

ABSTRACT

American National Identity, the “Other,” and the Little Theatre Movement

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The Little Theatre Movement began in the early twentieth century as an effort to create theatre which was inventive, well-made, and uniquely American at a time when American theatre had yet to be established. While the movement was beneficial to the trajectory of American theatre, its attempt at forging national identity led little theatre practitioners to define themselves using exclusivist ideology. They came to define Americans as an “in” group of upper-middle class white people versus an “out” group composed of everyone else. Using original research this project will explore the rhetoric and practices of the Little Theatre Movement with relation to “outsiders” by examining two genres which were popular in little theatres across America: Orientalist and Folk plays. This analysis will demonstrate that the movement, while beneficial in establishing the American Theatre, was guilty of reinforcing exclusivist notions in the process.

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by

Merritt Denman, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Theatre Arts

Stan Denman, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee

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Accepted by the Graduate School

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The Roots of the Little Theatre Movement

The Little Theatre movement began in the early twentieth century as an effort to create new theatre which was inventive, well-made, and uniquely American by asserting that the stage could be a venue for “high art.” While the movement was valuable to the trajectory of American theatre, attempts to forge national identity led its practitioners to define themselves using exclusivist ideology. They came to define Americans as an “in” group of upper-middle class white people versus an “out” group composed of everyone else. This thesis explores the rhetoric and practices of the Little Theatre movement by examining two genres which were popular in little theatres across America: Orientalist and Folk plays. The following analysis will illuminate the ways in which the little theatres approached the issue of the “other,” and will demonstrate that the movement, while beneficial for the development of new theatre organizations and plays, was guilty of reinforcing exclusivist and nationalist notions in an attempt to establish a uniquely American voice in the theatre.

This thesis explores the Little Theatre movement, its goals, and its impact through five chapters. Chapter One will examine the historical context and various factors which led to and defined the Little Theatre movement, including nationalism, Social Darwinism, and Progressive Era sentiment. Chapter Two will synthesize these elements with Benedict Anderson’s theories of nationalism put forth in *Imagined Communities* to examine how the formation of national identity became one of the primary goals of the

Little Theatre movement. Chapter Three will utilize Edward Said's cultural theories of Orientalism to assess how the nationalism of the movement led to the racial and cultural othering of Eastern cultures and persons on little theatre stages. Chapter Four will study how the Orientalist methods of racial and cultural othering were applied to subjects in folk theatre within the movement to reify the boundaries of "American-ness." Overall this thesis will demonstrate that the Little Theatre movement exhibited a desire to form national identity through art theatre, and that in their attempt to reach this goal, the practitioners of the Little Theatre movement were complicit in racial and cultural othering in their treatment of the subjects of highly popular Orientalist and folk plays.

"Something has happened to our American theatre. Not so long ago, it was a luxury, a pastime, an industry. A harmless adjunct to life, a game played according to traditional rules, a little world set off to itself whose personalities and scandals were discussed with a sentimental flutter. Today, it is the most provocative of the arts. The art of the theatre in the midst of life, drawing new life therefrom."¹ So begins Oliver Sayler's 1923 work *Our American Theatre*. Sayler's words illustrate both the perception of his contemporaries and the subsequent judgment of history: something vital was happening in American theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. The late nineteenth century theatre saw the end of an era, and the turn of the century brought with it the birth of a new theatre for which the practitioners of the Little Theatre movement would serve as midwives. This movement, rooted in an effort to create community and national identity, would come to be of immense importance in the life of the American theatre because it changed the way the public related to theatre, fostered new plays and playwrights, and

¹ Oliver Sayler, *Our American Theatre* (New York: Brentano, 1923), 1.

was a catalyst for local theatre activity. To understand this movement as a whole it is necessary to first study the circumstances from which it resulted: the state of theatre in America (particularly the death of the road), the state of theatre in Europe, and Progressive Era ideology. Each of these in turn contributed to the advent of the movement and shaped its goals.

The Origins of the Little Theatre Movement

In the 19th century, the theatre was the entertainment of the masses; “there was a fast-growing middle-class population that was largely uneducated, had money to spend, and looked to theatre as a source of entertainment.”² These conditions fueled the massive road system which took commercially successful Broadway shows and sent them to major hubs across the country. Theatre consisted almost exclusively of melodramas, such as *The Octoroon* (1859) by Dion Boucicault, *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829) by Douglas Jerrold, *Thérèse* (1873) by Emile Zola, *Metamora* (1829) by John Augustus Stone, and *The Drunkard* (1844) by William Henry Smith. By the end of the nineteenth century the road system was entirely controlled by the Theatrical Syndicate, a veritable cartel “dictating which companies would play where with what vehicles and under what terms.”³ Within such a tightly controlled system it was impossible for any theatre organizations or new plays to flourish. Susan Glaspell, who would become a prominent Little Theatre dramatist, bemoaned the state of the theatre saying, “We went to the theatre and for the most part came away wishing we had gone somewhere else. Those were the

² Adele Heller and Lois Palken Rudnick, 1915, *The Cultural Moment* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 218.

³ *Ibid.*, 219

days when Broadway flourished almost unchallenged. Plays, like magazine articles, were patterned...They didn't ask much of you, those plays. Having paid for your seat, the thing was all done for you, and your mind came out where it went in, only tired." ⁴ Little Theatre practitioners saw the works being produced by the commercial theatres and were dissatisfied with their caliber. They were motivated to shape theatre that should be more.

The second contributing factor to the advent of the Little Theatre movement was the influence on American theatre artists from their contemporaries in European theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Europe, experimental artists such as André Antoine, August Strindberg, Gordon Craig, and Lady Gregory began to alter the landscape of the theatre. The European continent saw a veritable revolution as multitudes of new theatrical forms, practices, and ideologies such as expressionism, psychological realism, folk theatre, and non-representational staging arose as innovative theatrical practices. News of this movement reached American shores and took hold of the imaginations of theatre lovers across the country. Furthermore, artists from abroad visited the United States and brought their influence directly to hungry artists. In 1911, the Abbey Theatre toured the United States from Dublin; George Bernard Shaw's writing was regularly staged on Broadway beginning in 1906; New Stagecraft exhibitions of European modernist theatre design took place in the United States throughout the 1910s through the 1920s; and French director Jacques Copeau came to America for a lecture tour in 1917. ⁵ When these European influences made their way across the Atlantic, the

⁴ Susan Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1927), 248.

⁵ In addition to visits from these European artists, the United States saw the influence of Eastern theatre artists such as Saddayakko and Kawakami Otojiro, who

country was primed to ignite with the spark of the new theatre born by these emissaries. Progressive theatre practitioners in the United States agreed that the new theatre coming out of Europe would be the salvation that would elevate theatre into the higher echelons of the fine arts.

Another circumstance which helped bring about the Little Theatre movement was the state of American theatre, in particular, the death of the road. With the early advent of the film industry at the beginning of the twentieth century, fiscally motivated theatre practitioners and producers saw the opportunity to make more money. Economically, it was far more lucrative to produce one film which could be distributed nationwide, than a stage production which cost more money with each performance and was making less money as trends in theatre shifted. So, the commercialized entertainment of the masses began moving to Hollywood, leaving a vacuum in the discipline of the theatre. Theatre audiences who sought entertainment rather than art could spend less money and achieve the same results with film while producers could take advantage of larger markets for less money up front. Furthermore, as Alexander Dean points out in his 1926 text *Little Theatre Organization and Management*, the road system began to collapse due to other economic factors. “The cost of productions between 1910 and 1920 almost doubled. The American theatre also saw rising cost of materials and labor increase the price of a one-

toured with their troupe from 1899-1900 just before their performance at the World Expo in Paris, and Michio Ito who moved to the United States in 1916 and gained notoriety for his theatrical dance pieces as well as his close work Yeats. For more see: Tara Rodman, “A Modernist Audience: The Kawakami Troupe, Matsuki Bunkio, and Boston Japonisme,” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 4 (2013): 489-505; and Carrie J. Preston, “Modernism’s Dancing Marionettes: Oskar Schlemmer, Michel Fokine, and Ito Michio,” *Modernist Cultures* 9 (2014): 115-133.

set production, roughly speaking, from four to ten thousand dollars.”⁶ As the cost of producing road shows continued to increase, the demand for these shows decreased. Dean argues that audiences became dissatisfied with the caliber of show produced by this road system. The end of the road system in theatre, often referred to as “the death of the road” meant that the syndicate no longer controlled the theatre and that dramatists, no longer up against the massive infrastructure of the road system, could afford to experiment. With these groups departing the theatre, audiences and practitioners oriented towards art theatre felt emboldened to fill the void.

Finally, while these things were taking place in the world of the theatre, American culture was seeing the effects of the Progressive Era as it developed at the end of the nineteenth century. The ethos of the Progressive Movement promoted activism, so that when the death of the road occurred, progressively-minded dramatists were ready to take action and reshape the landscape of the theatre. Growing out of political and ideological tumult in the 1870s and 80s, Progressive Era reform became the fashionable ideology for much of America beginning in the 1900s and extending through the 1920s. Urban growth and population boom became one of the first social issues that drew the attention of the reformers and stimulated Progressive ideology. The horrific living conditions of many lower class citizens in urban areas began to draw the attention of middle-class citizens who saw it as their duty to help. Similarly, the Social Gospel grew to prominence in American religious life at this time. This phenomenon saw clergy preaching that faith had

⁶ Alexander Dean, *Little Theatre Organization and Management* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1936), 27.

a social element which was necessary to put into practice, so the nation saw a rise in those who sought to do good out of a sense of religious duty.⁷

Women in particular took up the call of the Progressive Era with gusto, creating a great many women's clubs which made it their purpose to improve various elements of social life. The temperance and suffrage movements both took place in this time, exemplifying this largely female-led, socially conscious type of movement. Women such as Jane Addams and Ellen Starr who began the famed settlement organization Hull House in 1889 began taking action for social issues. As Melanie Blood states in her article on the subject of Hull House, "Jane Addams and the Hull-House residents represented a liberal trend within the Progressive Movement: They advocated social and cultural as well as political democracy among Americans of all classes."⁸ The Progressive Era was marked by a sense that it was a person's religious and civic duty to help to improve the nation: to identify and take action to correct injustices. This Progressive Era ideology was so influential that it permeated every aspect of American life. Theatre, interestingly, came to be seen both as an injustice which needed to be corrected and a means of correcting other various injustices. Theatre was itself in need of help to escape the melodramatic, unoriginal cycle in which it was caught due to commercial forces; what is more, theatre could be utilized by progressives to mobilize other causes such as temperance and suffrage.

⁷ Lewis Gould, *America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1914* (Florence, Great Britain: Routledge, 2013), 7-8.

⁸ Melanie Blood, "Ideology and Theatre at Hull-House Under Jane Addams," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 5, no. 2 (1993): 72

Stimulated by the Progressive Era zeitgeist, those dissatisfied with the current state of the theatre took advantage of the vacuum left by the death of the road and began to sound the call for a new theatre. Just as was often the case with Progressive Era issues, women largely led the charge in the action of changing the theatre. They began to create their own methods of improving theatre by forming clubs such as the Drama League of America and small local theatres known as Little Theatres. The Progressive Era philosophy thus was intimately tied to the project of the Little Theatre movement. Faced with the opportunity to make their mark, the originators of the Little Theatre movement began to call for practitioners to improve the theatre, both for its own sake and the sake of local communities. With these Progressive philosophies in mind, determined to change the theatre and the world, the Little Theatre movement took root.

Characteristics of the Movement

The combination of Progressive Era sentiment, the death of the road, and influences from Europe, greatly affected the state of the American theatre at the turn of the century and created the perfect conditions in which the Little Theatre movement could flourish. Furthermore, the effect of all of these circumstances can be seen in the character of the Little Theatre movement as a whole. As Dorothy Chansky outlines in her 2004 study *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, the movement, which was established in 1912 and continued through the 1920s, began as an effort rooted in anticommercialism and interested in high art. “Unashamedly amateur, although not always without professional ambitions, these

practitioners and advocates sought to develop an American audience for serious theatre.”⁹

Across the country, the founders of the Little Theatre movement countered the often “intellectually thin or downright frivolous”¹⁰ theatre which dominated the beginning of the twentieth century. Created mostly by amateur women, these little theatres took root quickly and began to sound the call for people across the nation to follow suit. As Chansky notes, “Between 1912 and 1916, sixty-three organizations calling themselves little theatres sprang up in the United States. By 1926, a writer for *Variety* claimed there were 5,000.”¹¹ Though formed in opposition to the existing commercial theatre industry, the Little Theatre movement also impacted the commercial stage in the United States. Eugene O’Neill and Susan Glaspell wrote many of their best known works while with the Provincetown Players, founded in 1915, a little theatre which influenced the theatre world greatly. Several commercial plays found success because of the Little Theatres, making unsuccessful runs on Broadway and then finding later success when declared great works by the Little Theatres, most notably, *The Yellow Jacket* discussed in Chapter Three.

The Progressive Era saw calls for American ideals and identity to be established in every aspect of national life and encouraged artists to help shape this American spirit as a matter of duty. The vast land and varied populations across the United States meant that a sense of national identity was still forming for the young country, and popular sentiment held that America needed to find its voice. Likewise, the consensus in the

⁹ Dorothy Chansky, *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

theatre world before the Little Theatre movement was that the United States of America had yet to establish its own national theatre. Theatre critics, artists, and lovers the world over saw American theatre as merely variations on a theme, that theme being European theatre. The American stage “was still very much British and remained so long after the states won their independence.”¹² For many years, commercial theatre favored British stars and shows sent directly from England. When American actors and playwrights did finally establish themselves in the commercial theatres of Broadway, they tended to look like imitations of their predecessors.

The new groups that formed in the Little Theatre movement considered themselves participants in the establishment of a truly American theatre. Alexander Dean stated that the beginnings of the movement saw “much talk about the birth of a theatre in America which would some day be to our country what the theatre of Pericles was to Athens, what the theatre of Shakespeare was to England and the theatre of Molière was to Paris – an institution of art and culture rather than a means of making money.”¹³ The little theatres became forces fighting the priorities of the commercial stage from within the world of theatre and improving the art form for the sake of their country.

The Little Theatre Begins

Characteristic of the beginnings of this movement is the little theatre of Hull House in Chicago. Begun by Jane Addams in 1900, the Hull House Dramatic Association was under the direction of Laura Dainty Pelham from its foundation until her death in

¹² Heller, 218.

¹³ Dean, 4.

1924. Addams began the theatre with the hopes that the club could help its recent immigrant members transition better into their new lives as Americans. She believed in the power that theatre held both over those who practiced and those who witnessed it; she wished to help tenants in the process of assimilation and to influence audience members in their thoughts regarding class and immigration. Although it was partially propelled to fame by the renown of Hull House itself, the Hull House Dramatic Association was noted for its “theatrical achievement” and “increasing mastery of an American cultural tradition.”¹⁴ The Hull House Dramatic Association was successful in fulfilling two of the main calls for the theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century: the need to improve the quality of theatre and the need to establish a truly American theatre.

In 1912 a theatre was founded which has often been cited as the unofficial beginning of the Little Theatre movement. Maurice Browne, an Englishman, had come to the states in pursuit of Nellie Van Volkenburg whose “ambition was to become a ‘really-truly’ actress.”¹⁵ Together they founded the Chicago Little Theatre. This delineation between a mere entertainer and a “really-truly actress” is one which is characteristic of the movement overall and illustrates the little theatre’s desire to create art rather than entertainment. Browne’s company, founded with this goal in mind, provided inspiration for theatres, little and otherwise, for years to come. The advent of the Chicago Little Theatre was quickly followed by the creation of several other little theatres around the

¹⁴ Blood, 76.

