



History in the out-of-doors: an American dramatic tradition

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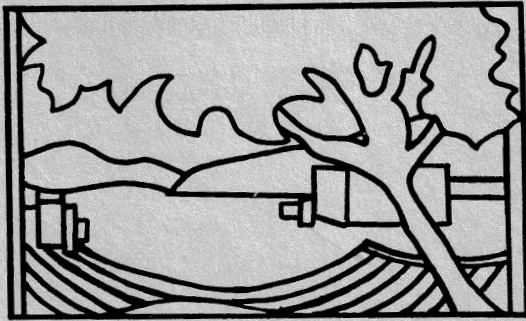
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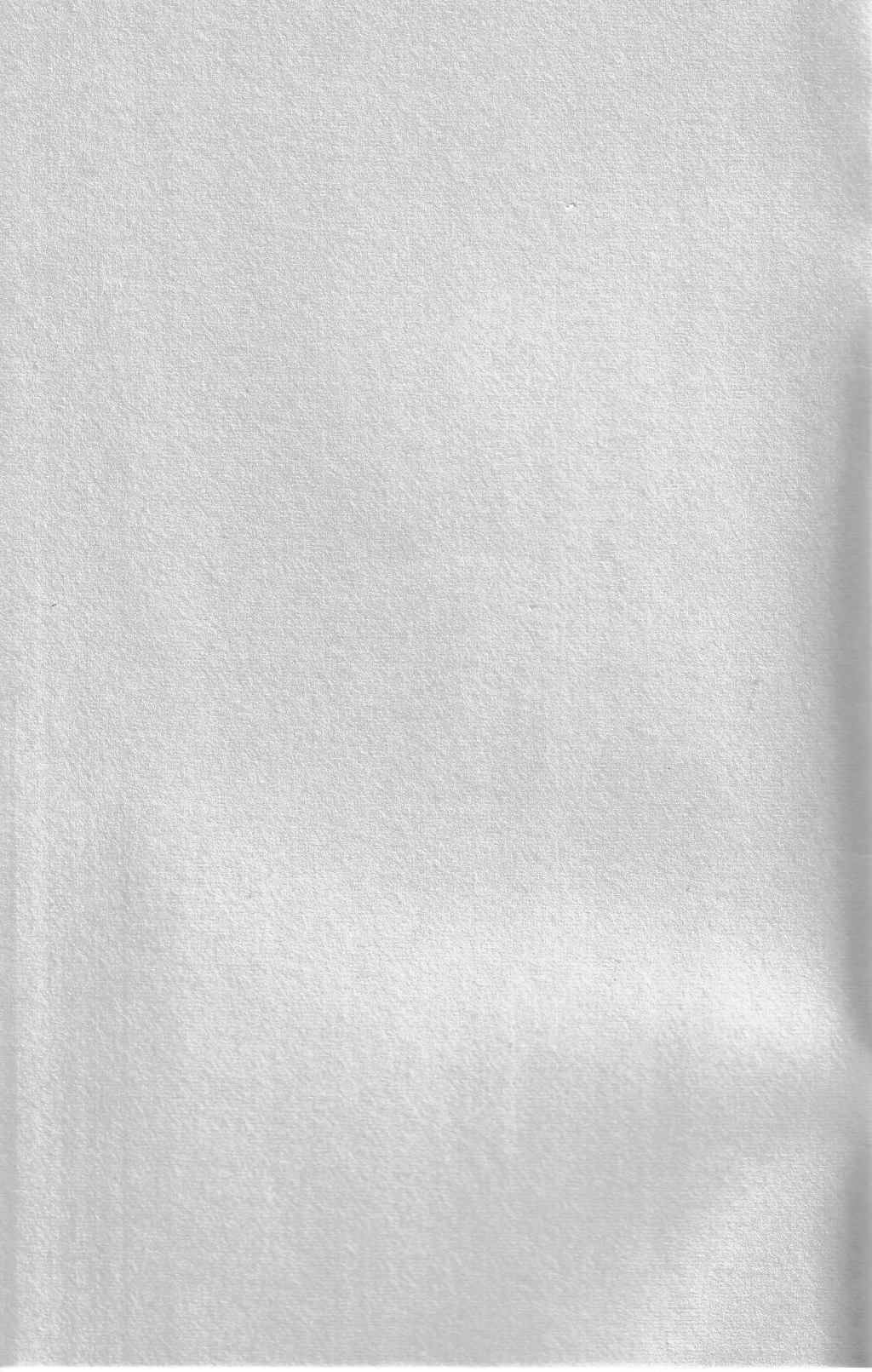
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**History in the Out-of-Doors:
An American Dramatic Tradition**



History in the Out-of-Doors:
An American Dramatic Tradition

by

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This continent has always inspired drama. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the early Americans created dance-drama to express their relationship to the earth, the elements and each other. Each tribe and band practiced its own dances, portraying its particular history, legend and ritual. But in all the dances, from the Eagle Dance of the Cherokees in the east to the Yei-bi-chai of the Navaho in the southwest and the platform dance of the Aztecs in Meso-America, nature was a significant presence in man's theatre.

