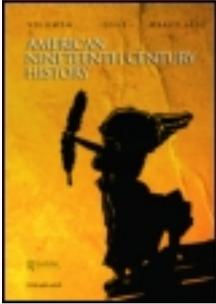


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## The Politics of Theatrical Reform in Victorian America

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Beginning in the late 1840s there was a concerted effort by a group of editors and opinion-formers to encourage the development of a more respectable and “moral” theater. The American Dramatic Fund Association, based in New York City but consciously part of a transatlantic movement, was founded in 1848 as the organizational embodiment of this cause and the Unitarian minister Henry W. Bellows was one of its foremost spokesmen. This article explores why theater reform was seen as important, who supported it, and who opposed it. It suggests that we should understand theatrical reform, in the form it took in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, as a quintessential example of a transatlantic liberal reform aimed at combating the destabilizing and morally degenerate consequences of urbanization and industrialization. The article also locates theatrical reform within antebellum party formations, arguing that it exposed a basic fracture within the Whig-Republican coalition between evangelical reformers and cosmopolitan liberal reformers over the nature of cultural authority in an urbanizing, fragmented society.

**Keywords:** theater; Whig Party; Republican Party; American Dramatic Fund Association; theater reform; Henry W. Bellows; New York City; William Charles Macready; transatlantic reform movements

The American theater of the 1840s and 1850s, recalled Horace Greeley, was a “systematic corrupter of Popular Liberty,” dominated by the kinds of people who offered only “sneers and slurs” to virtue. In the view of this irrepressible editor and reformer, the “wise and the good” were repelled by the “Stage’s habitual leaning to the side of Slavery, Tippling and other iniquities whereby some men derive profit from others’ weaknesses.”<sup>1</sup> Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* was a persistent advocate of the view that, far from being an irredeemable site of sinful behavior, theater could, in the right hands, become a positive moral force. And by the late 1860s, Greeley was confident that the worst excesses of the stage had been banished; if not yet an entirely respectable form of public amusement, it had at least been wrested from the clutches of those whose politics Greeley found most threatening. Since the late 1840s, a group of Whig-Republican newspaper editors, together with some prominent liberal Protestant clergymen and a host of elite social reformers, had been calling for a systematic reform of the stage. They were not the first voices to suggest that the theater could be an engine of moral reform, but they were the most

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prominent, and they made their case at a propitious moment. This antebellum theatrical reform movement represented a distinct alternative, from within the Whig tradition, to Puritan anti-theatricalism. Opposition to the theater was still a powerful cultural force in the middle of the nineteenth century. Yet, there was also, as Karen Halttunen has shown, an increasing readiness to acknowledge theatricality and artifice, even in a culture that continued to prize the ideal of authenticity.<sup>2</sup> In the 1850s, there was a fashion for parlor theatricals – making plays and tableaux in domestic space. This was the wider social and cultural context in which theater reformers sought to regulate, domesticate, and, ultimately, redeem the stage. Theatrical reform in the mid-Victorian period was a reflection of at least one face of the consolidating urban middle class in America and a projection of a distinct social and political vision.<sup>3</sup>

This article explores why theatrical reform came about, who supported it, and who opposed it. I examine theater reform both from the perspective of the world of transatlantic liberal reformers and also in relation to domestic US politics. Like abolitionism and temperance reform, theater reform emerged from a transatlantic world of bourgeois reformers, animated by common concerns about the moral health of their industrializing societies and connected across the Atlantic by networks of shared intellectual traditions and religious impulses. However, whereas Protestantism provided an organizational tie between British and American abolitionists, the more important transatlantic intellectual influences on theater reformers were liberal ideas about how culture could strengthen individual responsibility and self-reliance. Unitarianism, in both Britain and America, was an especially important influence in shaping theatrical reformers' ideas about the role of culture in creating a more disciplined society.

The Anglo-American dimension of theatrical reform reflected the nature of nineteenth-century theater. Especially from the 1820s onwards, theater was commercialized on an international basis as impresarios such as Stephen Price and Ethelbert A. Marshall helped to create transatlantic “stars” of actors like Edmund Kean, James W. Wallack, William Charles Macready, and Edwin Forrest.<sup>4</sup> This was not a simple story of elites imposing their class values on everyone else. Theater reformers wanted to reverse the social segmentation of theater in the hope of promoting social harmony, just as the same people wanted to create urban spaces such as parks that would be enjoyed by people from all classes. Yet, one thing that distinguished the world-view of theater reformers from others was that they recognized the limits of the old sources of cultural authority: the Protestant pulpit and the power of social deference. While theater reformers tended to want to create a society in which people like them played natural leadership roles, they aspired to do so by creating social institutions, including the theater, which would generate values of self-improvement without needing to rely on hectoring or inherited social deference. The attempt to combine structure and cultural cohesion on the one hand with individual freedom and the free market on the other hand was what placed theatrical reform in the main currents of transatlantic Victorian liberalism.<sup>5</sup>

Theater reform intersected with party politics in an interesting way. It was a distinctively Whig-Republican movement, but it also exposed a basic fissure within

that coalition. For Greeley and others like him, theatrical reform was an aspect of the broad transformation of American culture and society sought by many Whigs – most of whom, like Greeley, became Republicans by the late 1850s. Far from being a marginal issue, theater, by its very nature, raised questions of wide social and political significance. The working-class dominated theaters of New York City in particular incubated exactly the kind of political and social values that Republicans defined themselves against. Theater was often “culturally Democratic”: tolerant of drinking and boisterousness, but aggressively intolerant of antislavery and all other kinds of middle-class evangelical-inflected reform. Where Republican bourgeois reformers prized the domestic realm as the means of nurturing virtue, the theater had come to represent a masculine, public world they found alienating. Where Republicans differed among themselves however – and differed bitterly and profoundly – was over whether the theater could be saved. Most of the leading figures in the theatrical reform movement were Republicans. Yet many others within the broad Republican coalition – notably the most vocal evangelical Protestant figures – remained implacably committed to the notion that the theater was inherently and irredeemably sinful. Most Democrats remained on the outside of this battle, refusing to accept that theater posed any moral or social problems, and defending the right of workingmen to enjoy “amusements.” Most Whigs, and later Republicans, agreed that, for numerous reasons, theater as it existed had a degenerative effect on the moral health of society. The argument, as the Unitarian newspaper the *Christian Inquirer* put it, was whether theater “like Slavery[,] gambling [and] piracy” should be “annihilated in a truly divine order of human society?” Or “will it, and can it, be redeemed and saved?”<sup>6</sup>

### Theater and antebellum politics

“Antitheatrical prejudice,” as Jonas Barish has called it, had deep roots in American culture.<sup>7</sup> The censure of previous generations was frequently cited as evidence in itself of the immorality of the stage. “The great mass of the wise and the good of every age have frowned upon the acted drama,” the Boston *Congregationalist* reminded its readers.<sup>8</sup> It was a prejudice that had roots in republican thought as well as Protestant tradition. During the Revolution, prominent men often asserted, following the example of Plato in *The Republic*, that theatrical amusements undermined republican virtue. Theater had become another British commodity to be resisted and the staging of performances by occupying British military forces reinforced the perception that the acted drama was fundamentally antirepublican.<sup>9</sup> This secular objection was powerfully fused with a Puritan mistrust of imposture and ritual. The Calvinist idea that it was sinful to represent oneself as something that one was not persisted into the antebellum era, reanimated by the evangelical revivals of the Second Great Awakening.<sup>10</sup> In this view, thespians were no more than professional liars. At the dedication of the former Tremont Theater in Boston as a Baptist church in 1843, the Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher gave a triumphal sermon in which he castigated the theater as “a school of vice and immorality.”<sup>11</sup> The stage was a hideous parody of the pulpit; the theater’s pit a hellish echo of the church’s congregation. Beecher hailed

the sanctification of a space sullied by actors. The Tremont was far from unique: there were other buildings transformed from theaters to churches and vice versa in these years. In Boston alone, two other theaters were closed and converted into churches in the 1830s and 1840s. When fire destroyed the theater in Richmond in 1811, killing 72 theater-goers including the state governor, a memorial church was built on the site and preachers were not slow to interpret the event as a sign of God's will.<sup>12</sup> Lyman Beecher responded to the news of the burning of a Boston theater by declaring, "another gateway of Hell has been destroyed by the direct intervention of Divine Providence."<sup>13</sup>

