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WARTIME DRAMA: THE THEATER IN WASHINGTON (1861-1865)

By MAXWELL BLOOMFIELD

WHEN Abraham Lincoln assumed the duties of the presidency in 1861, his capital—the symbolic center of the Union—was little more than a provincial Southern town. In outward appearance it still merited the judgment passed upon it twenty years earlier by Charles Dickens, who found it a “City of Magnificent Intentions,” with “spacious avenues that begin in nothing and lead nowhere.”¹ Major thoroughfares turned into hazardous mud traps in rainy weather; geese and pigs roamed freely over much of the downtown area; the city canal was an open sewer, into which dead animals were sometimes thrown. All business and governmental activity centered in a narrow area north of Pennsylvania Avenue, between the Capitol and the Executive Mansion; and the city’s cultural life was similarly circumscribed.

At the outbreak of hostilities Washington boasted only one legitimate theater, the old Washington Theater at the corner of 11th and C Streets. Here the great stars—Joe Jefferson, E. H. Sothorn, Charlotte Cushman—made occasional appearances, playing repertory engagements of one or two weeks with the assistance of a resident stock company. As a center for the performing arts, however, the Washington Theater left much to be desired. Built in 1822 as a public hall, its stage facilities were minimal and it converted all too easily during the off seasons into Carusi’s Dancing Saloon. When utilized for theatrical purposes, it seated only several hundred persons, and was variously described by its patrons as “cozy” and “elegant” or “very small” and “miserable-looking.”

News of the fall of Fort Sumter interrupted an otherwise promising comedy season and led to the temporary curtailment of all further productions. “The Washington Theater has been closed for the present,” announced the *Evening Star* on April 22, 1861, “the condition of affairs here just now not being favorable to theatricals.”

¹ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (Boston, 1884), p. 316.

But a less cautious set of managers, after reviewing the situation, came to a different conclusion. One week later the theater reopened its doors to provide entertainment for the anticipated flood of transient soldiers and civilians soon to gravitate to the wartime capital. The experiment, measured by box office receipts, was an immediate success. By July 24th one newspaper critic reported: “Last night our theatre was full to overflowing, literally shaken down and running over with the throng that squeezed and elbowed its way into every nook and corner of the house. Seating the crowd was out of the question, and by nine o’clock, as far as getting in and out, ‘it couldn’t be had.’”²

Inevitably rival houses arose to contest the monopoly position enjoyed by the Washington Theater. John T. Ford opened Ford’s Atheneum on March 19, 1862, in a building which had formerly housed the 10th Street Baptist Church; while Grover’s Theater, on E Street some three blocks from the White House, presented its initial bill in April. Ford’s at first accommodated twelve hundred persons; after its destruction by fire in the fall of 1862, it was rebuilt on a larger scale to seat an audience of twenty-four hundred, approximately the capacity of Grover’s. These two “dramatic temples,” along with the little Washington Theater, constituted the legitimate theaters of Washington during the war years.

But there were music halls as well, several of which presented plays and burlesque skits as part of their general program. Canterbury Hall, located on Louisiana Avenue near 6th Street, was at once the earliest and most successful of these haunts of the soldier and the tired businessman. From its opening in mid-November 1861 it provided a generous potpourri of songs, dances, comedy routines, circus acts and sensational melodramas which proved an irresistible lure to Washington audiences. Several blocks away, on 9th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, the Varieties Theater, a renovated carriage house, followed the same pattern with comparable success after it began operations in October 1862. Minstrel shows were occasionally staged at such lesser spots as Odd Fellows’ Hall, Seaton Hall, and Philharmonic Hall.

