examine the fixed properties of a performance and then to consider separately the contextual determinations which explain how spectators received and interpreted those properties. In this kind of analysis, a historian would "explain" what a performance of *The Drunkard* in 1845 "meant" to its spectators on the basis of their social position and general ideological persuasion. This way of formulating the issue would essentially ignore the rhetorical force of the performance on its viewers; the context would overdetermine the event.

Neo-Marxist historian and theorist Tony Bennett, in his concept of a "reading formation" linking texts and readers as parts of the same phenomenon, suggests a way around this dilemma. Bennett proposes:

... A way of rethinking context such that, ultimately, neither text nor context are conceivable as entities separable from one another. According to most formulations, context is conceived as social; that

is, a set of extra-discursive and extra-textual determinations to which the text is related as an external backdrop or set of reading conditions. The concept of reading formation, by contrast, is an attempt to think of context as a set of discursive and intertextual determinations, operating on material and institutional supports, which bear in upon a text not just externally, from the outside in, but internally, shaping it--in the historically concrete forms in which it is available as a text-to-be-read--from the inside out.

Bennett's formulation has clear implications for the analysis of theatrical events and their historical contexts. Play performance and audience response must be looked at together as mutually interactive elements of a single phenomenon. Audience responses shape performances over time, delimiting such elements as dramatic styles, character types, and acting conventions. At the same time, similar performances are shaping the audience, driving away some spectators from the theatre and pulling in others eager to be manipulated and persuaded in ways specific to those productions. In effect, groups of spectators and theatre performers produce each other from the inside out as artists-to-be-experienced and audiences-to-be-persuaded in a given historical period. The result is what may be termed a theatrical formation, the mutual elaboration over time of historically-specific audience groups and theatre practitioners participating in certain shared patterns of action.⁶

The concept of a theatrical formation is a more appropriate unit of analysis for assessing the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic functions of theatre than other categories frequently used by theatre historians. Such traditional units as the individual production or the "season" of plays in a particular theatre or city don't include the interactive dynamic of a formation; the plays never get past the footlights. A focus on theatrical innovations in script, acting, or design may explore audience response, but ignores the repetition over time of similar patterns of interaction which is necessary to constitute a persuasion; a "hit" on opening night carries nowhere near the same historical weight as the frequent recurrence of a similar melodramatic climax with the same audience over a twenty year period. Looking at the conventions of scripted characterization, acting style, or scene design in a given historical period can underline popular types of interaction for several years, but may sacrifice an understanding of audiences and theatrical genres in the process; that Irish characters appeared in American comedies, melodramas, and minstrel shows in the 1850s means little by itself since audiences for these shows varied and each genre organized the presentation of Irish characters in different ways. Employing the concept of theatrical formation as the unit of analysis, then, requires the historian to dive into the apparent chaos of theatrical events and to emerge with regularities of audience and genre over a significant stretch of time.

Asking theatre historians to focus on the same audience group over time requires that they undertake careful empirical research and distinguish among types of audiences using such categories as gender, class, and ethnicity, but there is little that is inherently problematic in this task. The injunction to center historical investigation on regularities of genre, however, demands some theoretical clarification before empirical investigation can begin. Much generic criticism simply pigeonholes plays or performances according to abstract and ahistorical categories which, however internally consistent, usually lead the historian away from a consideration of the interaction between historically-situated players and playgoers. Neo-Marxist critic Fredric Jameson offers a more promising approach. "Genres," he writes, "are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact." Consequently, "generic affiliations, and the systematic deviation from them, provide clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself, and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a protopolitical response to a historical dilemma." Shifting Jameson's definition of genre from the literary to the theatrical scene, the historian will look for regularities of content and form in performance which induced similar responses over time from an audience who implicitly accepted the "social contract" undergirding and facilitating this "protopolitical" formation.⁷

Between 1820 and 1870 groups of audiences and theatre people in the United States constructed and maintained a variety of these formations. Various groups enjoyed and produced specific types of comedy, opera, farce, minstrelsy, and melodrama, for instance, over periods ranging from fifteen to twenty-five years. Formations centering on melodramatic productions and responses, however, achieved greater popularity than did other confluences of audience groups and theatrical genres. Elite white males dominated an audience group which enjoyed fairy-tale melodramas between 1820 and 1835. From 1830 into the mid-1850s, male Jacksonians of all classes applauded heroic melodramas. In a subformation of this historical construction, urban, white workers supported apocalyptic melodramas between 1835 and 1850. Beginning about 1845, a new formation emerged centering on Protestant, white men and women, a mix of working- and middle-class, most of whose female auditors were new to theatre-going. At first applauding and promoting moral reform plays, this group, enlarged in the early 1850s by the addition of upper-class audiences, embraced sensational melodrama and was, in turn, embraced by it. These melodramatic theatrical formations, then, provide a logical focus for investigating major aspects of nineteenth-century theatre and cultural hegemony.

