

NATIVE AMERICAN DRAMA

INTRODUCTION

Native American drama is both contemporary and lost in time, readily accessible and nearly irretrievable, familiar in form and uncharted in contour. This double aspect of what can be considered the drama of Native Americans comes from two separate bodies of work: one, an ethnic drama that flourished in the last three decades of the twentieth century and continues to flourish; the other, a living art form tied to religion, ritual, and dance that began to perish at the end of the nineteenth century with the increasing removal of Indian peoples to reservations and that is now all but lost as a vibrant form.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Contemporary Native American drama, like the drama of other American minority groups, was born in the cultural revolution of the late 1960's and early 1970's as the success of the Civil Rights movement and the failure of the Vietnam War became apparent to most Americans. As the viewpoint of a single dominant racial group loosened its hold on the culture, the validity of other viewpoints was considered. Drama was a powerful tool in this cultural revolution. Black playwright Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (pr. 1959) gave Americans an unforgettable glimpse of the dignity and self-defined agency of an African American family. Frank Chin and other Asian American playwrights established a theater group that would educate the United States about issues such as the atrocities of Angel Island, the heroism of workers on the transcontinental railroad, and the unnecessary humiliation of the Japanese American internment camps.

The American Indian Theatre Ensemble, founded in 1972 and changed to the Native American Theatre Ensemble in 1973, took on the tremendous and exhilarating task of presenting, through drama, Native Americans in their own terms. The figure of the Indian in American literature, as in popular literature and culture of several centuries, was a misrepresentation, skewered between the misbegotten poles of the uncivilized "savage" and the romantic keeper of nature's secrets. In a labor no less Herculean than that of African American dramatists, Native American playwrights tried to shake themselves free of centuries of stereotypes to create realistic characters conceived from their own personal experiences. The American

Indian Theater Ensemble resolved not only to rectify the cultural image of the Native American but also to produce a body of drama intended primarily for the Indian community.

HANAY GEIOGAMAH

A key figure in the history of contemporary Native American drama is playwright Hanay Geiogamah. His work is well represented in two anthologies of Native American drama: *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays* (1999) and *Stories of Our Way: An Anthology of American Indian Plays* (1999). Of Kiowa and Delaware background, Geiogamah was active in the crucial founding years of the American Indian Theatre Ensemble, which produced his one-act play *Body Indian* (pr. 1972).

Body Indian is a difficult play and demonstrates the problems Native American playwrights face in creating a new, realistic drama based on contemporary Native American life. At first reading, the play seems to be about alcoholism (a disease that has disproportionately plagued Native Americans since early European settlers used alcohol as an item of trade), and its realism is intense and shocking. Bobby, in his thirties, is alcoholic; he has lost a leg in a drunken stupor on the railroad tracks. As the play begins, he arrives at his Indian "uncle's" apartment with two of his aunts. The group gathered there has been drinking for some time, as have Bobby and his aunts. There is some socializing and more drinking. Then Bobby, who has hidden in his artificial leg some money he plans to use to enter a detoxification program, passes out. The group of friends and relatives move toward him, intent on finding some cash to restock the dwindling wine supply. Before the play ends, Bobby has been robbed a half dozen times; his money is gone, and his uncle is about to leave the apartment to pawn Bobby's artificial leg.

The problem for a mainstream audience is the tone of the play: The intense realism seems to be the tool of social tragedy. In an interview in a special "Ethnic Theater" issue (1989-1990) of the multicultural literary journal *Melus* celebrating the first ten years of the New WORLD Theater, Geiogamah himself admits to being unsure of the play's tone before he took it to a Native American audience. That audience's reaction to the humorous side of the play made the playwright realize he had created a tragicomedy, one that not only successfully brought a social problem into the light of community attention but

also emphasized the indigenous communities' ability to survive the most hopeless of situations. The "sardonic smile" that the stage directions indicate Bobby is wearing as he surveys his final state in the play has been linked to the Coyote/Trickster character in Native American mythology: Have we been tricked into overlooking the humor of the play?

