York. (New York: Schocken, New York, 1966) 118-120. See also J.M. Scanland: "An Italian Quarter Mosaic." *Overland Monthly.* (April, 1906).

[27]Rosenfeld. *Op. cit.*, 32.

[28]Frederick O. Bushel. *Arena.* (April, 1897) as cited in Wayne Mocquin, ed. *A Documentary History of the Italian Americans* (New York, 1942). 53.

[29]David Lifson — remarks made as commentator at Panel on Ethnic Theater at the *Organization of American Historians* Annual Meeting; New York: April 14, 1978.

Critique

A major point of ambiguity in the essay on ethnic theater, namely the inexact, overly-generalized application of the term ethnic, unwittingly perpetuates a wide-spread misconception about immigrant groups and unfortunately weakens valuable observations on immigrant culture. The study reinforces the tendency to perceive groups other than one's own as homogeneous and undifferentiated.[1] Quite the opposite is true. Ethnic groups are always heterogeneous and differentiated. Simplified categorization encourages simplified interpretation; neither one can accommodate the complicated nature of immigrant activity as reported in the essay. In order to understand the remarkable diversity of goals manifested in the development of ethnic theater, the diversity of membership in an ethnic group must be appreciated. It is this diversity which stimulated the cultural awakening recorded in the survey. Ironically, the advent of thorough analyses revealing the complex nature of immigrant culture may very well have been due to the reaction precipitated by similar inadequate and ambiguous labeling in early studies of ethnic minorities.

Recent scholarship has isolated three sets of variables which influence the relationships within an ethnic group and, consequently, that group's acceptance by the host society.[2] The first—the preemigration histories of the members — includes the different geographic, educational, and economic backgrounds of the individuals, as well as their varied political, social, and cultural views. The second set refers to the immigration itself: the motivation (usually political, religious, or economic), the conditions leading to the decision to emigrate, and the intervening history. Finally, each individual within the group is affected differently by the contact

situation, which refers to the position the immigrant achieves both in the new society and within the ethnic group. Once these influential factors are recognized, it becomes clear that ethnic communities do not appear fully-evolved overnight, with an established code of values, a standard dialect, a common religion, or even a shared perception of history. Social cohesion and a common identity emerge only after considerable internal conflict and accommodation. An immigrant community develops slowly; its identity reflects diverse individuals who have gradually adjusted to one another and a new environment.

An examination of the composition of the ethnic groups mentioned in the essay would doubtlessly illuminate the reasons that the style and content of theatrical productions varied within a single community and from one community to another. The essay equates foreign language theater with ethnic theater, implying that the standard use of foreign languages in these theaters becomes the basis for the ethnic designation. Yet, ethnic theater frequently did offer productions in English. Within the wide range of theatrical presentations noted, there is no single identifying characteristic that can be considered uniquely ethnic. Logically, the institution of ethnic theater cannot be declared ethnic on the basis of language, nationality, religion, or even social status. No common denominator seems to exist. To say that a common basis is provided by the roles of the theater in immigrant communities presumes that a contextual definition has already been formulated. It has not, and we are thus led to feel that we must either accept this phenomenon on intuitive grounds, recognizing its origin in the immigrant adjustment to American culture, or dismiss it on the grounds of logic. This dilemma reconfirms the importance of understanding the composition and history of an immigrant community. The differing motivations for emigration and the diverse cultural interests represented in each group explain the apparent contradictions; they explain why both amateurs and professionals participated in theater, why immigrants as well as imported foreign companies performed, and why both newly-composed and classical materials were presented.

It is comforting to find that the confusion, the inconsistencies, and the countless variations which permeate descriptions of ethnic theater do not, as initially thought, defy efforts to define it as ethnic, but give us an authentic record of the tangled loyalties and aspirations of immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The difficult and painful process of adaption and acculturation found its expression in the dynamic, protean art of theater, where every emotion could assume a shape. The rewards of

such a dramatic outpouring were certainly many for generations of immigrants. Perhaps most precious of all was a temporary freedom from the conflicts and pressures of intense role-playing in the world beyond the stage.

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[1]Annenstasi and John P. Foley, Jr. *Differential Psychology*. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1956). 704.

[2]Djuro J. Vrga. "Adjustment vs. Assimilation: Immigrant Minority Groups and Intra-Ethnic Conflicts" in *Ethnic Groups in the City*. Otto Feinstein, ed. (Lexington, Mass: D.C Heath and Company, 1971). 40-41.

Critique

Seller's broad overview of the functions of ethnic theater in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provides a useful compilation of information hitherto scattered throughout a variety of often obscure publications. Commenting chiefly on Scandanavian, German, and Yiddish theater, she presents a glimpse into a complicated and rich social and cultural life through which American communities of immigrants established and maintained a sense of identity with their place and culture of origin and through which life in Europe was sea-changed into a different but still distinct life in America. Seller sees three vital roles for the theater of these immigrant peoples: a tangible focus for community life, an entertainment and release from the rigors of life in city tenements and prairie towns, and a vehicle for education both of the immigrant generation and of its children. The entertainment function is hardly unique to ethnic theater, of course; circuses, whether provided by the government or the community itself, have always substituted for an insufficiency of bread. The other two functions, however, are more special to community theater (whether defined ethnically or not), and it is they that provoke the most specualation for future work in this area.

The more complex of these other vital roles is the one Seller discusses in terms of "theater as education," which she claims compensated in part for the immigrants' having been "deprived of