At the center of each of these formations were certain "social contracts" based primarily on the rhetorical success of the theatrical fiction shared by audiences and actors. To assess the hegemonic implications of these fictions,

the theatre historian must understand their rhetorical power; that is, what they persuaded their willing participants, theatre artists and spectators alike, to think, feel, and do. As Kenneth Burke defines it, rhetoric is, "The symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols." In this broad sense, rhetoric is the primary means whereby social groups construct, legitimate, and gradually alter their culture. Rhetoric may work at conscious levels of intention and reception, but mostly it operates at semi- or subconscious levels to persuade groups throughout an era of their common bonds. Audiences and theatre people in a given theatrical formation have consequently persuaded one another of the legitimacy of certain cognitive categories and norms of behavior--cognitions and norms that position this group as a part of a dominant, subordinate, or oppositional culture.⁸

Understanding that rhetorical identifications among actors and spectators lie at the heart of any theatrical formation, the historian may use this assumption to open up the constituents and dynamics of this historical institution. Clearly the texts of plays popular among audiences and theatre practitioners within a formation will provide the most useful evidence of the nature and intensity of the identifications which occurred. Next to the scripts, an understanding of the acting conventions which put them across will provide important information. Play reviews, actors' autobiographies, occasional diary entries by play-goers, and similar sources will also help to specify this interaction, although care must be taken in evaluating such material to assure that it represents mostly typical rather than ideosyncratic points of view. More revealing of the dynamics of these performances will likely be prompt books which include stage directions and the programs, handbills, and newspaper advertisements used by the producers to prepare the public to enjoy their shows. Productions of apocalyptic melodramas, for instance, regularly featured handbill programs which paraded the scenic marvels of the show at the expense of the cast and the playwright. Finally, the historian will be looking at theatre architecture, especially the conventional spatial relations between the stage and various parts of the playhouse. The gradual shift from apron staging and box-pit-and-gallery seating to box-set staging and orchestra-balcony seating between the 1840s and the 1860s significantly affected the types and degrees of identifications which occurred during this period. In short, evidence of any phenomenon that shaped performer-audience interaction is potential grist for the mill.

Drawing back from the interaction itself, it's apparent that other, less direct institutional constraints within melodramatic formations also limited and channeled their ideological dynamics. Ticket prices and seating arrangements not only determined the probable class, gender, and ethnicity of who got into the theatre, but shaped the ways in which the performers were likely to respond to audience requests. Actors in the 1820s, for example, rarely refused a demand from the boxes but might ignore a request from the gallery. This class-based interaction partly accounts for the reputation of the "gallery gods"

as noisy and riotous. Other institutional conventions, such as benefit performances and rioting, though not everyday occurrences, nevertheless influenced what happened nightly between actors and audiences. Managers in the 1830s and '40s ignored the possibility of a riot at their peril. Organizational arrangements behind the scenes also impacted on interactions and identifications between spectators and performers. The shift from stock to star production directly affected audience perception of the stars, of course; less noticeably to the public, it also changed the way scripts were written, actors were hired, companies were managed, and shows were mounted on the stage. These changes, in turn, pushed performer-spectator relations in new directions.

The historian cannot assume, *a priori*, that one of the above elements shaping a theatrical formation will always (or even usually) be the most important. Play scripts may appear to be central and, indeed, the historian will usually grant them significant weight in shaping audience expectation and response. But the scripts themselves usually resulted from managerial calculation, the desires of the actors, the conventions of casting, time and budgetary limitations, a general conception of "what will work" for the audience, and perhaps a dash of "originality" from the playwright. Playscripts may have some enduring existence beyond their initial success, of course, but that only means that new audiences (or perhaps readers) are enjoying them in somewhat different ways within a new historical formation. (This has happened continually to the plays of Shakespeare, for instance, which Jacksonian theatre-goers admired for reasons which would have puzzled the Bard's Renaissance contemporaries.) Just as plays cannot be taken as determinative of theatrical formations, no more can the cognitive and normative orientation of its primary audience. Certainly audience desires shape the general persuasion of a formation, but theatrical communication is never entirely "demand driven;" actors, designers, playwrights and others--together with the weight of theatrical tradition--animate and channel only a select few of the amorphous hopes and fears of their spectators. In effect, the theatrical formation, responsive to the various needs of all of its participants but determined by no single one of them, shapes each of the elements that constitutes it. The whole finally produces the dynamics of its parts.

