



# **THEATRE HISTORY STUDIES**

**2001 VOLUME 21**

# The Canvas Cathedral: Toby Shows as Nativistic Social Movements

---

DAWN LARSEN

From the turn of the twentieth century through the nineteen thirties, the most prevalent form of rural American popular entertainment represents an integral chapter of American theatre history; a facet of theatre that is unfamiliar to most people, theatre historians included. The tent show with its later addition of popular character, Toby, was a major theatrical force that was responsible for keeping rural theatre alive. This study investigates Toby shows as a theatrical representation of a nativistic social movement and strives to uncover the Toby show experience's effects on the rural population that patronized the shows performed in Toby's canvas cathedral. The term "Toby show," in its heyday, denoted a traveling vaudeville-type melodramatic tent show that included one dominant feature, the character Toby. Toby is defined in *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, which draws from material by Robert Downing, as "a stock character in the folk theatre of the United States, a bucolic comedy juvenile leading man in provincial repertory companies of the Mississippi Valley and the Great Southwest."<sup>1</sup>

Ralph Linton, in his article in *American Anthropologist*, entitled "Nativistic Movements," defines nativistic movements as, "Any conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture."<sup>2</sup> I maintain that rural audience support and patronage of these historic shows signified a "conscious, organized attempt to" revive in some cases, perpetuate in others, rural Americans' waning agrarian ideologies. Linton's article concerns behaviors associated with cultures in transition, specifically when one culture clashes with another. I argue that an encroaching urban presence threatened rural communities' long-held ideologies and the tent shows, functioning as nativistic movements, were reactions against the urban influence.

In order to delineate the rural culture in question, through examination of historical summaries, trouper testimony, and personal interviews, I can ascertain that most Toby show patrons were similar in certain respects and formed a specific interest group central to the nativistic argument: they were isolated and derived their income directly or indirectly from agriculture, usually of a lower-income agricultural class, white, religious, conservative, and patriarchal. Surely, town businessmen and their wives as well as those of an upper, probably merchant, class attended, but it is important to remember that these upper classes were also dependent, though indirectly, upon farming. Though a somewhat melodramatic example, Larry Clark provides an illustration of a tent show audience in the first dissertation written



concerning Toby shows:

Although no description of a very early audience is available, this one of a typical audience in 1929-30 shows many elements which must have been equally present earlier. The company plays to lean farmers, unshaven, often unwashed, who come clad in working overalls, collarless, who slump in their seats, worn out by all day's haying in the hot sun, who are childishly eager to be amused, to plump farmers' wives in housedresses and aprons, to young couples who have come twenty miles in the Ford over rough dirt roads, carrying the baby in their arms, bringing the two and four-year-olds to sit sleepily alongside until nearly midnight, to the garage mechanic and his daughter. Their audience is talkative, lively, and it has the wistfulness of people who work hard and have little recreation.<sup>3</sup>

Jere Mickel in his book, *Footlights on the Prairie*, relates a similar story in that these people worked for a meager living and saved enough of their income to attend the show each year. The story goes that one night Bess Robbins, co-owner of the Robbins Show, which toured the Midwest, had spoken to a newspaperman about her annoyance with crying babies during the show. The man severely, and with good reason, reprimanded her:

Bess Robbins, the mothers of those babies have saved egg money for months, to get to see you tonight. Some of them came forty miles by horse and buggy, because you are the brightest spot in a very dreary existence. Any time your audience boasts a baby, it means the mother is a devoted fan—and you be grateful.<sup>4</sup>

These stories illustrate not only the shows' appeal, but the economic essence of their rural American audiences.

Audiences were almost consistently white. In e-mail to me, scholar and former trouper, William L. Slout remembers,

No Blacks during the early Michigan years. There weren't many Blacks in Michigan before World War II and defense work. Later, when the show [Verne Slout show] went farther south into Illinois and Missouri, I guess there must have been. I wasn't really conscious about it.<sup>5</sup>

Statistics found on the *Historical United States Census Data Browser*, support Slout's contention. In 1910, less than 1% of the population in Michigan was African-American. In 1920, the numbers had risen to only 2%, and remained until 1940 when the count rose to 4% of the total population.<sup>6</sup> In an interview, Billy Henderson Schuller, former tent show child actress, recalled, "No. There were no blacks in our territory [Michigan and upper to middle Midwest] prior to World War II. After the war, there were some, but I don't remember them attending the show."<sup>7</sup> It is unclear whether this was due to a low minority population in those areas or if minorities did not choose to attend tent shows. Tent show material was often very

racist, though in the early twentieth century, racist material was standard in many popular entertainment forms.

Most audiences were religious, yet not immune to minor off color humor. The shows were often referred to as "mother, home and heaven" shows. The comedy in the early Toby shows was never "blue" (sexual or vulgar in nature) because the predominately Protestant audiences would not tolerate it. Mickel states that the general rule concerning comedy was, "'If you can't tell the story Sunday morning in church, you can't tell it Monday night on the stage,' except maybe in the Saturday night concert," because the concert was after the regular show and an optional performance.<sup>8</sup> The contentment of attending ministers was an important marketing tactic because they, in turn, would persuade their congregations to attend a clean family show. Showman Harley Sadler's biography by Clifford Ashby illustrates:

Preachers who regularly inveighed against 'the sinful delights of that gorgeous playing place, the theatre,' were regular patrons at Harley's show, and would frequently move Wednesday night services to an earlier hour so that both religion and entertainment could be accommodated in the same evening.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, to combat the tawdry reputation long carried by the theatre profession, tent show owner/managers required their employees to uphold a spotless moral image. For example, managers forbade actresses to fraternize with "townner" males and often actresses boarded in a separate building from men in the company.

