

## TOURING MELODRAMAS AND MIDWEST FRONTIER VALUES

by Judith Zivanovic

The history of the "Middle Border" is largely a history of town development. As the frontier pushed West, wise developers recognized the necessity of "softening" settlers' lives by adding various amenities; these usually included a general store, hotel, and a building that could serve as a focus for community events.<sup>1</sup> At first, social activities were held in courthouses, churches, or schools, but by the 1860s, many communities began to add halls or opera houses, specifically designed "with stages and platforms for dances, exhibitions, lectures, community celebrations and amateur and professional theatricals."<sup>2</sup>

Two attitudes were prevalent among the early settlers concerning the development of theater in the community. Some considered the theater harmful to public morality. (Harriet Beecher Stowe, as one of this number, for some time rejected the idea of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a theater piece.)<sup>3</sup> Others saw theater as a means of extending education beyond the schools. Even those with no strong feelings either way saw the theater in moral terms: they approved of community halls and opera house being used by local and national touring companies—but only if they presented plays of "high moral tone." Such attitudes were largely responsible for the steady growth in production of melodrama from before the Civil War through the early years of this century.

The attitudes also defined the role of these value-laden melodramas—not so much the teaching of morality (although that could certainly occur for the unconverted), but rather, speaking to the converted, a "speech to stimulate" which

spoke to and reinforced values already held.<sup>4</sup> As critic David Grimsted stated of frontier theater,

... the theater was certainly the most democratic institution of public entertainment, dependent for success on the response of people drawn from all parts of the community, and drama was the most social of art forms, in which the will of the audience was immediately influential. The audience, all critics agreed, ruled the kingdom of drama, which survived only by acute responsiveness to their desires.<sup>5</sup>

This paper examines popular melodramas of the Midwest Border during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to determine what those values and community standards were. Much of the source material for this paper is derived from records of touring companies that visited Minnesota, the Dakotas, and other Great Plains states. Oral history information was provided by performers interviewed at the Museum of Theater Americana in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, and several locations in South Dakota. Additional sources included the touring company newsletter, *Bill Bruno's Bulletin*; Denver Public Library local news items; the archives of William Davidson, who owned Minneapolis/St. Paul opera houses; and the records of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Scott, who managed these opera houses.

*Touring Melodramas*

During the period from 1870 to 1910, there were two major types of tours which presented melodramas to the Middle Border. One was the "national touring

company" which typically had a home base on the East coast and presented opera, plays "fresh from Broadway," and, frequently, major stars such as Sarah Bernhardt, James O'Neill or Dion Boucicault. The other was a regional touring company which had its base in the Midwest, typically in Iowa or Nebraska, and traveled "a circle" in the region, regularly returning to that home base.

Both tours provided primarily comedy and melodrama. Moreover, those who recognized the appeal of both genres promptly developed the popular play which combined comedy into the melodrama. By melodrama, I mean the genre which can be traced to Aristotle's discussion of the Euripides' *Medea*, a play which includes pity, hatred, and fear in a primary plot action depicting the struggle of good and evil. The type melodrama that was popular on the frontier had its origins in French and British drama of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

One way to determine frontier community values and prejudices is to examine which melodramas were popular in a given season and public reaction to them. As Grimsted observed, the owners and managers of these opera houses had neither Carry Nation's axe to grind nor John Brown's social agenda; they were entrepreneurs, in business to make a profit, and they tried to stay attuned to changing public interests and tastes. Letter after letter in the Louis Scott files reveals the degree to which this was the case. For example, in 1909, Scott cautioned one touring company manager that the dates he offered for a play aimed at Jewish patrons were inappropriate--they fell on a Jewish holiday. On another occasion, he resisted booking *Tobacco Road* until he could be assured that local authorities would sanction it (1934); on yet another occasion, he booked a show to play mainly in St. Paul, with half as many days in Minneapolis, because previous experience