Brightly costumed dancers usually performed in the open air, poised between earth and sky, as a part of celebrations of the harvest or other points in the seasonal cycle or of feasts honoring nature's creatures: the bear, the buffalo, the horse, to name a few. In setting, costumes, action and subject matter, nature was omnipresent; yet history too was on stage. The reenactment of a successful hunt, the Plains Indians' dramatic commemoration of their migration to Pueblo territory or the Kwakiutl staging of a tribe member's kidnapping by divine powers, all share and celebrate historical events in various stages of absorption into legend. Indian dance-drama, the first American theatre, is rightly revered for its own sake, and it along with other aspects of native North American culture -- for example the stylized gesture, formal address and elevated metaphor which characterized the proceedings of tribal councils -- was to exercise an enduring influence on the drama which evolved in the nation that began with colonies from Spain, France and England.

The early European explorers of the 'New World' were presumably in search of benefits more tangible than those of a new theatrical tradition. But as early as Marc Lescarbot's 1606 *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle France*, playwrights felt the challenge of depicting the new environment. The first drama presented by Europeans on the North American continent north of the Spanish settlements was also the first

outdoor history pageant: a cast of thirteen members plus extras presented the welcoming entertainment to the governor of Port Royal, Acadia, in three outdoor sequences set "On the waves of Port Royal Harbor," "In the shallop and canoe" and "At the landing place before the Habitation." The simple grandeur of the natural setting enhanced the history-in-the-making in the final scene which portrays and predicts the mingling of American Indian and European civilizations as four Indian characters in canoes offer to the new governor gifts of game, skins, porcupine-quill and fish from the larger nature which acts as backdrop to Lescarbot's spectacle.

In the thirteen colonies and the young republic, the dramatists' interest in national history continued, although in the less worthy surroundings of rented rooms in cities and barns and inns in the country areas. The late seventeenth century had provided little in the way of theatrical achievement in the colonies despite the vitality of Restoration drama in England; and when in the eighteenth century leisure time and cultural sophistication sufficient to support professional theatre evolved, the playhouses built, even such mid-century models as Williamsburg's second playhouse or Philadelphia's Nassau Street Theatre, were inferior imitations of British playhouses until the construction of the Park Theatre in New York in 1798.

During the years 1758-1776, history past and present had been presented on the American stage in a propaganda war of conflicting Whig and Tory impressions of history. 'Patriot' presentations included *The Fall of British Tyranny*, *The Battle of Bunker's* [sic] *Hill*, and *The Death of General Montgomery*. The most lively satirical crossfire occurred between General Burgoyne's troops, who presented *The Blockade*, ridiculing the patriot army then blockading Boston, and an anonymous resident of Massachusetts who responded with *The Blockheads*, or *The Affrighted Officers*, which portrayed the plight of British soldiers and Tory refugees in that state. It can be assumed that none of the revolutionary history plays or satires

attempted polished theatre. The postwar facilities at the Park allowed a greater degree of spectacle, and the historical plays produced there -- for example William Dunlap's adaptations of Kotzebue's Inca plays or Dunlap's *The Glory of Columbia - Her Yeomanry*; James Nelson Barker's *The Indian Princess*; or Mordecai Noah's *She Would Be A Soldier*; or, *The Plains of Chippewa* -- exploit this potential.

In the years following the war of 1812, the American fascination with forging drama from history continued as theatre itself moved closer to recreating history in the open air of its original enactment. First, the theatre actually followed the military and pioneers to the midwestern frontier, and second, it employed in the more established theatre new technical advances to bring the most striking and sublime of North American settings -- cliffs, cataracts, dark forests and bodies of water -- into the playhouse to serve as the setting for the presentation of American history and pseudo-history.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century spectacle, especially scenic spectacle and large groups of characters, were united with the legitimate theatre and large-scale historical dramas resulted, among which Nathaniel H. Barrister's *Richmond Hill* (1846) or Captain Stephen E. Glover's *Cradle of Liberty*; or, *Boston in 1775* (1832) might be mentioned, as well as George Washington Parke Custis' *Pocahontas*; or, *The Settlers of Virginia* (1830). Many of the historical dramas of this period were deliberate celebrations of the democracy and unique society of the youthful republic following its second war for independence from Great Britain, and numerous productions concerning the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 or Indian-White relations became patriotic ritual and self-validation for their large audiences. In theatre as in life, this complacency was disturbed by the Civil War; and diminished national optimism found its reflection in the shrinking domain of later nineteenth century theatre, most of which ventured no more than realistic representation, and that of fictitious rather than historical persons and events.