Calvinist anti-theatricalism played into a fear of hidden enemies, of disguise and imposture, which came to the surface again and again in antebellum political culture in anxiety about Catholic, Masonic, or British conspiracies. It was also overlain with what Karen Halttunen has called the sentimental "cult of sincerity." If "to be genteel, simply stated, was to be sincere" in the 1830s and 1840s, overt theatricalism in any form, especially in a theater itself, was inherently suspect and difficult to reconcile with bourgeois respectability.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons, one critic argued, cleaning the Augean stables had been a "holiday enterprise" compared to the task of reforming the stage.<sup>15</sup> The Congregationalist weekly, *The Independent*, reached for a different metaphor: "he who would wash [the theater] white, may sooner change the Ethiopian's skin, and make the leopard shed his spots!"<sup>16</sup> What separated Greeley, with his conception of theater as a corrupter of liberty, from Beecher, with his very similar-sounding accusation that it was a school of immorality, was that for Beecher, the very act of playing was the tap-root of the sin.

In David Grimsted's judgment "the violence of the religious attack was in large part the result of its ineffectiveness. Desperation much more than exaltation, or even hope, marked the tone of most religious writing about the theater."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, notwithstanding the disapproval of the pulpit, by the first decade of the nineteenth century, most eastern seaboard cities and towns, and many inland communities as well, had at least one professional or amateur theatrical troupe and dedicated theaters were being built. In the Early Republic, theaters, even in large cities such as New York, Boston, or Philadelphia, generally catered to something approaching a social cross-section of their communities, but from the late 1820s onwards, as the cities grew and a more assertive working-class culture developed, especially in urban areas, the number of theaters multiplied and the audience became increasingly stratified by both genre and venue.<sup>18</sup> Although it requires qualification, there is some truth to the influential interpretation of the relationship between class and culture most famously formulated by Lawrence Levine in *High Brow/Low Brow* which sees the increasing fragmentation of culture on class lines by the middle of the century.<sup>19</sup> New popular theatrical forms, such as travesty and minstrelsy were increasingly contrasted with "higher" forms of public entertainment such as Italian opera and "classical" music, while a proliferation of theaters appealed to audiences that were more socially homogenous than had once been the case.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as Peter G. Buckley has shown, there were differing expectations of the appropriate relationship between the audience and the stage depending on how exclusive or popular the venue.<sup>21</sup>

These two parallel and interrelated developments – the continuing popularity of the stage especially with working-class audiences and the revival of evangelical anti-theatricalism – left many of the Victorian American middle-class ambivalent about theater by the 1840s. Both the condemnation from the pulpit and the association of much theatrical entertainment with vulgarity meant that the word “theater” itself had connotations that managers appealing to a “respectable” clientele sought to avoid. A series of ventures to create a “respectable” theater in New York from the 1840s onwards called the new spaces “Opera Houses,” even though they offered a mixed fare including theatrical performances; P. T. Barnum in New York and Moses Kimball in Boston created “Lecture Rooms” within their museums for the staging of moral melodramas and sometimes Shakespeare; and entrepreneurs keen to attract middle-class patrons to their performances opened summer “gardens.” Many of these commercial ventures in producing theater that was not called theater were highly successful. Anti-theatrical prejudice among the middle class coexisted with an appetite for theatrical entertainment, sometimes within the same people. Amateur theatricals at home became wildly popular, prompting a surge of publications of playscripts and instructions on how to create tableaux. Even some of the strongest evangelical opponents of the stage did not extend their critique to parlor theatricals.

Despite, or because of, the air of unrespectability that hung over theater, it generated a huge amount of attention in antebellum culture. The recognition that theater has always been, in Stephen Greenblatt’s phrase, a “collective creation” in which audiences pass judgment on the images and ideas presented to them, has led historians to an increased recognition of the function of the theater in helping to constitute identities, including, in the nineteenth-century United States, political identities.<sup>22</sup> No less a figure than Andrew Jackson saw the theater as the best mechanism for disseminating national sentiment. “It is time,” he wrote, “that the principal events in the history of our country were dramatized, and exhibited at the theaters on such days as are set apart as national festivals.”<sup>23</sup> Stock stage characters – the veteran of 1776, the frontiersman, the Yankee with his homespun wisdom unsullied by British decadence or pretension, and, most obviously, the figure of Uncle Sam himself – became familiar to American audiences.<sup>24</sup> Theater also disseminated political information by representing topical events on the stage. The European revolutions of 1848 were re-enacted in long-running productions in New York and Philadelphia, for example.<sup>25</sup> And only weeks after the battle of Bull Run, at least two New York theaters staged productions re-enacting the Union defeat. The Bowery production offered the live appearance of the “Eighth Regiment Drum Corps,” while the Broadway Music Hall production featured some of the most famous minstrel and comic performers of the day, including Dan Holt as Jeff Davis.<sup>26</sup>

To antebellum Americans, theater seemed to matter; it was a reference point, a litmus test for the moral health of republican society, and a never-ending source of metaphors. Democratic politics was naturally conceptualized in theatrical terms: the people as audience; politicians as actors; the “political stage”; the behind-the-scenes “wire-pullers” ensuring that all was not necessarily as it seemed. Theater also influenced the practice of politics. The self-conscious theatricality of torchlight parades, liberty pole raisings, and magic lantern displays borrowed heavily from the

techniques pioneered by popular entertainers. An essential attribute of an aspiring politician was the ability to command a crowd. Politicians, like actors, relied on sheer energy, on pacing, on elegant cadences, and on the physical mastery of their respective stages. For both, the visual and stylistic aspects of their performances were at least as important as the content of their speeches. The remoteness of the actors from most of the audience as theaters got bigger in the 1820s and 1830s – four and a half thousand people could fit into the Broadway Theater – encouraged a ritualized physical expression of emotion which was similar to the highly stylized system of poses and gestures within which antebellum orators operated.<sup>27</sup> The consciousness of performance and the animated interaction between performer and audience were intrinsic to antebellum Americans' understanding of how politics worked. Reports of speeches in nineteenth-century newspapers always include references to audience participation. A written speech without such moments would miss a critical dimension: the validation, or repudiation, of the audience.

To Alexis de Tocqueville, the relationship between theater and democratic politics seemed innate. The “tastes and propensities natural to democratic manners,” he predicted, would first be visible in theater. “The pit has frequently made laws for the boxes,” he noted, meaning that, in the absence of aristocratic patronage on a European model, lower-class tastes were catered to.<sup>28</sup> This sense that American theater was distinctly – exceptionally – democratic in form and tone was a point of pride to the defenders of the theater. As the *New York Herald* put it in 1848, whereas

the rulers of the people on the continent of Europe . . . granted large sums annually for the support of the theaters . . . here, in our happy and free country, the sovereigns also make large contributions to the support of the theaters – the sovereign people we mean.<sup>29</sup>

And for reformers, too, the starting point for their efforts was the perception that American theater was uniquely intertwined with the project of democracy. This meant that theater contained all the dangers as well as the potential inherent in the democratic project.