¹⁵ Charles Lock, “Maurice Browne and the Chicago Little Theatre,” *Modern Drama* 31, no. 1 (1988): 107.

United States which would become just as, if not more, influential than their Chicago counterpart.

The Washington Square Players, the project of liberal artist-intellectuals of Greenwich Village, was formed in 1914 with the following stated policy: “in regard to the plays which we will produce – they must have artistic merit. Preference will be given to American plays, but we shall also include in our repertory the works of well-known European authors which have been ignored by the commercial managers.”¹⁶ The misfits of Greenwich Village certainly embodied the Progressive Era as well as the motivations of the Little Theatre movement, so it is not surprising that through this group passed a great number of famous and influential theatre artists such as Susan Glaspell, Eugene O’Neill, and Zoë Akins. Throughout the life of the Washington Square Players, the group was able to stage several influential and successful shows such as *Children* (1916), *Moondown* (1915), *Plots and Playwrights* (1915), and *The Girl in the Coffin* (1917) which were written by new American playwrights. When the theatre disbanded for multiple reasons, including financial troubles and the advent of World War I, the Theatre Guild quickly took its place. Oliver Sayler spends an entire chapter of *Our American Theatre* outlining the history of “The Washington Square Players and their Inheritors, The Theatre Guild.”

Founded in 1915 by George “Jig” Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell, the Provincetown Players began with the stated determination to only stage American plays. Seeking to do their part in helping establish truly American theatre, the Provincetown Players became the home of some of the most innovative and influential theatre in the

¹⁶ Sayler, 78.

United States. Although best known as the theatre where Eugene O'Neill got his start¹⁷, the little theatre was also responsible for launching the underrated writing career of co-founder Susan Glaspell.¹⁸ The theatre quickly became one of the most famous and successful groups in the United States, though for its anti-commercial founders, this was the cause of a great deal of turmoil. As Glaspell writes, "when the Provincetown Players had succeeded, Jig felt they had failed."¹⁹ For the Provincetown Players the goal was to create an artistic community which could bring new theatre to life and allow for experimentation among practitioners and audience members alike, so the success of a commercial stage and having several shows move to Broadway was conflicting at best. Eventually, this conflict led to the slow end of the theatre when Cook and Glaspell left in 1919 and those who stayed carried on for a few years. While short-lived, the experiment of the Provincetown Players illustrates that even small groups could have big impact on American theatre.

While he could certainly not be called a little theatre practitioner, commercial empresario David Belasco was an influential figure in the so-called "new art of the theatre" which the little theatres embraced. Belasco's connection with the Little Theatre movement seems odd, however, when viewed in light of the fact that he was a highly

¹⁷ The Provincetown Players first produced such works as *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), *Before Breakfast* (1916), *Emperor Jones* (1920), and *Hairy Ape* (1922). O'Neil would win the Pulitzer Prize for *Strange Interlude* (1928), and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1957).

¹⁸ While with the Provincetown Players Glaspell produced such works as *Trifles* (1916), *Bernice* (1919), and *Suppressed Desires* (1915). She went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for *Alison's House* in 1931.

¹⁹ Glaspell, 298.

commercial dramatist. He was one of the dominant forces on Broadway and even fought with the little theatres over the direction that the new movement in theatre should go because many emerging artists embraced non-realism while Belasco was “the chief exponent of naturalistic stage setting...who arrived in New York City in 1882 and quickly made himself the dominant influence.”²⁰ Belasco’s focus was on realism in the theatre, going so far as to construct working restaurants and install interiors of actual tenement houses on stage.²¹ He brought innovations to set design and new techniques in lighting which set a new standard for artists. Furthermore, his detailed production style resulted “in serious attention being given to the need to create a homogenous effect with lighting, setting and acting which made possible the naturalistic acting of the twentieth-century theatre. It introduced an artistic unity which had not formerly been required.”²² Although his taste in plays veered toward old fashioned melodrama which the newer artists disdained, Belasco’s innovations to make theatre more artistically sophisticated make his interest in the Little Theatre movement unsurprising. We know that Belasco was a sympathizer with the movement as is exhibited by his little theatre tournament based on the establishment in 1923 of David Belasco’s Little Theatre Tournament, an annual competition in which little theatres from all over the country would present the best production that they had to offer in the hopes of winning the Belasco cup as well as

²⁰ C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-century American Drama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

bragging rights. The second, third, and fourth years of the tournament those bragging rights were claimed by the Dallas Little Theatre.

The Dallas Little Theatre, one of hundreds if not thousands of little theatres around the country during this movement, is an interesting case to consider when exploring the incarnation of the ideals of the Little Theatre movement. The Dallas Little Theatre, hereafter referred to as the DLT, is well-chronicled and preserved in an archive at Southern Methodist University, so primary sources for the theatre are readily available and richly informative. Interestingly, the DLT was founded after many claim the significant portion of the Little Theatre movement was over, so its existence and success serve to prove that the movement did not end with the first surge in creation of little theatres. The organization illustrates that this movement is best understood when it is not limited only to the little theatres established in large, east coast, theatre centers. The DLT is not widely remembered by theatre history in general, but it was undeniably successful for many years both financially and in carrying out the goals of the movement. The theatre functions well as an example of what an average little theatre set out to accomplish and what success looked like.

The DLT began in 1920 when a group from a women's club in Dallas decided, in the spirit of the Progressive Era and inspired by the Little Theatre movement, to organize their own theatre club. Their successes came early in the life of the group as exhibited by the fact that they won the Belasco cup all three times that they competed, beginning within the first five years of the group's existence. According to the rules of the competition any group that won three years in a row would keep the cup and be retired from further contests. So, the Dallas Little Theatre was able to bring home the cup

permanently, furthering a regional sense of pride in the work of local Dallas artists.²³

Dallas disqualified themselves in only the fourth year of the tournament's existence, so one cannot help but wonder if the rule were created because of the surprising success of the DLT. The Dallas Little Theatre then utilized their success with the Belasco cup in publicity materials to further the notion that the DLT was the best in the nation.²⁴ The win is trumpeted throughout fliers and pamphlets with the rhetoric of the expected pomp and circumstance which greets a victorious army. In a pamphlet written in 1924 the DLT states "During the last year, the Dallas Little Theatre has received letters from Europe and Australia, as well as from many parts of the United States, asking various questions concerning its activities and for the secret of whatever success may have come to it."²⁵ These, the opening lines of a pamphlet sent out to DLT patrons, are certainly characteristic of the regional pride which ran through the Little Theatre movement. Like many theatres in the Little Theatre movement, the DLT set out to create a sense of American identity, and for them, that was intrinsically tied to a sense of regional pride.

Progressive Era sentiment resulted in the belief that the improvement of theatre was a matter of national duty, and the circumstances in the American theatre at the time led theatre artists to a doctrine of anti-commercialism. The Little Theatre movement grew out of the desire of theatre artists to present high art which was uniquely American and anti-commercial. Their mission and goals were successful and were subsequently tied to

²³ Little Theatre of Dallas Collection. Southern Methodist University Library, Dallas, TX.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the project of shaping an American voice which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Unfortunately, the formation of the American voice and the methods employed by little theatre practitioners, had consequences for the historically voiceless in America.

CHAPTER TWO

American Nationalism and the Project of the Little Theatre Movement

In a 1916 editorial in his *Theatre Arts Magazine*, Sheldon Cheney wrote unhappily about the relative lack of progress that had been made with the new movement for “high art” theatre stating that “the promised ‘new art of the theatre’ is hardly nearer realization than five years ago. No American Shaw or Barker or Yeats has been born of the struggle against the established order.”¹ In this statement Cheney summarizes the hope that was held by those who counted themselves as part of this movement: that a new form of theatre would develop which they could truly call art and which would be as reflective of American-ness as the work of Shaw, Barker, and Yeats were reflective of their respective national identities. And while Cheney seems to be despondent that these goals have not yet been reached, the characteristic Progressive Era sentiment is summed up in the statement with which he ends the piece: “But we have faith.”²

In his book *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, T. S. Eliot states that culture “includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people... And then we have to face the strange idea that what is part of our culture is also a part of our *lived* religion.”³ While Eliot believes that religion in the traditional sense of the word is an integral part of culture, what he argues here is that culture is, in a way, its own religion. Culture is the

¹Sheldon Cheney, “Editorial,” *Theatre Arts Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1916): 48.

² *Ibid.*, 48.

³ T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 31.

active, quotidian stuff of a nation in the same way that religion is the active manifestation of a collective spiritual belief. Nationalism is the feeling that we are connected by our nation, and culture is both the expression of that sentiment as well as the means through which that connectivity is created and maintained. As Benedict Anderson explains, nationalism is a global cultural phenomenon which, although widespread, largely evades definition because, as he posits, the nation “is an imagined political community.”⁴

Anderson’s work, *Imagined Communities*, explores the problem of nationalism and how the concept of the nation came into being, noting, “it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each live the image of their communion.”⁵ A strong sense of connectedness to the larger group elevates the importance of the community so that it supersedes the self. Culture is how nationalism manifests. This chapter will illustrate how the Little Theatre movement set about achieving their stated goal of depicting humanity on stage through reflecting American and community identities. This chapter will complicate the issue of cultivating American identity through high art on the little theatre stage by introducing the issue of Social Darwinism inherent in the era and illustrate how the doctrines therein set limitations on the boundaries of American identity.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2016), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

Nationalism and Culture

To fully understand how the phenomenon of nationalism affected the Little Theatre movement, it is necessary to first consider the formation of nationalism. Anderson asserts that when religion began to lose footing as the dominant worldview a sense of imagined community and nationalism took its place. Furthermore, the expansion of the print industry led to the standardization of languages making it easier for large, imagined communities to connect through the materials that they read. Cultures began to develop surrounding language and literature as literacy increased and the written word became democratized. As Latin, the language of the church, waned from popular use, religion itself began to decline and literacy cultures allowed people to feel that they were still a part of something bigger than themselves.⁶ They belonged to the religion of culture, so to speak. Imagined community is created by culture just as culture is created by imagined community. Thus, nationalism takes great pride in historical and cultural heritage.

Nationalism developed slightly differently in the United States. Because the country was young, vast, and largely composed of immigrants who carried their former cultural heritage with them, nationalism established itself in a more problematic manner. While immigrants brought with them the cultures from which they immigrated, there was also a sense in which many wanted to move away from those mother cultures. For example, after the Revolutionary War, English immigrants wanted to leave behind their English roots in order to establish the new country's identity as separate from its parent

⁶ See Benedict Anderson's Chapter Two: Cultural Roots in *Imagined Communities*.

country. But because of the size of the country, as well as the fact that thousands of immigrants, with remnants of their respective cultures would arrive over the next several decades, it was difficult to create a clear, unified cultural language in the United States. Critics and artists at the start of the twentieth century recognized the disconnected nature of American culture and bemoaned the fact that they were part of a tradition that had yet to establish itself.

Discussions of national identity and American-ness turned to art and literature because in the eyes of those calling for the creation of a distinct American culture, these elements were most visible, easiest to affect directly, and provided the most tangible evidence of a nation's superiority. In the introduction to *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, T. S. Eliot states that the word culture is often used as "a kind of synecdoche, when the speaker has in mind one of the elements or evidences of culture – such as 'art'."⁷ At the start of the twentieth century "intellectual" Americans were still struggling with the notion that their country had as yet failed to develop a real sense of uniquely American art and literature. As Bliss Perry states in his 1912 work *The American Mind*, "The men and women of the colonial period in our own country... have been pretty uniformly declared to have been deficient in the sense of beauty... They produced no poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture, or music worthy of the name. They were predominantly Puritan, and the whole world has been informed that English Puritanism was hostile to Art."⁸ Perry goes on to say that, "This vast national domain was long ago

⁷ Eliot, 14.

⁸ Bliss Perry, *The American Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), 16.

‘organized’ for political purposes: but so far as literature is concerned it remains unorganized to-day.”⁹

Perry’s comments from 1912 illustrate three principles which are vital to the understanding of American nationalism and its connection to emerging American art and literary culture. First, the invocation of Puritan America for the illustration of a culture lacking in artistic achievement demonstrates the perceived absence of American cultural history. Anderson argues that history and culture are integral to a strong sense of nationalism, and while Americans certainly had a rich and colorful history on which to look back, their sense at the turn of the century was that culture had yet to reflect who they were as a nation. Second, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the list which Perry creates to illustrate the dearth of Puritan art (no poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture, or music) is telling of the type of art which Americans saw as being valuable to a sense of imagined community. Finally, Perry’s words illustrate the lack of American artistic and literary development up to this point in history. His use of the word “unorganized” here suggests something disjointed and lacking unity. His sense, reflective of the popular view of the time, was that American art and literature lacked a cohesion which would reflect what it meant to be American.

Nationalism and the Progressive Era

By the time of the Progressive Era, the United States had certainly developed a sense of nationalism. This nationalism can be seen in innumerable ways throughout American history: the rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln, the Preamble to the Constitution, the

⁹ Perry, 27.

Monroe Doctrine, the principle of Manifest Destiny. But American citizens longed for art and literature to catch up with the sense of national identity that they felt. With some notable exceptions, such as Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, there were few artists who created the types of cultural touchstones which produced American nationalistic sentiments, and those who did became the exceptions that proved the rule. The Progressive Era mindset encouraged Americans to help further the common good of the country through the progression of national development. The fact that the rest of the world saw American artistic and literary offerings as sub-par at best made the world of culture an obvious target for Progressive Era activists who may have agree with T. S. Eliot that culture was “that which makes life worth living. And it is what justifies other peoples and other generations in saying, when they contemplate the remains and the influence of an extinct civilisation, that it was *worth while* for that civilisation to have existed.”¹⁰ The era saw a push to create an American heritage that could be held up with pride to show that the country had arrived on the world stage. Americans at the turn of the century looked to the cultures of European countries and saw the long histories that they had and the amount of great art and literature each had produced and were motivated to produce a uniquely American cultural heritage. Nationalist sentiment mandated that those in the community work to prove that their existence was worthwhile, Progressive Era sentiment ensured that this goal was seen as socially worthwhile.

The beginning of the twentieth century, and specifically the American quest for national identity observable in the period, was also shaped by the doctrine of Social

¹⁰ Eliot, 27.

Darwinism. As Richard Hofstadter explains in his seminal work, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), Darwinism was influential in virtually every aspect of life in the early twentieth century: “Darwinism established a new approach to nature and gave fresh impetus to the conception of development, it impelled men to try to exploit its findings and methods for the understanding of society through schemes of evolutionary development and organic analogies.”¹¹ Darwinism radically shaped the way that people thought about society and America was particularly taken with Darwin’s work, or, as Hofstadter puts it, “England gave Darwin to the world, but the United States gave to Darwinism an unusually quick and sympathetic reception.”¹²

One of the most influential thinkers and writers on Darwinian thought was Herbert Spencer, who became something of a celebrity in the United States. Spencer believed that the work of Darwin should directly influence the way people thought about social sciences. In fact, Spencer went so far as to say that the goal of sociology should be “to chart ‘the normal course of social evolution,’ to show how it will be affected by any given policy, and to condemn all types of behavior that interfere with it.”¹³ For Spencer, sociology was the study of natural selection in society. Spencer viewed social life as a “survival of the fittest” and this concept was widely accepted in American thought

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1955), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4 Hofstadter clarifies, saying that the American reception, while quick, was not immediate, as *The Origin of the Species* was published in the United States just as the country was on the brink of the Civil War. So, the American fascination with, and rapid embrace of, Darwinian thought did not begin in earnest until the effects of the war were waning and the country turned toward the new century.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

throughout the early twentieth century. It follows logically, then, that the popularity of this doctrine meant that most Americans viewed the formation of national identity as a step toward proving American superiority. In this Darwinian world, every move was a race to survival, and if Americans wanted to end up on top, the nation needed to understand what made it different and then establish that its distinctive contribution was indeed better than what the rest of the world had to offer.

