

KAČER, Tomáš (2019) *Dvoustletá pustina: dějiny starší americké dramatiky*. Prague: Charles University Press (Karolinum), 1st ed., 380 pp., 2019. ISBN: 978-80-246-4413-4.

Title in English: *Two Hundred Years of Wasteland: A History of Early American Drama*

A brief summary

This book represents the first Czech history of drama in the United States of America, beginning in the mid-17th century through 1916. The most prominent movements and works are placed in the context of artistic, theatrical, social, and political changes, which directly influenced them. The book is divided into two parts. The first part contains a historical overview and is subdivided according to the stages of development of early American drama. The second part is an anthology of translated excerpts from representative plays of the period.

A detailed summary

The book opens with the statement of purpose, which is to provide Czech readers with an overview of the history of American drama from the beginning to 1916, the year of the first successful production of a play by Eugene O'Neill, *Bound East for Cardiff* by Provincetown Players. It explains that this history is written with Czech readers in mind; therefore, it is bound to put the plays into historical, cultural, and aesthetic contexts, which may not be immediately obvious to the intended reader. For this reason, it would not suffice to merely translate an existing history of the subject in the English language, as these already count on cultural knowledge in the English-speaking world (for example, the understanding of what is meant by "realism" is different for Anglo-American and German-Slavonic European continental theatre traditions; historically speaking, a political history of the United States needs to be recalled to the Czech reader who will have a somewhat vague knowledge of US history milestones). Furthermore, the book explains that the focus will be mainly on written drama, i.e., the literary genre associated with the Euro-American literary tradition of dialogical writing intended for stage presentation, which was produced in the area of what is the United States of America today, and that the main focus will be on the production in the English language, the language of the dominant culture there. With these limitations in mind, the introduction to the book concludes with a critically assessed overview of available sources, ranging from historical studies to anthologies of selected texts to online archives of American drama.

Each chapter of the book is structured according to several principles. It opens with a general overview of the artistic, cultural, historical, and political context, which had an influence on the dramatic production of the period. Then, it summarizes the main trends in drama at that time, with as much reference to theatre practice as possible. It illustrates these trends on examples of several plays from the given period, with a specific focus on at least one play, which is illustrative of a particular trend, and this play is treated in detail, giving as much as textual evidence of the actual dialogue as possible. Biographies of the most important playwrights of the period are presented separately in two- to three-paragraph long boxes, visually separated from the rest of the chapter. It is the plays, however, that is the primary focus here, and all chapters are written inductively, with the play texts as the starting point for the discussion of the particular period. For this reason, the book does not provide a complete cultural history of the country, but rather a selective view of it from the perspective of the nation's dramatic culture, with all its flaws and deficiencies spelled out for the reader to be aware of.

The first chapter, "Birth of American drama," covers the colonial period. It identifies several possible first dramas, including the lost *Bear and the Cub* (1665). It focuses on *Androboros* (1715) by Robert Hunter and explains that drama was mainly intended for political purposes and reading only in this period. Similarly, various moral and political dialogues are covered as examples of educational and polemical writing. The mentioned colonial satires and comedies were not, for the most part, intended for acting, either, including *The Paxton Boys* (1764) by an anonymous writer, which is arguably the first drama written in the United States involving native American characters. Early theatrical companies are introduced, such as Lewis Hallam's and David Douglass's traveling groups. Theatres in Williamsburg and Philadelphia, such as the Southwark, are described, and the typical features of theatrical management are introduced. The chapter finally focuses on the highly derivative *The Prince of Parthia* (1767) by Thomas Godfrey as a representative piece of colonial tragedy.

