How do you (and why would you) read these scripts?

We tell our theatre history students, if you want to know what a culture believed, valued, and espoused; read their popular plays. It is through a deeper reading of rural American playscripts that scholars can discover information essential to the rural audience's philosophies, beliefs, and nature. Such information also supports a clear understanding of a vital aspect of American theatre. We fashioned this chapter as a "how-to" manual for reading and critically evaluating these scripts to lead you to deeper investigations of this genre of popular plays. We will begin with tent rep characters and how they were constructed, and then move to themes found in the scripts. Further, it is our intention to encourage you to not only to read and critically analyze, but to produce these scripts and others like them because, as with all dramatic literature, these plays were meant to be performed.

The Characters

First we begin with a study of their characters. Production companies from this era, both permanent and traveling, hired actors according to *lines of business*.[2] Like most information from primary sources involving tent theatre, the definitions and names of the lines of business varied with each company. Generally, characters fell into two categories: the good guys and the bad guys. The good guys included the leading man and lady, also called, leads and/or the hero and

[2] *Lines of business* refers to the character types an actor would be hired to play.

heroine of the play; the juvenile (male) and soubrette (female), both young sometimes naïve and/or silly characters; the g-string, comedy old man or old lady role; the comedy roles, in some scripts may include the g-strings, the Toby, and character parts; and the character roles. The villains were known as heavies, both male and female. Tent rep plays might contain all or some of these types.

Once you understand the characters' lines of business, you can consider what the characters value based on their lines and behavior. Since these shows were extremely popular, we can then logically assume that what the rural audience would consider to be appropriate behavior and values for the good guys, would be preferable for its own community. Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her book, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory,* contends if what a society values is contingent upon its social, economic, philosophical, and political atmospheres, what she calls "economies," then we can assume that what an audience responded to positively was generally what they deemed appropriate, based on those economies .[3] Rural audiences responded positively because we know that thousands of rural folk attended these performances. These plays reflected the attitudes and behaviors found within that rural culture. For example, the lines of the juvenile light comedy role, Wallie, in *Saintly Hypocrites and Honest Sinners*, to his girl, Tessie, imply what love and marriage should be:

Tessie, little girl, I want you to listen while I tell you that I love you with all the power of my heart, my life,

[3] Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. "Contingencies of Value." *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988). 30.

my soul. I want you to trust your life, your happiness, into my keeping. I want you to give yourself to me to keep, to cherish, love, protect and honor. I want you to believe me when I whisper that no sorrow will be too great, no suffering too terrible for me to share them with you. And I want you to promise that when away out yonder in the dim and distant future, when the great curtain of life begins to fall, when age and care have robbed us of our youth, when the fires of life begin to smolder and grow dim and low, that we will stand in the shelter of each other's arms and say life has been good to us, for we have loved. Tessie, little sweetheart, I want you to be my wife.[4]

Conversely, how the heavies behaved and what they valued were generally what the culture feared. Further, this served as a warning to rural audiences against behavior that was not in keeping with rural community standards. Values and warnings are clear in *Saintly Hypocrites and Honest Sinners*, as the lead's brother, Billie, speaks to shame him into taking right action to stand up to the hypocritical members of his church:

Hold on Dick, don't insult the church, the place where God's people congregate to hear of his goodness, his kindness. Don't insult the good honest members of your church.…No Dick, it isn't the church that causes you to perjure your soul and stand before your God a coward. It isn't the church you are afraid of. You are afraid of the power, the influence of a low, mean, contemptible hypocrite. You are afraid of Deacon Stromberg.[5]

Because Deacon Stromberg is the heavy in this play, the dialogue specifies that a rural person should endeavor to be

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honest and good, not " mean, contemptible, [and/or] hypocritical;" and further, should not even associate with such villainous people. Once you determine the characters' lines of business, and their personality traits and behaviors, you will have a clearer understanding about the values and attitudes inherent in the rural culture that supported these plays.

The scripts also reflected crucial historical social constructions. For example, clear female gender construction in *The Push or Tamed and How*, similar in theme to *The Taming of the Shrew,* as well as expectations for that gender, were made apparent by fashioning a character that initially misbehaves (spoiled, has her own mind and speaks it), but is then redeemed through her husband's physical and mental manipulation. She becomes the lady she *should* be (tamed). Early in the text, her mother describes Frieda's behavior to Frieda's sister-in-law: "Spoiled. There is no doubt of that Olga. And Harvey and I are to blame. We have allowed her to have her own way so long, that now she resents our slightest attempt to advise or reason with her."[6] After she marries Rollo and he begins to tame her, Frieda explains, "…He wanted me to go driving with him, I said no, he simply threw me over his shoulder and started down the street with me, everybody laughing their heads off ------I told him to get the car. When he asked [sic] me now-----I'm ready to go."[7] Though it is couched in comedy, obeying your husband is a rural marriage obligation. However, in tent rep plays, including the previous example, women were not merely expected to sit quietly and look pretty. On the farm, they were expected to work, even performing tasks that might, to a genteel society, be considered unladylike. Rural women, out of necessity, were expected to and did as much of the work on the

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farm as rural men. In Act I of *Sputters or Girl of the Flying X*, Rose (lead), speaking to her father, is as good a cowgirl as the men are cowboys:

Rose: I could ride in the round-up you know. Your daughter used to be considered quite a cow-puncher.