As Social Darwinism spread and its proponents delved deeper into the theory, notions began to arise surrounding race and nationality. Many theorists began to claim that racial hierarchy was the natural manifestation of Social Darwinism in the world. In 1916, Madison Grant published his seminal work on eugenics entitled *The Passing of the Great Race*. The text gained notoriety in the United States and a wide readership over the subsequent years. The fame of the text was such that, as Jonathan Spiro states, “it had been quite common for congressmen to read aloud from Grant’s book in the U.S. Capitol.”¹⁴ Grant’s name was widely recognizable across the nation and personal friendships with various politicians, including Theodore Roosevelt, earned him a fair amount of influence in the United States. His influence extended far beyond American borders, however, when his book was printed in German. A copy subsequently found its way into the Nuremburg trials as an exhibit when it became clear that “upon reading the book, the Fuhrer himself had announced: ‘This book is my Bible.’”¹⁵ Contemporary sensibilities have led to Grant’s name losing almost all notability, but the legacy of his

¹⁴ Jonathan Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (Vermont: University of Vermont Press, 2009), 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8

text and his ideas cannot be ignored when examining the early twentieth century (and arguably beyond). Grant's text was the manifestation of the racist undercurrent of the Social Darwinism that gained popularity throughout the United States in the beginning of the twentieth century. As Benedict Anderson notes, "racism and anti-Semitism manifest themselves, not across national boundaries, but within them. In other words, they justify not so much foreign wars as domestic repression and domination." While the doctrine of Social Darwinism motivated Americans to further their efforts in creating national identity it also resulted in the proliferation of racist thought and gave birth to harmful notions, including in American Theatre as will be discussed further in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis.

High and Low Culture

At the turn of the twentieth century, popular sentiment, as now, held that art fell into two categories: the worthwhile "high" and the frivolous "low." For much of American history, theatre was not recognized as high art. While the theatre of Shakespeare or Moliere would certainly by the early twentieth century be categorized as high art by Western culture, American theatre of the same period was not. American theatre before the turn of the century was the entertainment of the masses. The "most popular form of entertainment in the United States," theatre of the era "comprised a vast array of public amusements that included vaudeville, minstrel shows, and burlesque; circus and freak show; musical comedy and revue; as well as the so-called legitimate stage: drama, comedy, and tragedy."¹⁶ Critics, audiences, and dramatists alike all

¹⁶ David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 1.

designated some stage work as “legitimate” theatre, a term referring to non-musical, non-variety performance, which became widely accepted and has remained in use ever since. The term is “not an unprejudiced descriptive but a value-laden metaphorical concept.”¹⁷ During this period, the “legitimate stage” approached high art, but the vast array of low forms of theatre was seen as keeping the discipline as a whole from reaching its potential. As David Savran points out in his work *Highbrow/Lowdown*, “In virtually every account of the American theatre during the 1920s... the decline of cheap, commercial entertainments is seen as salutary purification.”¹⁸ This brings us back to the fact that Bliss Perry did not include theatre on his list of arts which illustrates that for most Americans at the time, theatre was not considered high art. Similarly, the rise of the term “legitimate” illustrates that within theatre itself there was a continuum between high and low art. Theatre practitioners at the turn of the century were frustrated with the state of theatre as a whole and believed that if they could only be rid of the burden of low theatre and illustrate the merits of legitimate theatre, that the theatre overall could become a part of high culture in America.

While the “arrival” of the American theatre on the world’s stage is often cited as beginning with the theatre of Eugene O’Neill and the new era which he is credited with initiating, the Little Theatre movement with its goal of elevating the level of artistry in the American theatre is largely to be credited as the catalyst for the decline in “cheap,

¹⁷Savran, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

commercial entertainments.”¹⁹ As Savran says, “In New York and across the nation, the proliferation of the so-called little theatres, or art theatres (like the Provincetown Players), plus subscription theaters (like the Theatre Guild) nurtured a new generation of American writers and led to the somewhat belated invention of what is now regarded as a literary theatre and the composition of the kind of plays that continue to fill anthologies and college syllabi.”²⁰ The Little Theatre movement brought about the changes which led to the proliferation of so-called legitimate theatre art. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the main goals of the Little Theatre movement was to elevate American theatre to the level of “art” and “literature.” Creating high art was a matter of national pride. Americans were attempting to assure the quality of the cultural elements which formed American national identity, and theatre artists wanted to make sure theatre was at its best in order to insure its place in helping the fledging nation find its footing.

High Art and the Little Theatre Movement

As previously discussed, the ethos of the Progressive Era was intimately tied to the project of the Little Theatre movement. The Little Theatre movement developed out of the belief that theatre could be a high art and could contribute to the artistic landscape to form a distinctly American legitimate theatre. The Little Theatre movement saw itself as an answer to the call for a specifically American cultural heritage. For the practitioners of the movement, the creation of American theatre was inextricably tied to the notion of American identity because theatre was inextricably tied to art and culture, and therefore

¹⁹ Savran, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

to the assessment of how, in T. S. Eliot's sense of the word, "worthwhile" American civilization was. Throughout the period, dramatists and critics alike espoused American writers and celebrated American works, and this attempt at bolstering the American theatre was deeply tied to what it meant to be American.

In light of the discussion thus far it can be seen that the Little Theatre movement and its goal of creating legitimate American theatre is inextricably linked to nationalism and national identity. As nationalism developed in the modern age, each nation raced to demonstrate the ways in which their communal identity was the best; in other words, how their culture made their civilization the most "worthwhile." In this way, nationalism is self-perpetuating: community members attempt to prove that their nation is best in order to justify their nationalism, and nationalism strengthens when members of a nation decide that their imagined community is something in which to take pride. For the Little Theatre movement to attempt to create legitimate theatre which is also uniquely American is an act of deep nationalism. The European cultures which they admired could proudly point to Shakespeare, Impressionism, the Sistine Chapel, or Mozart as indications of their rich cultural history, and while Americans at the time had several popular cultural touchstones to which they could point such as vaudeville and Broadway, these forms were considered low art. But by illustrating simultaneously the ways in which America is unique and can create high art on stage, the Little Theatre movement made the statement that America was finding its way onto the world stage as a cultural titan. The Little Theatre movement saw it as part of their purpose to help establish American identity and to explore what it truly meant to be an American. For the Little Theatre movement, theatre was a part of

creating the high culture which would give Americans something to point to as evidence of their country's greatness.

In his foreword to Frank Shay's book written in 1919, *The Plays and Books of the Little Theatre*, Pierre Loving writes that

...it is not because the professional theatre leans too far toward life that insurgency is wholesomely welcome; but it is to be devoutly wooed because the shekel-down drama of Broadway has not fresh contact or remote relation with life and its deeper motivations; because, in essence and in fact, it is actuated by sordid purposes and a false, illiterate conception of the art of the theatre... For this reason must the little theatre break through into the open. Its aim is the depiction of life unveneered and of real psychological motives, as well as the attainment of pure beauty flowering from the achieved synthetic ideal, the perfect production.²¹

This rhetoric, typical of the time – casual anti-Semitism and all – communicates a great deal about Little Theatre ideology. Firstly, the language of this quote insisting that the theatre is disconnected from real life is further evidence of the perception that American theatre had yet to mature. Part of the reason the theatre felt disconnected was that it did not seem, to theatre artists and audiences to be singularly American or in step with their lives and character. It was, perhaps, too oriented toward Europe. Furthermore, this quote illustrates the perceptions and function of the high art/low art binary in the minds of theatre practitioners during the movement. Loving, and many others at the time, speak about the inherent good of theatre. As Loving puts it, the ultimate goal of the theatre is to depict “life unveneered” and “real psychological motives.” For little theatre practitioners this was the difference between extant low art and illusive high art, the difference between truthful and false portrayals of humanity.

²¹ Pierre Loving, “Preface,” *The Plays and Books of the Little Theatre* (New York: Theatre Crafts Exchange, 1919), 11.

Because the Little Theatre movement was made up of many local groups, the formation of American identity and culture for which Progressive Era Americans were striving often manifested itself in the formation of local identities. These local theatres seemed to affirm that to be American was to be part of a local community, that these small, diverse cultures were what, collectively, made up the American experience. The regional pride of small, local organizations such as the Dallas Little Theatre, discussed in Chapter One, typifies the regional pride held by little theatres all over the nation. Formation of local identity was embedded in the ethos of the movement as a whole.

However, despite the project of creating American identity, the types of American experience presented on the little theatre stage fell into narrow categories which served only to define rigid boundaries of American-ness. In other words, in attempting to clarify what an American was, the little theatre often attempted to depict American identity by illustrating what it was decisively not, by depicting the “other.” Of these negative depictions, two types of theatre became distinct, often repeated categories: Oriental and Folk. These stories of Asian cultures and of lower class Americans were told again and again by white, upper-middle class theatre artists who knew little of either experience. In telling these stories, the dramatists of the Little Theatre movement said less about the subjects of the plays and more about the audiences that would see them. The little theatre performed the “other” in order to define themselves, but in so doing they perpetuated divisions that have helped sustain classist and racist thinking in America. While the legacy of the Little Theatre Movement includes the formation of modern American theatre and paved the way for truly great art, it must be acknowledged that these groups

also passed down a legacy of racism and classism in the theatre, the effects of which can be felt today.

CHAPTER THREE

Orientalism in the Little Theatre

As discussed in Chapter Two, the rise in nationalistic tendencies and the subsequent artistic search for American identity were shaped in the context of the developing theories of Social Darwinism and the racist undercurrent established therein. The development of the Little Theatre movement within these circumstances lead to the racial and cultural othering of non-Western characters, persons, and stories. The conceptual binary of East vs. West, Orient vs. Occident, was well established by the time the Little Theatre movement began, and the participating artists upheld and reinforced this dichotomy in their practice. The Orientalism of the movement was not simply limited to plays written by Western authors, but also included plays written by and for audiences of other cultures which the Little Theatre movement saw fit to appropriate for their own purposes. Works such as *Bushido* (1916) by Takeda Izumo and *The Post Office* (1914) by Rabindranath Tagore were written by Asian authors, but were utilized by the Little Theatre movement in ways that reinforced the binary of East and West. Plays such as *The Yellow Jacket* (1913), *The Tents of the Arabs* (1915), *String of the Samisen* (1917), *The Chinese Lantern* (1908), *No Sabe* (1917), *The Prince of Stanboul* (1917), and numerous others were written by British and American authors with limited knowledge of the cultures about which they were writing, but who still took it upon themselves to tell these stories. The little theatres – composed primarily of white, middle and upper class audiences and artists interested in fostering local and national community – produced many plays that portrayed the community of the East with characters and stories that

reinforced the perceived superiority of the community of the West. By looking at Orientalist ideas in *The Yellow Jacket*, *The Tents of the Arabs*, *The Chinese Lantern*, and *No Sabe*, this chapter will demonstrate the ways in which the idea of the unified Orient was systematically reinforced, examined, othered, and demeaned by the practitioners, audiences, and general culture surrounding the Little Theatre movement within and through their project of forming national identity through high art.

The Orientalist theatre of the movement adopted three modes of Orientalism which can all be observed in the history of Orientalism as a whole: romanticism, mocking, and anthropology. These modes are all historically linked to the development of Orientalist art. Orientalist romanticism focused on the perceived sensuality and mystery of the East and utilized language and imagery; the mockery of the East established the perceived differences between East and West and posited that the Orient is somehow “wrong” by belittling it; and the anthropology or pseudo-ethnography of Orientalism asserted itself as the scientific study of Eastern cultures while reinforcing harmful notions about the singular Orient. Overall, this chapter will explore these three modes and the specific methods by which each of the plays discussed conforms to the content of Orientalism. This analysis will illuminate the Orientalism of the little theatre and how it was used to further the cause of building American national identity. The ideals and practices of the Little Theatre movement – specifically those related to the little theatre’s goal of forging national identity – directly led to the cultural othering which characterized the movement.

Orientalism

The Yellow Jacket, The Tents of the Arabs, The Chinese Lantern, and No Sabe

each exemplify the systems which Edward Said, author of *Orientalism* (1978) says created Orientalism and in which Orientalism can be observed. Orientalism is best understood as the way that the West has historically functioned in regards to an imagined East. According to Said, Orientalism is “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience.”¹ Said argues that it was developed by Europeans as a way to control the Orient for colonial and political reasons and that the result was a way of categorizing the world into two parts: East and West, Orient and Occident. Orientalism involves a view of the Orient as imagined by Europeans for European purposes. Said believes, “Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient.”² In other words, Orientalism can only be taken as the cultural manifestation of the political and colonial workings of the Western world in the East; it is not a discourse about the actual East. As Said states, “the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate.”³ Orientalism is a self-referential conversation rather than a collection of direct observations about any part of the complex and multi-faceted countries and cultures which have become conflated under the European notion of “Orient.” Said goes on to say that “the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically ‘different’

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is equally a highly debatable idea.”⁴ So, for Said, the notion that there is such a thing as a “true” representation of the East is absurd because the idea of the East itself is absurd.

Said asserts that Orientalism is material, that it is quantifiable and observable rather than being merely the way Western minds think about the Orient. “Orientalism is inextricably linked to the discursive systems out of which it developed: ‘vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.’”⁵ In other words, Orientalism can be observed in the very systems which were used to create the East/West binary. This gives the West a power over the East that cannot be easily resisted because that power is legitimized through “mythic discourses”⁶ which are given the appearance of validity for the purpose of enforcing this binary in “scholarly” terms. By using vocabulary, scholarship, and imagery to create this negative quantity of Orient, the West insured that these systems would continue to reinforce this binary and thus bolster Western power.

Finally, it is pivotal to understand the end goals of Orientalism. Whether the Orientalist thinker is aware of this or not, one of the main objectives of Orientalism is to see Eastern cultures become more like the West. All of the attributes ascribed to the East – laziness, sensuality, materiality, femininity – which will be explored in this chapter, are seen from the Orientalist perspective as being inherently Eastern and inherently wrong.

⁴ Said, 322.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 321.

Though often unspoken, the goal of the Orientalist is to study the behaviors of the Orient, to illustrate their deviance, and to correct the incorrect by whatever means. “The Orientalist now tries to see the Orient as an imitation West which, according to Bernard Lewis, can only improve itself when its nationalism ‘is prepared to come to terms with the West.’”⁷ There is no sense in which the West must “come to terms with” the East, but rather the East would be redeemed were it willing to assimilate; however, Orientalism suggests that the condition of being separate and irredeemable is permanent. The East, therefore, as the consummate “other” stands as the negative example to the rightness of the West.

Orientalism and Art

Throughout the nineteenth century the Western world saw a trend toward Orientalism in the fine arts, most notably in painting. Art historians cite this trend as growing out of the flurry of colonial activity in the Near East: the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt in 1798; the Greek war of independence from the Ottoman empire in the 1820s; and Lord Byron’s death from a disease contracted while fighting for the Greeks; the French colonization of Algeria in 1830; the consolidation of power and establishment of the British Raj in India in 1858; the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869. In short, the political tumult in the Near East through the nineteenth century was such that Western Europe, in particular England and France, became intimately linked to the East. Each of these and other major events concerning European powers throughout the nineteenth

⁷ Said, 321.

century had enormous consequences, the effects of which continued, and perhaps still continue, to be felt for many years to come.