The play also functions at a symbolic level, as the title *Body Indian* suggests: Bobby represents the impoverished Native American population, bled of vitality to a level at which victims begin to victimize each other. Sound effects of drum and rattles compete with the sound of an approaching train and train whistle; stage directions indicate that the cast freezes at this symbolic announcement of European modernity, the soulless culture that has terrorized the Native American population as it displaced them from their homelands.

Another play by Geigomah is *49* (pr. 1975). This upbeat play deals with the kind of social gathering of primarily young Native Americans called the "49." The event begins after midnight and lasts through the night; it is a social, sexual, and spiritual event during which young Native Americans discard their apathy toward tradition and sing the songs of the tribe. The vitality of a whole people flows back into them, and they actively resist police efforts to break up their gathering. The pace of the play is quick as scenes alternate between the choruslike prophecies of Night Walker, the ceremonial leader, and the looming confrontation between the young group and the police. The tone of the play is the polar opposite of *Body Indian*; the resistance and hope of the young people in the play reflect the increasing optimism and activism of the mid-1970's.

WILLIAM S. YELLOW ROBE, JR.

Another influential and prolific playwright is William S. Yellow Robe, Jr., an Assiniboine Sioux from the Fort Peck reservation in Montana. He has been associated with the Sante Fe Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), where he taught playwriting for three years beginning in 1993. The IAIA had been running a training program in indigenous theater for several years at the time Yellow Robe joined the faculty. Like Geigomah, Yellow Robe employs a social realism in his plays that is tempered with the moderating influence of memory and tradition.

Yellow Robe's *The Independence of Eddie Rose* (pr. 1991) depicts a few days in the life of a dysfunctional Native American family. Eddie, sixteen, is torn

between a desire to flee the reservation and a need to protect his younger sister from the threat of sexual abuse from his mother's current boyfriend. Help and guidance are provided by his aunt Thelma, who retains the healing ways of the community. Eddie, only a teenager himself, forces his mother to sign papers documenting her boyfriend's sexual abuse and signing over custody of his sister to his aunt before he leaves home. Eddie's vitality and instinctive turning to healing ways mark a turning away from an attitude of helpless victimization.

Yellow Robe has been an articulate spokesperson for Native American theater. Interviewed for the special "Ethnic Theater" issue of *Melus* by Roberta Uno, an Asian American playwright and then artistic director of New WORLD Theater, the Montana writer spoke out on differing expectations of mainstream and minority playwrights. Although mainstream writers are seen as possessing individual voices, minority authors are seen as spokespersons for their people, he asserted. Commenting on his own choice to work on the East Coast rather than the West Coast, Yellow Robe pointed out that, for many Westerners, the idea of paying money to see Indians perform onstage is totally alien.

In his one-act play *Sneaky* (pr. 1987), Yellow Robe constructs a rebellion against the meaninglessness of modernity. The three Rose brothers, all in their thirties, steal their mother's body from a funeral parlor in order to give her a traditional funeral and send her back to her people properly. A good deal of comedy ensues as Frank, the oldest and the mastermind of the plan, tries to convince the others while supervising Kermit, the youngest, who is in an alcoholic haze. The act pulls the three brothers together; in the final scene, their mother's body is placed in a tree and, searching for an Indian way to pray, they create an "Our Father" prayer that deconstructs modernity.

OTHER MODERN PLAYWRIGHTS

Like every form of minority drama, Native American drama has to fight against indifference and lack of knowledge on the part of some mainstream audiences. The playwright must be aware that he or she is also writing for audiences who may not be aware that Indians still exist. This creates a double burden of the need to educate as well as to create vibrant drama, a heavy load for any playwright to incorporate into a single play.

Roxy Gordon and Leanne Howe, both Choctaws, demonstrated in their *Indian Radio Days* (pr. 1993) just how light that burden could appear to be. The play is

structured as a radio show, with the narrator interviewing a flotsam of characters involved in key historical events, pseudo-events, or the fabrication of the many stereotypes surrounding American indigenous citizens. The pace of the play is light and fast, and the tone is bracingly ironic, building as the stranger-than-fiction events of Native American history race by. Performances of the play gain spontaneity as bingo cards are distributed to the audience, who play periodically and listen to the “Rez” (reservation) gossip of a Bingo Lady.

