



Yankee Theatre: The Image of America on the Stage, 1825-1850

Francis Hodge

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The famous "Stage Yankees," with their eccentric New England dialect comedy, entertained audiences from Boston to New Orleans, from New York to London in the years between 1825 and 1850. They provided the creative energy for the development of an American-type character in early plays of native authorship. This book examines the full range of their theatre activity, not only as actors, but also as playmakers, and re-evaluates their contribution to the growth of the American stage.

Yankee theatre was not an oddity, a passing fad, or an accident of entertainment; it was an honest exploitation of the materials of American life for an audience in search of its own identification. The delineation of the American character—a full-length realistic portrait in the context of stage comedy—was its projected goal; and though not the only method for such delineation, the theatre form was the most popular and extensive way of disseminating the American image.

The Yankee actors openly borrowed from what literary sources were available to them, but because of their special position as actors, who were required to give flesh-and-blood imitations of people for the believable acceptance of others viewing the same people about them, they were forced to draw extensively on their actors' imaginations and to present the American as they saw him. If the image was too often an external one, it still revealed the Yankee as a hardy individual whose independence was a primary assumption; as a bargainer, whose techniques were more clever than England's sharpest penny-pincher; as a country person, more intelligent, sharper and keener in dealings than the city-bred type; as an American freewheeler who always landed on top, not out of naive honesty but out of a simple perception of other human beings and their gullibility.

Much new evidence in this study is based on London productions, where the view of English audiences and critics was sharply focused on what Americans thought about themselves and the new culture of democracy emerging around them. The shift from America, the borrower, to America, the original doer, can be clearly seen in this stager activity.

Yankee theatre, then, is an epitome of the emerging American after the Second War for Independence. Emerging nationalism meant emerging national definition. Yankee theatre thus led to the first cohesive body of American plays, the first American actors seen in London, and to a new realistic interpretation of the American in the "character" plays of the 1870s and 1880s.

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