Audiences were typically conservative. Paige, in his book, *Agrarian Revolution*, agrees, "Cultivating classes dependent on land are politically conservative."<sup>10</sup> They are conservative because small farmers are subject to a free market economy, to supply and demand. They rise to a higher agricultural class by driving other less efficient and productive producers out of business. Their profits could then be reinvested into more land and equipment to increase production. Therefore, according to Paige, "The farm community is likely to be dominated by its wealthiest members."<sup>11</sup> The most successful farmers, thus the most influential, did not desire change because the present system had worked for them.

Rural audiences lived in a patriarchal culture. Men ran farms and businesses; women worked those farms and business. Tent show plays and organizational structures reflected this culture. Toby was the main character, whom the action revolved around. Susie, though a female personification of Toby, was a subordinate character in the plays. Moreover, the companies cast women in a subservient capacity. Early scholars and biographers categorized women in the business as either managers' wives or actresses, the former being the most esteemed position. Managers' wives were further typed as either ornaments or leading ladies (my labels). Clifford Ashby, in his biography of Harley Sadler, explained the role of ornament this way:

The company's first stroll through the town was an important event. . . . For the ladies of the town, the daytime attire of the actors provided as much grist for the conversation mills as the evening's entertainment in the tent. . . . The popular wife of the company manager/owner could not help but be aware of

her position as leader of fashion, and responded by spending endless hours in dress shops, looking for 'just the right' blouse, or scarf, or earrings.<sup>12</sup>

Females not categorized as wives were hired actresses contracted by tent show managers to uphold the flawless image of the company, an image certainly constructed by those male managers and the patriarchal culture.

Toby's audiences tended to uphold certain ideologies. Because testimony is scant and often dubious, I additionally rely on the following supposition. If, according to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, what a society values is contingent upon its social, economic, philosophical, and political atmospheres, what she calls "economies," then I can assume that what an audience responds to positively is generally what they deem appropriate, based on those economies.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the intense popularity of the shows suggests that the reflected ideologies inherent in them represented those of their audiences.

Tent show authors wrote their plays to reflect rural audiences' attitudes and beliefs. Because Toby personified these ideologies, he, in effect, became the rural people's prophet/trickster and the shows were a theatrical representation of a nativistic social movement.

In my years of first performing and then examining tent show material, I began deeper explorations into historic scripts to discover if they were merely light amusements for audiences starved for entertainment or if there were deeper symbolic meanings associated with the ideologies reflected in the scripts and the comedy. Linton believes that nativistic movements use distinctive elements and assign them symbolic value. He argues, "The more distinctive such elements are with respect to other cultures with which the society is in contact, the greater their potential value as symbols of the society's unique character."<sup>14</sup> The rural characters in Toby plays came to represent each man or woman in the audience and personify distinctive principles such as morality, integrity, honesty, and righteousness in contrast to the city's perceived antithetical customs.

The plots of historic shows directly reflected the attitudes of rural Americans. The early shows revolved around scripted plays, usually in three-act form, that tended to feature a moral message that represented essential and distinctive elements crucial to historic rural American ideology. Slout in *Theatre in a Tent* succinctly identifies the typical tent show plot:

The plot is simple, easy to follow, leaving nothing to the imagination. Rural audiences preferred it this way. Characters reflect popular attitudes toward right and wrong, with wrong being disposed of in conformance with Christian practice. The homespun rural dwellers are idealized. Rustic comedy abounds. . . . Success through enterprise is encouraged. . . . Everything is agreeable to the image the auditor has formed of himself and his neighbors, supporting his ideals of mother, home, and heaven.<sup>15</sup>

In all Toby plays, the silly hillbilly outwits the evil city slicker through righteousness and integrity. Toby plays were not about another time and place, but about problems close at hand. Supporting the tent show companies by attending the

plays was to me, from Linton's definition, "a conscious, organized attempt" to perpetuate aspects of the culture that rural Americans felt were being taken away by the wicked dominant urban culture.<sup>16</sup> In the historic plays, Toby's integrity was his defense and his strength and the optimal way was the honest way, the backbone of rural tradition and the agrarian myth.

