Treading the Borders: Immigration and the American Stage

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Accessibility
‘Treading the boards’ is a colloquial theatrical expression that refers to the wooden planks of the stage upon which performers ply their trade. The turn of that phrase employed by this exhibition highlights a simple but significant point—much of the richness and vitality of the performing arts in the United States derives from creative talent originating elsewhere. The contradictory sentiments evoked by successive waves of immigrants have ranged from celebrations of their contributions and American diversity to nativist indictments portraying them as a threat to an American way of life. The larger dynamics of this historical process have been reflected on the stage, where generations of immigrant actors, artists, and entertainers displayed a resilience and virtuosity that transformed American culture.

The materials from the Harvard Theatre Collection featured here illustrate the wide variety of circumstances that led immigrants to the United States and the manifold impact they made on and through the American stage when they arrived. It is, however, necessarily selective—limitations of space and indeed of the archive itself preclude a comprehensive account of this complex story. The cast of characters in this exhibition portray the drama of American immigration in broad strokes, from the earliest English theatrical companies that crossed the Atlantic in the 1750s to the global flows of people and culture that shape our present.

Throughout, the immigrant experience in the United States has been characterized as often by poverty, prejudice, and racism as by more idealized narratives of hard work, opportunity, and prosperity. For many artists and performers, the hopes and anxieties of crossing the border and starting a new life were transmuted onto the stage, which provided a means to sustain their identity and express their struggle in adapting to American life.

Before raising the curtain on this story, it should be acknowledged that despite notions to the contrary, what Europeans came to refer to as the New World was not a tabula rasa, but a land filled with diverse indigenous peoples whose own traditions were largely shunted aside. The destructive dynamic that typified relations between colonists and Native Americans has echoed in the dehumanizing rhetoric and policies deployed against immigrants. That the United States is a nation of immigrants is undeniably true, but exactly what that means has been the source of endless debate. Looking at immigration through the lens of the American stage throws key issues into sharp relief, dramatizing the conflicts and spotlighting the communities that define our common culture.

—Matthew Wittmann, Curator of the Harvard Theatre Collection
When the fortunes of the entertainment business revived in the early republic, it attracted a new wave of talent from abroad. The versatile French performer Alexandre Placide established a theater in Charleston, where he introduced American audiences to more diverse programs that included ballet, acrobatics, and adaptations of French plays. In spite of the late war, British theatrical traditions and personnel remained predominant, and the generous reception afforded to visiting players like Mary Ann Duff, James W. Wallack, and Junius Booth was such that they elected to make the United States their home. Duff was the first female star of the American theater, renowned for the pathos she brought to tragic roles, while Wallack and Booth gave their names to theatrical dynasties. Edwin Booth was venerated as the finest actor of his day, but the family name became shrouded in infamy following his brother John Wilkes Booth’s assassination of President Lincoln during a performance at Ford’s Theatre.

By the 1820s, a cohort of American-born actors and playwrights were challenging the dominance of British theatrical culture. Among them was Mordecai Noah, an American Jew of Portuguese descent, who wrote a series of popular plays that dealt with issues of identity and belonging, to which many immigrants could relate.

**SETTING THE STAGE**

A combination of religious disapproval and geographic isolation meant that only a hardy few itinerant performers from Europe toured the American colonies prior to the mid-eighteenth century. As the colonial population swelled with new arrivals by way of both forced and free immigration, British theatrical companies took interest. The first to cross the Atlantic was managed by two young Englishmen, Walter Murray and Thomas Kean, who staged productions of Shakespeare and standards like Thomas Otway’s tragedy *The Orphan*, a 1750 performance of which is documented by the oldest extant American playbill. British companies built the first theaters and flourished for a time, but the coming of the American Revolution disrupted business, and in 1774 the Continental Congress went so far as to ban shows altogether as a distraction from the war effort.
A RISING TIDE

The United States experienced an unprecedented influx of immigrants during the mid-nineteenth century, and by 1860 around one in eight residents was foreign born. The spike in immigration paralleled a boom in popular entertainment as impresarios like P. T. Barnum sought to capitalize on the growing audience. The diverse character of the immigrant wave was on display in the theater, where exaggerated ethnic types like the drunken Irishman and stolid German became prominent. Further afield, the California Gold Rush attracted a large number of immigrants, including a significant number of Chinese, which ignited racially charged conflicts even as it created space for Asian performers on American stages.