The gaudier music halls of the Civil War era have not enjoyed a good press. Some contemporary journalists reported

² *Washington Evening Star*, July 24, 1861.

that Canterbury Hall and the Varieties were nightly crowded with "soldiers and roughs, screeching, catcalling, smoking and spitting."³ And drinking, they might well have added, for the Canterbury at least boasted its own bar, where drinks sold for ten cents apiece. Through the years these criticisms have been magnified until the music hall in some recent studies begins to look more and more like today's "little art" theater. Margaret Leech, for one, argues: "Matinee performances, suitable for women and children, were sometimes offered on holidays, but otherwise, save for a possible spree, family men did not frequent the music halls."⁴

Such a picture draws too sharp a line between music hall entertainment and the legitimate stage. The real difference between them was more a matter of degree than of kind. Undoubtedly the music halls were livelier night spots, but they attracted the best available novelty acts and their farces and melodramas were often interchangeable with those performed at the allegedly "high class" legitimate theaters. During the war years the music halls likewise mounted more original patriotic plays and topical satires than the repertory-minded playhouses. While these new offerings were generally devoid of artistic merit, their undeniable popularity indicates that they filled a real need for audiences who desired to see more American themes dramatized.

The legitimate theaters catered to the same broad public taste and drew their audiences in large part from the patrons of the music halls. Even their programs bore the stamp of a strong family resemblance. Ford's and Grover's usually presented one or two short farces in addition to the main piece; songs were interjected into many plays, with a musical or dance number featured between the acts. There is little reason to doubt that clerks and their wives as well as workers and their wives—the lower middle class and the working class—patronized both types of entertainment indiscriminately. And the same might be urged of more fashionable upper income groups as well.

Certainly the comparative scale of prices supports this conclusion. At the legitimate theaters prices ranged from 75¢ to 25¢, with box seats selling anywhere from five to ten dollars. The

³ Quoted in Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington* (New York, 1941), p. 276.

⁴ *Ibid.*

music halls had only two price levels—50¢ and 25¢—with private boxes available at five dollars. To complete the picture, we have eye-witness testimony that the level of gentility among patrons of the temples of drama was scarcely overpowering.

If a gentleman were forced to sit in the back of the house, he needed, said the *Sunday Chronicle*, an umbrella and a life preserver to protect him from the sluices of tobacco juice which ran under his feet in a yellow sea, laden with peanut and chestnut shells.⁵ He might also need protection from the crowd of "vulgar fellows" who nightly laughed and sneered at pathos and tragedy and walked out noisily on scenes they did not like. (Considering the acclaim that greeted such soggy melodramas as *East Lynne* during these years, the instincts of the rowdies may well have been sounder than those of contemporary critics.)

Indeed the ordinary playgoer of the Civil War era could respond wholeheartedly to almost any production, because the theater meant much more to him than it does to his twentieth-century counterpart. For him all the world *was* a stage, in a very literal sense; he tended to view life itself as a romantic spectacle. Hence the popularity of soldiers' theaters in military camps, where the recruits formed their own stock companies to present standard repertory pieces, sometimes assisted by one or two civilian stars in a rudimentary USO arrangement.

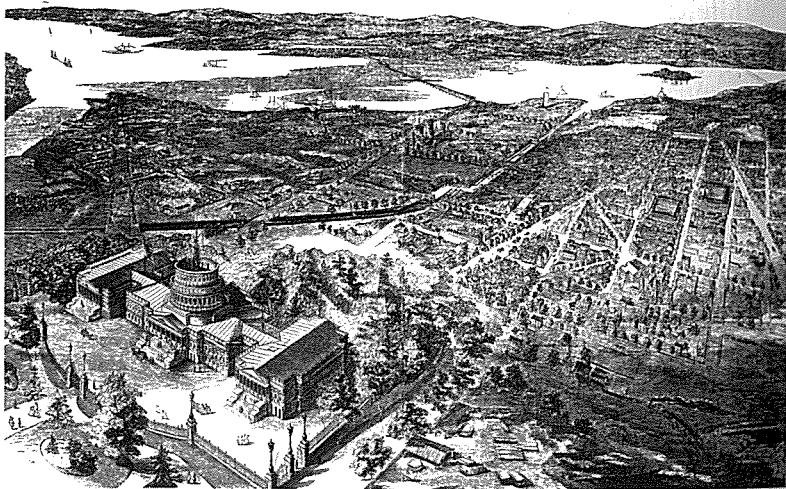
While the documentary records of such camp theatricals are virtually nonexistent today, scattered references do pinpoint certain performances in the Washington area. On January 1, 1862 the *Evening Star* reported that the soldiers of General Auger's brigade had erected a theater 40 by 80 feet, in which performances would shortly be given. A more circumstantial account of another military production appeared in the *Star's* pages on February 27, 1862: "Miss Susan Denin and Ben. Rogers are now 'starring' it at a neat little theater established by the men of Gen. Birney's brigade. They are assisted by volunteer 'talent,' and the 'Lyceum' flourishes amazingly. The band of the Third Maine regiment furnishes the music." Further details of these theaters are lacking, although one of them was probably the "new frame army theater" which reportedly burned to the ground in Alexandria, Virginia, during the year 1863.⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁶ J. M. Toner, *Notes on the Burning of Theatres and Public Halls* (Washington, D.C., 1876).