The most influential phenomenon supporting the success of the tent play was what Hofstadter in his book, *The Age of Reform*, called the agrarian myth, which "[represents] the kind of homage that Americans have paid to the fancied innocence of their origins."<sup>17</sup> The agrarian myth originated long before the turn of the century, apparent in the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. Early writers, especially Thomas Jefferson, idealized the role of the citizen-farmer. Browne, Skees, Swanson and Thompson in their book, *Sacred Cows and Hot Potatoes: Agrarian Myths in Agricultural Policy*, assert that a romantic notion of agrarian values has two basic themes: "First is the notion that nature is a formative element in the American national character. Second is the related idea that hard physical labor is a prerequisite to achieving the virtues necessary for self-realization."<sup>18</sup> Toby, a hard-working farm boy, embodied both of these ideals. The authors continue by noting that "Jefferson and Emerson elected farmers as embodying moral and political ideals that should be applied to all citizens."<sup>19</sup> Our founding fathers believed that not only should the American public believe that hard work and honesty were the American way, but that they should hold the farmer as a consummate standard. Tent shows reflected these dominant standards as Slout, in *Theatre in a Tent*, describes fundamental themes inherent in a tent or Toby play:

Tent show dramas supported [an] idealistic image of the farmer. The gossips, the hypocrites, and the dishonest deacons were small town upper-class, not tillers of the soil. The yeoman was their prey, vulnerable through innocence. For him, righteousness was his defense and his strength. The simple way was the honest way. Education connoted insincerity and even dishonesty. . . .<sup>20</sup>

Toby provided them an archetype through all his regional incarnations, cowboy, hillbilly or farmer. He represented agriculture because in the plays, he survived by utilizing natural resources from various tent rep companies' representative regions.

The development of agriculture as a business and its impact on rural Americans fueled the myth and the popularity of the tent show. The golden age of tent shows grew out of the profitable first two decades of the twentieth century. World War I caused the agricultural market to flourish. Further, according to Slout, "the war years brought prosperity to tent show managers the like of which they had never experienced."<sup>21</sup> Heightened demand for agricultural products due to the war and the lure of industrial jobs caused the farmer to move from an agrarian society to a commercial society. Hofstadter asserted that "the more farming as a self-sufficient way of life was abandoned for farming as a business, the more merit men found in what was being left behind."<sup>22</sup>

Further, the nation was immersed in the Progressive era from 1893 through 1917, which contributed to the idea that something valuable from the past had been lost. Pease, in his book, *The Progressive Years*, described Progressive activists' influence



in America:

The reformers of that generation did not comprise more than a small segment of the young and middle-aged urban citizens, but they were educated far above the average, their professions placed them in a strategic position in society, and in consequence their influence grew all out of proportion to their numbers.<sup>23</sup>

I would maintain that a major part of this influence was reflected in the messages and practices of Chautauqua, another extremely popular entertainment form that traveled similar territory during nearly the same time period, 1874 to 1927. Progressive ideals were spread most especially through Chautauqua platform speaker, William Jennings Bryan. His appearances in the tent Chautauqua during the nineteen teens and twenties were an opportunity for him to preach Progressive messages. Hofstadter, maintains that the general theme of Progressivism was,

the effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine; and with that restoration to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost.<sup>24</sup>

Though the actual representation of the agrarian myth was personified by the opposing Populist party, the progressive movement also fueled the belief in the agrarian myth. According to Terry Wunder, in his dissertation, "Living in a Progressive Age: Tent Repertoire Shows, Melodrama, and the Agrarian Myth," "many of the reforms suggested by the Progressives were based on an economic individualism and political democracy that rural Americans believed was escaping them."<sup>25</sup> Progressivism's message with its particular ideological base was similar to that of tent show plays. However, Chautauqua was a performance genre dedicated to intellectualism, betterment and growth, tent show drama looked to the simplicity of the agrarian past. Toby shows seem to reflect Progressivism as an outcry to return to a previous way of life that was more moral, pure and physically versus intellectually centered. Tent show material favored hard work and honesty over education, viewing the cities as evil and the country as the ideal environment.

The agrarian ideals were clearly represented in the tent shows' stock characters derived from Melodramatic tradition. The hero character stereotypes reflected certain simplistic attributes that were symbols for ideologies upheld by rural Americans. Conversely, the villains' attributes directly represented what rural audiences considered to be evil and harmful toward their community.

Toby and his girlfriend as heroes personified, from Linton, "current or remembered elements of culture . . . selected for emphasis and given symbolic value." These characters exhibited consummate attitudes and behaviors for their audiences, Toby for men and Susie for women.

Historians agree that the character description of the hero, Toby, was standard. The costume and make-up of the Toby character consisted of four basic elements: a red

wig, freckles, a blacked-out tooth, and baggy, tattered clothing. Because of those theatrical conventions, the audience recognized Toby the minute he appeared on the stage. There were variations determined by the particular actor and the area in which he played. Larry Clark states that tradition fixed many elements of the portrayal of Toby, including costume and make-up, text and ad-libbing, and physical comedy techniques.<sup>26</sup> Particular actor's characters variously reflected their respective conceptions of Toby. For instance, Downing in his article, "Toby," recognizes Fred Wilson, thought to be the first Toby, who played him rather unadorned since he had natural red hair and freckles.