Other representative playwrights include the three Miguel sisters, founders in 1975 of Spiderwoman Theater, whose drama has done much to reincarnate the figures and themes of traditional native legends, and Diane Glancey, whose *The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance* (pr. 1995) explores the theme of intergenerational conflict and the transmission of traditional values. As more anthologies of contemporary Native American drama are published, the astounding variety and creativity of the contemporary scene become more apparent.

RECONSTRUCTING A LOST DRAMA

If history is examined beyond the removal and displacement of native peoples, the outlines of a living culture in which dance and drama were an integral part of a way of life can be glimpsed. Hints of what this drama was like can be found in the records of anthropology and in a few extraordinary documents such as *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, an account of the Oglala Sioux Horse Dance performed in the 1870's by the nonnative poet John G. Neihardt that was first published in 1932. The story of this performance was told to Neihardt by Black Elk, the young visionary who transformed a private vision-dream into a healing performance for his nation.

Neihardt's book contains an account of both the vision that Black Elk had as a nine-year-old boy and an account of the performance event that was informed by this vision, an event that took place when the visionary was seventeen years old. Neihardt's rendering of Black Elk's account offers students of Native American drama a rare opportunity to study the connection between private vision and community performance. It also poses a challenge to the typical European understanding of what drama is: The portrait of a hero or heroine struggling against society and its conventions is a product of nineteenth and twentieth century forces of modernity, forces that have increasingly focused on the individual and have

seemingly exiled the spirit world from creative performance.

To understand the Oglala Sioux performance of the Horse Dance as described in Neihardt's account, it is important to imagine a dramatized version of *Piers Plowman*, the medieval poem in which the dream-vision of a young man helps him construct a way of healing for his people. Here the focus is not on the individual but on the communal; the imaginative act of the visionary becomes the treasured road that will redeem his people from annihilation.

Because the language used to describe theater performance is tied to the conventions of European drama, there are no categorical terms to describe the kind of performance Black Elk describes; “pageant” may be close to the reality of the enormous communal effort, one that took place outside in a space approximately the size of a football field. At the center of the field is the Rainbow Tipi, the site of the drama's beginning when the young visionary enters the tent and encounters the Six Elders, who present him with gifts for his journey.

Outside the tent, at the four corners of the compass, teams of horsemen wait, mounted, for the slow, clockwise rotation around the tent that enacts the events of the vision. In the tipi, the Elders draw a sacred circle on the ground and paint on it to show a red road from north to south and a black road from east to west. They beat their drums and sing verses about each group of horses, which rotate with the chanting.

It becomes increasingly clear in the narrative of the performance the extent to which the horse is at the center of the pageant; this is an important point, for the Horse Dance is a celebration of the horse during which human beings cross over the border of creaturehood and dwell in the skin of the horse, seeing creation with the eyes of a fellow creature.

The Japanese writer Yuko Tsushima has commented on the narrative art of the Ainu people, the indigenous hunters displaced from Japan's main island by agricultural immigrants from Korea some thirteen hundred years ago, praising their narratives for an unusual shifting of point of view: In the tale of the bear, the bear is the first-person narrator. This very quality, which Tsushima prizes in Ainu tales, is at the center of the Horse Dance; at the moment of the shifting point of view, humankind is back under the skin of grace. At the point of the shift, Black Elk reports the neighing response of the horses as he sees again in the sky the vision that had troubled him as a child.

The procession of horses and riders makes a complete revolution around the field. As the second revolution starts, spectators join in the procession, both on horseback and walking. At the end of the procession, the sacred circle in the Rainbow Tipi is examined; the earth there now shows the marks of tiny horse hooves. Right relation has been restored by crossing over into the creaturehood of another being. Tales of healing begin to pour in to Black Elk.

Although Neihardt's record presents an unusual opportunity to participate imaginatively in a lost form of Native American drama, it is not the only such source. Works like *Cherokee Dance and Drama* by Frank G. Speck, Leonard Broom, and Will West Long (1951) also reconstruct some of the drama-pageants of Native Americans, most of which involve a similar crossing over to an animal point of view.