Theater reformers generally agreed with Lyman Beecher about the “low” morality of most plays, including the insidious subversion encouraged by ribald burlesques, notably of Shakespeare. And, like the espousers of anti-theatricalism, reformers were horrified by the age-old association of theaters with prostitution and sexual immorality as well as with violent and unruly behavior. In her account of her travels in America, Frances Trollope was appalled to see a man in a theater audience vomiting everywhere.<sup>30</sup> Other middle-class play-goers recalled having to endure a hail of missiles from the gallery as a regular part of a performance, and, as David Grimsted has shown, theater riots occurred regularly in early nineteenth-century America and involved larger crowds than any other type of riot.<sup>31</sup> The theater was one of the few places in which popular sovereignty could be expressed in boisterous, perhaps even violent, ways.<sup>32</sup> For reformers, the lack of discipline and order, the “pandering” to baser values they saw in much theater, was indicative of the dangers of the democratic project. And since, for them, the Democratic party, or

“the Democracy” as it was generally known, was the organized embodiment of these dangers, tackling the excesses of the stage was one aspect of the battle against the Democracy.

As Bruce McConachie and others have shown, the melodrama that became the pre-eminent theatrical form in the 1830s and 1840s reflected the values of the dominant Jacksonian political culture. The language of Democratic party politicians and the plays that were most successful at the box office both featured images of an idealized yeoman republic of manly, independent working men and comradely honor. Both were structured around a narrative of the threat of subversion, the emergence of a redemptive leader, and culminated in the promise of revenge and catharsis.<sup>33</sup> And both were also often marked by resistance to change, deeply ingrained notions of racial hierarchy, and, above all, a yearning to resist encroachments on established rights through appeals to an idealized past.<sup>34</sup> No one illustrated the connection between theater and the Democratic party better than the first celebrity American actor, Edwin B. Forrest, who, in the 1830s and 1840s cultivated a fiercely loyal fan base especially among urban working-class men with bombastic performances that echoed Jacksonian rhetoric. The “American Tragedian,” as he was known, stepped out of character to make stump speeches on topical issues and even toyed with the idea of running for Congress on the Democratic ticket. The politics of Forrest’s performances could hardly have been more overt. When, in *The Gladiator*, a play written as a vehicle for Forrest, the hero cried “Freedom for Bondmen! Freedom and Revenge!” the audience knew that he was declaiming the words not only as Spartacus the Roman slave, but also as Forrest, the embodiment of American democratic promise. And when audiences watching Forrest in his most popular role as the Indian chief Metamora heard Forrest denounce English decadence, they were brought to their feet cheering. All Forrest’s interchangeable heroes shared the same qualities: they were all strident, flawless, physically powerful redeemers of their people, burning with a lust for freedom. All offered hope to those who harbored resentments against the coteries of effete, selfish, and corrupt men who tried to lord it over the people in republican America.

The audiences who rallied to Forrest’s standard wanted to be part of the act just as they wanted their theatrical hero to visibly engage with them and for his performance to be obvious and overt. The self-consciously dramaturgical approach of antebellum audiences was exemplified by a group of young men called the “Forrest Life Guards” who would appear in the pit at Forrest’s performances wearing fancy French-style military uniforms.<sup>35</sup> If, as Karen Halttunen suggests, an important marker of “gentility” in the 1830s and 1840s was a rejection of overt theatricality, such play-acting from the audience made theaters even more unsettling places to the middle class.

While the increasingly working-class oriented theater of the 1830s and 1840s displayed a cultural affinity with the Democratic party, the political culture of the Whig party contained the seeds not only of Lyman Beecher-style anti-theatrical rejection but also of the project of theatrical reform. As Daniel Walker Howe has demonstrated, Whiggery was less a coherent political program than it was a culture – a way of making sense of the world. One of the impulses that defined

Whiggery was the idea that social reform would be effected only in part through the electoral process, and that at least as important was a moral reformation to be enacted through religion, education, voluntary associations, and culture. Whigs rejected the laissez-faire approach of their Democratic opponents, both in terms of regulation of the economy and individual morality, and yearned for social integration and harmony.<sup>36</sup>

The case for reform was made powerfully in 1832 by William Dunlap, a sporadically successful painter, prolific playwright, and failed theater manager, who argued in his *History of the American Theater* that the “deterioration of the drama” in America was due to a lack of state regulation and support, forcing a manager to pander to “the vulgar or shut his theater.” Art, and especially drama, could be the “great engine” of moral reform and social progress, Dunlap believed. In a democracy, the theater was even more important than elsewhere. As democracy took hold around the world, public institutions like the theater would be needed to enable “the governors, *the people*” to rule. “Let us give to theaters,” he argued, “that purity, as well as power, which shall produce the high moral purpose here aimed at.”<sup>37</sup> This was a Whig view of progress in which culture would be a means of social integration and moral uplift. For Dunlap, if the genres of plays, the culture of the performers, and, above all, the character of the audiences could be transformed, then theater could not only cease to be dangerous, it could potentially be politically useful – even virtuous – as well. A similar case was made by the conservative Whig mayor of New York, Philip Hone, who, when laying the foundation stone for the new Bowery Theater in 1826, expressed confidence that the new venue would improve the taste and correct the morals of the people. But Hone was unusual for a man of his class and political views. No act of his public life, as he recalled ruefully in his diary, lost him so many friends as did this endorsement of the theater.<sup>38</sup> Within a handful of years of opening, the Bowery had lost any pretensions it may once have had to attract a clientele from all sections of society and had become associated with the rowdiest kind of working-class theater in a city in which the upper classes were losing control of theatrical space.<sup>39</sup> At the height of Jacksonianism, Dunlap and Hone’s optimistic vision of a republican theater that would cultivate good taste seemed further away than ever.

The theater reformers who emerged in the late 1840s, therefore, while they echoed many of the same arguments as Dunlap and Hone, were operating in a different environment. Their concerns were with managing the consequences of the dramatic urbanisation and social changes of the first half of the century. While there was, for some of them at least, a discernibly paternalistic undertone to their arguments, they recognized the impossibility of reconstituting a vanished social order. A comparison of Philip Hone and Horace Greeley, two Whig advocates of theater reform of different generations and temperaments, illustrates the difference. The two shared a characteristic optimism about America’s capacity to progress and develop economically without the worst social consequences visible in the Old World. Both were champions of a reformed theater, but whereas Hone was nostalgic for an era in which the upper classes exercised unquestioned cultural power, Greeley came to the project

with a radical agenda. Greeley was a tireless enthusiast for new ideas and projects that promised to marry social mobility with the old Whig ideal of social harmony.

One thinker who exercised a profound influence on Greeley was Charles Fourier, the French utopian socialist whose advocacy of “associationalism” became highly fashionable in radical circles in the United States in the 1840s.<sup>40</sup> Greeley’s *New York Daily Tribune* published the work of Albert Brisbane, the leading American Fourierist, and supported Fourierite ideas in editorials – and theater was important to Fourier’s vision of his ideal community.<sup>41</sup> Fourier believed, in the words of *The Harbinger*, the organ of the American Fourierites, that man is a complex being whose duty it is to bring himself into harmony with life by “industrial labor, by intellectual research, by spiritual worship [and by] artistic discipline.” All these things “are perfectly realised in the Theater.”<sup>42</sup> Theater, in Fourier’s words, was a “pathway to any work in the arts and sciences, even mechanics, which is much used on the stage.”<sup>43</sup> A “phalanx,” as Fourierite communes were known, would be a “miniature of that great city, Holy Jerusalem,” explained *The Tribune*. It would have not only a “Temple for its Sacred worship” but also a “Theater for its amusements in subordination to the discipline of unitary taste . . . and true refinement.”<sup>44</sup> There was a coherent philosophy of theater underlying this conviction: drama was morally elevating only when it was serious and conducted by actors who did not pander to the gallery for cheap laughs. Bad actors, argued Fourier and his followers, were one of the “seeds of depravity” in society because of their habit of “caricaturing and rendering ridiculous every play they put on.” But if the Fourierite plan was put into effect, displays of egoism by a demagogic star player would be discouraged and theatricality reconciled with sincerity. A universal “theatrical language” of emotionally “truthful” gestures would obviate any need for histrionic performances by charismatic “stars.” Only then could theater start influencing morals for the better.<sup>45</sup> Insofar as the Fourierite ideas, as popularized by Greeley’s *Tribune*, played a role in shaping the theatrical reform movement, they did so not because a socialist utopia was practical politics, but because they dovetailed with the concerns of middle-class reformers who wanted theater to become less boisterous, actors to be less bombastic and demonstrative, and playhouses to be less unruly. There was a concern with propriety and proper moral function in Fourier’s writings about theater that reinforced a wider Whiggish critique.