Wilson [said,] "I came into this world with a shock of unruly red hair and later acquired a flock of freckles that all the make-up in Stein's laboratory couldn't have improved upon. The character was just myself plus a hickory shirt, patched jeans, boots with run-down heels and a battered hat."<sup>27</sup>

Neil Schaffner, on the other hand, played Toby as more of a clown-type character. Clark notes that Schaffner added peaked eyebrows, a raspberry mouth, and a great deal of red coloring to his face.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes the actors' creeping age resulted in exaggeration in make-up as tent scholar, Carol Pennepacker, notes that "the freckles grew larger with the passing years, and the costume more ridiculous and elaborate; the face may have greater quantities of paint, perhaps a means of concealing the age of the actor, who may be all of fifty or even sixty."<sup>29</sup>

In order to provide a more personal representation for the rural audience member, the Toby character was purposefully shaped by the actor to reflect the geographical area in which the company toured. Ranny in his article, "Forever Toby," illustrates:

Verne Slout of the Slout Players [played] Toby as a Midwest farm yokel, for he tours Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Missouri and Arkansas. On the other hand, the Bisbee comedians [traveled] in the mountains of Tennessee and Kentucky, so their Toby, played by Boob Brasfield, is more of a hillbilly. Out in the West and Southwest you're apt to find Toby in chaps and carrying side arms.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, each Toby would use the area's particular accent and find a delivery style to suit that accent. Mickel cites that, "[Toby's] witticisms in the West were the dry, cow-country type which would send the audiences rolling in the aisles with laughter, but would fall flat in another part of the country."<sup>31</sup> These regional differences in character provided an intimate connection with the audience in order to further entrench the company into the rural community.

Toby's girlfriend, alias Susie, Sally, Ora, Sis, Cindy, or Elviry, was the female representation of Toby. Delores Dorn-Heft, a former tent show actress in her article entitled, "Toby, the Twilight of a Tradition," defined Susie as "a redhead with pigtailed and freckles, a simple but clever girl," a counterpart to Toby, "the essence of simplicity, good humor and good feeling."<sup>32</sup> Helen Baird Branyon in her article, "Susie of American Tent Repertoire Theatre," traced Susie's character development, which evolved from a "stock soubrette character called Sis Hopkins."<sup>33</sup> Sis Hopkins was a character created by Rose Melville. Slout asserts in *Theatre in a Tent* that in a specialty act that featured Rose as Sis Hopkins, she won such acclaim that her

management immediately expanded Sis into a principal role.<sup>34</sup> Susie was not just a foil to Toby, but an integral part of the show. People loved her as much as Toby. Branyon found that: "Although Susie's popularity may have been eclipsed by Toby because of her sex, she remained a favorable small town image."<sup>35</sup>

The villains in Toby plays represented the city and its urban customs. To rural Americans, the cities were wicked and Toby's audiences were not, because of their unique way of living life via their beliefs in mother, home and heaven. They believed that they could fight the encroaching urbanization by remaining Christian, honest, and moral.

Rural Americans believed that cities were stealing their children. Farmers' fears were magnified as 1920 brought the end of the social, political, and economic power that they had previously enjoyed. Necessity mandated that young sons and daughters leave the farm in search of better income in urban areas. Rural children were disappearing into corrupt territory. Ostrander, in his book, *American Civilization in the First Machine Age: 1890-1940*, argued that the city was a center of wickedness long before World War I commenced:

The American city was just as shockingly sinful in reality as it was in the lurid imaginings of the farm woman whose son or daughter had left home for the bright lights of the metropolis. All cities supported their raging red-light districts, and until the nineties little thought was given to eradicating these. . . . They were taken for granted as manifestations of the dark side of man's nature; and many pious people took some satisfaction in viewing them as the continual working out of God's law that the wages of sin are death.<sup>36</sup>

In self-defense, the rural population perpetuated the agrarian myth and its premise that the city was a wicked place that could corrupt the best of men, that the country was the home of all virtue and honor, and that the poor and meek, even the stupid, would eventually triumph over the rich and clever. According to Mickel, "The myth was already in the minds of the folk when Toby appeared to personify it."<sup>37</sup>

Linton further classifies a nativistic movement into typologies dependent upon dominance and perpetuation/revival elements of culture. I believe tent shows were social events that reflected a perpetuative-rational nativistic movement. Linton states that "the practicability of reviving or perpetuating the element[s] under current conditions is a main consideration."<sup>38</sup> The movement was certainly perpetuative because the ideals reflected by the show's heroes were already crucial aspects of agrarian society when tent shows appeared on the scene.

The movement was also rational, which Linton asserts, "find[s] [its] main function in the maintenance of social solidarity."<sup>39</sup> With commercialism fragmenting the rural way of life, rural community solidarity was something that was continually challenged by urban influences. Farmers felt threatened by urban ideologies and used the shows to remind the audiences of their ideological roots. Further, Linton states,

The elements selected for perpetuation become symbols of the society's existence as a unique entity. . . . The culture elements selected for symbolic use are chosen realistically and with regard to the possibility of perpetuating

them under current conditions.<sup>40</sup>

Linton argues that the "inception of [nativistic] movements can be traced almost without exception to conditions of extreme hardship or at least extreme dissatisfaction with the status quo."<sup>41</sup> He continues to detail that this is due to a perceived inequality between two cultures and that the inequality is based "on attitudes of superiority and inferiority."<sup>42</sup> The feelings of Toby audiences toward the encroaching urban ideologies were similar and these attitudes were emphasized in the plays.