Exploring the records of the lost drama-pageants heightens appreciation of contemporary Native American drama and other genres. Spiderwoman Theater's *Power Pipes* (pr. 1992) is a modern dance-drama featuring characters such as Wind Horse Spirit Warrior and Owl Messenger; the play is performed on the borders of myth and reality. Such an investigation also deepens understanding of the dramatic narratives of Leslie Marmon Silko: *Ceremony* (1977) and *Storyteller* (1981) exist at the moment of crossing over from the modern to the mythic, from the fragmentation of the contemporary to the wholeness under the skin of creation.

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—Hideyuki Kasuga

AMERICAN REGIONAL THEATER

INTRODUCTION

"Regional theater" has always been an uncomfortable term for the network of professional nonprofit theaters that are found throughout the United States. One of the movement's pioneers, Nina Vance, said the term made them sound second-class, and although many agree with her, no one has coined a better term. Some theaters tried the term "resident theater," but that implied a resident company that they did not have. "Repertory theater" was tried as well, but performing plays in repertory means alternating the same shows throughout the season, and most of the theaters were not doing that. As uneasily as the title fits, "regional theater" has become the catch-all term for most theaters outside New York City that use professional personnel but operate as not-for-profit businesses. Other theaters outside New York City include community, college/university, or professional commercial theaters such as dinner, touring, and outdoor theaters.

Hundreds of fine regional theaters exist across the United States, producing interesting revivals of the

classics as well as provocative new plays and experimental works. Most regional theaters owe much to the communities that support them, and in return they offer an array of services such as school performances and tours, training for young people, and other educational programs. Like the city ballet and orchestra, the regional theater now enjoys a foothold in the cultural landscape of most American cities and of many smaller towns and rural areas. Unfortunately, however, this was not always the case. It has taken nearly one hundred years and the efforts of some very determined artists for professional theater to spread its wings and escape the confines of the commercial theater district of Broadway to earn the reputation it enjoys today.

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY ROOTS

At the turn of the twentieth century, American theater was very much a commercial venture. It had evolved from the colonial days of British touring companies into a network of theater “circuits” that were controlled and operated, at first, by prominent family companies. Early pioneers of American theater brought the English tradition of a resident company to the shores of the United States in the early 1800’s. Throughout the nineteenth century those companies concentrated their performances in certain areas of the eastern United States. These circuits relied on a series of theaters in towns of close proximity, and the companies would perform on a regular basis in the theaters, moving from town to town. By the mid- to late nineteenth century, the theater had become a prominent social gathering place. Theatergoers often cared less about the play and more about seeing certain actors, thus giving rise to the American “star system.” By the end of the century, resident companies were a thing of the past and managers were casting star players to tour the circuits for a purely commercial audience. These circuits were eventually taken over by an unofficial “family” of powerful theatrical producers who came to be known as New York’s theatrical “Syndicate,” a cartel of sorts that controlled first-class theatrical production in the United States for a period of time.

Meanwhile, European theater experienced an artistic revolution during this period. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen introduced a new kind of play genre known as “realism,” in which actors had to behave more naturalistically onstage. Punctuated by themes of social significance and psychological depth, this new approach inspired directors like Konstantin Stanislavsky, who

formed the Moscow Art Theatre with writer Anton Chekhov in the late 1890’s. Stanislavsky realized that realist plays required a new kind of actor, and over a period of several decades, he developed his “method” of teaching actors, which evolved into standard practice in Europe and in the United States. It was the touring of Stanislavsky’s “independent” art theater company (and others like his) in the United States that inspired the movement toward artistic theater in America.

THE RISE OF THE “LITTLE THEATER”

Around the time of World War I, the United States’ commercial theater experienced a decline. The advent of film excited mainstream audiences, and many flocked to each new release, leaving conventional theater behind. The Syndicate dissolved, and instead of theater circuits and live performances, “moving pictures” were appearing in most of the old theaters. Theater artists who witnessed the touring performances of the European companies became enthusiastic about this new kind of theater, and the Little Theater movement was born. In emulation of the European independent art theaters, more than fifty groups formed their own “little theaters” across the country—notably in Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Provincetown, Massachusetts. From 1912 until 1920, members of the Little Theater movement studied and reproduced new drama and production methods and contributed greatly to the artistic life of American theater.