* * * * *

The beginning of the twentieth century combined a number of factors which eventually gave rise in 1937 to *The Lost Colony*, the first of the great outdoor historical dramas. The beginning of serious study of folklore and anthropology resulted in the founding in 1888 of the *Journal of American Folklore* and later of state and regional folklore societies. Suddenly, prospective writers were made aware of the rich mine of literary material beneath their feet. The United States after 1900 was thus in the enviable position of Ireland some twenty years earlier -- confronting vast deposits of untouched folk material and under-exploited history which begged for dramatization.

Frederick H. Koch, founder of the North Carolina Playmakers, had the Abbey Theatre of Yeats, Gregory and Synge fixed firmly in mind when he called for the writing of folk drama which would speak to the average American of his own daily experience in such a way as to discover the "common vision, this collective striving that determines nationalism, and remains throughout the ages, the only touchstone of the future." Professor Koch was to use his position at the University of North Carolina to inspire his students (including Paul Green and Thomas Wolfe) to dramatize and produce the local legends of their home communities in imitation of the Abbey's one-act peasant plays. Eventually this type of drama was to touch on the history play, as in Paul Green's *The Sheltering Plaid* which deals with the legendary and historical Flora MacDonald; and Koch himself created an historical pageant-spectacle entitled *Raleigh, The Shepherd of the Ocean* as a belated celebration of the tercentenary of Sir Walter Raleigh's death.

The expansive political climate as the United States assumed the position of world power was also conducive to new directions in the arts and American attempts to weld past and present into a coherent national definition. *The Chautauquan* in 1900, like Robert Walsh's *American Quarterly Review* seventy-odd years before, urged the creation of a national drama,

historical in content, by means of articles such as "What is the Most Dramatic Incident in American History, and Why?" and "Historical American Plays." The direction for development of historical subject material was marked in 1905 by Percy MacKaye who produced his first commemorative masque in Cornish, New Hampshire, and established a model for future civic pageants. A number of pageants (and an accompanying quantity of children's historical plays and pageants, for production in elementary schools) followed: Alice G. Alhee's *Conquerors of a Continent* (1912), Lily A. Long's verse drama *Radisson the Voyageur* (1914), and William Ellery Leonard's *Red Bird* (1923) to name but a few.

The pageants were a step in the direction of dramatizing history, but too often their effectiveness on stage was impeded by the pageant's impersonality and lack of cumulative causality. It remained for a playwright skilled in depicting the conflict of several personalities in the small-scale folk theatre to combine the visual and vocal color of the pageant with a foreground focus on the fate of several contemporary characters, real or fictional.

Having won the Pulitzer Prize for *In Abraham's Bosom* and having received a Guggenheim which allowed him to travel, Paul Green spent 1928 in Germany contemplating ways to construct a new kind of drama which would stay close to the common people, portray an experience with which all Americans could identify, and incorporate elements such as music, dance and spectacle, which the scale of the short folk play made problematical, while challenging the play's audience to an active involvement in the shared experience. After observing Alexis Granowsky's West End Yiddish Theatre and Bertolt Brecht's Berlin Opera, Green began his struggle to structure what he later was to call "symphonic drama," in which

All tokens and means of statement and outward give and take and inner intensification are incorporated and available here, for the

dramatic artist's needs -- story-line, poetry, scene design, sound, choreography, song, puppetry even, and lighting and music.

Green used the label "symphonic" in its original Greek sense of "sounding together," as a statement of the balance of different theatrical elements that he hoped the play in production would achieve. Green's experiments in new forms began almost immediately with *Potter's Field*, a musical version of the earlier short play *In the Valley*, and *Tread the Green Grass: A Folk Fantasy in Two Parts With Interludes, Music, Dumb-show and Cinema*. But it was not until he went by invitation to Manteo, North Carolina, to a pageant-drama for the Roanoke Historical Association on the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the colony at Roanoke that the ideal form and subject matter coalesced.