At the turn of the century, Colonial Exhibitions became popular throughout Western Europe. These exhibitions were large events in which the “mysteries” and “outward appearance” of Eastern countries would be put on display.⁸ While such exhibitions were put on in the interest of colonialism, they proclaimed an interest in science and discovery. Erika Fischer Lichte points out that it is perhaps,

somewhat naïve to believe that the European audiences only poured in to the colonial exhibitions because they were supposedly ‘authentic’ (i.e. in order to ‘learn’ something about foreign cultures). Certainly, such exhibitions were ‘authentic’ insofar as all the elements presented – costumes, make-up, objects, actions – were actually to be found in the respective cultures. But in order to be presented in the context of a colonial exhibition, these elements were taken out of the context of the culture in which they functioned as particular meaning-generating elements... The elements to be presented in the colonial exhibition were therefore selected and combined in such a way that their presentation would appeal to the suppressed sexual desires and archaic fears of the audience.⁹

Even in these supposedly accurate exhibitions and paintings the pieces of various cultures which were put on display were chosen for their salacious value and ripped out of their cultural context. This only served to broaden the perceived gap between “us” and “them” in the West vs. East mentality.

The popularity of these exhibitions and their proclaimed interest in science helped further Orientalist trends in the arts, perhaps because they relied on hundreds of illustrations as anthropological evidence of life in the East. The artists of the West

⁸ Erika Fischer Lichte, “What are the Rules of the Game? Some Remarks on *The Yellow Jacket*,” *Theatre Survey* 36 (1995): 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

became interested in the countries and territories in which their respective countries were involved and found what they viewed as new territory to explore for subject matter and aesthetics. Literal expeditions to new Eastern areas illustrate the Western tendency to view the Orient as “a symbol of that unknown territory, that ‘other’ universe that all artists, and especially painters, seek to explore.”¹⁰ Artists would accompany these expeditions in order to view for themselves the “opulence and strangeness of the East,”¹¹ and saw their work not only as helping to further the artistic world, but also as furthering the social sciences. Demand for Orientalist painting became such that Napoleon declared, “Great names are made only in the Orient.”¹² Painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, William Holman Hunt, Eugène Delacroix, David Wilkie, Henri Matisse, and August Renoir utilized the imagery which the West came to associate with their versions of the Orient.

Holly Edwards explores the European roots of American Orientalism in her 2000 article, “A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930.” In the article, Edwards briefly describes the function of Orientalist painting in the Western world arguing that painting was a form of asserting the “truth” about the Orient in corporeal terms. Depicting the Orient in art rendered true the assumptions that the Orientalist West made about the East. French Orientalist painting in particular, tended to represent the Orient through various depictions of the human body and thus literally came to “embody”

¹⁰ Christine Peltre, *Orientalism in Art*, trans. John Goodman (Paris: Abbeville Press, 1998), 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² Napoleon Bonaparte qtd. in Peltre, 64.

the image of the Orient as it existed in the Western mind. But in French paintings the Oriental bodies that were depicted again and again were “naked harem girls and tyrannical despots, which served to fascinate, titillate, and ultimately flatter the nineteenth-century French viewer... France reduced the Orient to colony, concubine, and indolent heathen.”¹³ These depictions made up the bulk of the subjects for Orientalist painters as a disproportionate number of paintings with Oriental subjects displayed either scantily clad women or fearsome military men.

Similarly, Christine Peltre argues in her 1997 work, *Orientalism in Art*, that the trend is a manifestation of the already extant European attitude toward the East. She posits that in the minds of Westerners, the Orient was romanticized as an “enchanted elsewhere” of “lightness.”¹⁴ Peltre states that “the Orient encountered in poetry and painting, then, is pure frivolity; that is its charm and perhaps its aim, something like a harmless and agreeable feminine pursuit.”¹⁵ Peltre’s suggestion that the “aim” of Orientalist art was to depict a “harmless and agreeable” East illustrates Said’s argument that the Orientalist mindset came about as a way to control the East. The trend toward Orientalist art is merely a manifestation of the nationalistic concerns of the nations of the West, a means by which the West can assert its dominion over the East. One of the main ways in which Orientalist art depicted the East as this dominion of “lightness” was the emphasis which Orientalist art placed on the sensuality of the East. As previously stated,

¹³ Holly Edwards, “A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930,” *Noble Dreams Wicked Pleasures* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁴ Peltre, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

Orientalist art often depicted the Orient in an “embodied” form. While this form frequently manifested itself literally through the human form, often this embodiment is achieved through Orientalist discussion of the sensual nature of the East. In his 2010 article “The Native Performant: Linguistic Authority in the Text of Romantic Orientalism” Zak Sitter describes this trend saying that there is “a broad and longstanding European characterization of the Orient as a realm subjected to the materiality of the signifier.”¹⁶ Sitter argues that the Orient, in the view of the West, has long been something which is inextricably linked to the material signs and objects by which it is signified, that the East is material, while the West is immaterial, something more than matter. From an Orientalist viewpoint, the Orient is characterized by a sensuality which sometimes manifests itself as erotic and violet and at others as “harmless and agreeable.” So the Orient came to be represented by a barrage of signifiers: highly saturated or deep colors; lush fabrics; nude or semi-nude black and brown bodies; highly violent or sexual scenes; snakes, horses, camels, lions, and other various animals associated with the East; minarets, pointed archways, mosaics, geometric designs, domes, and spires; reclining postures; exotic instruments; and crumbling ruins among many others. These signifiers effectively became the Orient as the West delved further into conversation with itself as to what constituted the East; from the Occidental perspective, the Orient became more and more clearly an entity associated with a purely sensual existence.

Similar to the trend toward Orientalism in painting, the West in the nineteenth century saw a trend toward Orientalism in literature. While painting could create literal

¹⁶ Zak Sitter, “The Native Performant: Linguistic Authority in the Text of Romantic Orientalism,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2010): 110.

depictions of the Orient, poetry and literature could reinforce the imagery of the Orient and represent it through the medium of language. Orientalist discourse has long held that, as Sitter discusses, the Orient is “subjected to the materiality of the signifier,”¹⁷ and one of the major manifestations of that subjugation is, per Western appraisals of the Orient, the East’s belief in the material significance of language. Sitter gives the example that, “Enlightenment writing about the Orient developed the trope of a specifically Islamic idolatry of the letter, derived from the superstitious reverence Muslims were supposed to have for the Koranic text.”¹⁸ And since the Orient has developed into one, homogenized unit, this principle has been transposed onto the Orient as a whole so that what began as Western supposition regarding Islam shifted into Western attitude toward all Eastern philosophy. So the Occident, in its pseudo-anthropological study of the East, began to claim that the Orient was a place where people believed that the spoken word itself held power, without regard for the motivations behind or truth of the words themselves. Yet as the West attempted to study and depict the East it began to enact the very thing for which it faulted the Orient. Orientalism is a construct of Western ideas about the East, yet it is put forth as truth; the West asserts the verity of its own notions about the East based solely on the fact that they are being voiced. The Orient becomes what the West says it is because the West says it.

¹⁷ Sitter, 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

American Orientalism

The internal political turmoil which was taking place in the United States in the years before and during the Civil War meant that while various Americans displayed an interest in the same Orientalist subjects as the rest of the Western world, Americans did not take up this trend in earnest until around 1870.¹⁹ So, from after the Civil War until after World War II, the United States tended to mimic the Orientalism of their European counterparts with the important difference that American Orientalism tended to be more focused on culture rather than geo-political concerns as the French and British were. In his discussion of Orientalism, Vijay Prashad characterizes American Orientalism as follows: “Literary critics and historians have demonstrated that U.S. Orientalism was both heterogeneous and ‘far more mobile, flexible, and rich than the Orientalism binary would allow.’”²⁰ For example, Henry David Thoreau did not condone colonialism: “‘They may keep their rupees,’ he wrote of ‘Orientals’—he sought only their wisdom.”²¹ So, while American Orientalism is certainly related to European Orientalism, at the time it had no interest in colonialism or dominion over the countries of the East. In other words, American Orientalism at the beginning of the twentieth century was not as much concerned with taking up “the white man’s burden” of colonialism, but rather with

¹⁹ And because the colonial interests of the United States were fairly limited in the East until after World War II, America did not begin to develop its unique mode of Orientalism until the latter half of the twentieth century. Said, 284-285.

²⁰ Vijay Prashad, “Orientalism,” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 175.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

discovery of the mythic wisdom of the Orient.²² Furthermore, American Orientalism was made “far more mobile, flexible, and rich” than in Europe because its attempt at studying the East necessitated this fluidity.²³ In part this fluidity can be observed in the variations in American treatment of the Near East, Japan, and China at this time. During the Russo-Japanese war, Western powers interested in reducing Russian global influence backed Japanese efforts in the war. As a result, Japan was seen as the most “Western” of the Eastern countries as the powers in the West took up the Japanese cause. Conversely, China, having just seen the Boxer Rebellion, and the Near East, having a long history of religious conflict with the West, were both seen as more “other” than Japan. The American interest in discovering the “mysteries” and “wisdom” of the Orient made American Orientalism flexible enough to accommodate variations in the unified Orient, differences in culture from country to country; yet, as it will be shown, this fluidity was maintained within the boundaries of a strict binary which allowed for variations while reaffirming the notion of East as “other.”

So, then, American Orientalism during the Little Theatre movement was intensely interested in this pseudo-scientific, pseudo-ethnographic mode of speaking about and looking at the East. And because Orientalism then seeped into American popular culture through painting, through the “high art” with which the American theatre was trying to prove itself on par, the Little Theatre movement was eager to follow this trend. Since the

²² This is certainly not to say that American Orientalism was somehow innocuous or less harmful than European Orientalism. In fact, Prashad goes on to explain that American Orientalism became more aggressive and malicious after the emergence of the U.S. as a world power after World War II.

²³ Prashad, 175.

Little Theatre movement aspired to elevate theatre into the cultural echelon occupied by painting and literature, it follows that the movement would embrace one of the biggest trends in these “high arts.” For all of these reasons, when the Little Theatre movement began, it carried with it the Orientalism – both the forms and functions therein – of its predecessors.

The Orientalism of the Little Theatre Movement

Sheldon Cheney, the editor of *Theatre Arts Magazine* during the rise of the Little Theatre movement and a strong proponent of art theatre, commented in his historical study *The Theatre* (1929), about the trend toward Orientalism. He wrote in his chapter about stage design (notably the elements concerned with the imagery and the materiality of theatre) that after viewing the drama of “Oriental richness” the audience member “has been intoxicated; but it is an intoxication that vaguely lasts, that is pleasant in memory.”²⁴ Cheney suggests that theatre which is characterized by this “Oriental richness” is less serious and even less useful than the theatre of the West which enables an audience to be “purged by experience, taken beyond the world, left with a deeper ecstasy that clarified.”²⁵ Theatre concerning Oriental subjects is conversely characterized as producing the sensation that “one is of the world, knows it as lush, sensuously soft and infinitely pleasurable.”²⁶ Cheney himself advocated for more simplified, modern set

²⁴ Sheldon Cheney, *The Theatre*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), 523-524.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 523.

²⁶ Cheney, 523.

designs of the European New Stagecraft movement, so his preference for this type of setting over “Oriental richness” is indicative of larger aesthetic implications. In this passage Cheney utilizes language associated with the categories of high and low art to establish the more serious theatre which can bring about “ecstasy” and “clarification.” In contrast, he employs language associated with low art – focusing on pleasure – and suggests that these attributes are less serious and less worthwhile.

Cheney goes on to say that “legends” are usually Oriental and uses the example of *Scheherazade*, noting, “unrefined tale of Arabian Nights, monarchs, harems, intrigues, passion. It is full of eroticism and violence that are hardly noticed; these elements are lost in the total sensuous design.”²⁷ Oriental settings for plays “are picked, one imagines, more for their setting than for the story. The whole show may be stylized, dancing included, from feeling for a color, or a place, or a musical phrase.”²⁸ Here Cheney suggests that the stories of people from Eastern countries are inherently less serious and are more focused on the surface and materiality of the world whereas the West feels the proper gravity of human life and is therefore able to portray it onstage.

Many artists connected with the Little Theatre movement similarly aestheticized the East. Constance D’Arcy Mackay outlines how the little theatre began in her book, *The Little Theatre in the United States*, and notes that the movement was born out a spirit of experimentalism which began first in Europe. She cites the influence of Max Reinhardt’s

²⁷ Cheney, *The Theatre*, 524.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 524.

“decorative drama embodied in such plays as *Salome* and *Sumurun*.”²⁹ She states that Reinhardt’s tendency toward this “decorative drama,” which she seems to implicitly connect to the Orient, makes him “at heart a romanticist, not a realist.” Mackay then argues that

The Little Theatre might have become narrow had it devoted itself solely to the production of realistic plays. But men like Reinhardt and Stanislavski pointed the way toward new accomplishments in creating the decorative drama that exists for beauty’s sake, that makes no pretense at reality. That is imaginative and not photographic, that belongs to the world of vision and dream. The decorative drama has nothing whatever to do with the false romanticism which existed previous to the founding of the Theatre Antoine. It is new, free, and splendidly colorful. It widens the experimental scope of the Little Theatre.³⁰

For Mackay and her sympathizers, unlike Cheney, it was good and necessary to experiment with the “richness of the Orient.” However, their sensibilities belittled the East by expressing it exclusively in terms of sensuality and mystery, by mocking it and insuring that it was not taken seriously, and by positing it as an other to be studied ethnographically.

Orientalist plays – meaning both plays written by Asian artists and those written by non-Asians with little real knowledge of the topic – emerged early on as one of the most definitive trends within the Little Theatre movement. The *Tents of the Arabs* by Lord Dunsany is known to have been performed between 1912 and 1919 by the Community Theatre of Hollywood, the Players Club of San Francisco, The Plays and Players Club of Philadelphia, and the Detroit Little Theatre and Pierre Loving stated that

²⁹ Constance D’Arcy Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1917) 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

“Dunsany and the little theatre are impossible to conceive apart.”³¹ When *The Yellow Jacket* premiered on Broadway in 1912 it was said to have been written “with words that Shakespeare might have envied,”³² and went on to become a favorite of little theatres across the nation. *No Sabe* was written and performed in 1917 in the Players Workshop of Chicago, a later iteration of the influential Chicago Little Theatre. *The Chinese Lantern* was performed in 1919 by the Little Theatre Society of Indiana which had close ties to the Drama League of America. Other popular Orientalist titles include *The Flower of the Palace of Han*, *Jael*, *The Hindu Gods or Shadow Magic*, and *The Lady of the Weeping Willow Tree* which all were performed before 1917 by early little theatres as the movement was first establishing itself. These plays provide insight into the function of Orientalism in the movement as a whole and reveal how Orientalism became entangled with the question of American identity at the heart of the Little Theatre movement.

The rest of this chapter will examine four popular little theatre plays which typify the Orientalist modes of romanticism, mocking the East, and anthropology: *The Yellow Jacket*, *The Tents of the Arabs*, *The Chinese Lantern*, and *No Sabe*. These plays were created, developed, and performed almost exclusively by and for people who did not belong to the cultures that they claim to represent. Because, as Fischer Lichte states, “these elements were taken out of the context of the culture in which they functioned as particular meaning-generating elements,”³³ the Orientalist plays of the Little Theatre

³¹ Loving, 9.

³² “The Play that Went Round the World” *The New York Times* (November 26, 1916).

³³ Lichte, 23.

Movement should be read as a reflection of the culture by and for which they are being created. They are reflections of Western thoughts about the East rather than actual portrayals of the East.³⁴ Each play exhibits the characteristics of Orientalism and illustrates how the performative and community ethos of the Little Theatre movement became discursive systems for American Orientalism.