A need for funding eventually dampened the artistic goals of most of these theaters until they came to be known as “community theaters,” relying on recent Broadway hits and pageantry to survive. On the positive side, however, the Little Theater movement introduced the idea of producing professional theater outside of Broadway’s commercial companies, and by 1925, there were almost two thousand community theaters registered with the Drama League of America, a group started in 1910 that supported and encouraged local development of theater.

Former members of the Little Theater groups, especially the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players, went on to lend their extraordinary talents to developing several resident or repertory theaters. After the Washington Square Players split up, some members formed the Theatre Guild, a highly respected group dedicated to producing professional theater without regard to commercial value. The Provincetown Players began in 1916 in Massachusetts and soon moved to New York City,

becoming a highly prolific company in the following decade. Although the Provincetown Players, the Theatre Guild, and groups like them finally succumbed to financial pressures and either turned to commercial ventures or completely disbanded by the late 1920's, they made valuable contributions to the revolution toward artistic theater in the United States.

THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

Another important contribution to the American theater revolution came from an unlikely source—the government. With the United States suffering through a long economic depression in the 1930's, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a national program to revitalize the country's economy by putting Americans to work on federal projects. One of the most remarkable sections of the WPA was the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Centered in New York and headed by a college drama professor named Hallie Flanagan, the FTP initiated a tremendous number of programs throughout the country. It ran training programs for directors, playwrights, and actors; created new theaters dedicated to ethnic groups and minorities; and encouraged theaters to be established in odd places such as warehouses, high school auditoriums, and outdoor parks. Although it lasted only four years, the impact of the FTP on American theater, especially the regional theater movement, is undeniable. Without these new theaters and theater artists who gained their training and experience in an FTP theater, the future of the noncommercial theater would have been an uncertain one. Many of those inspired by Flanagan and the FTP soon became directly responsible for making regional theater a reality.

REGIONAL THEATER PIONEERS

By the end of the 1930's, drama curriculum was being offered in colleges and universities, nearly every large township had a community theater, and the American public had been introduced to many new forms of drama and production techniques. However, the best theater, the professional venue, remained in New York City on Broadway or in professional touring companies that emanated from it. It would take the efforts of three adventurous women to begin a serious movement toward decentralizing American professional theater.

Although an organization known as the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) was chartered by Congress in 1935 to help establish theaters outside New York City and an academy to train theatrical personnel, it received very little funding and became, instead, a center for networking news and information about the American theater. Yet ANTA stalled after the FTP took the lead in theater matters and, later, as World War II occurred. A woman named Margo Jones, however, picked up the torch in 1947 and opened the country's first professional arena theater (theater-in-the-round) in her native Dallas, Texas. She had served as assistant director for the Houston Federal Theatre, which failed to succeed but initiated an adult performing group started in 1936 called the Houston Community Players. Jones eventually made the theater her full-time job. It was with this group that she introduced the arena staging method, which, along with being recognized as the mother of regional theater, would become her "claim to fame." In 1944, she received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to develop her plan for a professional nonprofit theater in her hometown of Dallas.

In June, 1947, she opened Theatre '47, a name that changed each year (Theatre '48, Theatre '49). The theater closed four years after her untimely death in 1955. Her book, *Theatre-in-the-Round* (1951), outlined her ideas about arena staging as well as her strategies for creating and maintaining a professional theater. It became a noted reference to those interested in the movement and for those who chose to follow in her footsteps.

Another important step in the revolution was taken by a woman who had worked with Jones and the Houston Community Players and who began her own independent theater in Houston in 1947. Nina Vance met with a group of interested people, thirty-seven of whom donated a small sum each to begin a season of plays, and the Alley Theatre was born. Though completely amateur through its first few years, this theater struggled with the problems of finding and relying on volunteer personnel. In the early 1950's, Vance persuaded the board of directors to allow payment to a few "semi-professional" actors. Although this did not sit well with the community volunteers who had worked so hard to make the Alley a success, it was the best decision for the survival of Vance's dream. In 1954, the Alley became a fully professional theater, hiring only Equity actors (Actors' Equity is the union that all professional theater actors join to be labeled as "professional") and granting professional experience to talented rising actors,

directors, and designers. In 1960, the Alley Theatre became one of the first regional theaters to receive a major grant from the Ford Foundation. The three-year promise of \$156,000 would enable the theater to attract better-known actors who would work in Houston for the \$200-a-week salary for more than forty weeks in a season. This nearly quadrupled the usual salary of \$57.50 and put the Alley Theatre on the road to permanence and national recognition. In 1962 the Alley Theatre received another substantial grant, enabling it to construct its permanent home, a structure completed in 1968 and opened with national press attention. The Alley Theatre remains one of the most prestigious and successful regional theaters in the country.

