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Review of *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* By Roger A. Hall

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the topic. Covering the period from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of cinema, the book surveys how eastern audiences reacted to frontier depictions, examining these reactions against the backdrop of contemporary debates about national policies affecting the settlement of the West. Hall has limited his discussion to plays produced in New York, which allows him to take advantage of a wealth of theatrical documents, including reviews printed in New York newspapers and trade papers of the day. He takes into account the often neglected elements of scenery, staging, and the quality of performances in his analysis, which helps him probe whether a play succeeded or failed as a consequence of its quality, the popularity of its star, its spectacular scenery, the opinion of the critics, or some combination of these factors.

The number of plays and productions discussed in the book is impressive. Hall does not neglect the performances of famous Westerners such as Buffalo Bill, or the dramatic efforts of such popular novelists as Brett Harte and Mark Twain, but he also includes careful examinations of the work of recognized theatrical greats such as David Belasco and Augustus Thomas. Of particular interest is his discussion of Native American playwright and actress Gowongo Mohawk.

Hall's main argument is that New York audiences participated in a revolt against the "aristocracy of the critics" by enthusiastically attending frontier productions in spite of terrible reviews. Hall says the opinions of these huge working class audiences eventually moved frontier drama from low-brow entertainment to high-brow art. Imbedded in this argument is the problematic claim that frontier plays improved as they moved from melodrama to realism, a positivist view that mars an otherwise strong argument for the value and influence of these dramas.

Hall's work complements three other studies of American melodrama. Jeffery Mason, in *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (1993), disagrees with Hall about the meaning of frontier plays, offering readers an interesting coun-

Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906.
By Roger A. Hall. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001. xi + 281 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00.

Roger Hall's engagingly written study of frontier drama provides a good overview of

terpoint. Bruce McConachie's *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (1992) is more theoretical in approach and more sweeping in its coverage. Rosemarie Bank's *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (1992) contains excellent information about frontier drama that enriches Hall's work.

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