One of the first observations which can be made about these plays is the connection of genre to each of the cultures they portray. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the fluidity of American Orientalism allowed room for variations in Orientalism from culture to culture while still maintaining Orientalist boundaries. In the Orientalist plays which were popular in the little theatres at the time, these variations were made manifest through genre. Orientalist works which examined Japanese culture, such as *Bushido* and *String of the Samisen*, tended to be more serious in tone. Similarly, plays about the Near East, such as *The Tents of the Arabs* or various adaptations of *Arabian Nights*, tended to be serious in tone, but allowed for some comic moments, sub-plots, and characters. Plays with Chinese subjects, in contrast, tended to use the genre of comedy—as in the case of *The Chinese Lantern*—or to invite laughter at Chinese characters as in *No Sabe* and *The Yellow Jacket*. Examining this dichotomy between the “serious” and comic modes as they relate to the countries that these plays represent – and, in particular, the way in which the Orientalist view of China is connected to genre – will illuminate the ways in which genre and Orientalism are related.

³⁴ As Said states: “It is not the thesis of this book to suggest that there is such a thing as a real or true Orient. . . . On the contrary, I have been arguing that ‘the Orient’ is itself a constituted entity,” Said, 322.

Dunsany's *The Tents of the Arabs* first exhibits the romantic mode of Orientalism through its blatant preference for that which "feels" Oriental to the Western mind over that which really belongs to a particular Eastern culture. Within the first moments of the play, the audience encounters the alleged mysteries of the Near East as one character tells of men who play "skabash" and "light great bubbling pipes and smoke nargroob," however, no such things actually exist.³⁵ It seems that Dunsany invented the words "skabash" and "nargroob" because to his ear they sounded right for his Arabian play.³⁶ In addition to Dunsany's fictional words, the play takes place in the imagined city of Thalanna, in an unspecified country. Dunsany thus exhibits that he is unconcerned with the specifics and nuances of Arab culture. Because Dunsany made up the various elements of this generically "Arab" world, it is clear that the play is about a Western view of the Middle East rather than an authentic representation of the culture which he purports to depict. The Arab culture which Dunsany puts forth is a romanticized amalgamation of various notions which he has about the East, and which he has received from other Orientalists, most notably from paintings of the Near East.

The romantic mode of Orientalism is further invoked when Dunsany opens the play on two men who spend four pages waxing poetic about the sensual elements of the desert and city. They utilize highly romantic language to tell of the sights, sounds, and smells of each and explain how they prefer the feel of one over the other. For example,

³⁵ Lord Dunsany, *The Tents of the Arabs* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons LTD., 1922), 6.

³⁶ The word skabash might perhaps have been made up first by Rudyard Kipling for his novel *Kim*, but even if Dunsany did not make up the term himself, the association with Kipling should be enough to prove the word's Orientalist bona fides.

Aoob, a camel-driver, states that “there is nothing in the world so beautiful as cities... they are loveliest a little after dawn when night falls off from the houses. They draw it away from them slowly and let it fall like a cloak and stand quite naked in their beauty to shine in some broad river, and the light comes up and kisses them on the forehead.”³⁷ The king later speaks about the desert “whispering” to its inhabitants. The play is marked throughout by the type of sensual language which was associated with the Orient at the time. The language which Aoob uses to speak about the city even evokes the Orientalist preoccupation with the body. By characterizing the East as being concerned with surface-level issues the West is made to seem more serious and intellectual by comparison. This sensuality, which Said also notes is typical of Orientalist thinking, is then characterized as being an integral part of Oriental culture and also becomes a pseudo-ethnographic element, reinforcing the veracity of Orientalist claims.

One of the primary methods employed by the romantic mode of Orientalism is to invoke the “mysteries” of the Orient. By positing that it contains vast, unsolvable mysteries, the East is positioned as an “other” which no man can truly understand but which can still be explored and exploited. The practice of labeling the East as mysterious ensures that the West appears rational and clear. The West is discovered and discoverable. The East is eternally out of reach because the West ensures that it remains that way. In *The Tents of the Arabs*, this air of mystery is made manifest in the longing that the king has for the desert and the mysteries therein. The title of the play is derived from a speech which the king makes expressing his desire to run away into the desert: “O that I might marry the child of some unkingly house, that generation to generation had

³⁷ Dunsany, 4.

never known a city, and that we might ride from here down the long track through the desert, always we two alone, till we came to the tents of the Arabs.”³⁸ The phrase “the tents of the Arabs,” then becomes a synecdoche for adventure and the mysteries to be discovered in the Orient. As the early Orientalists and painters of the nineteenth century explored and reported on the various countries and cultures of the Near East, they proliferated the notion of the “mysteries of the Orient.” This myth helped justify the colonial efforts of European countries and became a part of popular Western thought as it was exhibited and reinforced in the arts, including in Dunsany’s play. *The Tents of the Arabs*, then, follows in a long line of Orientalist discourse which perpetuates the myth of the mysteries of the Orient and serves to reinforce the notion of East as “other.”

Of all the plays discussed here, *The Chinese Lantern* by Lawrence Housman is perhaps the most offensive to the sensibilities of the modern reader. The romanticism that is present can be seen in the fantastical plot and in the focus on painting which would allow for the sensuous scenic design which Cheney described. The play follows a Chinese art teacher who owns a piece of art which, legend has it, was painted by a master so adept at creating realistic works that he could simply walk into them. As a student in the studio begins copying the master’s work in secret, the master comes and takes the student with him into the picture. The play focuses on these artistic themes and plot devices, grounding the show in the same romanticized sensuality which characterized Orientalist painting. Furthermore, because this fantasy plot is made to appear believable to the Eastern characters, the play reinforces the notion that even the minds of Oriental

³⁸ Dunsany, 11.

individuals are different and are perhaps under-developed because they accept outlandish stories as truth.

While the Orientalist mode of laughing at the East will be discussed in more depth at a later point below, it is important to note that *The Chinese Lantern* is unmistakably a comedy. The play certainly subscribes to the romantic Orientalist; however, much of the play, including that which could be considered romantic, is designed to evoke laughter. The realistic style applied to this outlandish tale allows Housman to mock the East and its “incorrect” view of the world. Through this comic structure, familiar comic devices such as the use of stock characters are employed for the purposes of mockery of the East. For example, the dialect assigned to many characters in the play is barely readable and highly offensive such as that of the merchant Josi-Mosi³⁹ who speaks such lines as, “before de Feasht commenshes. You’ll see ‘em: dey come dish way.”⁴⁰ The names of the characters are vaguely Chinese sounds put together for their comic effect such as Tee-Pee, Hiti-Titi, and Nau-Tee. Overall, the play seems to be a comedy with little aspiration towards “serious” drama or anthropological Orientalism, but which is instead meant to evoke laughter within a “poetic atmosphere of China.”⁴¹

By examining the popular little theatre plays *The Yellow Jacket* and *No Sabe* at greater length in both the textual and non-textual aspects of the plays (performance,

³⁹ Josi-Mosi is described in the cast list as “a Chinese Jew rag-and-bone merchant,” and his primary character trait is his greed and scheming for money and items to sell.

⁴⁰ Laurence Housman, *The Chinese Lantern* (London: F. Sidgwick, 1908), 23.

⁴¹ F. K. W. Drury, *Drury’s Guide to Best Plays* (Washington D.C.: The Scarecrow Press, 1953), 140.

history, critical reception, etc.), the Orientalist modes of romanticism, mocking, and anthropology are further illuminated. Harry J. Benrimo, coauthor of *The Yellow Jacket: A Chinese Play done in a Chinese Manner* openly declares, “I am not...a Chinese scholar,”⁴² in the opening lines of his article entitled “Legend and Truth: The Facts about *The Yellow Jacket*, Again in Revival Here.” This declaration might have come as somewhat of a shock to *New York Times* readers as the *Times* itself had previously and repeatedly suggested that the authors of *The Yellow Jacket* were Chinese scholars. With such statements as, “The play itself is a composite of portions of several real Chinese dramas. And as far as possible the actors are said to duplicate the methods of Chinese performers in them,”⁴³ and “It is a reworking of ancient Chinese materials and is presented in the ancient Chinese way,”⁴⁴ the *Times* proliferated the notion that the authors of the play were knowledgeable about Chinese culture and theatre. The playwrights were lauded as Chinese theatrical scholars by numerous critics, and their authority on all things Chinese was so widely praised that critics believed the blatant lie that Benrimo both spoke Chinese and had worked with Hazelton to translate an extant Chinese play. By the time Benrimo was writing this article in 1928, *The Yellow Jacket* had already made its way on tour throughout Europe, had two runs on Broadway, and had established itself in the eyes of critics as the first purely American classic of the theatre. Perhaps Benrimo felt

⁴² J. Harry Benrimo, “Legend and Truth: The Facts about *The Yellow Jacket*, Again in Revival Here,” *The New York Times* (November 4, 1928).

⁴³ “Something New and Strange in Drama,” *The New York Times* (November 3, 1912).

⁴⁴ “‘The Yellow Jacket’ Augustly Revived,” *The New York Times* (November 10, 1916).

secure enough in the establishment of his play by this time to admit that neither he nor his coauthor were Chinese scholars. However, Benrimo admitted in “Legends and Truths” that much of the thought regarding his expertise as a Chinese scholar was actually the result of rumors which were “the invention of the press department” and with which Benrimo eagerly went along.⁴⁵ In fact, even the assertion that the plot of the play was an amalgamation of several Chinese stories is admitted to be false.

In reading the play it becomes clear that the “Oriental atmosphere” of *The Yellow Jacket* is composed of various signifiers and cultural elements which have been taken out of the context in which they were intended to be read and appropriated for the purpose of telling a Western story. In Benrimo’s article he confesses that:

In looking for a plot that would lend itself to Chinese treatment, we hit upon the underlying theme of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, substituting Chinese morality for that of Puritan England. In other words, we carried a boy from the cradle to the grave in a fashion plausible to the Occidental mind, and yet developed the tale in an Oriental atmosphere. We made use of Chinese imagery, symbolism and morality but the basic vitality of the play was American. It was not a translation nor an adaptation, only clothed in Chinese garments.⁴⁶

The play follows a hero’s journey, modeled, as previously mentioned, after the journey in *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The eponymous jacket is the garment of the emperor, and though Wu Hoo Git, the hero of the story, is unaware, he is the rightful heir to the throne. The plot follows his life as he is lost from his mother through the deception of an impish demon and rediscovers his destiny. Examples of Orientalist pseudo-ethnography in *The Yellow*

⁴⁵ Benrimo, “Legend and Truth.”

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, “Legend and Truth.”

Jacket are seen in the characters names which present themselves as authentic but, like the author, prove to have an invented history.⁴⁷ The names themselves use imagery from nature (such as Due Jung Fah which is said to mean “Fuchsia Flower” or See Quoe Fah cited as meaning “Four-Season Flower”) or words that are descriptive of the characters themselves (such as Wu Hoo Git or “Young Hero of the Wu Family”).⁴⁸ These are not, however, accurate translations into English, which shows a disregard for the actual Cantonese spoken language. In this way, the language choices are appropriated for the purposes of making these characters conform to Orientalist notions of nature, religion, and familial duty. The authors utilized language, imagery, and philosophy which felt Oriental to them resulting in a reflection of a vague East as seen from their Western viewpoints. This allowed those involved with productions of *The Yellow Jacket* to operate under the assumption that there was some degree of authenticity to the work, making their feelings of “us” and “them” feel somehow factual.

Other methods employed in the telling of the story also exemplify the anthropological, pseudo-ethnographic mode of Orientalism. The dialect reads almost as an Orientalist’s guide to linguistics. For example, when the Chorus first makes his appearance on stage⁴⁹ he speaks the following lines: “I have been appointed by my

⁴⁷ Hazelton and Benrimo give no specific reason for choosing Cantonese as the language for these names, but Benrimo was from San Francisco where there was a large Cantonese speaking population, so it is likely that this choice is connected to Benrimo’s tangential exposure to Cantonese immigrants.

⁴⁸ George C. Hazelton and J. Harry Benrimo, *The Yellow Jacket* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1913), Characters.

⁴⁹ Benrimo speaks about the Chorus as a Western invention, again displaying a pattern of Western countries imposing their ideals on Eastern countries.

humble brothers of the Pear Tree Garden to conduct you through a story of our celestial land to be played upon our most unworthy stage. Permit me to thank that vice of curiosity which beckoned you hither that we might paint before your august eyes our humble fancy.”⁵⁰ Words like “august” and “celestial” appear on virtually every page seemingly for their vaguely Chinese tone. Furthermore, as demonstrated by this quote from the Chorus, the language utilized by the characters is written in a style which seems to mimic Pidgin, creating a caricature of the Chinese individual presented in the guise of ethnic study. The play further exhibits Orientalist thinking in its characterization of the Property Man. The character is described throughout the text as performing his duties “indifferently” and “complacently” and is given the stage business of smoking, sitting, and reading a newspaper. The property man, one of the few elements which Hazelton and Benrimo “did borrow bodily from the Chinese theatre,”⁵¹ embodies the Orientalist concept of Eastern laziness. This sort of thinking, that specific races inherently possess certain qualities such as laziness, exemplifies the racist undercurrent of Social Darwinism which developed at the turn of the century. Hegemonic groups began to assert that they were in power because they were inherently better than other races and the Little Theatre movement reinforced those notions by allowing them to play out on stage.

No Sabe, written by little theatre producer Elisha Cook in 1917, tells the story of Wo, a Chinese slave in an upper class American household, who murders his beloved master. It is revealed that Wo committed this crime because his master objected to the

⁵⁰ Hazelton, Benrimo, 1-2.

⁵¹ Benrimo’s Orientalist attitude is further emphasized by this quote and the fact that there is not, as he suggests, a singular “Chinese theatre.” Benrimo, “Legend and Truth.”

marriage of his daughter, Lettie, whom Wo also views as a daughter. Before it is revealed that Wo committed the crime, it is clear that the audience is meant to feel sympathy for Wo arising from the harsh treatment he receives from the inspector and sergeant who question him. However, Wo, with his “pidgeon English,”⁵² is written as a flat caricature of the mysterious Chinese man rather than a fully realized human being. After it is revealed that he committed the murder, the play relies on explanations of Chinese morality, which are dubious at best, to absolve Wo and his actions. Wo’s character then is seen to be a manifestation of an American idea of a Chinese person, rather than an attempt at putting a real Chinese person onstage. Furthermore, the title of the play comes from Wo’s repetition of the phrase “no sabe,” which is suggested to mean “I don’t know.” This is problematic because “no sabe” is Spanish for “I don’t know,” and has no meaning in any Chinese language. This conflation of foreign languages demonstrates that, in Cook’s mind, everything which does not belong in the category of American has been categorized as “other.”

Wo’s characterization is one of the main ways in which the Orientalism of this play can be seen. He is presented throughout as a romanticized other which the audience is clearly meant to study and try understand. Cook attempts to defend Wo’s crime by explaining how it was justified in Wo’s Chinese tradition. When Lettie finds out about Wo’s guilt she demands “How could you?” and Wo replies,

Me Chinese. Me can catchem make you heap much happy. Me no schare for die. My God – lite down my big book – me must die, allee same make you happy. Me Chinese. Me no can catchem you – (*His voice breaks with emotion.*) but – you sabe – me allee same *man* – me lub you!⁵³

⁵² Elisha Cook, *No Sabe* (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1917), 14.

⁵³ Cook, 26.