The second chapter, "Revolutionary drama," covers approximately the period of the Revolutionary War. It begins with an assessment of the ideological "literary war," propaganda pieces, which preceded the hot phase of the War. It focuses on works by Mercy Otis Warren and her influential *Adulateur* (1772), among other political pieces, as well as several Tory plays. It covers propaganda dialogues and satirical plays during the War, such as dialogues by Thomas Paine and the British *Blockade of Boston* by the British army General John Burgoyne. It discusses elegies and war dramas such as *Bunker Hill* (1776) by H. H. Brackenbridge. Before discussing the issue of military theatre and its role in the Revolutionary War, it explains the dominant anti-theatrical prejudice in the emergent United States, explaining that it differed among various religious groups and that some states were stricter than others in enforcing these regulations both during and after the War. The case of opening the first theatre in Boston, the Federal Street Theatre in 1792, is illustrative of these tensions and concludes the chapter.

The third chapter, "The republic and modest beginnings," follows the discussion of cultural independence, which many considered the next step to the political one at that time. It studies in detail *The Contrast* (1787) by Royall Tyler, the first republican comedy written and produced in the United States. It introduces the stock characters first appearing in this comedy, such as the stage Yankee, and illustrates the theatre culture of New York, now an emerging cultural center of the country. It discusses values, actions, and behaviors presented as "American" and "republican" in a variety of plays and places them in the cultural-political context. It covers the first fully professional theater practitioners, such as William Dunlap, and explores theatre management styles and their transformation. It also studies Dunlap's tragedy, *André* (1798), in greater detail. It briefly covers further tragedies and comedies, including pageant performances. It presents a case study of Suzanna Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers* (1794) as an example of drama as political activism. A description of the transformation of acting as a profession is discussed based on Rowson's account. Two important playwrights of the time are also covered and their works introduced, J. N. Barker and M. M. Noah.

The fourth chapter, "Romantic America," covers approximately the first half of the nineteenth century. Following a discussion of Romanticism in the American literary/dramatic context, it exemplifies general observations on works such as *Brutus* (1818) by J. H. Payne and *The Gladiator* (1831) by R. M. Bird, treating both plays with close reading, which disclose Romantic elements and their American tint. The greatest piece of the era, *Francesca da Rimini* (1855) by G. H. Boker, is covered at an extensive length, illustrating the dialogue's emotional charge and literary qualities. Popular drama such as social comedy is addressed as the dominant dramatic entertainment of the time. The chapter introduces further typical American stage types, which make their appearance in *Fashion* (1845) by A. C. Mowatt. A sub-chapter dedicated to "Indian" plays,

which were in vogue at that time, follows, mapping out the main plays of the era and putting them in the context of the racism, exploitation, and expulsion in Jacksonian America. Confronting the myths presented, the chapter discusses J. N. Barker's *Indian Princess* (1808) and J. A. Stone's *Metamora* (1829). The focus then shifts to Edwin Forrest, the acting profession and the theatre industry in antebellum America, finally exploring various aspects of the infamous Astor Place riots of 1849, focusing on nationalism and differences in acting styles, which are identified as the latest push of American populists toward cultural independence.

The fifth chapter, "Melodrama everywhere," covers the arrival and adoption of melodrama as a mode of expression, defined as a "mode of (emotional) excess". Capitalizing on findings in McConachie's vastly influential *Melodramatic Formations*, the chapter introduces fairy tale melodramas as alternative histories of the country. It further explores the social function of melodramatic "spectacles of reform" by studying temperance plays including *The Drunkard* (1844) by W. H. Smith, and in the second half of the chapter, the abolitionist melodramas that helped to write the history of the nation: George Aiken's adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and the blockbuster *Octoroon* (1853) by Dion Boucicault. After close readings of both plays, a discussion of sensational melodramas and their appeal to the audiences, intertwined with their influence on stage technology advancement, follows. In a logical follow-up to the abolitionist plays, the final sections of the chapter are devoted to the history of African American playwriting and theatres in this period, including a closer look into New York's The African Grove, and history and implications of American minstrelsy (or, "blackface") are covered and contextualized specifically for readers not familiar with American realities.