### **The American Dramatic Fund Association**

Theaters did gradually respond to the imperatives of mid-Victorian gentility. Some establishments banished the word “God” from the stage and marketed themselves as purveyors of plays with morally impeccable messages.<sup>46</sup> The decline of heroic melodrama and the rise of parlor comedies which often burlesqued in a knowing and affectionate way the social pretensions of the rising middle class, all indicated a changing theatrical clientele. Museum theaters like Barnum’s helped to reconcile theatrical performance and bourgeois notions of acceptable recreation. “No vulgar word or gesture and not a profane expression was *ever* allowed on my stage,” insisted Barnum. “Even in Shakespeare’s plays, I unflinchingly and invariably cut out vulgarity and profanity.”<sup>47</sup> Museum theaters also helped popularize temperance dramas like

*The Drunkard*, the emergence of which brought a new audience to the acted drama.<sup>48</sup> By the late 1870s, as a marker of the extent of this transformation, two ministers opened the Madison Square Theater in New York, solely in order to produce plays of a “moral tendency.”<sup>49</sup>

One of the agents of this gradual, if partial, transformation was the American Dramatic Fund Association (ADFA), the organizational embodiment of the campaign to bring the stage into line with genteel notions of respectability. The Association was founded in New York in 1848 for the purpose of making a provision for “aged and decrepit” thespians but also, more generally, with the aim of legitimizing the stage. “Both actors and the elite,” commented a supportive newspaper, “are now assembled in a corporate body legally authorised to maintain actors’ privileges upon equal terms with other benevolent institutions in the land.”<sup>50</sup> *The Spirit of the Times*, one of a relatively new genre of newspapers focusing on sports and entertainment, reminded its readers that the aim was that through the “elevation of the profession of ‘actor’ . . . the civil and social reforms needed in our day and country” would be brought closer.<sup>51</sup> Harnessing middle-class reformist culture on behalf of actors was a new departure in the United States, although it followed closely on the pattern of the General Theatrical Fund Association (later the Royal Theatrical Fund), which was set up with similar charitable aims in England in 1839 by a coterie of supporters of a reformed stage including William Charles Macready and Charles Dickens.<sup>52</sup> By 1857, the annual reports of the ADFA reveal an annual income of \$6,115 and an endowment of more than \$35,000.<sup>53</sup> It was an overwhelmingly Whiggish affair. The leading lights, including presidents Henry G. Stebbins and James T. Brady, Secretary J. C. Wemyss, and Vice Presidents Simeon Draper, Philip Hone, J. Prescott Hall, N. P. Willis, and James Brooks, were all prominent Whigs and, in most cases, later Republicans.<sup>54</sup> These men conceived of themselves as part of a cosmopolitan liberal movement, anchored in the conviction that a new kind of cultural and political leadership was needed for an industrial age. Adopting a phrase coined by Charles Eliot Norton, the historian David S. Hall has called such people “modern missionaries” and the terms aptly captures cosmopolitan liberals’ rejection of traditional sources of authority in the Protestant pulpits as well as their conviction that they were at the avant-garde of a progressive movement to reconcile democracy and authority.

The press’s recognition that the theatrical reform “movement” was “simultaneous with other movements of a kindred character in England,” generated some hostility. The association of the wealthy reformers with Anglophilia – and therefore, it was imagined, aristocratic pretension – condemned them, and the entire project, in the eyes of opponents.<sup>55</sup> It was reported with disdain that above the head of the President of the Association at the eighth anniversary dinner in 1856 were portraits of Shakespeare and Garrick, but the only American represented was not an actor or a dramatist but Washington. This iconography, observed the Democratic-leaning *New York Herald*, was an all-too-accurate reflection of the participants and their agenda.<sup>56</sup> Was there not one American actor or dramatist to be “found in this great city to grace this annual festival?” asked the *Literary Messenger* incredulously after the 1851 event.<sup>57</sup> This theatrical nationalism was also a way of talking about the battle for

control of the stage between the popular theater and a newly self-confident elite whose engagement in a transatlantic liberal community rendered their patriotism suspect.<sup>58</sup>

The Anglophile and socially elitist tenor of the ADFA's annual dinners and the transatlantic nature of its political project was indicative of theater reform's place in a wider web of mid-Victorian reformism. England, as Sam W. Haynes has recently shown, was often an avatar for nationalist and class-based resentment against American elites.<sup>59</sup> In this context, the deadly riot at the Astor Place Opera House in May 1849 dramatized the stakes for which theater reformers were playing. More than 25 lives were lost when the militia was called out to restore order when a large crowd attempted to prevent the leading British tragedian William Charles Macready performing *Macbeth*. The origins of the outburst of violence lay in a well-publicized feud between Macready and Edwin Forrest, as well as class tensions, partisan conflicts, and popular Anglophobia. The deaths were the result of bungling on the part of the authorities more than malice aforethought.<sup>60</sup> But the riot drew sharp lines between two distinct theatrical cultures in New York City and more widely. Many of the supporters of Macready who signed a public letter urging him not to give in to the mob were key players in the ADFA.<sup>61</sup> Initially, the Association had tried to recruit Edwin Forrest, the most famous actor in America and a well-known supporter of various thespian benevolent causes. Forrest had been sympathetic, appearing in benefits for the Fund, at least one of which was at the Astor Place Opera House. After the events of 10 May 1849, however, tarnished by the (not unfounded) perception that he had offered tacit support to the anti-Macready movement, Forrest was conspicuous by his absence from all events organized by the Association.<sup>62</sup>

To the patrons of the Astor Place Opera House and the supporters of the British tragedian, the anti-Macready mob was the Bowery working-class audience in hideous caricature, stoked to a frenzy by their hero Edwin Forrest. It dramatized the social and political threat, the "systematic corruption of public liberty," as Greeley was to put it, posed by an unreformed theater. Some people responded to the riot with conventional anti-theatrical rhetoric. But for theater reformers, including the members of the newly formed ADFA, this was a galvanizing moment. The riot led to an editorial campaign in several Whig newspapers, not just in New York City, but nationwide, calling for the American theater to be the agent of its own – and the nation's – redemption.<sup>63</sup> Now was the time, argued Greeley's *Tribune*, for theater to reassert the idea that liberty was not "the unchecked supremacy of brute numbers over law and authority" but demanded a "watchful regard for the equal rights of others," however unpopular they may be.<sup>64</sup>

The man at the epicentre of the Astor Place Riot, William Charles Macready, attracted great loyalty from his American – as well as his British – friends and supporters because he appeared to be a new kind of actor who was pioneering a new kind of theater. The working-class supporters of Forrest had not just picked a fight with yet another English actor to match earlier confrontations with Edmund Kean, James Anderson, or Fanny Kemble.<sup>65</sup> They had picked a fight with the personification on both sides of the Atlantic of the hope for a reformed theater. Macready's cerebral approach to Shakespearean texts, and his concern with creating a unified vision that

would enable total suspension of disbelief, anticipated theatrical developments of the early twentieth century.<sup>66</sup> He aimed to create performances that were authentic in their naturalness, emotional truth, and even, perhaps, their moral purpose.<sup>67</sup> In 1849, he offered a reformed stage with a far grander political purpose – a much more ambitious notion of the function of culture – than did temperance plays or “moral melodrama” in museums.

