MATTHEW REBHORN

PIioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier

Reviewed by Jefferson D. Slagle

This book juxtaposes varied, even contrary, representations of the nineteenth century frontier in order to reveal the varied cultural politics of frontier drama and of the frontier itself. Rebhorn brings much-needed attention to a genre that was deeply influential at the time of its staging but has for too long been neglected. The most significant recent study of the genre is Roger A. Hall's Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906 (2011), but this study aims primarily at documentation rather than analysis. The hard-to-find plays Rebhorn discusses, many of them housed in seldom-visited archives, here benefit from the increasing attention to performance that has characterized recent scholarship on frontier drama, and the range of plays he analyzes reveal the complexity of nineteenth-century theater.

After perforce recounting Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis on the American West and his near-miss of Buffalo Bill Cody in Chicago in 1893, the introduction explains the conflict between their two versions of frontier history. To do so, it briefly analyzes two contemporary performances: Buffalo Bill's Wild West and the then-popular Traveling drama of Gowango Mohawk, who claimed to be a daughter of the Seneca leader Red Jacket. Rebhorn contrasts the female leads of each production--
Mohawk and Annie Oakley—to show that each embodies a different kind of femininity. The introduction then concludes with a brief discussion of the Foucauldian terms "genealogy" and "revolutionary aesthetic" (19). Since the first term is central to the book's argument, it could and should have been more precisely defined here; later on, it too often feels like a substitute for clear articulation of the mechanism and stakes of the influence it aims to designate. By contrast, Rebhorn much more clearly explains how the "revolutionary aesthetic" of frontier drama spurred greater realism, exposed racial difference, and contested conservative, imperialist ideologies of westward expansion. Reborn thus lays the groundwork for much of the argument that follows.

In Chapter one, which examines famed actor Edwin Forrest's performance in John Augustus Stone's play *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags*, Rebhorn links this performance to the literary and political debate around the "Indian problem" and to the oratory and elocution movements. Though Forrest sought to "animate but still control the passions" (34) of his performance, he succeeded only in doing the former, for audience members reportedly feared they would die of the emotional excitement he induced. According to Rebhorn, therefore, Forrest's performance shifted the dynamics of performance to an aesthetic of "wonder" marking the boundary between the known and the not yet known--in this case, the frontier of emotion.

Wonder is likewise said to be aroused by James Kirke Paulding's *The Lion of the West*, examined in Chapter 2. By staging the frontiersman as originary, Rebhorn argues, this play undermines dominant frontier discourse,
subverts European aesthetic principles, and thereby makes the frontier wondrous to eastern and European theatergoers. While the earliest version of this twice-rewritten play adopted the melodramatic mode to stitch together the moral fabric of a nation rent by revolution, subsequent revisions increasingly made the words and actions of the frontiersman Nimrod Wildfire threaten the conventional morality of melodrama. Likewise, the play replaced the melodramatic sublime--"the aestheticization of fear," with wonder, "the aestheticization of delight" (64), thereby revealing how complex the increasingly pluralistic nation had become.

The following chapter tries to link the staging of frontier drama with the blackface performance of Thomas Dartmouth Rice, the actor and playwright who played Jim Crow Rice. Redefining the frontier in a way that that is tenuous at best, this chapter asks us to believe not simply that frontiers are sites of cultural difference and encounter, but also that this encounter itself--not western geography--constitutes the frontier, and therefore that any site of such difference is a frontier. But to call nineteenth century racial difference a "frontier" is to erase the line between the two. In his attempt to conflate them, Rebhorn argues that Rice's blackface performance grew out of his own experience on the frontier and out of the frontier roles he sometimes played. On stage, Rebhorn contends, the frontiersman and Jim Crow tended "to impersonate each other without hesitation or interruption" (76). Certainly these two very popular character types represent major developments of their times and may even speak to each other across generic lines, as Rebhorn suggests in analyzing Rice's The Virginia Mummy. But given the fragility of his evidence, it seems dubious to classify blackface performance "as a kind of frontier performance" (79).
Even if the frontier is consistently defined not as a place, but rather as a "representation . . . that creates the notion of place textually and aesthetically" (20), how do the conditions and concerns dramatized in blackface performance overlap significantly with those dramatized in plays about the west? To his credit, Rebhorn acknowledges the "conflicting racial and political investments of the two forms" (79-80), but this awareness of conflict hardly regulates his subsequent reading of Rice's play.