Evidenced by the messages and ideologies present in popular tent show plays, Toby audiences believed that they were the superior culture, though they increasingly feared that they and their children were becoming susceptible to urban influence. Therefore, according to Linton, Toby audiences were involved in a contact group situation known as Dominated-Superior, where the rural audience becomes dominated by urban culture, yet considers its way of life and ideologies superior.<sup>43</sup> I must point out, however, that Linton's research typically involved cultures that came into direct contact with other cultures attempting colonization. Toby audiences were not confronted directly, but always felt the invading urban presence. For my purposes, the most important conclusion regarding Linton's Dominated-Superior situation is:

One of the commonest rationalizations for a loss of a dominant position is that it is due to a society's failure to adhere closely enough to its distinctive culture patterns. Very often such nativism will acquire a semi-magical quality founded on the belief that if the group will only stand firm and maintain its individuality it will once again become dominant.<sup>44</sup>

Led by Toby, the plays sanctioned a return to or perpetuation of the cultural ideals of honesty, integrity and hard-work. Most important in the plays, Toby and his ideologies always won in the end reestablishing rural cultural standards as dominant.

According to Linton, a magical nativistic movement "usually originates with some individual who assumes the role of prophet."<sup>45</sup> Further, cultural elements' "revival [or in this case, perpetuation] is part of a magical formula designed to modify the society's environment in ways which will be favorable to it."<sup>46</sup> Toby served as their prophet/trickster. Toby was prophetic in that he brought the message to audiences that they must uphold and practice their rural ideologies in order to perpetuate their culture and resume their dominant status. Examples, though often subtle, of ideological reminders for rural patrons abound throughout tent show material. A comic sketch found in the Theatre Museum at Mt. Pleasant bearing a "Pitcauthley" tent company stamp provides such a warning. M and C denote man and comic respectively. Most probably, due to the tone of the entire sketch, the man was the heavy from the city and the comic was Toby:

- M. You don't know much bible history either. Don't you go to church?  
C. Of course, I go to church every Sun. I remember the bible verse from last Sun.  
M. Good, what was it?  
C. Don't worry, you'll get your blanket.  
M. No, no, it must have been. . . . Fear not, thy Comforter cometh.



C. I knew it had to do with bed clothin. . . .

M. Let me see your profile.

C. I should say not. If it ain't a showin, you ain't a goin to see it.<sup>47</sup>

Though subtle, the Toby speech represents certain rural ideals. He goes to church every Sunday and, though he mistakes the heavy's words, he would not consider showing anything that is not proper within the rural social context.

Though the mythic trickster figure can also be prophetic, Toby most resembles the trickster in that he turns the normative world upside down. Through theatrically radical improvisational antics, he deviates from the written script, the normative, though created, theatrical world of the play. Toby's comic antics were major traits of his character. He was well known for his low comedy. The primary techniques used included slapstick and facial contortion. The plays were fast paced, of the slapstick genre, and were usually supplemented by the visual antics of Toby. Toby was a master of various types of theatrical gymnastics. Downing notes that, "a Toby who [could] not execute efficacious and frequent pratt-falls, splits, glides and rubber-legs [was not] worth his salt along the bush circuit."<sup>48</sup> Often Toby used various facial effects such as mugging, rolling his eyes, or other such expressions to achieve his comic superiority. Mickel cites troupers who knew Boob Brasfield (sometimes called the "king of Tobys") to be a master of comic facial expression. "He would hitch up his baggy britches, stare stupidly across the footlights and the audience would scream with laughter."<sup>49</sup>

The Toby character reified for his audiences that radical behavior was appropriate in certain situations. The theatrical world had always frowned upon ad-libbing. Currently, the unauthorized use of ad-libbing in scripted plays is grounds for legal suit. Ad-libbing, physically and verbally, was a consistent element of Toby's character. As Downing points out, Toby did not always reserve the physical action just for the stage, "Toby may [have climbed] the proscenium or [ridden] into the flies clutching at drop curtains."<sup>50</sup> Ad-libbing was a liberty that the Toby comedian took for granted. It was an integral part of the Toby character. With these ad-libs and asides, Toby maintained the rhythm of the comedy. To illustrate the term, Mickel, describes Boob Brasfield, a master of ad-libbing:

He was a natural comedian. . . . He stayed in the general vicinity of the script though he would toss in a new line whenever he saw fit. If on account of this an actor happened to miss a cue, Brasfield would be ready to cover with more ad libbing, and help the actor back to his place.<sup>51</sup>

Rural audiences perceived Toby's triumph over the city and its evil ways as a departure from their normative world. Toby additionally acted, as trickster figures often do, as a transforming archetype. Lundquist, in her book, *The Trickster*, explains Jung's definition through Joseph F. Rychlak, "Transforming archetypes . . . emerge when the personality is moving for change and particularly that balancing change which will result in a total personality."<sup>52</sup> Further, "The movement involved in such . . . change is towards wholeness."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Toby's message is one of unification of an increasingly fragmented rural society. Rural Americans feared fragmentation

through the loss of their children and neighbors to the lure of the cities.

Another more blatant comparison emerges with Radin's assertion that, "Many of the Trickster's traits were perpetuated . . . and have survived right up to the present day . . . in the clown."<sup>54</sup> Toby was the clown of the play. Toby comedians such as Neil Shaffner and Billy Choate furthered the clown relationship with their gaudy, clown-like make-up. Toby personified their values and instructed, through the plays' moral messages, his audiences to perpetuate the ideologies that they held dear in order to rise above threatened (or in some cases, actual) metropolitan ideological dominance.