This response is problematic for several reasons. First, Wo's language throughout the play is written in this difficult to understand dialect, but we are told in the play that Wo has lived with the family for twenty-five years. The idea that a normally functioning adult male would still be speaking such broken, incomprehensible English after spending so much time with an Anglophone family is difficult to believe. The fact that Cook wrote Wo's dialect in such a difficult to understand manner illustrates that in his mind this is simply the way that Chinese immigrants speak. This dialect, then, immediately signals to the audience that Wo is different from themselves. Furthermore, we are told from the beginning of the play that Wo dearly loved his master. Lettie tells the inspector at the beginning of the play that he should not suspect Wo because, "He was father's slave. He worshipped him like a big dog."⁵⁴ Wo is portrayed throughout the text as having childlike devotion to his white master. From the beginning, Wo is posited as something less than human: through his language we are shown that his intelligence is sub-par, and the other characters (who are all white) treat him as a less evolved being than themselves.

Wo's explanation of his crime is also problematic. Wo speaks about Lettie's love for her fiancé by saying that their relationship was written down in her God's "big book." Lettie clarifies this sentiment for us saying "Yes, Wo – it is fate."⁵⁵ Wo then uses this same sentiment to explain why he killed Lettie's father. Cook attempts to utilize Chinese morality to justify Wo's actions, but instead he reveals his own Western ideas about the Orient and its philosophy to show Wo's motivation. So instead of seeing a fully realized,

⁵⁴ Cook., 15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

reasonable human, we are left with the image of the brutal Oriental which was depicted by Orientalist painters. The use of this problematic Chinese philosophy is a continuation of the Orientalist pseudo-scientific tradition. Cook attempts to present Wo's philosophy as something which is different, but which we should attempt to understand. While this motivation might be benign, the philosophy which Cook presents as Chinese only serves to further the notion that the Eastern mind is inherently brutal.

The influence of the pervasive doctrine of Social Darwinism can also be observed in the Orientalism of *No Sabe*. Wo is presented as "other" through his relationship with Lettie, which is situated within the romantic mode of Orientalism in two ways. First, the relationship positions Wo as endearingly simple. Wo's motivation for killing his master is ultimately that he wants Lettie to be happy. Since we know that Lettie loved her father and is deeply saddened by his death, Wo is presented as sweetly feeble minded for thinking that this would make her happy. Despite the brutality of the crime, we are meant to see that he committed murder out of love and that, although misguided, it was well-intended. Second, while the relationship reinforces Social Darwinian views by positing Wo as less than human, it also reinforces those views by asserting that the purpose of the Oriental in society is to serve the "better" whites. Wo is a sacrificial lamb in the play, martyring himself for Lettie's happiness. Wo says to Lettie "You God lite down in big book for you – Georgie must get mally. My God lite down my big book, when you, Georgie catchem mally, me allee same *must* die. You sabe?... You no happy – wha' fo' me die?"⁵⁶ Wo sees his crime as fulfilling his destiny of dying for Lettie's happiness. Wo

⁵⁶ Cook, 25.

tells Lettie that his purpose for the past twenty-five years has been her contentment and that he sees this last action as the fulfillment of his purpose. Wo's Chinese life, then, is not given as much importance in the world of the play as Lettie's white happiness. This reinforces extreme Social Darwinian notions that suggest that white lives have more value than those of the "lesser" races.

In her introduction to *No Sabe*, Alice Gerstenberg, a highly influential dramatist who was involved with the beginnings of the Little Theatre movement at its Chicago epicenter, writes with great feeling about the original production of the play in which the playwright, Elisha Cook, originated the role of Wo.

'No Sabe' came to light with Elisha playing the part of the Chinaman, Wo. His slight figure, his excellent 'make-up', the humanity of his interpretation, the sincerity of it, the pronunciation by lips that were mobile, and no tell-tale information by eyes that were stoical, with a final vibration in the voice, 'You – you – no – *can* – sabe,' which lifted the entire play into a spiritual significance – these have not been forgotten with the passing of years by those who were thrilled by that first performance.⁵⁷

It is clear from Gerstenberg's appraisal that Cook, both in writing and playing the role of Wo, intended to create a sympathetic character. Cook creates Wo out of his romantic notions of the Chinese "other." While this romanticization may be intended to invoke pity and sympathy, neither is empowering or humanizing if extended without relinquishing the notion that the East is subservient. So rather than succeeding in generating empathy for Wo, Cook's script reinforces Orientalist viewpoints and illustrates the "other-ness" of Wo.

⁵⁷ Alice Gerstenberg, "Foreword," *No Sabe* (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1917), 4.

The cumulative result of this binary of East vs. West being enforced again and again is the belittling of the East. In an article written about *The Yellow Jacket*, but which speaks to the Orientalist mode of mockery overall, the author states “much laughter is sure to ensue as a mere result of the overturning of our ordinary convention. In other words, matter which is necessarily serious to the Oriental mind becomes grotesque and humorous to Occidentals, because the method of its projecting is so completely in opposition to the latter’s stage convention.”⁵⁸ From a psychological standpoint, we laugh because something is “wrong”, not because it is “interesting.” While American Orientalism might have positioned itself as scientific study, the manifestation of that study often takes the form of laughter at the East which is the fulfillment of the Orientalist desire to “correct” the East, presenting the East as a punchline rather than insisting that it be taken seriously. *The Tents of the Arabs* and *No Sabe* employ this tactic the least because both plays are intended to invoke the mysteries and wisdom of the Orient and are therefore more serious in tone; however, *The Tents of the Arabs* is marked by comical moments in which we are meant to laugh at the greediness of the Chamberlain or the religion of the gypsy character Eznarza. *The Yellow Jacket* and *The Chinese Lantern* are far more comic in tone and clearly and purposefully present the Orient as something amusing. Aside from the offensive employment by the author of vaguely Chinese language, this notion is made even more offensive by the idea that it is acceptable for the “Occidental mind” to laugh at the “topsy-turvy” conventions of the Orient.

⁵⁸ “Something New and Strange in Drama.”

In speaking about the Chinese convention of the property man which is employed in *The Yellow Jacket*, this same article goes on to say, “His mental assistants are supposed to follow him in sublime invisibleness. And the effect, to our eyes, should be merely amusing, whereas to the Celestial it is all taken in deadly earnest.”⁵⁹ In discussing his playing of the property man, actor Arthur Shaw said “I have come to learn that there are just as many laughs to be obtained by ‘business’ as there are by spoken words. My time comes when I walk on with the snowstorm. If that isn’t a wild, ringing laugh, I never heard one.”⁶⁰ So while the convention of the property man is one which is utilized in the Chinese theatre and taken seriously by Chinese audiences; however, *The Yellow Jacket* takes this convention and turns it into a comic element in which a trait of “the Orient”, namely, laziness, is transposed onto the figure of the property man so that everything he does seems ridiculous. In this way, the convention of the property man is placed, not simply at arms’ length for it to be studied, but is transformed into something which must be ridiculed.

The Chinese Lantern is perhaps the most obvious in its belittling of the Orient. The entirety of the play is constructed around a concept which is meant to make Chinese culture seem ridiculous, the characters are vicious caricatures of Chinese stereotypes, and the jokes throughout the play make Eastern culture the punchline. Mee-Mee, a Korean

⁵⁹ “Something New and Strange in Drama.”

⁶⁰ According to the stage directions of the play, the property man walks to center stage at one point and throws a handful of ripped up paper into the air to symbolize a snowstorm. This action is intended to be performed in the same bored, lazy manner as the rest of the character’s actions. “Acting, Acting All the Time, But Not a Word to Speak,” *The New York Times* (December 1, 1912).

slave girl speaks in an incredibly broken English such as the phrase “me velly sill – me know dat! Not evellebody so gleat wise person,”⁶¹ and while Housman does attempt to subvert expectations by having Mee-Mee be the hero of the story the fact is that by turning Mee-Mee into the wise fool Housman further illustrates that *The Chinese Lantern* is merely a Western play with Eastern clothing. This then, means that the most redeeming quality about Mee-Mee, her wisdom, is associated with the West rather than the East and that the only pieces of her character which are left to be associated with the East are the pieces which most demean her, namely her comic name and dialect.

These popular little theatre Orientalist plays provide no serious reflection on the lives of real people in Eastern countries. Instead, they offer a look at ideas that the Western mind holds about those countries. In putting these types of plays on display for the white middle class audience members of the Little Theatre movement, the movement declared that the Orient was outside, “other”, “them.” The little theatre audience could look at these portrayals and rest in the comfortable notion that they knew who belonged and who did not. In endeavoring to establish an American identity, the artists and audiences of the Little Theatre movement defined themselves by a process of elimination. In declaring the Orient as “other” they asserted that to be American was not to be Oriental. As Benedict Anderson tells us, “nationality...nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind.”⁶² So nationalism, then, is an element within culture, or, put another way, culture is the means through which the imagined community is created. By distinguishing how other cultures differed from

⁶¹ Housman, 44.

⁶² Anderson, 4.

American culture, the artists and audiences of the little theatres could establish more clearly what was thought to be uniquely American.

CHAPTER FOUR

Folk Drama in the Little Theatre

The cultural othering and appropriation of the Little Theatre movement extended beyond the reification of an assured East/West binary to further assert itself in the popular subgenre of American plays known as folk drama. The folk movement overall, but especially as it was manifest in the little theatres, treated its folk subjects in ways that offered logical and even ethical ground on which the marginalization of impoverished people could stand. By employing the tactics of racial othering, the folk movement functioned in much the same way as – and with a similar purpose to – the Orientalist movement. Works such as *The Neighbors* (1914) by Zona Gale, *Trifles* (1916) by Susan Glaspell, *Peggy* (1922) by Harold Williamson, *The No 'Count Boy* (1924) by Paul Green, and *Plumes* (1927) by Georgia Douglas Johnson exemplify the American folk trends that were popular within the Little Theatre movement. The Little Theatre movement's focus on forging national identity directly led to their support for national folk drama, but the movement treated its folk subjects as a racial other, bolstered by popular Social Darwinian notions. The American folk theatre movement overall was an earnest attempt to give voice to those who lacked representation, but in the end, and in the context of the Little Theatre movement especially, this form of theatre exacerbated the problems facing impoverished Americans by romanticizing their lives, presenting them for pseudo-scientific study, presenting their stories out of context, treating them as caricatures, and ultimately reinforcing existing class and race divisions.

Folk as “Other”

The folk movement treated its folk subjects – the lowest American rural socio-economic classes and, sometimes, African-Americans – as “other” in three important ways. Firstly, the subjects of folk drama were heavily romanticized. The language used to discuss folk life evokes the language of the Romantics to establish the narratives of folk mythology. In the introduction to his 1922 book *Carolina Folk Plays*, Frederick Koch, widely considered the progenitor of the American folk movement, writes about the folk plays that resulted from his theatre in North Dakota:

Such are the country folk-plays of Dakota – simple plays, sometimes crude, but always near to the good, strong, wind-swept soil. They tell of the long bitter winters in the little sod shanty. But they sing too of the springtime of unflecked sunshine, of the wilderness gay with wild roses, of the fenceless fields welling over with lark song! They are plays of the travail and the achievement of a pioneer people.¹

This soaring prose is characteristic of the manner in which most folk dramatists portrayed their subjects. Koch’s ethos was the root of the folk movement in America, so when he stated in his high Romantic language that, “in North Carolina, too, we have the ballads and the lore of an outlived past side by side with the new life of the present day,” in order to encourage his students to write about the world around them, that Romanticism was embedded into their original drama.² Furthermore, Koch’s Romanticism resembles the obsession with language and sensuality which characterized Orientalist thinking. Koch

¹ Frederick H. Koch, “Introduction,” *Carolina Folk Plays* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), xvi.

² *Ibid.*, xvii.

even wrote that folk drama was “rich and strange, and of enduring beauty,”³ language which, as discussed in the previous chapter, was frequently used during this period to describe Oriental subjects in drama.

Secondly, the subjects of folk drama were presented as an “other” for study. Just as colonial exhibitions and, subsequently, Orientalist drama, had presented the Orient as a subject for anthropological study, so too were folk dramas presented with an air of investigating the unknown. It cannot be said that acknowledging a difference between cultures and wanting to learn about another culture is somehow wrong; however, the presentation of the strangeness of the subjects in folk drama brings to mind the same sort of pseudo-anthropology apparent in the treatment of Orientalist subjects. When the goal of social science is to learn more about another individual in order to appreciate the multifaceted nature of humanity and to simultaneously recognize how much we have in common, then it is contributing to the furthering of our understanding not only of the world but of humanity in general. However, these plays were instead drawing attention to the differences between the lives of their audiences and their subjects, and reinforcing classist notions

Finally, just as the Orientalist movement ripped pieces of the Orient “out of the context of the culture in which they functioned as particular meaning-generating elements”⁴ and stitched together the pieces, so too did the folk movement in the little theatres appropriate cultural elements for their own purposes. Frederick Koch insisted

³ Frederick H. Koch, “The Dakota Playmakers: An Historical Sketch,” *Reprint from the “Quarterly Journal” of the University of North Dakota, Vol IX, No. 1* (Grand Forks, N. D.: University of North Dakota, 1918), 21.

⁴ Lichte, 23.

that the plays in his theatres be community experiences from their inception, from their production to their audiences. The work of both of the famed centers of the folk movement, the Dakota and Carolina Playmakers, which were guided by Koch, was intended to be created by and for the respective communities of each region. However, in most cases the only people involved were those who were somehow related to the universities where the theatre companies were based. And while these two organizations did occasionally try to reach out to the lower class people who were being portrayed in folk drama, the productions still ultimately belonged to middle and upper class white people. Furthermore, when these works were transplanted into the little theatres, they were performed and viewed almost exclusively by white middle and upper class Americans. Because of this fact, folk theatre, while originally conceived as a contextual form, was most often seen out of its context by those with no understanding of the lives of these folk subjects. The act of taking these plays out of their contexts creates an othering of characters which is similar to the racialized othering of the Orientalism in the Little Theatre movement. Furthermore, while the folk movement in North Dakota and North Carolina seemed to earnestly seek to somehow subvert existing stereotypes of lower class individuals, because these stereotypes were often not effectively challenged within the text of the plays, performing them at the little theatres resulted in their reification.

The Irish Folk Movement

A major source of inspiration for the Little Theatre movement and its performance of folk drama came from the Irish folk movement in drama which can be traced back to its root in the Irish Literary Theatre that began in 1899 with the expressed

intent of reframing Irish theatre and Irish characters. As Diane Hotten-Somers characterizes it, “while the [Irish Literary Theatre] had many goals, among them encouraging the development of a native Irish dramatic canon and developing an Irish audience that had an appetite for more sophisticated realist and avant-garde theatre, the re-imagining of the stage Irishman was one of its highest priorities.”⁵ Because of the observation made by Irish dramatists that the Irishman had rarely been portrayed well on stage, re-casting the type became central to their mission. So upon the founding of the Irish Little Theatre in 1899, the manifesto of the theatre stated that their intent was “to show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.”⁶ Over the next several years they successfully built up a distinctly Irish movement in theatre and fostered several new and successful playwrights whose legacies remain today. Irish theatre practitioners such as Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, and John Millington Synge began writing with the goal of “build[ing] up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature.”⁷

The Irish Literary Theatre came to an end after its third year. Looking back on this time, Lady Gregory wrote: “Our three years' experiment had ended, and we hesitated what to do next. But a breaking and rebuilding is often for the best, and so it was now. We had up to this time, as I have said, played only once a year, and had engaged actors

⁵ Diane Hotten-Somers, “Re-envisioning stage identities: Ethnicity and cultural nationalism in Irish and American drama, 1899–1939,” (dissertation, Boston University, 2011), 1.

