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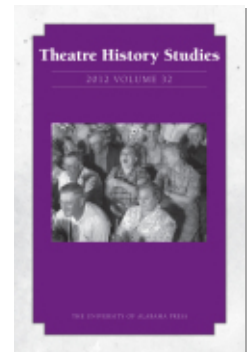
The Theatre of Empire: Frontier Performances in America, 1750-1860 by Douglas S. Harvey (review)

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The Theatre of Empire: Frontier Performances in America, 1750–1860. By Douglas S. Harvey. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010. 235 pp. \$99.00 cloth.

In *The Theatre of Empire: Frontier Performances in America, 1750–1860*, Douglas S. Harvey explores the ways that “frontier performance” conditioned audiences and established assumptions that ultimately served to “perpetuate, or resist, imperial expansion” (1). He argues that the “theatre of empire” was intrinsically bound up with the systematic subjugation and destruction of various “others” and that such abuses became “institutionalized” through disingenuous theatrical characterizations and their role in “sugar-coating the crimes and abuses” of an expanding empire (19). Despite the title, this is not Harvey’s only project, and his introduction announces that he will contrast the theatre of empire with ceremonies of the “indigenous peoples,” exploring “the entire spectrum of performance from indigenous rituals to colonial and national theatre on and near the cultural frontier of the British and Euro-American expansion” (4). *Theatre of Empire* is nothing if not ambitious, and several of his proposed topics—such as examining the transformation from one of his categories to the other—have the potential to contribute significantly to scholars’ understanding of performance culture(s) in the periods he treats. Harvey’s study pursues breadth over depth, however, and his evidence and methodology limit the value of *Theatre of Empire* for theatre scholars.

Harvey’s analytical frame is crucial to understanding the selection and treatment of the material he presents. Building on recent work blending theories of embodiment with cognitive studies, Harvey argues that the key distinction between these types of performance and their functions inheres in the environments that shaped each. In indigenous performances “the entire cultural milieu of the performances are [*sic*] embedded in the environment of the participating bodies,” whereas, for the theatre of empire, “the environment is notably absent or limited to the immediate spatial dimension that locates the performance” (8). Harvey believes that indigenous performances are structured around cultivating *relationships*, both between individuals and between the community and the natural environment; the theatre of empire, however, is concerned with *transaction* and *commodification* and alienates individuals by forcing them to interact through the lifeless medium of capital. He also draws on Bruce McConachie’s usage of “simulation theory,” a methodology Harvey defines as “the reasonable and intellectually honest projection of the historian’s experienced judgement into past situations to overcome the limitations of objectivism and relativism”

(9). What Harvey projects is a deep compassion for the Native Americans who were displaced and eventually destroyed and a repugnance for the agents of empire and their actions, both of which inform an argument that proceeds empathetically rather than empirically.

Harvey's six main chapters traverse the titular period in roughly chronological fashion, alternating between play analysis, glosses of historical context, and descriptions of indigenous performances. In addition to plays, the "theatre" of Harvey's title includes graduation orations/recitations, popular songs, imperial spectacles, mobs, tavern brawls, circuses, dancing exhibitions, and minstrelsy. Throughout the first three chapters, he juxtaposes examples of indigenous rituals/ceremonies with "colonial" theatre (a term he prefers because it implies that the dynamics of colonial domination did not end with the Revolutionary War). He devotes considerable attention to describing indigenous performances such as the "Edge of the Woods" and "Condolence" ceremonies, which mediated contact between the Native Americans and the colonizing forces. Particular emphasis is given to Condolence ceremonies that coincided with treaty negotiations, what he calls "intercultural performed negotiations." These intriguing encounters—in which fundamentally different worldviews, languages, performance traditions, and agendas collide in the context of performance—are one of the few examples in the book that speak to the transformation from "indigenous" to "colonial," though Harvey privileges description over analysis.

The second half of *Theatre of Empire* features little discussion of indigenous performance, focusing instead on the circus, minstrelsy, and melodrama. While eighteenth-century "colonial" theatre had made explicit appeals to imperial/nationalist sentiments, "empire" in the nineteenth century employed a more subtle process of appropriation and denigration. Blackface performance, for example, initially a "screen for calling into question the social order, politics and general assumptions of the day," was soon co-opted and codified into a form that fomented racial prejudice and defended slavery, as did the numerous proslavery adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (152). Harvey also argues that popular reform melodramas relied on a "formula that combined folktale with the bourgeois goal of worker productivity" and were part of a general effort to inculcate virtue, or at least eliminate economically unproductive behaviors in a working-class audience (168). Harvey concludes by hearkening back to his introduction, where he calls for a restoration of humanity's connection with and awareness of the natural world, and warns that "the dangers of imperial hubris are catching up with us" (178).

The utility of defining a spectrum that encompasses such profoundly different cultures and historical periods is questionable. Harvey retraces well-

worn paths in American theatre history, covering familiar plays and genres, and—despite his appreciation for embodiment and the importance of lived experience—frequently chooses textual analysis over an exploration of the dynamics of theatrical reception. And, while he suggests his study is “embedded in the discourse of ritual and theatre performance,” his use of performance theory tends to focus primarily on Victor Turner (4). Perhaps most problematic is Harvey’s lack of objectivity, although it is a methodological choice rather than an unconscious bias. Those who share his appreciation for the indigenous worldview and echo his denunciation of all things imperial may welcome the straightforward binary he presents, although by focusing on this contrast he misses opportunities to nuance his argument.

While doing so is understandable in the context of indigenous performance in largely oral cultures, Harvey relies heavily on secondary literature and chooses not to interrogate many of the primary sources he does include. *Theatre of Empire* would also have benefited from more diligent editing, as there are numerous missing words, incorrect premiere dates and play titles, and misspelled character and author names. While this study may not fully realize Harvey’s proposed project, it certainly suggests the potential of such a comparative analysis.

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Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theatre. By Felicity Nussbaum. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2010. 383 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

Over the last twenty years the subject of female performance and the figure of the actress have moved to the scholarly mainstream, symbolized by the publication in 2007 of *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*. Earlier foundational works such as Elizabeth Howe’s *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660–1700* (1992) are now complemented by deeply researched biographies like Claire Tomalin’s absorbing, poignant *Mrs Jordan’s Profession* (1994) and by studies that address both historical and modern female entertainers, as does Kirsten Pullen’s *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (2005). In *Rival Queens*, Felicity Nussbaum provocatively challenges the traditional view