In fact, this chapter starkly exemplifies the book's most significant problem: even as it tries to show how frontier drama explodes the reigning ideology of westward expansion, its readings of individual texts sometimes seem reductive, flattening analytical possibilities that might impede the book's stated aims. Rather than reading blackface performance as a frontier form, Rebhorn could far more usefully have considered how cultural and political imperatives might have led Rice to respond to Paulding, and what other nineteenth-century plays might have spoken to each other in this way. The chapter also presupposes a monolithic notion of the frontier as locus of an "autonomously conceived, rigidly demarcated identity" that is plainly evident in certain popular western forms, but has for some time been challenged by studies such as Blake Allmendinger's *Ten Most Wanted: The New Western Literature* (1998) and Forrest G. Robinson's *Having it Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics* (1993). The stability of western identity is tacitly discredited by Rebhorn himself two chapters later, in a discussion of the southern California mines. As it stands, then, Chapter 3 engagingly explores the interaction between two performers and two playwrights, but contributes little to our knowledge of frontier drama.
Chapter 4, on Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana*, suffers from some of the same deficiencies as Chapter 3. But much of the chapter highlights a subplot involving Wahnotee, an Indian from "out West" (107). Rejecting, Rebhorn argues, the racial dichotomy of black and white, the play uses the story of Wahnotee to disrupt its own dominant "north-south axis" and to replace the melodramatic equation of morality and suffering with a "dramaturgy of pleasure" (107). In a happy coincidence, *The Octoroon* was performed for a time at P.T. Barnum's American Museum, where an exhibit called "What Is It?" presented a so-called missing link that nicely complemented Boucicault's genre-bending play and, as Rebhorn argues, helped it "rescript what it meant to perform or 'act' as an American offstage as well" (117).

A chapter on postbellum drama contraposes Augustin Daly's *Horizon* and Joaquin Miller's *The Danites in the Sierras*. After the war, Rebhorn argues, the frontier became a memory that could be reconstructed according to the cultural and aesthetic perspectives of the artist, and these two plays stage that memory quite differently. For Daly, the stage was a site to be tamed in much the same way as he tamed his actresses to perform within the bounds of bourgeois sensibility. Bourgeois love became a "mode of empire" (125), a taming of passions analogous to the taming of the frontier. Miller, on the other hand, saw both the frontier and the stage as "a zone of license that allowed him a kind of freedom that Daly could not tolerate" (126). Rejecting dominant ideologies of class, gender, and the frontier,*The Danites* charted for the nation a much more complex course.
Rebhorn's analysis of this play, however, falters in too-reductively equating two gender-bending personas. The first, a widely-circulated photo of John B. Colton, was taken by many gold rush-era miners as the picture of a young girl; the second was Kitty Blanchard's portrayal of Miller's character Billy Piper, who poses as a young man for much of the play. While both the photo and the stage character clearly reveal the instability of gender on the frontier, they do so in quite different ways. It is one thing for heterosexual miners to mistake a young boy for a desirable girl; it is quite another thing for an actress who is listed on the playbill under her own name to play a female character who dresses as a young man so as to elude malevolent pursuers. In missing this difference, Rebhorn misses an opportunity to further his argument about the fluidity of gender on the frontier stage. By the end of Miller's play, moreover, Billy seems to reify conventional gender roles: her masculine performance is constantly under siege, and as soon as it is safe to do so, she dons the "natural" garb of a woman. (On the other hand, as Rebhorn notes, both Captain Tommy and Bunkerhill maintain alternate, even resistant, femininities.) In short, the play seems both more complex and more "traditional" than Rebhorn admits.

In an afterward, Rebhorn examines the continuing complexity of the frontier in two phenomena of our own time: George W. Bush's brush clearing at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, and Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain*. In re-enacting the role of the rugged male frontiersman a la Buffalo Bill or John Wayne, Rebhorn argues, Bush silenced alternative representations of the frontier. While the analogy to Wayne seems a stretch, Bush enacted a physical masculinity that resonates with the ideals, if not the concrete practices, of the frontiersman. More importantly to Rebhorn, Bush's
version of western work also masked the conservationist practices of many of his neighbors, much as the performances of Cody and Wayne reified physical masculinity at the expense of other frontier identities and practices. *Brokeback Mountain* likewise simplifies the west. In Lee's "centrist and safe" (164) version of the frontier, Rebhorn contends, space can be temporarily cleared for homoerotic desire but is soon reclaimed by those who represent powerful discourses of frontier masculinity and of domesticity.

In the end, Rebhorn seeks to make the concept of the frontier include multiple discourses, aesthetics, politics, and histories. In promoting this inclusion, he joins scholars such as Nathaniel Lewis, Krista Comer, Stephen Tatum, and William Handley. Rebhorn's contribution to this body of work is a valuable analysis of nineteenth-century stage dramas that have been too long neglected by scholars of the frontier.

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