had shown that the people in St. Paul turned out much better for the leading actress, Eva LeGalliene (1934). Scott's opera houses contributed regularly to the famous quandary of James O'Neill--in Minneapolis/St. Paul, as elsewhere, whenever O'Neill tried to introduce new showcases for his acting talent, it was *The Count of Monte Cristo* which was booked, produced standing room only audiences, and made him a good deal of money, while confining him to this one vehicle for the majority of his acting career.<sup>6</sup> One actress I interviewed, Winifred Torwick, a member from ingenue through character days of the well-respected Robbins Company, informed me with pride that her company did only "clean family fare" and that the audiences came from miles around by horse and wagon, later, jalopy, in all kinds of weather, on horrible roads, to see the shows.<sup>7</sup> Some of the examples later in the paper will indicate that these entrepreneurs had no difficulty discovering the values and community standards of their audiences, rural and urban alike. Newspaper accounts from the Scott files describe campaigns waged against plays which were not "clean," a word used with regularity in advertising and newspaper copy. The majority of the frontier populace had values which were evident and to which the opera house and touring company manager appealed.

The books of Minneapolis and St. Paul opera houses reflect some consistency in seasons through the years. Each year, there were several operas, with *Faust* the most popular, if number of performances is taken as a prime indicator. Its tale of good and evil, with virtue under attack but victorious, is in the proudest tradition of the period's melodrama. There were also productions of Shakespeare with such noted stars as Julia Marlowe and Henry Irving. It should be noted that Irving traveled with other plays, including *Beckett*, the melodrama in which he was

performing at the time of his death. Unlike Anouilh's modern *Becket*, the character was seen by Douglas Jerrold not as a martyr but as a misguided individual led astray by evil clergy. Each year for a good number of years, the season in Minneapolis/St. Paul opened with a melodrama with comedy or a comedy starring Fiske O'Hara or Chauncey Alcott. A perennial favorite, *The Mavoureen*, was described by one critic as a "terrible play but clean."<sup>8</sup> The bulk of the season, like seasons throughout the frontier, was comprised of comedy and melodrama. Titles such as *The Runaway*, *Joseph Entangled*, or *The Tyranny of Tears* are interspersed among better known melodramas of the period.

#### *Values in Touring Melodramas*

There were four emphases in the season which were clearly major melodrama directions for the Twin Cities, and were likewise important to the frontier as a whole: ethnic and class concerns, separated from a related theme--slavery, or more generally, the conflict between freedom and tyranny; the role of the woman in society (and in melodrama); and the effects of alcohol/the Temperance Movement. An examination of the reaction to selected plays among these themes in the Twin Cities is useful to the understanding of frontier values.

The most clearcut example of melodrama that reinforced majority values was the temperance play, focusing as it did on the tyranny of "demon rum." The temperance play was typically a melodrama reflecting the evils of drink (and of those who would use this addiction to subjugate people), and the struggle of good persons, (generally the wife and children of a drunkard) to overcome the evil or the impact of being overcome by it. *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* became the second most popular play; others of the type, such as the various versions of *The Drunkard*, became exceedingly popular. Although

there were certainly some unseamy saloons, one need not assume that every town welcoming these plays was being destroyed by heavy drinking. The significant influence of a Calvinist tradition resulted in a widespread assumption that the entire community was tainted by the sin, when some (perhaps only the "lown drunk") engaged in that sin.<sup>9</sup> The strict morality of the frontier household meant that the majority of the citizens' values would be confirmed--as opposed to changed--by the messages witnessed in these plays. The rightness of their views was confirmed each time they saw such plays, and they saw them with some frequency. The stories were generally much the same: posters showed the poverty-stricken children standing outside the bar, hoping to regain the comfort of their family, indeed to feed themselves, urging their drunken father from the den of iniquity. Audiences perhaps soon tired of this theme; indeed it was not as popular theatrically, nor ultimately politically, as the slavery theme; however, the moral fibre of many a frontier citizen thrilled to the confirmation inherent in a good temperance melodrama.

The consummate popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* prior to the Civil War and well into the twentieth century attests to the importance of themes associated with the script, although one must not discount the importance of the spectacle itself to assure its perennial appeal.<sup>10</sup> Still, the concern of the American audience with the struggle for freedom against tyranny seems paramount to the appeal of this play. At the same time, advocates, including some ministers, were arguing that the institution of slavery was "necessary" for the protection of the black race. Such a rationalization played well for those persons with clearcut prejudices against blacks and created disquiet for those who had some doubts on the subject.