⁶ Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1913) 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

from London, some of them Irish certainly, but all London-trained. The time had come to play oftener and to train actors of our own.”⁸ So while the Irish Literary Theatre had not seen the fulfillment of the founders’ goal of creating a distinctly Irish national theatre, it had laid the foundations which allowed the artists at the Irish Literary Theatre to move forward with their goals at the Abbey Theatre beginning in 1904. It was here that the Irish folk movement truly took root and gained global attention, helping to shape the identity of Ireland at a time when that identity was in question due to English colonialism. From the end of the nineteenth century into the beginning of the twentieth there was a cultural movement in Ireland to establish a sense of national identity, and those involved with the Irish folk movement saw themselves as helping further this cause. The Abbey Theatre aligned itself with the national movement of Irish cultural resurgence as a rebellion against English colonial influence. Through the principles of their theatre, the artists of the Abbey Theatre “concentrated on portraying Irish characters who were, at least from the perspective of these early Irish playwrights, outside the reaches of British colonization, ...both realistic Irish peasants... and mythic heroes to represent the Irish from Ireland’s native heroic and mythological literature.”⁹

One of the most well-known plays to come out of this period is Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*. Using this play as an example one can clearly see how the tenets of the Irish folk movement were put into practice. The play is highly realistic, working to portray Irish characters in a naturalistic and human light, while establishing itself as a uniquely Irish work. The high realism of the piece is evident from the beginning when Synge describes

⁸ Lady Gregory, 29.

⁹ Hotten-Somers, 23.

the setting as, “Cottage kitchen, with nets, oil skins, spinning wheel, some new boards standing by the wall, etc.”¹⁰ The telling “etc.” implies two things: firstly that the set is meant to be populated with all of the expected trappings of an Irish peasant’s seaside home, and secondly, that the room is meant to be cluttered. Synge further signals that this is a realistic play when his stage direction continues to say, “Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, finishes kneading cake, and puts it down in the pot oven by the fire; then wipes her hands, and begins to spin at the wheel.”¹¹ The first image on stage is that of a young woman going about her daily chores. Synge clearly wants to exhibit a small moment in the life of a realistic Irish family. In this family we are presented with realistic, human characters who are also definitively, but not comically, Irish. The characters are clearly not the “buffoon” types which the practitioners of the Irish movement wanted to avoid, but they are, from the beginning, indisputably Irish. Each characters’ syntax and diction as well as references to Catholicism throughout the play establish the heritage of these characters. Through the characters and depictions of Irish traditions and practices such as keening, burning turf, connection with the sea, and references to knitting, Synge paints a portrait of Irish culture, helping to establish this play as a member of the “Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature” which the Irish Literary Theatre sought to create.

The principles of this new, native theatre made their way across the Atlantic and quickly ignited the imaginations of American theatre practitioners who were so eager to establish their own new, native drama. The success of the new Irish theatre was written

¹⁰ J. M. Synge, *Riders to the Sea* (Champagne, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2017), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

about extensively, and many of these great Irish works went on tour to the United States. The Abbey Theatre had its first American tour in 1911-1912 presenting *Riders to the Sea*, *Harvest*, *The Rising of the Moon*, and *Birthright* among others in cities from Indianapolis to Providence to Washington.¹² These works were hailed as theatrical triumphs and lauded by American practitioners who hoped to accomplish similar ends. While touring with the Abbey Theatre, Lady Gregory was asked a question which led to an informative exchange. She characterized the conversation thusly: “Someone asked me why I had worked so hard at the Theatre, and I quoted Blake: ‘I will not cease from mental strife / Or let the sword fall from my hand / Till we have built Jerusalem / In–Ireland’s–fair and lovely land.’ For, I said, it was a part of the building of Jerusalem.”¹³ For the artists of the Abbey Theatre and of the Irish folk movement overall, their activity was a matter of using shared cultural history to establish sacred ground for Ireland. The Irish folk movement sought to establish the center of that “lived religion” which T. S. Eliot called culture. American theatre artists who also sought to establish their own “Jerusalem” in America’s “fair and lovely land” were inspired by this goal of the Irish folk movement.

In the Irish folk theatre movement, little theatre practitioners saw an opportunity to create a similar sense of American identity with their own native folk theatre movement. However, in their attempts to recreate what had worked so well in Ireland, the practitioners of the Little Theatre movement engaged in a form of appropriation. The works of the Irish folk theatre often involved cultural and socio-economic circumstances

¹² See Lady Gregory’s *Our Irish Theatre*.

¹³ It should be noted that Lady Gregory is purposefully misquoting Blake as she emphasizes that her new Jerusalem is to be built in Ireland whereas Blake’s was to be built in England. Lady Gregory, 213.

which the middle-class Americans of the little theatres could not understand. They copied the form and style of the plays of the Irish movement without a real grasp of the context. What the little theatre practitioners did understand was the sense of national identity created by the new Irish theatre. While the Little Theatre folk trend included the Irish plays from which it gained inspiration, it was not limited to the appropriation of Irish playwrights' works. As the folk movement gained popularity in the United States, writers of the Little Theatre movement began to write new American folk theatre, and while this is a step away from the appropriation of Irish folk plays, American folk theatre ultimately turned into another form of cultural othering. The folk movement of the Little Theatre, unlike that of the Irish theatre, did not offer a voice to those who had so often been voiceless, but instead put on display those who the upper middle classes could find interesting and entertaining. Furthermore, the Little Theatre folk movement merged the experiences of African-Americans with those of impoverished white people in a way that partially erased the experience of being black in America at that time.

The American Folk Movement and Frederick Koch

While all large-scale national movements begin as a result of various factors, the beginning of the American folk theatre movement can perhaps be traced to the influence of theatre educator and artist Frederick Koch. Koch arrived at the University of North Dakota in the fall of 1905 as a professor of dramatic literature within the English department, but Koch's skill as an actor and rapport with his students quickly led to the formation of an unofficial dramatic society with Koch at its center. This set the pattern for the rest of his career in which he would teach almost every aspect of theatre, perhaps most notably, playwriting. Koch began his projects with the goal of making dramatic art

more accessible to his students.¹⁴ For Koch, this was the principle which would form the basis of all of his work in the theatre. So when Koch took a leave of absence in order to complete his MA at Harvard and fell under the tutelage of legendary teacher George Pierce Baker, it was only natural that Koch would be drawn to the dramatists of the Irish folk theatre movement which Baker shared with him.

Baker inspired Koch's interest in the new movements abroad—the work of Brahm in Germany, of Antoine in France, and especially of Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and John Millington Synge in Ireland. In the Abbey Theatre's use of the history, legends, and folklore of its native land, Koch saw a stimulating challenge for similar writing in North Dakota.¹⁵

Upon returning to teaching in 1909, newly inspired by the ideology of the new Irish theatre, Koch formed the Sock and Buskin Society at the University of North Dakota.

The Sock and Buskin society grew quickly in its influence and gained fame across the nation such that Hiram Moderwell, a leading critic in Boston at the time, commented on its influence, stating that the Sock and Buskin society was “relatively a much more important organization than the Harvard Dramatic Club.”¹⁶ Moderwell clearly shared the popular notion that the Sock and Buskin society was important because it was the leading university dramatic society in a movement of such societies which were setting out to educate the public in their respective regions. So the society was “relatively” more important because it was reaching an unreached area, the prairies of North Dakota which were seen as devoid of art. Koch first organized the society with the goal of bringing a

¹⁴ J. P. Hagan, “Frederick Henry Koch and the American Folk Drama,” (dissertation, Indiana University, 1969), 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶ quoted in Hagan, 44.

love of theatre to his students, and once he had established his loyal group of followers, the society set out to bring a love of theatre to the artistically neglected countryside of North Dakota. In this way the society functioned with similar ethos to many of the theatres of the Little Theatre movement. Koch and his theatre sought to bring art, both the consumption and creation thereof, to people in small towns and rural areas. Koch saw this ethos as the root of the new movement in theatre and carried it with him as he worked to bring his ideas to fruition.

As Koch continued in his career he did so with the expressed intent of creating a people's theatre as well as including Dakotans in the process of creation. In this spirit, the Sock and Buskin society toured North Dakota's countryside bringing such classic British plays as *The Rivals* and *She Stoops to Conquer* to the back woods of the state. Koch characterizes this tour as the event which paved the way for the advent of the folk movement: "In this way the ground was cleared and made ready for a people's drama of sound foundations."¹⁷ For Koch, the ideal American drama was one which was "of the people, by the people, for the people" and it was the duty of theatre artists to foster the creation of such art. This ideal is noticeably in line with that of the Little Theatre movement. In fact, the little theatres can perhaps be said to have influenced Koch as much as he would come to influence them since, "Many years later, Koch confided to a colleague at the University of North Carolina that not until Alfred Arvold's Little Country Theatre was established (February 1914) did he recognize the possibilities of folk materials."¹⁸ So, in 1917, Koch and his followers re-formed the Sock and Buskin

¹⁷ Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xiii.

¹⁸ Hagan, 144.

Society into The Dakota Playmakers and “pledged to the production of native plays of their prairie country.”¹⁹ Koch’s ethos in practice was to attempt to have the people create a truly native drama, theatre which was both distinctly American in its heritage as well as in its democratic formation.

With his company at North Dakota well-established and the legacy of his ideas firmly in place, Koch moved on to help foster those ideas at the University of North Carolina. While at the university, Koch established the Carolina Playmakers, fostered many new and highly influential playwrights, and established the folk movement’s importance in the landscape of the American theatre. Koch moved to North Carolina when he was contacted by Edwin Greenlaw who was head of the English department at the university. According to Koch, Greenlaw “saw a rich field for the making of a native folk drama.”²⁰ Koch’s move to a university which “offered no formal courses in drama” and at which only “a few students ventured to produce plays,” sheds light on the manner in which he saw his own work.²¹ This move illustrates that Koch wanted to spread the regional mode of creating theatre to other areas of the country, in particular the American South which was viewed as being almost entirely devoid of culture. As H. L. Mencken wrote: “If the whole of the late Confederacy were to be engulfed by a tidal wave tomorrow, the effect upon the civilized minority of man in the world would be but little

¹⁹ This use of the word native is typical of the period to mean regional and nationalistic American identity, it does not, however, mean First Nations people. Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xiii.

²⁰ Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xvi.

²¹ Hagan, 178.

greater than that of a flood on the Yang-tse-kiang. It would be impossible in all history to match so complete a drying-up of a civilization.”²² For Koch, the South represented a challenge to bring theatre to people who had not experienced it in its highest form and to help create native drama in a place which was full of the sort of folk subjects which Koch sought. As he characterized the state:

North Carolina is still without large cities, and a strong folk-consciousness persists. The State is still regarded by the people as a family of ‘folks,’ due to the fact that the population is almost pure Anglo Saxon and still remarkably homogenous. For all the changing industrial conditions less than two per cent of the inhabitants of the State are of foreign birth or parentage. Here the home talents are still cherished as a means of genuine enjoyment. The people have not broken their connections with the big family of the country folk. They have retained their birthright of pleasure in simple things. It is not strange that from such a spirit of neighborliness a native drama should spring.²³

This rhetoric exemplifies the Romantic notions which permeated the folk movement as a whole and illustrates the way in which Koch viewed North Carolina. Koch saw the state as being full of these “salt of the earth” folk subjects and so looked to bring his theatrical ethos to the university and the surrounding communities.

Koch taught all of his playwriting students to look to themselves and to their lives for artistic material and established the Carolina Playmakers with the stated purpose of “the production of original plays dealing with North Carolina life and people, and the

²² H. L. Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” *The American Scene: A reader* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 158. I think it prudent to point out the obvious denigration of the Orient and South, both of which constituted the majority of the subjects of the plays discussed in this thesis. Mencken’s essay stands as an example of the disdain held by many Americans toward both of these groups at this time.

²³ Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xvii.

promotion of such playmaking in North Carolina.”²⁴ “All real drama has come from the soil,” Koch told his students, and his rhetoric encouraged them to write about that which had grown in their own native soil, that which they could observe in their own lives.²⁵

The best plays which resulted from Koch’s work with his students in North Carolina were eventually published in three iterations of *Carolina Folk-Plays*.²⁶ Several plays feature incidents which were witnessed by or relayed to the authors, such as the story in *Dod Gast Ye Both!* The play was based on the true story of a moonshiner whose friends played a prank on him by telling him that his daughter had fallen in love with a “revenoor,” a law enforcement agent whose job it is to catch moonshiners. Koch tells of how the author returned to read the play to the man on whom it was based. Koch reports that “to find himself in a play and to hear his very words spoken again quite amazed and delighted the old man.”²⁷ Koch also tells us that the play was read to him “one winter evening by his still,” and that after hearing it “he got up to stir his mash.”²⁸ A similar tactic is seen in a Dakota play, posited in Koch’s words as “typical of these prairie plays.” *Barley Beards* by Howard DeLong tells the story of a threshing crew riot during World War I.²⁹ Koch

²⁴ University of North Carolina *Tar Heel*, January 28, 1919, quoted in Hagan, 198.

²⁵ Hagan, 187.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 154. In the first volume of Carolina plays, published in 1922, it is no coincidence the first advertisement which the publisher lists at the back of the book is for a work entitled *Producing in the Little Theatres*. The plays written under Koch’s tutelage in his prior years in North Dakota were never formally published.

²⁷ Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xxv.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xxv, xxvi.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

proudly states that DeLong “was born of French homesteaders in a sod shanty forty miles from the rail-road,” and that the play “is based on young DeLong’s experiences on a Dakota wheat farm at harvest time.”³⁰ The fact that Koch highlights these characteristics of the play and playwright illustrates the value that he placed on his students drawing material from their lives. Such details of the veracity of the plays are clearly important to Koch and his notion of folk plays because these details lend themselves to proving the authenticity of these native born stories in much the same way that the language employed by Orientalists allowed little theatre audiences to believe in the authenticity of Eastern drama.

One of the plays published in the first volume of *Carolina Folk Plays* was *When Witches Ride*, “a play of North Carolina folk-superstition drawn largely by the young author, Elizabeth A. Lay, from her own experiences while teaching in a country school in Northampton County.”³¹ This work was one of the first plays produced by Koch’s playwriting students in North Carolina and Koch himself sites it as indicative of the folk theatre ethos in that the production was “entirely home-made” and that “Miss Lay... scoured the countryside to find a log cabin to serve as a model for the scene.”³² Koch says this about “Our Heritage,” Lay’s prologue for the play,

... [it] expresses beautifully The Playmakers’ faith: ‘We mock with facts
the Southern folk-belief, / And so forget the eternal quest that strove /
With signs and tales to symbolize the awe / Of powers in heaven and earth
still undefined. / Yet we may catch the child-like wondering / Of our old
negroes and the country folk, / And live again in simple times of faith /
And fear and wonder if we stage their life. / Then witches ride the stormy,

³⁰ Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xv.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

³² *Ibid.*, xix.

thundering sky, / And signs and omens fill believing minds; / Then old traditions live in simple speech / And ours the heritage of wondering!’³³

While the rhetoric is grand and attempts to posit the subjects of folk drama in a positive light, they are undeniably belittled with such phrases as “the child-like wondering / Of our negroes and the country folk.” The curious use of the collective possessive before the word “negroes” is troubling enough in a country which had just stopped treating the group in question as legal property only fifty-five years previously, yet the poem continues to suggest that both “negroes and the country folk” are “simple” and live in “fear and wonder.” Through language such as this, the poem, which Koch says summarizes the beliefs of his group, reinforces existing notions which position folk subjects as lesser.