Macready was trying to create, in the real world, an approach to performance that, though the use of carefully rehearsed techniques, was so truthful that it reconciled performance with sincerity. Macready was trying to bring to life Charles Fourier’s notion that actors should have a “form for every impulse.” As one of Macready’s admirers, the critic George Henry Lewes put it, “far from deceiving or fooling his audience, the good actor aims to represent ideal character with such truthfulness that it shall affect us as real.”<sup>68</sup> And just as Victorian etiquette guides on both sides of the Atlantic offered the middle classes lessons on how to appear sincere, Macready’s approach to acting offered a mastery of theatrical conventions, or “legible signs,” in order to convey emotional naturalness.<sup>69</sup> In his more elevated moments, Macready’s intention was that his acting – and indeed the holistic theatrical experience he created – would serve as no less than a template for good citizenship. Few compliments can, therefore, have meant more to Macready than that he received on his retirement from his friend Charles Sumner in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “Of you we may say,” wrote the antislavery senator, “what Cicero said of the great Roman actor Aesopus, that he chose the noblest parts both as an actor and a citizen.”<sup>70</sup>

Sumner could see, in the old Whig tradition of William Dunlap, the moral value for a republic in a noble, well-acted drama. But the ADFA also helped catalyze a less high-minded conception of theater’s function. If bourgeois life in mid-Victorian America brought with it the expectation of being seen to be in control, to be a master of one’s emotions, to display the characteristics of respectability as well as to get ahead in the race of life – then maybe the theater, properly handled, could offer a much-needed antidote. According to the *Spirit of the Times* in 1852, “perhaps it is *because* life is serious, and *because* our ordinary pursuits are so absorbing, that theatrical diversions are so agreeable, and, we may add, so proper.”<sup>71</sup> Or, as *Putnam’s Magazine* put it in 1857, “the people *will* be amused and *must be* amused.”<sup>72</sup> Recognition of this reality was the core insight in a lecture in the same year by Edward Everett Hale, the prolific author and committed Unitarian. Hale suggested that play was as divinely sanctioned as work and that “public amusements,” including theater, should not always be expected to “teach men morals” but “simply to rest and amuse them.” This was a religious project, Hale argued. Places of amusement must be “consecrated.”<sup>73</sup>

### Henry W. Bellows and the social function of theater

An even more influential intervention along the same lines came from the most prominent Unitarian minister in the country at the time, Henry W. Bellows, in a speech to a meeting of the ADFA at the Academy of Music – a new opera house on Fourteenth Street that was to prove more enduring than its Astor Place

predecessor – in April 1857.<sup>74</sup> Bellows, like Hale, saw nothing wrong with amusement for its own sake. When we go to the theater, Bellows told his listeners, “Instead of ministering, we are ministered unto; instead of acting, we are acted for; instead of planning and scheming, we are watching schemes and plans; instead of feeling for ourselves we are feeling for others.”<sup>75</sup> In providing a release from the performative pressures of bourgeois life, and healthy recreation for workers, theater could also be a salve that countered selfishness, a claim more usually made from the pulpit about the church than the stage.

Henry Bellows’s intervention was significant because he was the first high profile clergyman, albeit from the most liberal branch of Protestantism, to endorse the theater.<sup>76</sup> He was also one of the first religious figures to articulate the underlying assumption of the ADFA, which was that part of the solution to the immorality of the stage was for the “moral and religious portion of the community” not to stand aloof. In effect, he suggested that commercial pressure be brought to bear. The presence in the auditorium of a substantial number of respectable persons “would be the only possible and effective [mechanism], in a country like ours, of securing the selection of plays of a harmless and spotless character, and their performance in a manner decorous and unblameable.”<sup>77</sup> Bellows’s social circles included actors and actresses. Fanny Kemble occasionally attended his church, and he had been one of William Charles Macready’s strongest supporters in the aftermath of the Astor Place Riot in 1849.<sup>78</sup>

Bellows’s lecture prompted a fierce debate in the press. “The papers here & in other cities are full of the subject,” Bellows told one correspondent.<sup>79</sup> To his friend Cyrus Bartol, Bellows complained that “The Religious press . . . treats me like a mad bull in a Spanish circus with twenty tormentors at his head and hoofs.”<sup>80</sup> But sympathizers wrote praising Bellows’ courage and his “noble stand.”<sup>81</sup> One compared him to Edmund Burke, who had defended the great eighteenth-century actor David Garrick on the floor of the House of Commons. “Religious society, respectable society,” wrote John W. Taverner to Bellows, has deprived actors of their “honor.” Bellows’s speech should be welcomed “from a moral point of view” as a “highly enlightened ‘reform movement.’”<sup>82</sup> The speech was even reported in Britain. The Liverpool Garrick Club sent him a letter of appreciation, to which Bellows replied that it was his duty to “carry the Gospel – its charity as well as its rebuke, but its sacred justice as well as its gentle mercy – into the theater.”<sup>83</sup> This comment got to the heart of Bellows’s position. The weakness of the church as an institution, he argued, was that it had “abandoned the world” as it really was, it had failed “to claim the world as its charge, and to assume its superintendence.”<sup>84</sup> But despite the transatlantic reach of his speech, Bellows was also acutely aware of very different political circumstances in the two countries. Theatrical reformers in Britain worked within the context of theatrical censorship by the Lord Chamberlain, and the capacity of Macready and his influential friends – Charles Dickens, Lord Tennyson, Edward Bulwer Lytton – to influence the stage was greater than was Bellows’s in America. In a democratic society, cultural leadership, thought Bellows, needed to be exercised through a combination of moral suasion and the power of the market. As the

*New York Home Journal* pithily, if optimistically, synthesized this view: “excellence will ‘pay’ better than trash.”<sup>85</sup>

Bellows was accused of naivety in believing that commercial pressures would be able to influence the tone of the plays or the playing.<sup>86</sup> But the minister also advocated a concerted campaign to influence managers and playwrights, encouraging them to seek a better style and a “nobler frame.”<sup>87</sup> The argument he would put to theater managers would be:

People will go to see great talent and great dramatic triumphs, in spite of the indecency or viciousness of the plots and incidents; but they would go a great deal more to see works of genius and power united with purity and truth.<sup>88</sup>

When Bellows spoke these words, his audience may well have had in their minds the extraordinary stage success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which had been credited with drawing the godly to the theater.<sup>89</sup> There was irony in the fact that the author of the novel that had inspired the greatest stage hit of the decade should be the daughter of Lyman Beecher and the brother of Henry Ward Beecher, who had taken on his father’s mantle as the most prominent of anti-theatrical preachers. Harriet Beecher Stowe herself had visited a theater for the first time ever to see a production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. One correspondent of the *New York Herald* wrote to urge that “Mrs Stowe would give us her own views of the theatre.” While her brother had “attacked [the stage] without ever having seen it . . . she has ‘been there,’ and on that account her opinion would have more weight than his.” Did she feel herself “demoralized,” he asked sarcastically, “by witnessing her superb tragedy in the Boston theatre?”<sup>90</sup>