Toward the end of the war a unique military hospital theater developed in Washington as a result of the efforts of Dr. A. F. Sheldon, a surgeon who believed that the sick and wounded soldiers under his care needed mental as well as physical rehabilitation. A hall with a seating capacity of five hundred persons was accordingly erected at Campbell Hospital on North Seventh Street. Here in the spring of 1865 professional actors from the Washington Theater and Grover's performed their favorite roles with a supporting cast made up of hospital patients. Plays were presented regularly every Friday, and a high point occurred on March 17th when E. L. Davenport and J. W. Wallack starred in Tom Taylor's immensely popular comedy, *Still Waters Run Deep*.

Wartime civilians shared a similar passion for do-it-yourself theatricals. During the years from 1861 to 1865 such amateur groups as the Jefferson Dramatic Association, the Washington Literary and Dramatic Association, and the Washington Dramatic Club added their productions to the mass of other dramatic entertainment available to residents of the nation's capital.



"Balloon View of Washington, D.C."
Harper's Weekly, July 27, 1861.

At first glance the volume and variety of the wartime fare staggers the imagination. There were literally scores of plays to suit every taste, from farce to tragedy, and even after one makes due allowance for the periodic repetition of standard pieces inseparable from a stock company system, the picture remains kaleidoscopic. Yet beneath this apparent diversity lay a set of common assumptions and expectations that profoundly conditioned the entire theatrical scene. As one embattled critic summed up the situation in 1864: "This is the day of stage sensationalism."⁷

Any play, in order to succeed, had to appeal directly to the emotions of an audience through the presentation of larger-than-life characters involved in situations of uncommon romantic interest. Eccentric types filled the center of the stage and many an actor rose to stardom through his ability to wring tears or laughter out of a gallery of grotesque creations.⁸ The shrewd homespun Yankee, the incorrigibly warmhearted Irishman, the simple happy darkey, the pathetic longsuffering heroine, the appallingly steadfast hero, and the unspeakably malign villain—all gamboled promiscuously through such favorite pieces as: *Therese, the Orphan of Geneva; Retribution; or, A Husband's Revenge; The Sea of Ice; or, A Mother's Prayer; Our American Cousin; Irish Boy and Yankee Girl; Camille; or, The Fate of a Coquette; The Hidden Hand; Robert Emmett, the Martyr of Liberty; The Flowers of the Forest; or, The Gipsy Flower Girl; Sketches in India; The Little Barefoot; The French Spy; or, The Storming of Algiers; The Gladiator; Willie Reilly and his Colleen Bawn; Margot, the Poultry Dealer; Rosedale; or, The Rifle Ball; Lady Audley's Secret; The Convict's Skull; or, Romar the Vagrant; and Gamea, the Hebrew Fortune Teller.*

As this random sampling suggests, most plays were either written by foreigners or designed to exploit foreign settings and themes. The most popular and prolific dramatists of the early 1860's were Tom Taylor the Englishman and the Dublin-born Dion Boucicault. Their works, old and new, proved sure-fire hits in wartime Washington, as did dramatized versions of the novels of Charles Dickens, Walter Scott, Charles Reade, and

⁷ *National Intelligencer*, June 27, 1864.

⁸ For an excellent general discussion of romanticism in nineteenth-century American drama, see: Richard Moody, *America Takes the Stage* (Bloomington, 1955).