This dichotomy in reaction is nowhere more clearly revealed than with an incident which occurred in 1906 in the Twin Cities. During that year, Mr. Scott contracted with a company touring with *The Clansman*, the play based on the novel of the same name, which became Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. This work, written by precisely one of those ministers decrying carpetbaggers and freed slaves as destroyers of the South and advocating the necessity of the Ku Klux Klan to preserve it, raised controversy from the moment it was announced in the season. The black newspaper began an attack on the scheduling of such a production, arguing that the Irish and Jewish communities would not permit the defamation of their cultures in such a way and the black community should not do so either.<sup>11</sup> The controversy reached a peak with articles in "The Tribune," stating that the play revealed the "Negro problem" and that through it one sees the "eternal difference between the races" and rejoices in the intervention of the KKK--all of which must be true because the book was written by a minister, while Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the then opposing viewpoint, was only "the daughter of a minister."<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, a black lawyer named William Morris argued that it was pointless to waste energy opposing the play because "it is not strong enough to create prejudice in thinking minds."<sup>13</sup> At about this time, the Governor threatened to close the theater, Scott and other theater managers began to fight this "censorship," and their arguments, for whatever reason, won out. The play was presented. The audiences were meager, apparently not only because many valued the anti-slavery theme more than that advocated by *The Clansman*, but, equally, and perhaps even more significantly, because the play was widely considered not to be very good; word-of-mouth rated it "very poor."<sup>14</sup> Lawyer Morris was asked

to do a review for the "News"; while not particularly objective, other papers such as the above "Journal" article, and indeed papers in other cities where *The Clansman* played, apparently agreed with the negativity if not the spirit of his review: "The play bears the earmarks, even to the slit in the ear, of having been written by a former minister . . . His congregation is to be congratulated upon his change of vocation--if he did change--though the stage suffers by it."<sup>15</sup> Within six months, with no unusual fanfare or printed recollection of the earlier controversy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played at the same theater to its usual packed houses.

The paradox represented by a commitment to abolitionist views on the one hand and a pervasive bigotry or the support of racial separation on the other is demonstrated not only in racial melodramas but in the popularity of ethnic melodramas as well. Indeed, blacks were among the characters in plays other than those dealing with slavery. The advertising of ethnic plays and the themes evident in them reveal a society somewhat willing to laugh at itself--but not too hard--and not when it came to certain values or political beliefs. It also reveals a totally unselfconscious bigotry and a growing acceptance, as Civil War fervor ebbed, of "Negro inferiority" and the "need" for racial segregation.

The Twin Cities season, year after year, from the 1880s to 1910, is indicative of the above conclusions. Each year the season began with a play about the Irish population. Though one might laugh at the Irish, the good characters were of that group, while those characters representing the evil--or at least negative--view, were generally of British extraction. Several actors made a living laughing at their Northern European background, but they were generally the heroes of comedy. No significant melodrama of which I am aware identified persons from that part of

the world as particularly villainous. On the contrary, a 1909 article in "The Journal" condemned the long-popular comedies about Northern Europeans as distortions, and found the rendering of Swedes in the melodrama, *The Norseman*, "the best portrait of Swedes in America yet." Still, the play was indicted as "crude melodrama" and its stolid if stoical hero "a disappointment," when instead such Swedish qualities should be "good contrasts put over against the volatile qualities of Western Americans."<sup>16</sup> Frequently the Chinese were seen as wicked villains in a piece, generally not worthy of being the primary villain but able to lure poor white family men into dens of sex and drugs. One ad regaled its audience with the opportunity to see in one production, "a human tower of Chinks."<sup>17</sup> Finally, when blacks were characterized in plays, including the later versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they were shown as simple-minded, naïve or clearly of low intelligence, though great lovers of music and dance. We are told in ad after ad in the Twin Cities of "pickaninny" bands or characters presenting "coon songs." The most blatant example of such attitudes can be found in a puff piece which described the forthcoming musical *Red Moon*, wherein the authors had "evolved a picturesque play and novel theme by using negro [sic] and Indian motive [sic] . . ." The tone cannot be missed as we learn that "Sam Lucas, the first actor to play Uncle Tom, plays the bandanna headed ol' mother." *Red Moon* blends the humor of the Negro with the picturesqueness of the Indian. Among the songs . . . "Cupid Is An Indian Pickaninny . . . and other coon songs . . . full of the harmonic effects for which the Negro is noted . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Ten years earlier, the season had included the popular Cole and Johnson with their "Black Face by an African-American Company," presenting *A Trip to*