The Lost Colony portrays the dream of Sir Walter Raleigh to establish in the 'New World' enduring colonies of men, women and children who will uphold and spread English traditions. Raleigh, Queen Elizabeth, Governor John White, Ananias Dare, Eleanor White Dare and a commoner named John Borden are important personages in the play and political forces in the colonization project's frustration and later success. But the democratic premise underlying Green's interpretation of history is not only shown in the prominence of Borden but in the large cast of adventurous men and women who accept Raleigh's challenge to try life in a new land. The Elizabethan crowds in the scenes set in England are favorably if humorously displayed; and the overcrowding, poverty and class system which have kept back many a person of ability in the mother country are demonstrated rather than proclaimed, so that by the time members of the large group on stage volunteer for Raleigh's expedition, the audience comprehends the incentive as clearly as the risks.

The Lost Colony preserves this democratic interest in theatrical terms by following several individual stories against the larger history of the colony and

by selecting two characters from the lower classes, the farm foreman John Borden and the ex-wastrel Old Tom, for a special focus equal to that given the more nobly born Eleanor White Dare. By the time of the colony's scattering at the play's end, the widow Dare is engaged to marry John Borden -- an alliance unimaginable in the old country. Appropriately, the first production of *The Lost Colony* during the Depression derived its strength from massive popular involvement which included not only residents of the Manteo area, but also C. C. C. and W. P. A. workers. The triumph of *The Lost Colony* depends upon a number of devices which maximize the presence of the colonist group: group movement, song, dance, background pantomime and foreground dumb-show exploit each character's identity as a member of the community as well as an individual whose separate history is only suggested.

Since its inception in 1937, *The Lost Colony* has been the subject of experimentation and revision by its author. In particular, as Green wrote more outdoor symphonic dramas, he reconsidered the role of the Roanoke play's historian/narrator, a character originally confined to a fixed stand but later allowed the freedom of the entire set in order, as Green expressed it, to "yearn over" the people whose story he told. The narrator figure came to be a principal element in the outdoor drama formula for portraying pre-revolutionary American history.

Other distinguishing features included: three playing areas (the stage directly in front of the audience and the slightly elevated forests and rocks to either side of them); an almost ritual statement of community and purpose in the first scene (in the case of *The Lost Colony*'s opening, a hymn by colonists on one stage as prologue to an Indian celebration on another); a secondary thematic statement which involves the introduction of a 'hero' figure, a man whose vision exceeds that of his particular time or place; the parody of the 'hero' figure's alienation in the misfit status of a clown figure whose rebellion generally involves sleep or alcohol; some romantic interest and complication for the hero; public

announcements to the assembled community of events which place it in perspective against the larger tides of national or international history; the precipitation of a climactic crisis or conflict in which the 'hero' figure plays a significant role and the community experiences some division; and the final reaffirmation of community and purpose, enhanced and strengthened by acceptance of the 'hero' figure's vision and reinforced through ritual. The reunifying ritual itself is not limited to the final expression of community onstage, but extends to include the audience as descendants of that community and as sharers in the history just retold. The "shrine" aspect of the outdoor drama invented by Green deliberately evokes an almost religious response to the events dramatized at the historical site where at least part of the action took place. Only one Green outdoor drama deviates from this tradition: *The Confederacy*, formerly staged in Virginia Beach, Virginia, a site unimportant to Robert E. Lee's view of the Civil War. (In *Wilderness Road*, presented in Berea, Kentucky, the traditions of nearby Berea College are portrayed, albeit through a fictitious 'hero' figure and a somewhat undefined setting.)

Following the success of *The Lost Colony*, Green created outdoor symphonic dramas for a number of American cities and towns, including Williamsburg, Virginia (*The Common Glory*), Washington, D. C. (*Faith of Our Fathers*), the state of Ohio (*The Seventeenth Star*), Berea, Kentucky (*Wilderness Road*), Virginia Beach, Virginia (*The Confederacy*), Jamestown, Virginia (*The Founders*), Palo Duro Canyon, Texas (*Texas*), New Philadelphia, Ohio (*Trumpet in the Land*) Saint Augustine, Florida (*Cross and Sword*), Jekyll Island, Georgia (*Drumbeats over Georgia*), Natchitoches, Louisiana (*A Louisiana Cavalier*), and Galveston, Texas (*The Lone Star*). In the summer of 1978, eight outdoor dramas by Green were in production in this country, while the total number of outdoor dramas performed reached 39, a figure which includes both professional and amateur productions of historically-oriented dramas, but does not include the numerous outdoor summer productions of religious plays, Shakespearean drama or others.