A few years after the founding of Theatre '47 and the Alley Theater, Zelda Fichandler opened the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., in 1950. Like Vance before her, Fichandler received important grants from the Ford Foundation to support her company, hold actor training, and obtain a permanent theater building. Fichandler's company, unlike Vance's, began as a professional venture with Equity actors. Her seasons introduced revivals of popular American plays such as Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (pr. 1944) along with the classics and new plays by established writers like Arthur Miller and Agatha Christie. Fichandler's theater soon became the most recognized and highly respected regional theater in the country and the acknowledged capital of arena staging. Its premiere of *The Great White Hope* in 1967 marked a major turning point in the history of regional theater. Howard Sackler's play, based on the life of black boxing champion Jack Johnson, played to such an enthusiastic reception from audiences and critics alike that it became a film and moved to Broadway. It garnered many awards, including the 1969 Pulitzer Prize. This type of recognition for an original play that premiered in regional theater was a new phenomenon and sparked the interest of a national audience in the value of regional theaters and their place in developing new drama.

THE ACTORS' WORKSHOP

A theatrical revolution had clearly begun, and other groups sprang up across the country, emulating the style, format, and function of the Alley Theatre and the Arena Stage, but each with its own distinct leader and vision. Some of the most notable include the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, The Charles Playhouse in New England,

and the Actors' Workshop of San Francisco. The latter deserves special mention in any overview of the early days of regional theater. Founded by two college professors, Herbert Blau and Jules Irving, in 1952, the Actors' Workshop held the dream of many for becoming a "national theater," something that still eludes American society. Notably, it was the first company outside New York to sign an Off-Broadway contract with Actors' Equity, and although important historically, this was not a force of stability for the actors, whose salaries were extremely low. With their first grant from the Ford Foundation, however, the Actors' Workshop became financially viable and in 1960 started rotating its repertory. This was a risky move for that era, but the Actors' Workshop was making history with its approach.

Although the Actors' Workshop did interesting experimental work and maintained its professional status, it never formed a true bond with its community. While other regional theaters were finding ways to give back to their cities through educational programs aimed toward cultural enrichment, the Actors' Workshop made no effort to compromise, serve, or break down the wall of apathy apparent in its audience. In 1965, Blau and Irving were invited to head the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center in New York City. Perhaps they saw this as a chance to finally establish a national theater, but Blau soon discovered he was unsuited to management and left Irving to carry on. Irving left the Repertory Theater in 1972, abandoning the dream that he and Blau had pinned their hopes on years earlier.

THE GUTHRIE THEATER

The 1963 opening of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota, signaled the significant evolution of regional theater. The Guthrie was founded by Sir Tyrone Guthrie, Oliver Rea, and Peter Zeisler, all of whom left behind prosperous theatrical careers because of a growing dissatisfaction with their work in London and New York. Instead of relying on their hometowns, the trio did an exhaustive search for the right locale in which to situate their theater. They decided Minneapolis had the right cultural climate to support a theater that focused on revivals of classic plays. The three men, however, demanded that most of the money needed would have to be committed up front before they would take residence in the city. The locals came through with more than \$2 million plus a grant from the Walker Foundation for the land and

money for construction. Unlike Vance, Fichandler, Blau, and Irving, who started theaters using unorthodox locales such as a beer factory or judo academy, the Guthrie founders created their own complex. A volunteer organization sold thousands of subscriptions and secured an audience of nearly 200,000 for the inaugural season. The Guthrie's opening is thought by some to have been a defining moment in the history of regional theater. The idea of a classical repertory of plays done in a new facility with the brightest of professional theater's talents had an undeniable impact on theater in the United States.