There was a doctrinal element here, well recognized in the religious press: those who held firm to belief in the inherent depravity of the human heart were unlikely to be persuaded by Bellows’s optimism. Bellows, in contrast, drew on a quintessential Unitarian faith in “self-culture,” or the capacity of men and women to cultivate their intellectual and moral faculties. Associated with an 1838 lecture by William Ellery Channing, “self-culture,” was a measure of “character” available to the poor as well as the rich. One of the most important purposes of life, argued Unitarians, was to cultivate a “Christian character,” a project that required the uncovering of the revelation of God in human nature. For Bellows, as for William Charles Macready, theater was a natural expression of the human spirit that should be harnessed to the project of cultivation.<sup>91</sup>

Democratic newspapers who felt little or no fastidiousness about theater welcomed Bellows’s speech as an endorsement by a clergyman of the honest amusements of the people.<sup>92</sup> But even as it drew out support from those who wanted to de-stigmatize actors and acting, Bellows’s lecture also prompted a fierce anti-theatrical reaction. Evangelical pastors and the majority of the religious press loudly asserted traditional anti-theatricalism.<sup>93</sup> Some used it to attack Unitarian theology.<sup>94</sup> Six months after Bellows’s lecture, noted the *New York Observer*, there was no sign of the promised reform. Instead, it claimed, parents “wept” at the way that Bellows’s lecture had “seduced” their children into the theater. Some of the arguments made in support of Bellows emphasized that theatricality was natural – since children “played

at soldiers” and so on – and in principle could be source of moral instruction and intellectual culture.<sup>95</sup> But the *Independent*, in reiterating the argument that “theatrical reform” was an impossible project, also flatly refused to believe the claim made by reformers that because “men have a dramatic faculty, that *the Drama is good*.”<sup>96</sup> Above all, Bellows failed to persuade, insisted the *New York Evangelist*, because “it was an argument for the Drama in the abstract which did not apply at all to the . . . actual Stage as it is, and as it is likely to be.” The *Evangelist* declared that it was not advocating anti-theatrical fundamentalism – it did not take the ground that the “acted drama is an acted lie” – but nor did it believe that the public theater could be made into the innocent pastime that Bellows imagined. People went to the theater, argued the *Evangelist*, not for gentle amusement but for an intense, exciting experience, a far more morally suspect motive. Parlor theatricals, in contrast, were acceptable because they took place within the home, amid the nurturing circle of the family. Theatricals, this writer concluded, were “safe and pure in proportion as they are *domestic*.”<sup>97</sup> In fact “domesticating” the theater was precisely what reformers believed they were doing. Their opponents, such as the writer in the *Evangelist*, simply did not believe that such domestication was possible in such a quintessentially public, commercially driven and masculine environment as a theater.

On the surface, Bellows’s argument was a reiteration of the Whiggish idea that a cultural elite should give direction to American democracy and a reassertion of the importance of cultural leadership in a complex industrializing society. In the wake of the Astor Place Riot, Bellows had called for “active government and private intervention to push the many, disparate social and economic classes of Americans together” and create a more “disciplined” and “harmonious” society.<sup>98</sup> This was the core idea behind his interest in theatrical reform. Bellows argued in Arnoldian terms that culture was an engine to elevate the masses and bind the nation together. Critically, however, he imagined doing so through the mechanisms of democracy and the free market, properly harnessed. Moral suasion and the salutary presence of the respectable in the audience were the mechanisms to effect reform, but he also envisaged regulation and the use of the power of government to help create the institutions most conducive to the cultivation of the masses. For example, theater reformers supported legislation in New York State to outlaw any establishment that offered staged entertainment also selling alcohol. In 1862, the Republican state legislature passed, against Democratic opposition, the “Anti-Saloon” Act which mandated the closure of establishments that had proliferated in the 1850s offering stage entertainment along with food, drink, and scantily clad waitresses.<sup>99</sup> Bellows had a broad conception of public action that saw no incompatibility between private action and governmental action. In this sense, his attitude to the ADFA probably paralleled his attitude to the United States Sanitary Commission, the benevolent association for the relief of soldiers that Bellows took a lead in establishing during the Civil War. Both were private charities with a broad public political purpose.

Theatrical reform was, for one influential strand of Whig/Republicans represented by Bellows, the key to a larger social and cultural project that would harness the power of the state and of private enterprise to the cause of reconciling democracy and authority. The historian David M. Scobey has described the emergence after the Civil

War of an elite group of reformers who sought to transform New York City into a “utopian terrain of parks, promenades, tutelary institutions, and planned suburban districts.”<sup>100</sup> Theatrical reformers like Bellows and his colleagues in the ADFC anticipated this project before the war. They saw themselves as charting a new, liberal, and modern path, distinguished from a conservative yearning for a society ordered by the pulpit on the one hand, and from the disorientating and divisive effects of unfettered markets and unfettered democracy on the other.

Bellows’s 1857 speech was the high-water mark for public discussion of the legitimacy and social function of theater in the 1850s. In April 1865, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in Ford’s theater dramatically reignited old passions. Anti-theatricalism was given a predictable boost. “Thousands of Christians,” noted the *New York Observer*:

felt intense regret that Mr Lincoln was at a theater when the fatal blow was struck. We heard it often spoken of, even in the midst of the intense national sorrow. Disguise it as we will, it is not a fitting place for a good or a great man.”<sup>101</sup>

For the Rev. Phineas Gurley, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, such a “dark and hellish” deed was no more than we might expect from a man “trained and schooled in the theater” and used to playing “exciting and tragic scenes.”<sup>102</sup> The *New York Times* called for Ford’s theater to be turned into a church.<sup>103</sup> An alternative plan favored by some religious periodicals was for the theater to be torn down and a monument erected that might “serve not only as a befitting memorial of the lamented President but also as a perpetual warning against the practice of visiting theaters.”<sup>104</sup> Actors were, for a time, collectively vulnerable to at least rhetorical attack. Even the *New York Times* observed that the acting profession is “not free from its taint of treason.” Horace Greeley’s notion that the antebellum stage had nurtured Democratic values had, it seemed, been tragically vindicated. According to the *Times*, at the start of the Civil War, there had been “not ten in one hundred of that profession [acting] who were not undisguised and outspoken friends of secession.”<sup>105</sup> Laura Keane, who had starred in the play Lincoln had been watching, and other actors in her company were arrested after the assassination, although there was no evidence to link any of them to the crime.<sup>106</sup> For a time, one Baltimore resident was quoted as saying, “it wasn’t safe for an actor to walk the streets.”<sup>107</sup>

Democratic papers including the *New York World* and the *Chicago Times* vigorously defended actors and pointed to the hypocrisy of “Puritanical” Republicans who condemned the theater even when their own president visited them. Yet, the tone of the anti-theatrical press suggests the extent to which, even in this emergency, they felt themselves to be losing ground. Although the *Christian Advocate and Inquirer* was certain that “no other form of worldliness so surely seduces the soul from Christ,” it noted sadly that there was, nonetheless, a “strong disposition to vindicate theater-going generally.”<sup>108</sup> And it could not be denied, as the owner of Ford’s theater indignantly pointed out, that all presidents from Washington to Lincoln, had gone to the theater. It was “patronized by the good and the great everywhere.”<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusion

Theater reformers aimed to make the public theater conform so far as possible to the dictates of Victorian domesticity. By 1866, the *New York Times* was confident that there had been a “Christianization of the *audiences*” of the theater. “Jests or allusions which, twenty years ago, would have been received with ecstasy by gallery and pit and helplessly endured in the boxes, would not to-day be tolerated for a moment in any part of a respectable theater.” Even more could be done to introduce wholesome plays, but the progress made was to be welcomed.<sup>110</sup> H. P. Phelps, manager of the Albany Theater, thought by 1880 that:

the vulgarity of most of the old-time comedians would not be countenanced in an ordinary variety show . . . the indelicacy which used to set the pit roaring has gone out and with it much of the profanity with which genteel comedy is interlarded.<sup>111</sup>

Implacable anti-theatricalism was clearly losing ground by the end of the 1860s to a liberal reformist perspective. The Lincoln assassination prompted a reassertion of anti-theatricalism and not until the very end of the century would Protestant denunciations of the stage fade. Yet the reformist impulse, once established in the 1850s, was there to stay.