*Coontown*. Perhaps in satire—albeit surely a painful one—of these attitudes, a handsome young black performer, Ernest Hogan, billed himself as "The Unbleached American," and performed his original piece entitled, "All Coons Look Alike to Me."<sup>19</sup> Dion Boucicault, frequently seen as an actor and playwright in Minneapolis/St. Paul, achieved the best of all worlds in appealing to the abolition-separation paradox with his popular play, *The Octoroon*. Here people could reject slavery for many of the popular black characters, be emotionally involved with Zoe (the loving title character) and still respect Southerners, as a Southern girl bids all she has to gain Zoe and set her free. The audience could be well-disposed to the South, represented by good individuals, and yet cheer the North for fighting the general ills of slavery.<sup>20</sup>

But the prejudices which involved women in the frontier society were much more pervasive than those concerning ethnic groups, and those prejudices were at the heart of most melodrama, and, at the same time, at the heart of society and the family. A dichotomy perhaps even more perplexing than that previously discussed with regard to slavery and race arose around this issue. Here the moral society had to value virtue, but it also especially valued the man as head of the family—a tradition with centuries of precedent in the Judeo-Christian culture and with immediate reinforcement from the work-ethic-oriented frontier culture. The melodrama which people came to love, then, placed the "weak and virtuous" in jeopardy—if the male hero saved the damsel, the male fantasy was redeemed; if the female fell beneath the stress of the pressures, it only confirmed weakness which the audience, both male and female, already largely acknowledged. Here, the melodrama not only acted as the "speech to stimulate," sanctioning and strengthening prevailing attitudes, but

critics--particularly today's feminist critics--see the power of this melodrama theme as one which "taught" women to be more subservient and solidified the hold of male dominance.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, as with most things as serious as values, not only was this not the case in all domestic melodramas, but some critics argue that melodramas promoted the very opposite--that woman, removed from participation in "essential production" and with "all her energies focused on the family," found her "moral superiority" to men confirmed by much melodrama and her self-sacrifice redeemed.<sup>22</sup> Add to this the presence in a number of these plays of a primary (occasionally) or secondary (more frequently) female character who rebels and/or equals the men at their game, and you have the final piece to the women-and-melodrama puzzle. Such plays show a strong female who is in the right, is the exponent of good, and wins with limited assistance from, indeed in a few cases despite, the efforts of a male. Ostensibly acknowledged to be weaker, she suffers more and exhibits greater inner strength. Why would such a play be popular? Cynically, we might say that most of these plays permitted female actresses to wear "breeches," an attire very titillating to the male audience member and enjoyed by actresses and selected female members of the audience since English Restoration. That is undoubtedly true. However, it is also true that there were segments of the population that had begun to value the needs and contributions of women more extensively, and parts of the Midwest and Western Frontier were among them. While the East lagged far behind, women achieved the vote first in the West. Leaders in both the Temperance and the closely linked Suffrage Movements were women who had supporters among the men of the region. Martha Vicinus believes that some authors also appealed to the "underlying emotional tension in

women's lives." She argues that both self-sacrifice and rebellion were key to many melodramatic plots because they were key to the lives of most women of the frontier--a steady diet of self-sacrifice and being undervalued produced a state of tension in women wherein they responded well to seeing a woman who remained unsullied while doing things they would not dare to do.<sup>23</sup> Still, many of the inhabitants were British and European immigrants or Eastern, less liberal, rulers of the roost, and the majority of plays reflected the traditional view. A significant number of plays, however, included some appeal to both sides of the issue, something we might expect given the tumult and social changes that were characteristic of the Midwest/Western frontier.