Colonel: Bless your heart, so you are. But I guess we can manage it somehow…[8]

Later in Act I, Rose speaks of her mother, "I've seen mother hold down some pretty fly bronks and not so many years ago either."[9] Rose and her mother are heroines in this play and so we can assume that being able to handle the plow, or in this example, a horse, was considered favorable and expected behavior for rural women.

Negative racial construction is a practice derivative of early melodrama as playwrights characteristically constructed their villains as "other," reflecting cultures that could threaten the audience's way of life. *Sputters or Girl of the Flying X* reveals racial intolerance inherent in rural Southwestern culture. The villain, Zambra, is Mexican and the good guys (white ranch owners and workers) routinely refer to him as, "greaser, dirty Mexican dog, snake, lazy critter." In this western-genre play, untrustworthy, immoral Mexicans were a threat to this particular regional rural audience.

Encountering the *other* in a script is a marker necessitating further research into why that culture would be considered *other* by rural American audiences. Problems developed after the Mexican revolution from 1910-1917 when Mexican immigration to the United States increased because of

[8] p.
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the declining economic situation in Mexico. From *Major Problems in Mexican-American History*,

> …the growth of large-scale agriculture in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas altered social relations between Anglos and Mexican Americans…Racism began to exclude Mexican Americans from participation in the social and political life of their communities [in Texas] and often led to widespread violence against Mexican Americans at the hands of the notoriously brutal Texas Rangers.[10]

Couple that with a false social construction of Mexico and Mexicans by American authors:

> …somewhere between 1880 and 1900 a defined literature devoted to Mexico assumed a substantial niche among the reading interests of an American pubic uninformed about Mexico...[There was] a compelling pattern of cultural images constructed by the authors…[which was that] Mexico formed a cultural and biological hybrid, a cross between Indian and European that exemplified the worst of both worlds.[11]

It now becomes clear that Zambra was a reflection of the bias against Mexican Americans by rural Anglo audiences. Mexicans were a threat to agricultural communities because they were, for the most part, itinerant farm workers, threatening Anglo jobs. We can still see this scenario acted out in border conflicts of today.

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[10] Vargas, Zaragosa, ed. *Major Problems in Mexican American History*. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co, 1999). 203.
[11] Gonzales, Gilbert. "The Mexican Problem: Empire, Public Policy, and the Education of Mexican Immigrants, 1880-1930." p. 201.

Themes

Themes found in the scripts, as well as character traits, reinforce cultural values. The moral of the story in each script provides information about what a good rural person was supposed to learn and do from experiencing the performance. Since these plays were produced time and again, they resonated with their audiences and the themes found within them were ones that rural Americans upheld. Because it was theatre, audiences could see cultural principles played out onstage. Rural patrons were verbally encouraged by their pastors and families to behave in certain ways. In the performances, audiences could experience what they would consider to be evidence of the consequences of good and evil behaviors further validating cultural standards.

Religion is a major thematic element in tent repertoire. Tent plays were often called "mother, home and heaven" shows. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a good example of a play that resonates with Christian, mostly Protestant audiences. In this particular play, religion is overt. We have included two versions of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. One from the catalog of Robert L. Sherman, noted play publisher out of Chicago, Illinois and another unnamed version. In the second script and the oldest, set in England, there is a section entitled, "Hymns used in Drama and Cues" that calls for nine specific hymns and other sacred music to be used throughout the play.[12] Good and evil are well defined. Just before the final curtain as Jekyll is fighting Hyde's influence, his lines let us know the difference between the hero (Jekyll) and heavy (Hyde):

[12] p.

…[as Jekyll] Oh God, look into my heart—You was [sic] right, I was wrong to tempt you. Oh Heavenly Father, hold me not answerable for the actions of this demon, locked within my heart-- Look into my heart and you will find it as pure as when I walked by my mothers side in your house…[as Hyde]Stop that damned [church] organ, it offends my ears…The bible, how I hate the bible![13]

More questions are raised as we compare that ending speech in both versions. "How I hate the bible!" was omitted from the newer Sherman script.[14] We could conjecture that rural American audiences found that line too offensive.