The role of theatrical reformers such as those who supported the ADFA needs to be set within the context of the political changes of the mid-Victorian decades in the United States. Civil War-era Republicans were engaged in a cultural, nation-building project as well as in an economic and political project. The continuing potency of anti-theatricalism during the 1850s and 1860s is a reminder of the importance of the concept of “Puritanism” in American politics in these years. It was a powerful rhetorical weapon wielded by Democrats who attacked the party of Lincoln as “sour, narrow-minded and illiberal” and embodying the “persecuting, intolerant, hateful and malignant . . . Puritan spirit of New England.”<sup>112</sup> Few ideas galvanized anti-Republicans so well as the word “Puritan.” It conjured up a hectoring, patronizing tone, a perceived New England conspiracy to dictate to the rest of the country, and the image of a meddling do-gooder. It was, above all, a charge that suggested hypocrisy, one of the most dangerous political labels to acquire, especially in an era that prized sincerity so highly. For hundreds of thousands of Republican voters, most of whom lived far from the theaters of Broadway, or any other big metropolis, and for the readers of the religious press still inveighing against the intrinsic sins of plays and players, the theater fitted into the category of evils to be confronted. Republicans such as Henry W. Bellows and Horace Greeley – different from one another though they were in many ways – were both conscious of the distinct pressures of urban, industrializing society and aware of the limits of the traditional pulpit in providing moral leadership to society as a whole. Some reform projects – notably antislavery – engaged the cosmopolitan liberal reformers and evangelicals equally. Theatrical reform, however, exposed different assumptions about the future development of society. “The restraints of Puritanism are giving way,” noted *Putnam’s Magazine* in 1857. In an increasingly complex modern society, new mechanisms were needed to bind society together and to develop – to “cultivate” – the human spirit.<sup>113</sup>

If “the Stage” in a democracy was, as Tocqueville suggested, not just a mirror to nature but the place where the morals and principles of a society are first revealed, then the redemption of the theater was an integral part of the process of redeeming the nation as a whole. The conflicting views of Republicans over the reformability of the theater reflected a basic cultural cleavage within the party. On the one hand, traditional anti-theatrical evangelicals saw theater as a symptom of the corruption of modern society which would be swept away in a millennial social revolution. Theater reformers, on the other hand, while still operating within the capacious boundaries of Protestant reform culture, were more connected to the currents of transatlantic liberalism. They saw themselves as part of a cosmopolitan community whose struggle against slavery was just one aspect of a global battle against anti-modern forces. Their vision of modernity embraced the market and sought to break down barriers to social and intellectual mobility. But they did not support theatrical “free trade.” Like parks, schools and other public institutions, theaters, they thought, should not be left to the mercy of the *unfettered* market, but should replicate the values of Victorian domesticity in public space. Through a reformed theater, democracy and capitalism could be reconciled with culture and social order.

## Notes

1. Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 206.
2. Halttunen, *Confidence Men*.
3. On the use of the term “Victorian” to describe bourgeois culture in the United States in this period, see Howe, *Victorian America*; Rose, *Victorian America*. The notion of a transatlantic community in the nineteenth century was articulated by Thistlethwaite, *The Anglo-American Connection*; Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion*; and Hall, “The Victorian Connection.” In recent years, interest in the transatlantic context has revived. See especially Butler, *Critical Americans*. The reference to bourgeois class consolidation draws especially on the work of Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*; Scobey, *Empire City*; Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power*.
4. For a discussion of the emergence of the “star system” and the commercialization of theater in the first half of the nineteenth century, see McConachie, “American Theatre in Context”; Williams, “European Actors and the Star System.”
5. Hall, “The Victorian Connection” identifies an important distinction between an Anglo-American, “cosmopolitan” and partially secular liberalism on the one hand and evangelical reformers on the other which, while more dependent on the notion of “secularization” than would be fashionable in today’s scholarship, nevertheless identifies a useful distinction within the world of mid-nineteenth century liberal reformers. Theater reform highlighted these tensions with particular clarity, setting cosmopolitan liberals against the Puritanical tradition of moral reform.
6. [New York] *Christian Inquirer*, May 23, 1857.
7. Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*.
8. [Boston] *Congregationalist*, May 15, 1857.
9. Davis, “Puritan Mercantilism and the Politics of Anti-Theatrical Legislation.” General Burgoyne wrote an anti-American play, *The Blockade of Boston*, that was performed in Boston in 1776 during the British occupation. See, Clapp, *Record of the Boston Stage*, 3–4.
10. Barish, *Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*; Agnew, *Worlds Apart*; Buckley, *Christians and the Theater*; Johnson, *Church and Stage*; Davis, “Puritan Mercantilism and Anti-Theatrical

- Legislation”; Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera*, 17–19; Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 22–45.
11. *New York Tribune*, July 8, 1843.
  12. Witham, *Theater in the United States*, 134–6.
  13. Crawford, *Romantic Days in Old Boston*, 250.
  14. Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 194.
  15. *New York Observer and Chronicle*, November 26, 1857.
  16. *The [New York] Independent*, May 7, 1857.
  17. Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 31.
  18. McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*, 5–64, provides a class-based analysis of the changes in theater culture in the 1820s and 1830s.
  19. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.
  20. On class divisions among theater audiences in the 1840s and 1850s, see McConachie, “New York Opera-going, 1825–1850”; McConachie, “The Theater of the Mob.”
  21. Buckley, “To the Opera House”; Buckley, “Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment,” 456–61.
  22. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 4. On theater and American nationalism, see Wilmer, *Theatre, Society and the Nation*; Mason and Gainor, *Performing America*; Hodge, *Yankee Theatre*; Bristol, *Shakespeare’s America, America’s Shakespeare*; Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity*; Teague, *Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage*; Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent*; Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*; Bank, “Staging the ‘Native.’” Important recent works on the creation of nationalism in this period include: Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*; Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth*; Baker, *Affairs of Party*.
  23. Quoted in Wilmer, *Theatre, Society and the Nation*, 7. See also Richards, *America on Stage*, xi.
  24. Jefferson, *Autobiography*, 20; Hodge, *Yankee Theatre*.
  25. Roberts, *Distant Revolutions*, 46–7.
  26. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, vol. 8, 23.
  27. Downer, “Player and Painted Stage”; Mullin, “Methods and Manners of Traditional Acting.”
  28. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, Chapter 14, University of Virginia digital edition. [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/ch1\\_19.htm](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/ch1_19.htm).
  29. *New York Herald*, April 28, 1848.
  30. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 133, 208, 209, 243.
  31. Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*, 363. Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 65–75; Grimsted, *American Mobbing*.
  32. On the exceptional circumstances of theater culture and the problem that posed for ideas of democracy in the early republic, see Evelev, “*The Contrast*.”
  33. See McConachie, “The Theater of Edwin Forrest and Jacksonian Hero Worship”; Mallett, “The Game of Politics”; Martin, “Metamora’: Nationalism, Theater and Jacksonian Indian Policy.”
  34. McWilliam, “Melodrama and the Historians.” There is a well-developed literature on theatre and popular radicalism in Britain. See, for example, Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London*; Swindell, *Glorious Causes*; Russell, *Theatres of War*; Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactic*; Joyce, *Democratic Subjects*, 192–204.
  35. *New York Herald*, May 9, 1849.
  36. Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 29.
  37. Dunlap, *History of the American Theater*, 405. On Dunlap, see Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 1–21; and Tice L. Miller’s introduction to the 2005 edition of Dunlap’s *History of the American Theater*.
  38. Hone, *Diary*, 324.
  39. Brown, *History of the New York Stage*, vol. 1, 367–8.