As the market for entertainment in the United States expanded, it drew in a huge range of performers from all over the globe—magicians, acrobats, jugglers, equestrians, and even giants. The massive migration out of Ireland during the potato famine was particularly impactful as Irish music and dancing were incorporated into American theatrical culture, and a talented generation that included Barney Williams, Matilda Heron, and Dion Bouicicault came to the fore. The press of immigrants out of Central Europe was such that by the 1850s, German-language theaters and concert halls were opened in several different American cities. The great German actor Daniel Bandmann first came to the United States in 1857 to tour these venues, but subsequently learned English and became renowned for his Shakespearean roles.

In the wake of the Gold Rush, San Francisco became known for its lively and multicultural entertainment district. Particularly notable in this context were the Chinese theaters that catered to the immigrant community while also attracting interest from curious Westerners. Although Chinese and later Japanese performers began touring the United States more widely, their talent was often obscured by a combination of exoticism and racism among the audience. By the 1880s, nativist hostility was such that the United States effectively barred immigration and the naturalization of people of Asian descent until well into the twentieth century, even as European immigration continued apace.
Charleston Company playbill, 1808.

Helena Modjeska, ca. 1870.

Chang, the Chinese Giant, ca. 1881.

Haman the Second handbill, 1896.

Isabella Cubas, ca. 1861.
Over the latter half of the nineteenth century the contours of European immigration to the United States broadened and shifted to Italy and Southern and Eastern Europe, although the influence of earlier immigrant waves continued to resonate. First-generation Irish Americans Edward Harrigan and Tony Hart created a popular long-running series of shows built around a bumbling Irish neighborhood militia called “The Mulligan Guard.” By integrating comedic sketches and song and dance numbers into a larger story, they laid the groundwork for the modern musical comedy, which the multi-talented Irish American performer and composer George Cohan brought to fruition after the turn of the century.

Another influential partnership from this period was that of Joe Weber and Lew Fields, both sons of Jewish immigrants who found success with comedic “Dutch acts” that burlesqued German immigrants. The increase in Jewish immigration was reflected in the emergence of caricatures on the stage, played by both Jews and gentiles with varying degrees of skill and animosity. And while immigrant performers were certainly more common in the realm of popular entertainment, they also found purchase in the nascent elite institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera, which was founded in 1880 and relied almost exclusively on singers, musicians, and dancers who immigrated from Italy, France, and Germany.

The number of immigrant women appearing on American stages also increased during these years. Unencumbered by language, dancers were a particularly prominent subset, with the Spanish danseuse Isabella Cubas and the Italian ballerina Maria Bonfanti among the notables. Although she was a gifted dancer and singer, ‘British Blonde’ Pauline Markham was ultimately more renowned for her great beauty and scandalous liaisons. The Czech-born tragedienne Francesca Janauschek and Polish actress Helen Modjeska had distinguished careers in their respective home countries prior to emigrating to the United States. After taking time off to learn English, both had very successful second acts on the American stage. Although celebrated for her Shakespearian roles, Modjeska was also significantly involved with producing the plays of Henrik Ibsen, which helped prepare American audiences for the emergence of modern drama.
REACHING A CRESCENDO

As the number of arrivals surged to over a million a year in the first decade of the twentieth century, conflicts sharpened over the desirability and practicality of assimilating so many immigrants into American life. A useful metaphor for this debate was popularized by Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play *The Melting Pot*, which centered on the struggle of a Russian Jewish protagonist to transcend his immigrant roots and embrace American values. The play proved popular as it rather dramatically idealized the United States, papering over the harsh realities and prejudice that more often than not characterized the immigrant experience.