James C. Scott's arguments in, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, support my nativistic assertion. He uses theatrical metaphor to explain behavioral phenomena concerning dominated cultures. Though Scott's book refers to actual historic situations involving a dominated culture, I contend that tent show plays and performances of them were representations of situations that were perceived by rural audiences as real. He terms "hidden transcript [as] discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders."<sup>55</sup> Additionally, he believes that individuals from dominated cultures often take on certain characteristics before their dominators that they would not normally embody. He calls these interactions, "public transcripts."<sup>56</sup> Based upon Scott's conclusions, I can add two fundamental arguments to this study that substantiate Linton's theory. First, Toby plays represent the culture's hidden transcript as the plays were written to resist urban ideologies and to be presented only within the rural context. Second, I think that the Toby character embodies the public transcript of the rural dominated culture, as ignorant, simple, slow, and unrefined.

The plays were hidden transcripts in that they were presented only within the dominated community that they were representing. Scott defines hidden transcripts as "derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript [and by] assessing the discrepancy between the hidden transcript and the public transcript we may begin to judge the impact of domination on public discourse."<sup>57</sup> The tent show plays reflect a great discrepancy between public and hidden transcripts. Often in the tent show plays, though rural characters would appear subordinate and inferior to the city villains in their presence, they would figure out what the villains were up to when alone on-stage. Further, Toby led the scene of inquiry into the rural characters' quandary and then would solicit ideas and solutions from the audience including the audience in finding the most ethical and right decision. Those scenes were hidden transcripts within the hidden transcripts of the play.

Scott's arguments allow a deeper look into the construction of and relationship between the hero and villain. At first glance, Toby's slow, rube, low comedy characterization, or public transcript, may seem to be a negative personification of the rural stereotype as one that is ignorant, slow, and old-fashioned. Scott argues that "the greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast."<sup>58</sup> Toby shows' stock characters reflect distinct virtues or evils. The positive elements stand as the cultural elements that are perpetuated. Moreover, Scott asserts that dominant groups often perceive inferiors as "deceitful, shamming, lying by nature."<sup>59</sup> The villains in Toby plays are suspicious of the rural characters. In one example from my Toby play, which I obtained from my collection

of historic bits, Darkheart, the villain, accuses Toby of deceit:

TOBY: How much money [do you have to wager]?

DARKHEART: All that I have left after you swindled me on that bet you made.

This much money! (*shows Toby the wad of money that he has left*)

TOBY: Now Mr. Darkheart, that was an honest wager and that's a lot of money!<sup>60</sup>

Scott notes that often "subordinates offer a performance of deference and consent while attempting to discern, to read, the real intentions and mood of the potentially threatening powerholder."<sup>61</sup> However, Scott further explains that public transcript is "an indifferent guide to the opinion of subordinates."<sup>62</sup> Simply, subordinates often take on characteristics expected of them by those that dominate them. In an early interchange between Toby and the villain in my Toby play, the villain has asked Toby whether he knows anything about show business. Toby replies, scratching his head, that he does not. The villain then asserts himself as an expert and asks Toby, "Do you even know what an expert is?" Toby innocently replies, "Well, let's see. X always stands for the unknown and a spert is a drip under pressure. So I guess that makes you an unknown drip under pressure!"<sup>63</sup> Thus Toby's public transcript indicates that he agrees that he is not as smart as the villain, yet proves he is, through an honest reply, superior.

I believe that the experience of audiencing a tent show also acted as a cathartic device for the dominated rural audience. After public declaration of the hidden transcript, though only to their own kind, through the presentation of the Toby play, those involved would release pent up frustration and hostility. At least in the play, the good guys win. Scott asserts that such insubordination was the first breach into the wall of domination, a "safety-valve theory."<sup>64</sup> At that point, the dominant group lost some element of social control over the subordinate group. However, Scott does not fully agree with these theories and admits that safety-valve theories differ "in supposing that this desire can be substantially satisfied, whether in backstage talk, in supervised rituals of reversal, or in festivities that occasionally cool the fires of resentment."<sup>65</sup> Though this display did not accomplish re-domination entirely for the rural culture, it surely did remind and reestablish the need for rural ideologies within the community.

Scott uses the term, *infrapolitics*, to denote "forms of disguised, low profile, undisclosed resistance."<sup>66</sup> He maintains that attempted ideological domination of *infrapolitical* structures creates the "development of dissident subcultures, e.g., millennial religions, slave 'hush-arbors,' folk religions, myths of social banditry and class heroes, [and] myths of the 'good' king."<sup>67</sup> The ideological domination of the rural culture forced a certain kind of folk religion. Certainly, I can see a parallel in the tent show audience's behavior. The play disguised the hidden transcript so that even if a member of the dominant culture were to view it, they would think it merely rural entertainment. It is this disguise that Scott asserts the dominated culture can use to voice aspects of the hidden transcript "in muted or veiled form into the public transcript."<sup>68</sup> Scott further argues that popular culture is in itself an "elaborate form of disguise."<sup>69</sup> It allows a way out for the dominated culture in the case of retaliation by the dominant culture. He argues that popular or folk culture is "capable of two

readings, one of which is innocuous."<sup>70</sup> The innocuous reading "provides an avenue of retreat when challenged."<sup>71</sup> Toby plays were considered safe because they were merely theatre, not reality, and moral theatre at that. Scott further asserts that "infrapolitics is, by contrast, the realm of informal leadership and non-elites, of conversation and oral discourse, and of surreptitious resistance."<sup>72</sup> This corresponds with Jeffery Paige's assertion in his book, *Agrarian Revolution*, that small farming communities, like Toby audiences, lack political solidarity. "Cultivating classes dependent on land are politically conservative and unable to form strong political organizations based on class solidarity."<sup>73</sup> That is why the only outcome of resistance in their case is reform of the commodity market instead of revolt. Though Toby shows may have had a cathartic effect on audiences, any kind of reform was minimal or nonexistent.