40. For Fourier's influence on Greeley's politics, see Tuchinsky, *Horace Greeley's New York Tribune*; Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*.
41. In the *Evening Post*, Parke Godwin, a former Democrat, made similar arguments, arguing that a play should be able to instruct audiences in right living and provide clear moral lessons. See, for example, *New York Evening Post*, September 11, 1843.
42. *Harbinger*, December 18, 1847. See also, Beecher, *Charles Fourier*, 110–11.
43. Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, 255.
44. *New-York Daily Tribune*, April 13, 1843.
45. Fourier, *Theory of the Four Movements*, 255–6.
46. Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 33.
47. McConachie, "Museum Theaters and the Problem of Respectability." The quotation from Barnum is on 65.
48. Frick, *Theater, Culture and Temperance Reform*.
49. Palmer, "American Theaters," 165.
50. *The Albion*, April 21, 1849; "Rules and Regulations of the American Dramatic Fund, March 3, 1848," ADFa, Records.
51. *Spirit of the Times*, May 23, 1857.
52. Trewin, *The Royal General Theatrical Fund*. On the influence of the General Theatrical Fund on the founders of the American Dramatic Fund Association, see [ADFA], *American Dramatic Fund Association, incorporated April 10, 1848*, 7.
53. *Spirit of the Times*, April 25, 1857.
54. Names of the committee members from the ADFa, Records.
55. Most of the names of the leading figures of the ADFa are identified as among the richest in New York City in Pessen, *Riches, Class and Power*.
56. *New York Herald*, April 12, 1856. For accounts of earlier annual dinners, see *Spirit of the Times*, April 16, 1853, 97; *The Albion*, April 17, 1852, 188.
57. *The Literary World*, April 26, 1851, 329.
58. *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, May 8, 1865.
59. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution*.
60. On the Astor Place Riot, see Buckley, "To the Opera House"; Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 761–6; Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility*, 225–7; Moody, *Astor Place Riot*; McConachie, "The Theater of the Mob"; Cliff, *Shakespeare Riots*; Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution*, 96–105.
61. *New York Courier and Enquirer*, May 9, 1849. The letter was reprinted in most of the other New York dailies.
62. *Holden's Dollar Magazine*, July 1848, 429; *The Literary World*, April 26, 1851, 329. Forrest was also tarnished by his high-profile divorce battle.
63. See, for example, in Brattleboro, VT, the exchange between the (Democratic) *Vermont Patriot*, May 17, 1849, and the (Whig) *Weekly Eagle*, May 28, 1849.
64. *New York Tribune*, May 9, 1849.
65. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution*, 76–105.
66. Downer, *Eminent Tragedian*.
67. On authenticity and cultures of performance, see Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*.
68. Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, 122.
69. Halttunen, *Confidence Men*; Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 44.
70. Charles Sumner to William Charles Macready, undated [1851] in Matthews and Hutton, *Actors and Actresses*, extra-illustrated edition, provenance Robert Gould Shaw, Harvard Theater Collection.
71. *Spirit of the Times*, August 21, 1852, 321. That this argument about the acceptability of theater as a public amusement slipped into public discourse around 1850 reinforces Karen Halttunen's argument that, "in its purest form, the sentimental culture of the early Victorian period was yielding by mid-century to the new theatricality of high Victorian middle class culture." Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 195.

72. "The Question of Theaters," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, June 1857, 642–9.
73. *Christian Examiner*, July 1857, 47–58; Hale, "Amusements for Poor and Rich."
74. For the background to the address, see James T. Brady to Henry W. Bellows, April 7, 1857, Bellows Papers; Henry W. Bellows to J. C. Wemyss, April 17, 1857, ADFA, Records. On Bellows, see Union League Club of New York, *In Memoriam*; Peck, *Henry Whitney Bellows*; Kring, *Henry Whitney Bellows*; Clark, "Religious Beliefs and Social Reforms in the Gilded Age"; Frederickson, *Inner Civil War*, 26–8, 53–6, 69–73, 103–11; Buckley, "To the Opera House," 583–602; Attie, *Patriotic Toil*, 51–3; Augst, *The Clerk's Tale*, 181–3.
75. Bellows, *Address Upon the Claims of the Drama*, 11.
76. A similar argument was made by his fellow Unitarian Moncure Conway. Conway, *The Theater*; Conway, *Autobiography*, 257–9.
77. Bellows, *Address Upon the Claims of the Drama*, 3.
78. Bellows to "Dearest Sister," April 8, 1861, Bellows Papers.
79. Bellows to Joseph Jameson, April 25, 1857, Bellows Papers.
80. Bellows to Cyrus A. Bartol, April 25, 1857, Bellows Papers.
81. Samuel St. John to Bellows, April 23, 1857, Bellows Papers.
82. John W. Tavener to Bellows, May 12, 1857, Bellows Papers.
83. Aneurin B. Rogers to Bellows, July 17, 1857, Bellows Papers. Bellows's reply to the Liverpool Garrick Club was reprinted in the *New York Observer and Chronicle*, November 5, 1857. See also Bellows to J. C. Wemyss, September 6, 1857, ADFA, Records. Copies of Bellows's lecture were re-published in pamphlet form as far away as Melbourne, Australia. An edition was published in Melbourne in 1859 with a new introduction by George Coppin discussing the implications of Bellows's argument for the Australian colonies.
84. Bellows, *An Address Upon the Claims of the Drama*, 21.
85. *New York Home Journal* reprinted in *Spirit of the Times*, August 21, 1852, 321.
86. See, for example, Thomason, *Fashionable Amusements*.
87. *Christian Inquirer*, August 29, 1857.
88. Bellows, *An Address Upon the Claims of the Drama*, 21.
89. The most popular version for the stage was Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On the success of the various play versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from 1852 onwards, including among religious people, see Reynolds, *Mightier Than the Sword*, 137–51.
90. *New York Herald*, June 1, 1857.
91. Channing, *Self-Culture*. On the concept of "cultivation" in nineteenth century transatlantic reform, see Butler, *Critical Americans*, 7–8; Howe, *Making of the American Self*, 189–255; Howe, *Unitarian Conscience*, 107–19.
92. *New York Herald*, April 29, 1857; *Knickerbocker*, June 1857, 625–9; *Spirit of the Times*, May 23, 1857.
93. Thomason, *Fashionable Amusements*.
94. *Free Presbyterian*, quoted in *Christian Inquirer*, May 23, 1857.
95. On this theme, see Cyrus A. Bartol to Bellows, April 27, 1857, Bellows Papers.
96. *Independent*, May 28, 1857.
97. *New York Evangelist*, May 7, 1857.
98. Bellows, *A Sermon, Occasioned by the Late Riot in New York*, 14. Bellows's sermon was favourably reviewed in the *Literary Messenger*, May 26, 1849.
99. Rodger, "Class Politics and Theater Law."
100. Soby, *Empire City*, 155.
101. *New York Observer*, July 27, 1865.
102. Gurley, *The Voice of the Rod*, 15.
103. *New York Times*, June 21, 1865.
104. *German Reformed Messenger*, May 17, 1865.
105. *New York Times*, April 21, 1865.
106. Kauffman, *American Brutus*, 238.

107. William F. Morgan to the War Department, Lincoln Assassination Suspect file, microfilm, National Archives. Cited in Kauffman, *American Brutus*, 238.
108. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, May 18, 1865.
109. Quoted in the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, August 17, 1865.
110. *New York Times*, January 14, 1866.
111. Phelps, *Players of a Century*, 410.
112. Cox, *Puritanism in Politics*; *Chicago Times*, November 11, 1863.
113. "The Question of Theaters," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, June 1857, 642–9.

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