Perhaps the best mirror on American society in this moment was vaudeville, which presented a huge range of acts meant to appeal to increasingly diverse urban audiences. While ethnic caricatures were common, vaudeville also afforded immigrant performers an opportunity to showcase their abilities and display pride in their cultural heritage. Rosa Ponselle started performing popular Italian songs as part of the “Ponzillo Sisters” act, but her singular voice was such that she was soon starring at the Metropolitan Opera. Reflecting a rather different impulse than vaudeville was the proliferation of ethnic theaters, which offered sustenance to immigrant communities around the country. The exodus out of Central and Southern Europe ensured that Yiddish and Italian language theaters were particularly robust, developing their own touring circuits and stars. By serving as a conduit for inventive European and Russian theatrical practices and plays, Yiddish productions exerted a notable influence on modernist American theater.

While some performers like Jacob Adler and Giovanni De Rosario had very successful careers exclusively within ethnic theater, it also served as a springboard for young performers. Paul Muni, for one, got his start on the Yiddish stage before moving to Broadway and then on to leading man roles in Hollywood. The diversity created by the influx of immigrants also ensured that stars such as the Italian actor Tomasso Salvini and the Russian actress Alla Nazimova could profitably perform in their native language. Nazimova eventually settled in New York, where she popularized both the Stanislavski acting system and introduced modernist dramatists like Ibsen, Chekov, and Turgenev to American audiences.
While the United States proved a land of opportunity for many immigrants, racial prejudice was such that non-white performers faced difficulties whether or not they were native born. The discriminatory nature of American society produced a rather remarkable dynamic whereby African American performers more often than not found greater freedom and success abroad. After a brief early career in New York City during which he faced persistent discrimination and even violence, Ira Aldridge went to England and became a renowned Shakespearean actor who toured across Europe over a forty-year career, never returning to the United States. The fortunes of African American entertainers improved but little after the Civil War, and groups like the Georgia Minstrels continued to find more freedom and remuneration touring overseas, with many of the more talented performers of that generation electing to remain abroad.

Although theoretically permitted, immigration to the United States by people of African descent was difficult. A singular exception was Bert Williams, who was born in the Bahamas but came to the United States as a teenager, where he made a name on the vaudeville circuit in partnership with George Walker. In 1903, the pair starred in In Dahomey, the first Broadway musical written and performed by African Americans, and Williams went on to a successful solo career as part of the long-running musical revue Ziegfeld’s Follies. While opportunities for black performers expanded in the 1920s, luminaries like Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, and Marian Anderson still often found it easier and more rewarding to perform overseas, at least until the Civil Rights Movement changed the cultural landscape in the United States.

Asian American performers experienced many of the same problems that African Americans faced. Anna May Wong and Sessue Hayakawa were bona fide stars in early Hollywood and on Broadway, but a combination of discrimination and typecasting eventually led each to pursue work in Europe. Asian immigration was almost completely curtailed after 1882, and although some exceptions were made for touring companies, Asian and African American performers were simply not afforded the same opportunities as white performers.

Roland Hayes, Moscow, 1928.

José Limón Dance Company program, 1953.


THE REPERCUSSIONS OF RETRENCHMENT

The Immigration Act of 1924 imposed restrictions meant to curtail immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe while reaffirming existing policies that effectively barred non-white immigrants. While the new laws did effectively limit immigration going forward, the Russian Jews and exiles from the Russian Revolution who immigrated in the years prior had a wide-ranging impact on American culture. Particularly notable was the experiential acting system Konstantin Stanislavski developed at the Moscow Art Theater, which was refined by Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg and taught to generations of actors in the United States. Artists like Sergei Soudeikine and Boris Aronson brought an avant-garde sensibility to scenic design, while Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and later Igor Stravinsky transformed modern American popular and classical music. Perhaps above and beyond all in terms of impact was George Balanchine, the father of the American ballet, whose innovative choreography for stage and screen brought dance in the United States to new heights.

The other principal avenue of immigrant influence on the American stage in these years was a consequence of the rise of National Socialism. Many Jewish performers associated with the vibrant vaudeville and cabaret scene of Weimar Germany came to the United States, but the new quota system meant that the total number of Jewish immigrants was tragically limited. More prominent Jewish artists and intellectuals had better luck securing visas, and theatrical luminaries like director Max Reinhardt, designer Leo Kerz, and composer Kurt Weill escaped Nazi Germany, though all would lose family and friends in the Holocaust.