History, in my case, does repeat itself. The look at nativism illustrates that rural society may still be attempting to perpetuate, in some cases revive, lost ideologies. Patrick Overton, in his 1997 book, *Re-Building the Front Porch of America*, believes:

Our culture is slowly "dis-integrating." We are losing our center and losing touch with the core values that keep us together as a community. . . . We are a society that is drifting and confused—unsure of the roles and the rules—caught in the middle of a social and economic upheaval. . . . This is especially true in the thousands of rural and small communities all across our country.<sup>74</sup>

Cultural elements are the same; honesty, integrity, family and conservatism. I believe modern rural society is in search of a prophet/trickster and that is one reason why these old, goofy, Toby shows are so popular with my rural audiences. A 1998 letter from one of my company's audience members reflects her modern, yet historic concerns.

I just wanted to write and let you know how much we enjoyed your recent show at Vol. State. My kids really liked the performance and for me it was such a relief to be somewhere I could actually relax and not have to worry. . . . So many places that claim to be family oriented really aren't. The prices . . . were really great too. . . . Thanks again and we look forward to the next performance.

Scott further supported my assertion that Toby shows and modern versions of them, like the once popular television program, *Hee Haw*, are hidden transcripts that urban people view as merely rural, crude entertainment and that public transcripts are still what many rural people do in self-defense when confronted with an aggressive urban presence. A performance of my Toby play in 1992 at a coffeehouse in Nashville, Tennessee was attended by *Nashville Banner* and *Nashville Tennessean* theatre critics. The *Tennessean* critic was an older woman, born and raised in Nashville. The other was younger, quite sophisticated, hip. Both laughed at the material. When the younger woman interviewed me after the show, I began to explain to her why I thought the comedy was timeless due to the agrarian values represented by the play. She looked at me quizzically and replied, "Isn't this just a no-brainer?!" The local critic said,



"Where are you from?" The *Banner* critic replied, "I'm originally from New York city." The local critic laughed, and said in her most simple hillbilly voice, "We don't know nothin.' We just want to have fun." She winked at me, "humped" and walked away. That public transcript display shows that the message was there and the rural folks recognized it (the local critic and I), but the dominant urbanite could not see past the public transcript of the characters and the rural nature of the material.

I can compare the factors that contributed to rising popularity of historic tent shows with our current rural social, political, and economic situation. We are in a similar predicament as the shows and audiences of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Contemporary rural America is sensitive to invading mechanization. For example, the agricultural recession of the 1980s caused a rural outcry against corporate commercial farms. Though not as severe, fifteen years later, there is still discourse opposing corporate commercial farms whose offices are found in metropolitan areas. The early recession, in turn, led to social events such as Farm Aid, Willie Nelson's benefit concert to raise money for farm relief. This particular event certainly emphasized elements associated with the agrarian myth; family, history, honesty, ethics and hard work. It even used a popular culture genre rooted in rural ideologies, country music, to disseminate its message. Farm Aid is successfully continuing to raise millions of dollars for farm relief. I can assume that Farm Aid's audiences, which are largely comprised of agricultural workers or those middle-class Americans tied to agriculture or sentimentally to rurality, must need to resist the urban commercial ideology of factory farms. Moreover, I can also see a connection to Farm Aid as a nativistic movement. I think these country singers are acting as Tobys, prophet/tricksters, representing rural people and spreading the agrarian message. This suggests why my Toby show is still popular. The ideologies are basically the same and agrarian ideals are alive and well, at least in rural Tennessee, Missouri, and Southern Illinois.

The rural comedy and the philosophies that the shows represent still apply. The same types of concerns exist. According to Overton,

The challenge facing all of us who work in rural and small communities is to help people find a way to address and overcome their fear and nurture rural genius. . . . The community arts experience provides an opportunity to overcome the sense of isolation and separation that is one of the causes of people's fear.<sup>75</sup>

This fear seems to very closely resemble the historic fear of isolation, fragmentation, and loss of culture that tent show patrons alleviated with Toby shows over one hundred years ago. Like my predecessors, I continue to incorporate local patrons and customs to create and maintain a strong social bond. Moreover, this social bond can help to restore a sense of community to those rural areas that are increasingly fragmented by providing a performative experience where audience can take part in creating the show through audience participation, as well as taking part in the construction of the performance space through volunteering to help pitch our 1929-model, dramatic-end, show tent.