Even granted the approach outlined above, however, using the concept of a theatrical formation will not completely solve the problem of how to relate performance events to their social context. By encouraging historians to see context from the inside out--that is, as "always already" enmeshed in the conventions of script, performance, architectural space, etc.--the concept does pull theatre historians away from considering performance and audience as inherently separate phenomena. Yet the hopes, fears, and desires of an audience are only the most immediate context for an ongoing pattern of performances. Theatrical formations exist side by side with other formations of society and culture, some similar in persuasive power, some more influential

than others in shaping the course of history, but all relatively autonomous and all constitutive of social relations and realities. How theatrical formations fit into the context of this larger dynamic is an open question. I join most other neo-Marxists in refusing to privilege the historical force of one kind of formation over others. As precursors of the wide variety of influential entertainment formations in our own era, however, melodramatic formations of the last century probably had a greater impact on nineteenth-century culture and society than has generally been recognized. Theatre historians are only beginning to find ways of explaining and validating this influence.

The College of William and Mary

Notes

1. Philosophers from a variety of traditions, including Wittgenstein, Habermas, and Barthes have noted the necessity of theoretical underpinnings for the writing of history. For an application of this understanding to the writing of theatre history, see my essay, "Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History," *Theatre Journal*, 37 (December 1985) 465-86.

2. For a description and critique of reflective models of historical explanation for cultural events, see Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1980) 119-54. Tony Bennett, in "Texts in History: The Determinations of Readings and Their Texts," in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, eds. Attridge, Bennington, and Young (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1987) 77-80 takes Lukacs and others in his tradition to task. Both reflective and "base/superstructure" models reduce cultural events to historical passivity by emphasizing their expressive attributes instead of their constitutive roles.

3. See Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1977) and *Culture* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1981); also Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of Ideology: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society, and the Media*, eds. M. Gurevitch, et al. (London: Methuen, 1982) 56-90. In the United States, sociologist Robert Wuthnow has also defined culture primarily as process rather than product: "The subject matter of cultural analysis is readily observed in the objective acts, events, utterances, and objects of interaction, rather than efforts to reduce culture either to the internal states of individuals or to the material conditions of societies" in *Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Jurgen Habermas* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) 259.

4. See Hall's "Culture, the Media, and the Ideological Effect" in *Mass Communication and Society*, eds. J. Curran et al. (London: Edward Arnold, 1977) 315-48. Hall's debt to Antonio Gramsci (and his reformulation of Gramsci's Marxism) is evident in "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1988), pp. 58-74.

5. See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971) and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, eds. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1985). See also my essay, "Using the Concept of Cultural Hegemony to Write Theatre History," in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Perspectives on The Historiography of Performance* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1989—forthcoming). Several Neo-Marxists, including Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, disregard Gramsci's generally orthodox notions of ideology, base-superstructure relations, and rationalistic psychology to emphasize the relative autonomy of culture vis a vis economic forces and to stress the working of hegemony on the unconscious.

In this regard, see also Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Toward a New Concept of Democracy" and Michael Ryan, "The Politics of Film: Discourse, Psychoanalysis, Ideology" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* 89-104; 477-86.

6. Bennett, "Texts in History: The Determinations of Readings and their Texts," 72. Theatre historians have no single word to denote the interaction between performers and spectators which occurs in the theatre; "production," "play," and "performance" relate mostly to what happens on the stage, not throughout the theatre. In "Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History," I suggest the use of the term "ritual" to denote this dynamic give-and-take.

7. See Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U P, 1981) 106; and "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History*, 7 (1975): 157. Also useful is John Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976), although Cawelti's definition of genre requires more aesthetic self-consciousness from producers and audiences than seems necessary for historical analysis.

8. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969) 43. On the general congruence of Burke's and Gramsci's thinking, see Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983).

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