Though religion is always a theme, organized religion is sometimes criticized. In *Saintly Hypocrites and Honest Sinners*, organized religion harboring hypocritical parishioners is rejected in favor of rural, heart-felt religion. In the last act, the juvenile, Billie, implores the rural preacher:

> I have been talking to a few of the members of the church. Also quite a few of the congregation and Dick, they are getting like you. They are tired of this high toned religion. They are tired of having . . . (Looks at Stromberg) two or three people tell you how to run the church. They don't want reserved seats in the church, anymore Dick. They want to throw the doors wide open, first come, first served and everybody welcome. They are working for God now and it's up to you to get busy.

Religion is requisite in all the plays, as long as it is of the rural community, rather than the "high toned religion" of the city.

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[13] p.
[14] p.

Education was another prevalent theme. The heavies in many of the later tent plays were white, but remain *other* in that they were from the city, thus evil, educated and progressive. If the heavies represented what rural audiences feared, then encroaching urbanization, carrying with it the ideas of progressivism, thus intellectualism, was the concept behind that representation of evil. In these scripts, common sense prevailed over formal education. In Robert Sherman's version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Dr. Jekyll admits that too much knowledge is evil in Act III, much like the knowledge the serpent offered in the Garden of Eden: "Because the knowledge you will gain will be but a temptation to lead you on to certain destruction as it has me…" In *The Awakening of John Slater*, John leaves his country home to go to the city to become a rich and famous lawyer. In the last act, he speaks of the fatal mistake he made: "Cal I came here three years ago with just one resolve in my heart and that was, to succeeed [sic}…My ambition mastered me… and in less than a week, I was sorry." Less overt, the lines still point to schooling and ambition as his undoing. William Slout exemplifies this argument in *Theatre in a Tent*:

> 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...[15]

[15] Slout, William. *Theatre in a Tent*. (Ohio: Ohio Popular Press, 1972). 80-81.

Closely related to progressivism[16] is the most influential phenomenon supporting the success of the tent play, what Richard Hofstadter, in his book, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R*, called the agrarian myth, which "[represents] the kind of homage that Americans have paid to the fancied innocence of their origins."[17] This myth, incidentally, 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."[18] The leading male roles, usually hard working farm boys, embody both of these ideals. In *The Push or Tamed and How*, Rollo (lead) is the chauffer, the working man, surrounded by privileged rich. He ultimately teaches them lessons about the right way to live—the working man's way. The lead in *Sputters* is a man's man, the ranch foreman that is defended by the Toby to the Sheriff, "Shut up and keep shut until I'm through. Jim Edwards is the best I ever knowed and any Sheriff that would try to jail him is too dadburned ornery to herd a gang of horned toads..."

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[16] Progressivism is a term used to denote a political attitude advocating change or reform, used especially in response to the changes brought about by industrialization in the late 19th to early 20th century.

[17] Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1961). 24.

[18] p. 9

The agrarian myth is reflected in all tent repertoire, especially Toby plays, thus the city, the antithesis to nature, is characterized as a bad place. Rural Americans believed that cities were stealing their children. Ostrander, in his book, *American Civilization in the First Machine Age: 1890-1940*, charged the city with being a center of wickedness:

> 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.[19]

In self-defense, the rural population perpetuated the agrarian myth and its premises, such as the belief 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. In the opening pages of *Clouds and Sunshine*, Samanthy, the housekeeper, rebukes the lead's brother (heavy):

> You talk about justice and your rights. You know as well as I that your poor heartbroken father divided the property equal between you and Joe. What did you do with your share? Spent it among those rascals in the city. Sporting on the great white way, you called it, while Joe

[19] p. 65

worked and saved his, and his fortune has grown as it should grow…

Moreover, the fear of the city and its ways grew continually as children left the homeplace and urban ideas and practices encroached upon the rural culture.

Alternative Perspectives

Anthropological, sociological, psychological theories, among other theoretical constructs can be utilized in conjunction with these plays to further study, from alternative perspectives, audience and rural culture. For example, we can apply anthropological theory to Toby plays. Because the character, Toby, personified agrarian ideologies, we could argue that Toby shows were a theatrical representation of a nativistic movement. Anthropologist, Ralph Linton, in his article, "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."[20] Linton believes that nativistic movements take distinctive elements of a culture 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."[21] The rural characters in Toby plays came to represent each man or woman in the audience and personified distinctive elements such as morality, integrity, honesty, and righteousness in contrast to the city's perceived antithetical customs, not directly reflecting the rural audience, but rather what they aspired to be. Further,

[20] Linton, Ralph. "Nativistic Movements." *American Anthropologist*. 14 (1943): 230.
[21] Ibid, p. 231.