#### *Conclusion*

We may ask, "Which came first--the morality or the melodrama?" Considering the entrepreneurial nature of touring, the clear background of the frontier in terms of its relatively harsh morality, and the plays themselves, one can say with a great deal of authority that from the onset of the tours, melodramas--sharing popularity on the frontier with comedy--reflected the straightforward morality and demand for clear-cut good and evil. Still, the issues are clearly complex, and subject to change. Prejudices and the extent of the rigid morality of our forefathers were factors in the types of plays brought to the frontier and in the response to those plays. At the same time, we cannot make the blanket assumption that these issues were the only ones when it came to a choice of plays. The audience wanted to see a good show as well as a *good* show.

The standards of what made that show good may be considered broad, declamatory, and relying too heavily on contrived resolution--funny by today's standards. Such criticism speaks of our values. On the contrary, in its day,

critically acclaimed melodrama was not considered simplistic but true, and these "unbelievable" endings were not only believable but redemptive. Justice *must* ultimately prevail for the true believer in a world of Divine order. Justice may take a long time to prevail, as it did in many melodramas and in an audience member's life, but the hard worker could see in the melodrama that he or she could finally triumph; that after years of virtuous perseverance, the reward could be sudden and dramatic. What could be more

desirable when life was hard and any alternative could bring forth blasphemous questions about a just God? As David Grimsted rightly states, the melodrama "meshed so exactly with public taste that no amount of critical abuse affected its popularity. Even those playwrights who deplored the form ended up adopting it."<sup>24</sup> A line from the well-known melodrama, *Hazel Kirke*, states, "Peace after pain and after sadness mirth." The line must have been seen by the frontier citizen as a summation of life.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890* (Lincoln, Neb.: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1954), p. 45.

2. Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), p. 135.

3. See, for instance, David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture 1800-1850* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968) and Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985).

4. This should not be understood to denigrate the importance of this aspect of melodrama to the socialization of the frontier town. See, for instance, J.S.R. Goodlad, *A Sociology of Popular Drama* (London: Heinemann, 1971).

5. David Grimsted, "Melodrama as Echo of the Historically Voiceless," in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations of Nineteenth Century Social History*, ed. Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs: N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971).

6. Louis N. Scott, *Collected Papers*. (A.S428), (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society), Letter from O'Neill's agent and newspaper accounts, 1892.

7. Winifred Torwick, interview in Huron, South Dakota, 1983.

8. Scott, "Journal," July 1900.

9. For example, see John Kobler, *Ardent Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973).

10. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the most popular play in this country from before the Civil War until the second decade of the twentieth century. It spawned so many companies, touring to towns of every size, that there were reportedly five hundred companies by the 1890s. One reviewer in 1902 estimated "in that year alone a million and a half people in the United States, one in every thirty-five inhabitants of the total population, would see a production of the play. By 1912, Charles E. Stowe, the son of Harriet Beecher Stowe, estimated that there had been 250,000 productions of the play in this country." (Gossett, pp. 370-1.)

11. Scott, "The Appeal," April 1906.

12. Scott, "The Tribune," April 27, 1906.

13. Scott, "The Journal," April 27, 1906.

14. See, for instance, Scott, "The Journal," April 27, 1906.
15. Scott, "The News," April 1906.
16. Scott, "The Journal," May 2, 1909.
17. Theodore L. Hays, *Collected Papers* (A 8089/8986), (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society, Vol. 48, 1899-1900).
18. Scott, unidentified newspaper, 1909.
19. Hays, Vol. 47, 1897-1899.
20. (Excellent discussions of the paradox are included in Maurice Willson Disher, *Blood and Thunder: Mid-Victorian Melodrama and Its Origins* (London: Frederick Muller, Ltd., 1949) and Kenneth T. Rainey, "Race and Reunion in Nineteenth-Century Reconciliation Drama," *ATO (The American Transcendental Quarterly)*, New Series: vol. II, no. 2 (June 1988), pp. 155-69.
21. See especially E. Ann Kaplan, "Theories of Melodrama: A Feminist Perspective," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. I, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1983), pp. 40-48.
22. Martha Vicinus, "'Helpless and Unfriended': Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, vol. XIII, no. 1 (1981-82), pp. 131-133.
23. Vicinus, pp. 133-34.
24. Grimsted, "Melodrama as Echo," p. 81.