

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

²Djuro 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 Scandinavian, 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 speculation 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

opportunities to learn about their own culture through poverty, isolation, or political oppression." It would seem that the rubric "education," as Seller uses it, is perhaps too encompassing for all ethnic theater, for, while second and third generations may require the somewhat artificial tutelage of drama to learn facts of their ancestors' culture, the immigrants themselves clearly need no such instruction. Culture is not a collection of physical and mental artifacts, but rather a set of perceptions, judgments, and modes of behavior which characterize a group of people. Culture, like ecology, simply is, and by definition one holds shares, willy-nilly, in the culture of one's community. We should thus expect to find differences, perhaps quite radical, between the theaters of immigrant communities made up of people with pre-immigrating connections and those of people whose interconnections were more tenuous. One end of this continuum might be represented by groups such as Scandinavians (who often transplanted virtually entire villages from the Old World to the New) or others such as Jews, with powerful nonlocal cultural ties (a common language, Yiddish, and a complex religious tradition, which provided immediate fellowship). The other end of the continuum might be represented by people such as Italians or southern Slavs (whose linguistic systems were sometimes not mutually intelligible and whose regional cultures were often very distinct). For the latter type of community (and here we perhaps should include peoples who already spoke some dialect of English, like the majority of the Irish and the English, whose theaters were equally "ethnic" and similar in function to those of non-English speakers), we may expect to find new definitions of what it meant to be an Italian, an Irishman, or a Serbian in America. (For example, we might consider here the uniquely American image of the "exiled Irishman," unable to return home to his native land—an obvious falsehood, which nonetheless was nurtured in song, fiction, and drama by immigrant Irish who wished to adduce a reason not to give up the relatively richer life in America.) For the former type of community, we may expect that the theater would be more celebratory than constitutive or "educational," for it would serve to remind the immigrants of what they had in common with each other, as well as what they shared with their Old World counterparts.

On this aspect of the celebratory nature of theater—the public acknowledgement and sharing of cultural commonalities—the theater of a closely-knit immigrant community may be comparable to that of traditional peoples who have not been split by emigration. Native American theater is a case in point. Native American dramatic art (like that of many other traditional peoples) must be defined broadly, to include the dramatic elements of many religious activities, dances, potlatch plays, as well as more recent drama superficially modeled on Euro-American theater, such as Hanay Geigamah's

plays. Such drama, in a fundamental sense, is not the creation of an individual alone; the artist is fully embedded in the community and by that embedding acquires (often unconsciously) an understanding of the principles of theater which hold for the society. Thus the community, the audience, is an integral part of the creative process before and after the fact of performance, because the performance realizes an aesthetic immanence of that society. There are several interesting results of this circumstance. Since Native American dramatic events (including those of a religious nature) do not recognize the inviolable boundary between the performer and the audience which is a characteristic of Euro-American drama, we may see little of the respect bordering on awe that Western audiences usually bestow upon drama (and always upon religion). But if Indians fail to applaud when their friends and relatives dance or otherwise demonstrate their impulse for dramatic expression, it is not from disdain or disinterest; instead their quiet acceptance acknowledges an unprepossessing participation in the entire event, whose boundaries do not end at the edge of the moving circle. Further investigation of this celebratory aspect of ethnic drama may reveal socio-cultural principles by which people draw themselves together, principles that unite all small communities, whether of long tradition or not.

Ethnic theater is an exciting field for investigation. It is rich in possibilities for truly interdisciplinary work, involving the talents of historians, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, linguists, and literary critics. Seller's brief article has provided a generous sketch of a complex but intriguing dimension of human experience that awaits, and will reward, analysis in depth.

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