Linton asserts, "the practicability of reviving or perpetuating the element[s] under current conditions is a main consideration."[22] The plays were not about another time and place, but about problems close at hand. For Toby, integrity was his defense and his strength and the optimal way was the honest way, the backbone of rural tradition and the agrarian myth. Supporting the tent show companies by audiencing the plays was indeed a conscious, organized attempt to perpetuate aspects of the culture that rural Americans felt were being taken away by the wicked dominant urban culture.

As another example, James C. Scott's arguments in, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, support our nativistic assertion. He uses theatrical metaphor to explain behavioral phenomena concerning dominated cultures. Though he uses colonized cultures as his examples, his theories apply very well to rural culture and encroaching urban influence and power that rural Americans feared. He terms "hidden transcript [as] discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders."[23] Additionally, he believes that dominated cultures often take on certain characteristics before their dominators that they would not normally embody. He calls these interactions, "public transcripts."[24] The rural lead, especially the Toby character, embodies the public transcript of the rural dominated culture, as ignorant, simple, slow, and unrefined. Moreover, the plays represent the culture's hidden transcript as the plays seem to resist urban ideologies and were presented only within the rural cultural context. So, in these plays, the lead or Toby behaved toward the city characters,

[22] Ibid, p. 232.
[23] Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New York: Yale UP, 1990). 4.
[24] Ibid, p. 2.

comically usually, but dumb or slow, representative of the public transcript. In *Clouds and Sunshine*, Toby says: "Last time I eat over here you got me so full of that nice stuff that I been sick ever since. And I don't want to git sick no more till I git good and well, then I can appreciate bein sick."

The plays were public and hidden transcripts. They were public in that they were presented as theatre available to anyone, but hidden because they were marketed 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."[25] The discourse of the rural characters to the city characters was slow and unrefined, very much the public transcript, but the discourse between the characters when alone together onstage, though still in its rural vernacular, was more intelligent than the city characters. Generally, it was the rural characters who figured out what the heavies were up to and thwarted their evil plans. For example, in *The Awakening of John Slater*, we can compare the two types of discourses involving the comedy role, Lun. When the Slater family meets the citified wife, they defer to her in public (public transcript):

Manuel [John's father]: I'm sure---proud---to---to—know ye Mum."

Lun [comic and John's brother]: (grabs her hands, shakes them heartily as he says.) Hello Sis, how are you?

[25] Ibid, p. 5

Later, Lun tells his family, and only his family (hidden transcript) what he overheard his evil citified sister-in-law say, thus exposing her manipulations:

> I don't give a darn, I don't like her anyway…she said, well if ye want to show off that bunch uf freaks, why don't ye rent a Hall and charge people to see 'em. She said she knowed folks as would pay a dollar , jist to git to look at us.

Further, in Toby plays, the Toby often led the scene of inquiry into the rural characters' quandary and then, as an adlib, would solicit ideas and solutions from the rural audience. Those scenes were hidden transcripts within the hidden transcripts of the play.

Since Anthropology investigates people and cultures, and theatre criticism and theory examines performance, we can apply theory from both Anthropology and Theatre to rural playscripts, making strong cases about how culture and performance interrelate. Understanding the psychological atmosphere of tent show audiences, through Linton's and Scott's theories, can allow attempts to discover the connection between tent show company and audience, to understand why the Toby character eventually replaced all male heroes in tent plays, to make further academic arguments about rural culture.

Summary

These scripts have been regularly excluded from serious academic study. Though we can, and regularly do, argue that the tent show genre and its scripts should not be omitted from the theatre canon, Nan Johnson in her book, *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910*, poses a more

pertinent question. Though her book centers on female rhetoricians, her query can concern any marginalized subject. She asked, "What cultural circumstances would have given license for the blatant erasure of [tent theatre] and… what [do] those circumstances tell us about how exclusionary maps are drawn and why?"[26] For example, the of the tenth edition of Brockett and Hildy's work, *History of the Theatre*, there is only one small paragraph concerning tent theatre. As well, contemporary university theatre programs rarely include rural American theatre information in their classes. We could argue elitism, patriarchy, and/or capitalism. Too expansive to be included here, Johnson's question is one for further academic study.

It is our hope that our work in this book raises new questions about tent theatre and its rightful place in the history of American theatre. We encourage you to examine these plays and be moved to seek out other scripts from the rural culture, as well as examine historic production practices, acting practices, and mount a production of your own. The tent theatre genre is one of the few historic areas left that is virtually untouched, still relying on primary (digging around in attics and trunks) research. Mounting a production to reconstruct a historic play within current contexts is challenging and exciting and can tell us a great deal about contemporary rural culture and how much, if at all, attitudes have changed over time. Finally, we believe that production teams and audiences will discover that mounting these plays is great fun!

[26] p. 10