In 1963, the Institute of Outdoor Drama was founded at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to provide a central clearinghouse for information on outdoor drama. The Institute staff, headed by outdoor drama veteran Mark Sumner, furnishes advice to groups wishing to start outdoor dramas, coordinates national publicity for the productions and sponsors conferences for outdoor drama directors, general managers and other members of the production staffs. Outdoor historical drama is now performed in states from Florida to Alaska and has challenged the abilities of many writers. The most prolific of these after Green is his disciple Kermit Hunter, whose work in 1978 stretched across thousands of miles: *Beyond the Sundown* (Livingstone, Texas), *Cry of the Wild Ram* (Kodiak, Alaska), *Dust on Her Petticoats* (Tulsa, Oklahoma), *Hernando Desoto, Conquistador* (Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas), *Honey in the Rock* (Beckley, West Virginia), *Trail of Tears* (Tahlequah, Oklahoma), and *Unto These Hills* (Cherokee, North Carolina). The production at Cherokee has an annual paid attendance in excess of one hundred thousand and demonstrates the vast potential audience for historical drama.

Many chapters in the history of this country remain to be written, and only now with research and commitment to the truth are some subjects, given frequent conventional staging earlier in American drama, receiving a full and accurate treatment. An example is the story of the Shawnee Tecumseh, which was earlier dramatized by at least three nineteenth century writers, but which until the staging of *Tecumseh!* in Chillicothe, Ohio, did not present a just picture of the events leading to the Battle of the Thames as the clash of two fully formed civilizations -- a fact underlined by director Mundell's decisions to use Shawnee in some parts of the dialogue, to adhere closely to the historical behavior and dress of Ohio valley tribes and their allies from distant regions, and to include the story of Tecumseh's love for Rebecca Galloway. American history contains many events not yet given dramatic shape or distorted through partial or biased treatment. In the wake of the national bicentennial and Alex Haley's success

with *Roots*, there can be no doubt that Americans strongly desire to explore their history through all its chapters, proud or shameful. A highly committed group of artists has done much to make that self-discovery possible. Our past is all before us.

OUTDOOR DRAMAS BY PAUL GREEN
REPRESENTED IN THE EXHIBIT

The Common Glory, Williamsburg, Virginia
Cross and Sword, St. Augustine, Florida
Faith of Our Fathers, Washington, D.C.
The Lone Star, Galveston, Texas
The Lost Colony, Manteo, North Carolina
Louisiana Cavalier, Natchitoches, Louisiana
The Stephen Foster Story, Bardstown, Kentucky
Texas, Palo Duro Canyon, Texas
Trumpet in the Land, New Philadelphia, Ohio
Wilderness Road, Berea, Kentucky

OUTDOOR DRAMAS BY KERMIT HUNTER REPRESENTED

Beyond the Sundown, Alabama-Coushatta Indian Reservation,
Livingston, Texas
Cry of the Wild Ram, Kodiak, Alaska
Dust on Her Petticoats, Tulsa, Oklahoma
Hernando Desoto, Conquistador, Hot Springs National
Park, Arkansas
Honey in the Rock, Beckley, West Virginia
Horn in the West, Boone, North Carolina
Trail of Tears, Tahlequah, Oklahoma
Unto These Hills, Cherokee, North Carolina

OTHER OUTDOOR DRAMAS REPRESENTED

- The Arkansas Traveller Folk Theater*, Hardy, Arkansas
- First for Freedom*, by Maxville Burt Williams, Halifax,
North Carolina
- From This Day Forward*, by Fred Cranford, Valdese,
North Carolina
- Gallia Country*, by Lee Durieux, Galliapolis, Ohio
- Hermannstraum*, by Charles Quimby, New Ulm, Minnesota
- The Legend of Daniel Boone*, by Jan Hartman, Harrods-
burg, Kentucky
- The Liberty Cart*, by Randolph Umberger, Kenansville,
Kentucky
- Listen and Remember*, by Dare Steele, Waxhaw, North
Carolina
- The Long Way Home*, by Earl Hobson Smith, Radford,
Virginia
- El Paso del Norte*, by William Hardy, El Paso, Texas
- Viva! El Paso!*, by Hector Serrano, El Paso, Texas
- Ramona*, by Garnet Holme, based on Helen Hunt Jackson's
novel, Hemet, California
- Simon Kenton*, by Marion Waggoner
- Strike at the Wind!*, by Henry B. Lowry, Pembroke,
North Carolina
- Tecumseh!*, by Allan W. Eckert, Chillicothe, Ohio
- Trails West*, by Bill Gulick, Walla Walla, Washington
- Wings of the Morning*, by David F. Davis, Lexington
Park, Maryland