The poem also illustrates that for Koch and his students, the folk movement was about using the idea American heritage to create folk drama. Throughout the writings of the folk movement such as *When Witches Ride*, superstitious “signs and tales” are utilized as a sort of “original,” rural culture. Roanoke is alluded to at the beginning of the play, in an attempt to contextualize the lore of the play within the lore of one of the most famous American mysteries. The dialogue of the play is written in a heavy dialect so that the language in which these superstitions are expressed is rooted in the native tongue of the “folk” of North Carolina. Since Koch sought to create native drama it follows logically that he would encourage his pupils to utilize mythologies and superstitions which were born on American soil since it seemed to Koch, as it did to the Irish folk theatre artists, that those myths were allegedly untouched and therefore purely American.

³³ Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xviii-xix.

Yet, as is often the case with folk plays, trying to reconcile the actual text of the play with the creed of the folk movement is challenging. Koch calls “Our Heritage” an apt description of the ideas of the folk movement. The poem itself states that there is something to learn from the “simple” ways of “country folk,” and that the play for which it served as a prologue would demonstrate the things which could be learned from their “signs and tales.” However, the play itself opens on three men in a log cabin filled with the stereotypical trappings of country life: “farm implements,” “dust and cobwebs,” “boxes and bales,” and finally, “a big jug of liquor” from which the men drink generously throughout the beginning of the play.³⁴ In reading the text it is difficult to tell how it would play for an audience. It is written in such a way that, played correctly, it could be a genuinely terrifying story and a thrilling evening of theatre. However, with the multitude of stereotypes which Lay has poured into her characters, it could also turn toward farce. The play even ends with one of the three men having been “witched” and the other two “crouch[ed] in abject terror” crying that “The Devil took him!”³⁵ This picture could easily fit into either category, the frightening or the funny, and it is in exactly this juxtaposition that the problem of the folk movement lies. For, while Koch set out to create a genuinely sympathetic, if at times misguided, depiction of folk subjects, the plays which were the product of Koch’s teaching could often be easily used to support extant notions of social and racial hierarchy that kept rural Americans in the lower status.

³⁴ Elizabeth Lay, “When Witches Ride,” In *Carolina Folk Plays*, ed. by Frederick H. Koch, 2-24, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

Folk Theatre in the Little Theatre Movement

Just as the plays of the Irish folk movement were removed from their context, when produced in Little Theatre movement, so were American folk plays transplanted onto little theatre stages across the country for viewing by white middle to upper class citizens, altering their messages in the process. Two popular folk plays stand out as examples of the type of work performed across the Little Theatre movement. *Peggy* (1922) by Harold Williamson and *The No 'Count Boy* (1924) by Paul Green both typify the themes and issues explored by the genre and exemplify the methods employed to explore those ideas. *Peggy* is the story of a young woman in a family of white tenant farmers who wants to become educated, get a job, and marry for love, but her family situation and the death of her father prevent her from doing so. In the end, she must marry a young man with whom she is not in love in order to save her family from being evicted and facing financial ruin. *The No 'Count Boy* follows the story of Pheelie, a young black girl, and her fiancé Enos as they discuss Pheelie's desire to see travel the world. Enos convinces her that this wish is one that they can fulfill together after a good deal of hard work, but Pheelie wants to simply run away together and explore. The pair then meet the "No 'Count Boy" who gives no other name, but tells tales of his wanderings and subsistence through begging and, quite literally, singing for his supper. Pheelie is enamored of this way of life and decides to run away with the boy when he asks her to do so. However, the boy's mother then appears and tells Pheelie and Enos that the boy is lying and has never even left the county. She tells them that he is prone to running away and lying to people about fabricated adventures and that he is merely too

lazy to do his work. She then takes her son home and the play ends with Enos consoling Pheelie while she cries over the dream that she has just lost. These plots and characters exemplify the type of American folk drama which appealed to little theatre audiences and practitioners across the nation.

The subtitle of *Peggy* is *Tragedy of the Tenant-Farmer*, suggesting that the play shares a sympathy with the plight of the tenant farmer. However, that sympathy seems to be about the way in which the wealthy treat the poor rather than the actual plight of poverty itself. The play critiques the way that Mr. McDonald, the owner of the farm for which Peggy's father works, treats his workers. The audience is clearly meant to have disdain for McDonald and his refusal to raise wages or let Peggy's family remain in their home after the death of her father, but the fact that his actions seem to be the root cause of all of Peggy's troubles demonstrates that the tragedy in Peggy's story is based on McDonald's actions or decisions rather than a critique of the tenant farming system itself. In this way, the system is reinforced as the play claims that any injustices are created by people who do wrong within the otherwise uncriticized system. Koch said the play belonged to a category of "tragedies of revolt,"³⁶ claiming that it truly was intended to stir up sympathy with the aim of promoting action of some sort. However, the action, or revolt which Koch claims to be called for is never specified, and does not seem to be clearly advocated in the play. If Williamson earnestly intended to incite revolution with his tragedy then there would be some obviously actionable path illuminated by the play. While it is certainly honorable for Williamson to seek to illicit sympathy for the unfortunate, if that sympathy and spirit of revolution are not imbedded in the text, then

³⁶ Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xxi.

those meritorious qualities cannot follow the play beyond any production in which the playwright is directly involved.

The folk movement was also guilty of creating caricatures of folk “types,” putting characters onstage who seem to be nothing more than an amalgamation of various stereotypes. Frederick Koch himself stated that when audiences first see Mag, Peggy’s mother, “the jaded farm woman with snuff-stick protruding from the corner of her mouth,” they greet her appearance with “spontaneous guffaws of laughter,” at the “‘sorry-looking,’ snuff-spitting character so familiar to them.”³⁷ While he goes on to say that audiences become sympathetic and see “the tragic fact of her hard-won existence,”³⁸ it seems that this sympathy is extended without negating the thought that those in higher social stations are somehow inherently better than Mag. While it might be better to have sympathy for someone rather than to simply laugh at them, that sympathy does little to change their circumstances unless it is coupled with a call to action. However, the play sounds no such call and instead reinforces the system which keeps Peggy’s family in the cycle of poverty and thus bolsters the socio-economic status quo in America.

Furthermore, the folk movement equated being black with being lower-class in a way that enforced socially Darwinian ideas that held that certain races were inferior. Folk plays and Negro plays became lumped in the same category as portrayals of a “simpler” way of living and representations of the lives of lower echelons of society, thus

³⁷ Koch, *Carolina Folk Plays*, xx.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xx.

conflating class and race.³⁹ This can be seen in both *Peggy* and *The No 'Count Boy*. In *Peggy*, the issue of class is established by the fact that the story is about a group of white tenant farmers. After the Civil War a great many freed slaves and their families became tenant farmers as they were often unable to find any other work, so the occupation was often associated with African-Americans along with the lowest class of whites. So when Peggy, a poor white woman, bemoans the life that her family leads and declares that her parents work “from sun-up to sun-down like n-----,”⁴⁰ it reveals a great deal about popular thinking regarding race and class at the time. The fact that this line is not highlighted, but instead is embedded in a discussion about another issue shows that the statement was not meant to be inflammatory. Instead, it seems that this statement is offered almost as support of Peggy’s larger point that while black bodies are meant for labor she does not want the life that her parents have led. The phrase that Peggy uses is offered as colloquially as her earlier statement that she does not want to “work like a dog” for all of her life.⁴¹ In this way Peggy’s language falls into the racist trope of equating African-Americans with animals. The fact that this play was written by and performed for middle class white Americans illustrates that it effectively reinforced these existing notions regarding race and class.

³⁹ The Little Theatre movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Negro Little Theatre movement were taking place simultaneously, but segregationist policies and the racist viewpoints of many white Americans at the time caused these movements to stay largely separate.

⁴⁰ Harold Williamson, “Peggy,” In *Carolina Folk Plays*, ed. by Frederick H. Koch, 2-24, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922) 46.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

The discussion of race is much more at the forefront of *The No 'Count Boy* since it is a play entirely about rural African-American characters. When viewed from a twentieth century perspective, the problems with this play are apparent: it was written by a white man, for a white audience, and performed first and most frequently by white actors in blackface. Yet, in its time the play was hailed for its realistic portrayals of black life in the American South. Even Alain Locke commended the play for its natural portrayal of black characters. However, when Locke was writing there were virtually no dignified portrayals of African Americans in mainstream theatre. So, it is unsurprising that Locke would find this play refreshingly naturalistic. If the project of the Little Theatre movement is to portray America, then it should certainly be stated that trajectory toward a more realistic and humanistic portrayal of African-Americans is a step in the right direction. However, we must understand *The No 'Count Boy* in the context of the little theatres, places where actual black individuals were often systematically excluded and performances therefore were more complex and contradictory than Locke's praise suggests.

As Dorothy Chansky points out, "*The No 'Count Boy* cannot be judged by post-civil rights standards. Its project was sympathetic understanding within the terms available to liberal theatre practitioners in 1925."⁴² Chansky argues that what Paul Green attempts and, for the most part, accomplishes with his play is a portrayal of rural African-Americans with which audiences can sympathize. While I agree with Chansky's assertion, the prevalence of the scientific racism of the era and acceptance of Social

⁴² Dorothy Chansky, "The Quest for Self in Others: Race, Authenticity, and 'Folk Plays,'" *Theatre Symposium* 1, no. 7 (2003), 16.

Darwinism in the play cannot be ignored. Green may have attempted to create sympathy, but the continuous othering of the folk movement proves that this sympathy was extended simultaneously with ongoing assumptions that black people were inherently inferior. Thus play's sympathy may allow room for the humanity of another it still asserts that there are discrete and scientific levels of humanity. So while Chansky is right to suggest that, "The Dallas players' sympathetic portrayals of African American characters in a city that, two years earlier, had turned out seventy-five thousand strong to greet the imperial wizard of the National Ku Klux Klan is surely the more desirable of the two activities," it also must be asserted that the folk movement that produced *The No 'Count Boy* was guilty of pseudo-scientific racism as were the little theatre artists who produced it.⁴³

From the perspective of the ethos which Koch proliferated, folk theatre was meant to be a truly American drama. In working toward creating great American theatre which could be considered true art versus mere entertainment while simultaneously seeking to solidify the notion of what it meant to be an American, the practitioners of the Little Theatre movement often worked backwards, first defining what they were not. This process of forging community through theatre practice reinforced middle class white audiences' preexisting ideas about who belonged to their imagined community and who was relegated to the outside. Little theatre practitioners worked towards the advent of what he could call a native theatre, one which could be said to be a true bastion of

⁴³ Chansky, "The Quest for Self," 16.

culture, a sign to the world that it was, as T.S. Eliot said, “*worth while* for that civilisation to have existed.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Eliot, 27.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In a 1917 *Theatre Arts Magazine* editorial, Sheldon Cheney declared:

We believe that we have found the beginning of America's national theatre in certain humble experiments in various parts of the country. Because they have their roots in native soil, and because they are training artists to understand the needs of the theatre, we look to the little theatre groups to build foundations on which a chain of American art theatres will someday rise. ...They will build playhouses dedicated to art and not to business, in the West and the South as well as in the East. And that will be our national theatre. It is the only sort of national theatre that is possible in a group of federated states.¹

Cheney's words summarize the project, and in large part, the success of the Little Theatre movement. Little theatre practitioners, dissatisfied with the state of American theatre at the turn of the century took matters into their own hands and decided to create a high art which they felt was lacking. That art was intended to edify and define a nation, and the movement was largely successful in these goals: theatres were formed within and as outgrowths of, small communities across the nation; new plays and playwrights were fostered; experimental and non-commercial theatre flourished; and it seemed to the world that out of all of this emerged a truly American theatre. Through the activities of the Little Theatre movement, artists and audiences were able to understand what it meant to be a member of the imagined community of the United States. Yet this result is complicated by the fact that many were left by the wayside as the movement marched on

¹ Sheldon Cheney, "At Last – A National Theatre," *Theatre Arts Magazine* 1, no. 4 (1917), 172.

in the name of progress. As representations of folk subjects, including lower class whites and African Americans, and Orientalist subjects grew in popularity on the little theatre stages, those depictions were used to establish and affirm outsider status to particular groups of people. In other words, the project of defining American identity in the Little Theatre movement, was largely realized by drawing borders around American identity: those inside the boundary were white, educated, not impoverished while those outside were non-white, poorly spoken, childlike.

Implicit in this distinction is a cultural elitism. In promoting high art as inherently better than mass entertainment, the practitioners of the Little Theatre movement lauded the art of the wealthy and educated while denigrating that which was associated with lower classes. This distinction was partially motivated by the feeling that, at the time, America was less impressive than its European counterparts. The country, and especially the theatre community, suffered from an inferiority complex which caused them to fervently promote that which they saw as the best of their art. This taste for “serious” theatre was intended as support of the larger project of proving the greatness of America as an artistic community and thus as a civilization, but the effect of the differentiation was classist.

Edward Said writes: “the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically ‘different’ inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is equally a highly debatable idea.”² The Little Theatre movement, which sought to create particularly American drama and prove the worth of American civilization, saw folk drama as a

² Said, 322.

parallel movement and so utilized those plays with the intent of reaching that mutual goal. But in doing so, they relied on othering an entire socio-economic segment of society in ways Said would describe as Orientalist. The Little Theatre movement positioned the groups portrayed in the genres of folk and Orientalist drama as imagined communities of their own. Little theatre practitioners assumed that any difference or state of being off-set from the “norm” of white middle class America established an individual’s place in a different imagined community. But the key distinction between the imagined community built by American little theatre artists for American people and the imagined communities into which they categorized other groups is that the marginalized were afforded no agency in those formations. Their communities, like their identities, were imagined for them by people who had little understanding of their everyday lives.

Constance D’Arcy Mackay characterizes the success of the little theatres calling them “racially expressive of America in that they show an indomitable pioneer spirit.”³ In so proclaiming, Mackay argues that the movement achieved its goal of reflecting the indomitable spirit of America. However, her use of the phrase “racially expressive” illustrates that for artists and audiences at the time, American identity was associated with race. Notions surrounding Social Darwinism led to the idea that race was inherently tied to a civilization. Little theatre audiences and artists saw their movement as representing American identity, but many were purposefully excluded from any true form of representation. Later, Mackay argues that “the Little Theatre is nothing if not inclusive,” because “the historic play, the problem play, and the play with or without a purpose can

³ Mackay, 15.

all find space on its boards.”⁴ Yet the genuine stories and bodies of outsiders did not seem to find much space on those boards.

Benedict Anderson distinguishes between nationalism and racism thusly: “The fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history.”⁵ While the project of the Little Theatre movement may have been the establishment of national identity, what was often accomplished was institutionalized racism. By banishing actual people who belonged to folk and non-Western cultures from their stages little theatre audiences and practitioners insured that their theatres were not contaminated by the “loathsome copulations” of allowing people from different echelons of society and walks of life to create great art together. Anderson also states that:

...there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and songs. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody.⁶

For little theatre audiences and practitioners, the stage became a national anthem of sorts. In these theatres, they found the space to come together and declare “this is who we are.” The art that they created and viewed was a fulfillment of their shared notions of their

⁴ Mackay, 18.

⁵ Anderson, 149.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

imagined community, but the racist exclusion of outsiders during these performances insured that some were never included.

In their fervent belief that they were moving the art of their nation forward, the practitioners of the Little Theatre movement were blind to the harm caused by their methods. The legacy of the Little Theatre movement should cause us to ask ourselves what might be taking place in today's theatrical practice that we believe to be beneficial, but which also have negative consequences which we cannot or will not see. As cultural historians, and particularly as scholars of popular expressions of historical viewpoints must be honest about the complicated issues that we inherit as a discipline and as a nation.

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