The first summer I did my show in my tent, a boy of about 10 or 11, dressed like a "surfer dude" with jam shorts and big untied tennis shoes, strutted up to the sponsor

and asked, "So these Toby shows are kinda historical, huh?" She told him that this was what people did before there were movies and television. He exclaimed, "Wow, this is way cooler than movies or TV!" And he came back with his brothers and sisters each subsequent night of the run. Though I was thrilled with his response, I always wondered why such a rural, low comedy would appeal to him. Besides the fact that live theatre is so much more corporeal and sensual than movies or television, this child was raised in a small farming community. Toby spoke to him literally and figuratively. That is why I plan to continue to bring the canvas cathedral to small towns in rural Tennessee and Kentucky because I am a rural daughter and I believe with all of my heart that a person should be honest, ethical, hardworking, and most of all, I believe good wins.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre.*, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll, (London: Oxford UP, 1957), 17.
- <sup>2</sup> Ralph Linton, "Nativistic Movements," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 14 (1943): 230.
- <sup>3</sup> Larry Dale Clark, "Toby Shows: A Form of American Popular Theatre," (Ph. D. Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana, 1963), 66.
- <sup>4</sup> Jere C. Mickel, *Footlights on the Prairies*, (Minnesota: North Star Press, 1974), 110.
- <sup>5</sup> William Slout, e-mail to the author, 24 and 25 February 1998.
- <sup>6</sup> <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>
- <sup>7</sup> Billy Henderson Schuller, conversations with the author. 13 and 14 March 1998.
- <sup>8</sup> Mickel, 68.
- <sup>9</sup> Clifford Ashby, Charles May, and Suzanne DePauw May, *Trouping Through Texas: Harley Sadler and His Tent Show*, (Ohio: Popular Press, 1982), 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Jeffery Paige, *Agrarian Revolution*, (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 45.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.
- <sup>12</sup> Ashby, 56.
- <sup>13</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory.*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988), 30.
- <sup>14</sup> Linton, 231.
- <sup>15</sup> William Slout, *Theatre in a Tent*, (Ohio: Popular Press, 1972), 79-80.
- <sup>16</sup> Linton, 230.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, (New York: Knopf, 1961), 24.
- <sup>18</sup> William P. Browne, et al., *Sacred Cows and Hot Potatoes: Agrarian Myths in Agricultural Policy*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 9.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>20</sup> Slout, 80-81.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.
- <sup>22</sup> Hofstadter, 24.
- <sup>23</sup> Otis A. Pease, *The Progressive Years*, (New York: G. Braziller, 1962), 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Hofstadter, 5.

- <sup>25</sup> Terry Wunder, "Living in a Progressive Age: Tent Repertoire Shows, Melodrama, and the Agrarian Myth" (Ph. D. Diss. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1996), 36.
- <sup>26</sup> Clark, 49.
- <sup>27</sup> Robert Downing, "Toby," *Theatre Arts*, (November 1946): 653.
- <sup>28</sup> Clark, 50.
- <sup>29</sup> Carol Pennepacker, "A Surviving Toby Show: Bisbee's Comedians," *Tennessee Folklore Society*, Vol. 30 (1964): 50.
- <sup>30</sup> Omar Ranny, "Forever Toby," *Theatre Arts*, Vol. 37 (1953): 95.
- <sup>31</sup> Mickel, 155.
- <sup>32</sup> Delores Dorn-Heft, "Toby, The Twilight of a Tradition," *Theatre Arts*, (August 1958): 53.
- <sup>33</sup> Helen Baird Branyon, "Susie of American Tent Repertoire Theatre," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 22 (1989): 141.
- <sup>34</sup> Slout, 72.
- <sup>35</sup> Branyon, 147.
- <sup>36</sup> Gilman M. Ostrander, *American Civilization in the First Machine Age: 1890-1940*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 65.
- <sup>37</sup> Mickel, 151.
- <sup>38</sup> Linton, 232.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 233.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 233.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 234.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 234.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 236.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 238.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 232.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 232.
- <sup>47</sup> Pitcauthley papers, Theatre Museum Americana, Mt. Pleasant.
- <sup>48</sup> Downing, 652.
- <sup>49</sup> Mickel, 155.
- <sup>50</sup> Downing, 652.
- <sup>51</sup> Mickel, 155.
- <sup>52</sup> Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist, *The Trickster*, (San Francisco: Mellen Research UP, 1991), 25-26.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>54</sup> Paul Radin, *The Trickster*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), ix.
- <sup>55</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (Yale University Press, 1990), 4.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 2.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>60</sup> Dawn Larsen Niceley, "A Continuing History of Toby Shows With an Acknowledgment of the Past and Plans for the Future," (master's thesis, Austin Peay State University, 1991), 150.

- <sup>61</sup> Scott, 3.
- <sup>62</sup> Scott, 3.
- <sup>63</sup> Niceley, 97.
- <sup>64</sup> Scott, 185.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 186.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 198.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 198.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 138.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 156.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., 157.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., 157.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., 200.
- <sup>73</sup> Paige, 45.
- <sup>74</sup> Patrick Overton, *Re-Building the Front Porch of America: Essays on the Art of Community Making*, (Columbia: Columbia College P, 1997), ix.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., 28.

Dawn Larsen is assistant professor of theatre and communications at Volunteer State College in Gallatin, Tennessee. She is currently contracted to write an essay on rural tent theatre for *Creating Traditions, Expanding Horizons: 200 Years of the Arts in Tennessee*, published by the Tennessee Historical Society. She is president and founder of the Hard Corn Players, the last old time tent repertory company in the United States.