One of the Guthrie Theater's major impacts came in the area of actor training. Before the Guthrie introduced performances of such demanding literature, there was little attempt to help actors understand the psychological nuances of contemporary plays such as those by Williams and Edward Albee. Very little, if any, training was offered in voice production or movement. Because of the physical demands of plays by William Shakespeare, Molière, Sophocles, and others, new actor training programs recognized the need for a more comprehensive curriculum in preparing the actors' instruments of voice and body for the stage. Since its opening, the Guthrie has enjoyed a prestigious reputation, critical success, and audience support. It remains one of the foremost regional theaters in the United States.

REGIONAL THEATER COMES OF AGE

Although the regional theater movement has seemed at times like a disparate band of independent thinkers chasing their own visions of the perfect theater, several of the original objectives held by Jones, Vance, and Fichandler have remained the same. The first, and probably most important, vision was to create an atmosphere in which quality professional theater could flourish outside Broadway's commercial enterprises. The idea that good theater is for everyone and should not be confined to one area of the country stayed central to the movement in all stages of its development. This philosophy helped give birth to a number of theaters that meet the needs of a diverse, multicultural American community. Independently, many regional theaters continued the efforts of the Federal Theatre Project in supporting and encouraging the expansion of theater with the inclusion of ethnic and minority groups. The decentralization of American professional theater was a move away not just

from the bright lights of Broadway but from the largely white, upper-middle-class audiences who patronized it.

The other dominant objective for regional theater has been to offer completely professional theater in a noncommercial venue. The opportunity to take risks and not to serve the whims of the popular audience has been, perhaps, regional theater's second-greatest accomplishment. Thanks to the generous funding of many foundations, such as the Ford, Rockefeller, and Doris Duke foundations, regional theaters have been able to remain financially solvent while exploring the artistic boundaries of theater. Government funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has also been instrumental in furthering the progress of educational programs offered to the communities the theaters serve.

The final sustaining goal of the regional theater movement has been to remain independent in vision and mission. In the early days, the passionate pioneers focused all their energy toward creating a theater free from the restrictions and censorship prevalent in commercial theater. Each had a vision of how theater could or should be. It is the dream of nearly every theater entrepreneur to have a company of actors who can explore and stretch the boundaries of drama and production methods according to their own philosophies. This drive toward independence has led to a rich diversity in contemporary regional theaters. There are theaters that focus solely on Shakespeare, the classics, developing new plays, European drama, minority drama, women's issues, experimental work, and many other avenues. There is no rule that says a regional theater has to work with any one kind of drama, staging method, actor, or theatrical space.

SUPPORT AND ADVOCACY

The League of Resident Theatres (LORT) was established in the mid-1960's by Peter Zeisler of the Guthrie Theater, Thomas Fichandler from the Arena Stage, and a lawyer, Morris Kaplan, to serve as a trade organization for resident theaters. It negotiates contracts with the various theater unions and serves as the main regulating body for the country's network of professional nonprofit theaters. LORT's objectives are to promote the general welfare of resident theaters in the United States, to encourage community interest and effective communication between theaters and the public, to assist resident theaters in dealing with labor relations and legal activities, and to inform government agencies of theaters' needs. The

membership requirements are minimal but include provisions for the following: that all member theaters be incorporated as nonprofit Internal Revenue Service-approved organizations, that each self-produced production be rehearsed for a minimum of three weeks, that the theater have a playing season of twelve weeks or more, and that the theater operate under a LORT-Equity contract. As of 2001, LORT boasted a membership of seventy-five theaters spread across the United States, including the Arena Stage, the Alley Theatre, the Guthrie Theater, and the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, as well as other prominent theaters such as the Long Wharf Theatre, the Mark Taper Forum, and the Goodman Theatre.

Another organization that has given support, encouragement, and advocacy to the United States' professional nonprofit theaters is the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), which began in the early 1970's to serve the broader needs of the country's professional nonprofit theaters. Its list of board members over the years has featured prominent personalities of the American theater scene. Past presidents include Nina Vance and Oliver Rea. At the turn of the twenty-first century, TCG had more than four hundred member theaters and seventeen thousand individual members. It offers an employment search network, legal advice, and lobbying power in Washington, D.C.; publishes *American Theatre* magazine; and supports workshops, new plays, conferences, and all other services pertaining to the support of regional theater.

UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS

One final aspect of contemporary American regional theater is its support of university training programs for theater artists. The FTP of the 1930's encouraged the development of university drama programs, but it was not until the emergence of prominent regional theaters that training took a more professional direction. The availability of professional theater jobs outside New York City created a new demand for more professional degrees to be offered in the university setting. The combination of university training programs with regional theaters was a natural marriage of convenience during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Degrees such as the bachelor of fine arts (B.F.A.) and master's of fine arts (M.F.A.) are now offered in every aspect of theater—acting, directing, designing—by most theater departments in the United States' major universities. Many have a direct association with a regional theater or have a nonprofit professional theater on or near the campus. Students train in the

classroom and then provide valuable services to the regional theater working as assistants, apprentices, ushers, and so forth. The association with the theater gives students an opportunity to witness professional theater in action while providing them with valuable theater experience for their résumés.

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—Jill Stapleton-Bergeron

NEW YORK THEATER: ON AND OFF-BROADWAY

INTRODUCTION

New York City and professional theater in the United States are such natural associations that it takes an effort of the historical imagination to recall that, in the days before sound movies came along, virtually every city had a theater for visiting performances and larger cities had resident stock companies of their own. Early in the nineteenth century, however, New York City established its centrality in the nation's theatrical activity, and with time came the preeminence of Broadway as a theater district and as an international entertainment icon. Even now, after many economic and artistic vicissitudes, Broadway is to theater what Hollywood is to movies—the mainstream, the standard setter. If Broadway signifies mainstream, Off-Broadway (and its 1960's sibling Off-Off-Broadway) means experiment, unorthodoxy, and quite often outrageous provocation.

EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

Theater in New York City long predates the emergence of Times Square as its geographical and symbolic center. As it did everywhere in the United States, the theater had a slow and uncertain early development in New York. The historical record shows no true professional theatrical activity in the city before approximately 1750, when Englishmen Walter Murray and Thomas Kean presented William Shakespeare's *Richard III* (pr. c. 1592-1593)

in the Nassau Street Theatre, a venue used before only for amateur theatricals. Another British group, the Hallam Brothers' London Company of Comedians (later renamed the American Company), successfully promoted the construction of three new theaters, the main one being at John Street in lower Manhattan. The repertory of these pioneer troupes was entirely British, including *Richard III*, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (pr. c. 1596-1597), and Joseph Addison's *Cato* (pr. 1713).

The American Revolution (1776-1783) put a temporary end to professional theatrical activity in New York City, but when the theaters reopened there were American playwrights and American plays to join the previous repertoire of British imports. Royall Tyler's historically important *The Contrast* was presented at the John Street Theater in April, 1787, and 1789 saw the debut (also at the John Street Theater) of William Dunlap's *The Father: Or, American Shandyism*. Dunlap's busy and prolific career in theater would earn him the unofficial title of Father of American Drama.

When the John Street Theater closed in 1798, New York's center of theatrical activity became the Park Theatre, which was also managed by the versatile Dunlap. For the next quarter century, the Park was the leading theatrical venue in the city, serving as the American performing home to leading performers from England and helping to develop native-born acting talent such as Edwin Forrest, J. H. Hackett, and Charlotte Cushman.

Well into the nineteenth century, the United States remained culturally dependent on England and Europe. Thus, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Shakespeare remained the most frequently acted playwright in New York. American subjects for the stage did emerge, however. Besides Tyler and Dunlap, the list of American playwrights who successfully staged American situations and themes include John Augustus Stone (*Metamora: Or, The Last of the Wampanoags*, pr. 1829). Though not the first American play to put the figure of the Native American at its center, *Metamora* was certainly the most popular of the era. Other notable plays on the New York stage included Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion* (pr. 1845); Benjamin A. Baker's *A Glimpse at New York* (pr. 1848) with its street-tough fireman Mose, a part that generated countless imitations; Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon: Or, Life in Louisiana* (pr. 1859, 1861); Frank Murdoch's *Davy Crockett* (pr. 1872); and, most important of all, George L. Aiken's adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist classic *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly* (pr. 1852).