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*Rogue Performances: Staging the
Underclasses in Early American Theatre
Culture.* By Peter P. Reed

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ROGUE PERFORMANCES: STAGING THE UNDERCLASSES IN EARLY AMERICAN THEATRE CULTURE. By Peter P. Reed. Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; pp. xii + 249. \$90.00 cloth.

In his well-researched and discerning *Rogue Performances: Staging the Underclasses in Early American Theatre Culture*, Peter P. Reed traces how the racial and economic underclasses were represented by and contributed to American and related British theatrical performances of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The influence of W.T. Lhamon Jr. and Joseph Roach here is clear and acknowledged; Reed fruitfully builds upon the latter's description of the performative cultures of the circumatlantic world and the former's emphasis on the African diasporic contribution to blackface by detailing how the wide range of "low" performances inevitably influenced theatre proper. According to Reed, a low-inflected theatre embodied and shaped an inherently theatrical modern culture.

As Reed states in chapter one, he does not seek to catalog types of the stage low but to examine the complex ways in which the performance practices of the underclasses were transformed into theatre, despite the perceived danger of cooptation. Karl Marx's 1852 analysis of a "lumpenproletariat," which does attempt to catalog types--"vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, [etc.]" (qtd on 6)--serves as Reed's inspiration and target. Reed points out that Marx's lumpenproletariat is essentially "a theatrical class, a cast of masked, costumed, and artficed characters" whose members' lack of affiliation with a single class makes them untrustworthy (6). To Reed, the slippery, performative underclass prompts not just class anxiety but also an intense attraction--as seen in the ubiquitous stage low.

Reed does detail some common characteristics of the stage low's central figure, the rogue: an innate charisma, a dandiacal aesthetic, and a loyalty divided between the self and the gang or mob. The subject of chapter two and primary point of reference throughout *Rogue Performances* is Macheath from John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), which was tremendously popular across the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. The Macheath figure implicated the viewer in his resistance to established law and hierarchies, associating the audience with the on-stage mob's power to grant the alluring rogue reprieve from the hangman's rope. According to Reed, the Macheath figure is seen not just in other plays but also in accounts of actual public executions, which readily became theatrical events.

Chapter three focuses on Susana Haswell Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), which links the newly formed American family to the subversive activities of an underclass that ultimately has no place in the national vision. Indeed, the drama's conclusion suggests that underclass theatricality--including the captive's strategic adoption of Algerian practices--must be expunged. Yet in a low comedy like William Dunlap's *The Glory of Columbia* (1803), the subject of chapter four, theatrical rogues appear on U.S. soil as Dunlap adapts actual street performances (namely effigy parades) into his patriotic pastiche. More lucrative than *André* (1798), Dunlap's tragic treatment of Benedict Arnold's co-conspirator on which the comedy is loosely based, *The Glory of Columbia* is not popular patriotic pabulum, Reed argues, but a demonstration of how the desires of the People, potentially an unruly mob, could be at once entertained and controlled through the theatre.

Throughout *Rogue Performances*, but particularly in the final three chapters, Reed expands our sense of blackface minstrelsy's origins by situating the racialized rebel within a broader theatrical low culture that was subject to (in the words of Eric Lott) love and theft. Reed's treatment in chapter five of John Fawcett's *Obi; or Three-Finger'd Jack* (1800), which appeared on London and U.S. stages, colors the titular rogue black while raising the specter of rebellion across all sectors of the underclass. It does so in part by staging the Caribbean carnival figure of "Jonkanoo," whose masked performance of inversion signals through mimicry both slave resistance to the master and the preordained failure of rebellion. Chapter six considers W. T. Moncrieff's *Tom and Jerry, or Life in London* (1821), a play popular in the U.S. that touted the pleasures of "slumming it" among the underclasses of London, and traces how U.S. productions in the 1830s began to incorporate the native low via blackface minstrelsy. In chapter seven, Reed links Edwin Forrest's performance in Robert Montgomery Bird's *The Gladiator* (1831) to his early minstrel appearances and his signature Shakespearean role, Othello. Just as important as the submerged treatment of race *The Gladiator*, argues Reed, is its conservative assessment of a treacherously unstable underclass. The subsequent epilogue appropriately connects Jonas B. Phillips's *Jack Sheppard, or The Life of a Robber!* (1839), an American version of London updates of *The Beggar's Opera*, to the proliferation of riots in 1830s America and the later Astor Place Riots (1849), pointing to moments when the theatre literally served as the site of contestation regarding the power of the assembled working classes.

Like scholars Heather Nathans, Jeffrey Richards, and Jason Shaffer, Reed is interested in the cultural formations made evident in and constructed through the heterogeneous theatrical forms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Over the course of the book, he employs the immensely useful term "print-performance culture" to capture the way in which "Print culture, the formal stage, and commercial celebrity colluded with informal and customary practices . . ." (3). Indeed, it is primarily by resisting the page-stage dichotomy that Reed convinces the reader that the underclasses made an essential contribution to theatre culture. With reference to broad range of archival materials, he shows how low performances were appropriated and transformed through a fecund mix of print (dramas, reviews, broadsides, etchings, etc.) and performance (stagings, parades, riots, gallows speeches, etc.).

While at times the reader finds herself wishing for a more carefully edited text, *Rogue Performances* nonetheless represents the best of scholarship in early American theatre. It challenges old narratives that would isolate "American" theatre from its international context; it

draws on Performance Studies methodology and U.S. historiography while bringing to light neglected archival sources; it resists foolish distinctions between textual and embodied, theatrical and paratheatrical, stage representation and “real” culture; and it offers a compelling prehistory of nineteenth-century ethnic mimicry.

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