The attack on Pearl Harbor and American entry into World War II was followed by the mass internment of over one hundred thousand Japanese Americans and immigrants. A leading modern dancer, Michio Ito, was one of many performers caught up in the hysteria, and despite having an American wife and a son who served in the U.S. Navy, he was deported back to Japan for the duration of the war. Ito’s story was broadly representative of this era and the way the inequities of the immigration system were felt onstage and off.
Even as immigration policy lagged, the success of an integrated 1943-44 production of *Othello* that originated in London and starred Paul Robeson, German emigre Uta Hagen, and Puerto Rican actor José Ferrer heralded the slow dawn of a more inclusive era in American theater. And yet the conservatism of the 1950s was very much reflected on Broadway, spurring more adventurous theater-makers to find new avenues for their creative work. The Panamanian-born director José Quintero co-founded the Circle in the Square Theatre, where he helmed landmark productions of Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams that helped inspire the Off-Broadway movement. Judith Malina, who came from a Polish Jewish immigrant family, and Julian Beck created The Living Theatre, an experimental group that staged avant-garde European work as well as collectively developing original plays and performances infused with radical politics. In a similar spirit, the German-born sculptor and dancer Peter Schumann started the Bread and Puppet Theatre, which developed a unique style of street theater that creatively engaged with the political tumult of the 1960s. The cultural upheavals of the decade were also reflected in the work of Yayoi Kusama, a Japanese artist who staged shows like *Self-Obliteration* (1967) that introduced the concept and practice of performance art. The globalization of culture in the postwar era promoted a greater awareness of theatrical practices around the world, a propensity that was reinforced by the global pattern of post-1965 immigration to the United States.

Irving Berlin and playwright Robert Sherwood collaborated on a 1949 musical, *Miss Liberty*, which celebrated American openness to the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” The reality for immigrants in the early postwar era was very different. While certain restrictive policies such as the ban on Asian immigration were loosened, initiatives like Operation Wetback, which involved the mass arrest and deportation of Mexican immigrant laborers, ensured that immigration to the United States was kept to a bare minimum. Indeed, it was not until the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 reformed the racist underpinnings of the quota system that numbers significantly increased and ushered in a more diverse and expansive era of immigration from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.
THE NEW AMERICANS

Since the reforms of 1965, over sixty million people have immigrated to the United States with a significant majority hailing from Mexico, Central America, and Asia. The shifting shape of immigration was echoed on the American stage as new voices have come to the fore. New multi-ethnic companies like the East West Players and the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre were formed in the 1960s and 1970s to support Asian American professionals who were either overlooked or confined to stereotypical roles in mainstream American theater. Indeed, it was not until 1988 that an Asian American play, David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, was produced on Broadway, and it went on to win a Tony Award for Best Play and Best Actor for B. D. Wong. While courting broader audiences, Hwang and many of his contemporaries like Velina Hasu Houston and Han Ong have also produced works preoccupied with notions of identity and belonging that have a particular resonance for Asian American audiences.

Latina/o theater in the United States was historically limited to the Mexican American population in the Southwest and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities that dotted the Eastern seaboard, but it gained much greater salience in the context of the postwar surge in Latina/o immigration. El Teatro Campesino, which began as an outgrowth of the United Farm Workers union, popularized a unique brand of community-oriented political theater under the leadership of artistic director Luis Valdez. New York City’s Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, which was founded and directed by Miriam Colón in the 1950s, was perhaps best known for its long-running production of *La Carreta* (The Oxcart) by René Marqués, a multigenerational drama about the immigrant experience.

While the success of Valdez’s play *Zoot Suit*, which in 1979 became the first Latina/o play to be presented on Broadway, brought new visibility, opportunities for Latina/o professionals remained limited. Lin-Manuel Miranda’s 2008 hit *In the Heights* was a breakthrough that emerged from the vitality of the Latina/o immigrant experience in New York City. Miranda’s follow up *Hamilton* created an international sensation by recasting the origin story of the United States in a way that celebrated diversity and underscored the contributions that immigrants have made in the making of the nation. Although conflicts endure, the struggles and triumphs of generations of immigrant actors, artists, and entertainers have invariably enriched the American stage since its very beginning.