The sixth chapter, "Melodrama, melodrama yet again," is fully devoted to popular genres, blockbuster plays, and phenomenal shows. It explores the aesthetic, stylistic, and genre-specific features found in a variety of melodramas, which were the staple of the mainstream dramatic production of the era. It also explains the social context and further developments of the mainstream American theatre culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. A mention of a couple of titles studied in greater detail in this chapter will suffice: *Under the Gaslight* (1867) by Augustin Daly and *The Poor of New York* (1857) by D. Boucicault. The chapter then covers more melodramatic plays with a tentative distinction between various genres. It presents a melodramatic take on war, such as the Revolutionary War in Joseph Jefferson's adaptation of *Rip Van Winkle* (1865) and the Civil War in Bronson Howard's *Shenandoah* (1888). The Western as an American genre is discussed at some length, with the close reading of *Horizon* (1871) by Augustin Daly providing the chief example of the genre. The Western spectacle of the Wild West Show by Buffalo Bill is presented, as well as other Western shows, such as "The Indian Mail Carrier" by the Native American performer and cross-dresser, Gowongo Mohawk.

The seventh chapter, "The arrival of Realism," discusses the differences between Anglo-American and continental European conceptions of Realism in literature and drama in particular. The discussion of Realism by W. D. Howells and other critics is introduced, and several of Howells's plays are presented. A substantial part of the chapter dedicated to *Margaret Fleming* (1890) by James A. Herne follows. Following the critical debate of the play by leading literary personalities, the chapter introduces Realist plays with a war theme, such as *Secret Service* (1895) by William Gillette and the Realist depictions within the genre of the Western such as in *The Great Divide* by W. V. Moody. Several further typically American types of Realist themes are presented, each accompanied with an example. The reading of *The City* (1909) by Clyde Fitch serves as an example of Realist staging on Broadway, Daly's plays illustrate Realist depiction of the American "home," Bronson Howard's plays present a Realist take on business, and Edward Harrigan's acting virtuosity and comedy genre

innovation illustrate various presentations of minorities, social as well as ethnic. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of the differences between Steele MacKaye and William Gillette's Realist acting techniques.

The eighth chapter, "Attempts at progressivism," covers as much as it can from Modernist drama at the time. While it acknowledges that melodrama is still present in many plays with Modernist themes and techniques, such as *The Witching Hour* (1907) by Augustus Thomas, it presents a Symbolist play, *The Scarecrow* (1909) by Percy MacKaye. At the end of the chapter, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) is given a detailed treatment as a superb example of Modernist writing in the United States in the era that preceded Eugene O'Neill's arrival. The chapter explains the role of the Little Theatre movement and some of their representatives, as well as the crucial role that the company The Provincetown Players played. A coda follows, merely enumerating the further developments of and challenges for American drama from the moment of its "emancipation" since O'Neill.

Following the eight historical overviews in the chapters sketched above, a second, no-less important part of the book, "Excerpts from early American plays," follows. I have selected seven representative plays previously unavailable to Czech readers in translation. I chose crucial excerpts from these plays, and translated them into Czech. As the plays could not have been translated and published in their entirety, I summarized stage action of the remaining parts of each play, thus providing the readers with complete contents of all of the plays with substantial excerpts, which combined produce a good – in my view – sense of the whole play. The last play in the chapter, *Trifles* by Glaspell, is an exception to this because it is complete and has been translated in its entirety.

The plays included in this anthology are:

- Royall Tyler: *The Contrast* (1787)
- J. A. Stone: *Metamora* (1829)
- A. C. Mowatt: *Fashion* (1845)
- Dion Boucicault: *Octoroon* (1853)
- Joseph Jefferson: *Rip Van Winkle* (1865)
- James A. Herne: *Margaret Fleming* (1890)
- Susan Glaspell: *Trifles* (1916)

Bibliography, Summary in English, and an Index of names conclude the book.