Victor Hugo. Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies likewise enjoyed a successful revival every season, although the prevailing taste for sensationalism led most theatergoers to prize the action sequences and pratfall humor above subtler artistic values. From a production of *Macbeth* that emphasized battle scenes and supernatural trappings it was no great step to the spectacular staging of a leading sensation drama such as *The Sea of Ice*:

TABLEAU SECOND
THE SEA OF ICE

The entire stage is here occupied by an immense Sea of Ice in the Arctic Regions, (rendered so profoundly interesting by the researches of the lamented Dr. Kane) upon which Captain De Lascours, his wife Louise, his infant daughter Maria, and his faithful attendant Barrabas, cast adrift by the merciless Mutineers, have found temporary and fearful refuge. Gorgeous appearance of

AURORA BOREALIS,

Resplendent with its sun tinted, variegated hues; suddenly a storm arises, and the swelling ocean bursts the shackles which confined it, and then occurs the awful, the sublime spectacle of the

BREAKING UP OF AN IMMENSE SEA OF ICE.

Amid the deafening crash of its icy fragments the towering icebergs disappear, and the entire stage is filled with

A RAGING SEA OF BOILING FOAM.

With the tenacity of life the Captain and his wife cling to the fragments of ice, from which they are engulfed in the furious waters, while their child, tossed about on a single block, is left in the hands of an OMNIPOTENT POWER FOR SUCCOR. Appalling Tableau.⁹

While exotic locales and extravagant perils eased the labors of most sensation playwrights, a small number found sufficient romantic interest in the American scene. Such earlier hits as Joseph S. Jones's comedy *The People's Lawyer* (1839), Mrs. Sidney Bateman's satire *Self* (1856), and John Augustus Stone's Indian drama *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829) remained popular with Civil War audiences. In addition the wartime crisis stimulated the revival of a minor cycle of

⁹ *Washington Evening Star*, Feb. 8, 1864.

"patriotic military dramas" centering about the American Revolution.

These plays—*The Days of '76; or, The Times that Tried Men's Souls; Horse-Shoe Robinson; or, The Battle of King's Mountain; The Black Rangers of the Wissahickon; or, The Battle of Germantown; The Pioneer Patriot; or, The Maid of the War Path*—paid tribute to the courage of colonial troops and appealed to sentiments of national pride and purpose. But as propaganda for the preservation of Mr. Lincoln's Union, their message was ambiguous, to say the least. Southern sympathizers as well as Unionists could readily identify with the cause of the oppressed colonists. In fact logic was on the side of the Secessionists, for the promotion of national self-determination was clearly not one of the war aims of the Lincoln administration.

Prompted perhaps as much by patriotism as by economic considerations, several Northern writers brought out their own "national dramas" during the Civil War, utilizing incidents of the contemporary struggle. By far the most effective of these newer military plays to be performed in Washington was Charles Gaylor's *Bull Run! or, The Sacking of Fairfax Court House*. Gaylor made no effort to deal with the underlying causes of the war, but his piece was filled with patriotic slogans and blood-stirring battle scenes, as a synopsis of the final act indicates:

Act III.—The Female Spy in the Union Camp—New National Song, "The Battle-cry of Freedom"—Death of the Female Spy—Skirmish in the Vicinity of Bull Run—Look out for Bombshells—Charge of Black Horse Cavalry—Battle of Bull Run—Tableau.¹⁰

Bull Run played for one straight week at the Washington Theater in October 1862. Whatever its deficiencies as a work of art, its propaganda value was incontestable. "Long before the time of opening," reported the *Daily National Intelligencer*, "the doors are besieged by an eager crowd desirous of giving vent to their patriotism by their approbation of the Union sentiments with which the piece abounds. . . . Each scene is productive of the greatest amount of enthusiasm, and the presence of so many of our principal military officers, and their

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Oct. 20, 1862.

hearty recognition and endorsement of the play and its patriotic sentiments, at once attests its popularity among them."¹¹ Less impressive were two later productions: *The Battle of Antietam; or, The Death of General Reno* (December 1862) and *Beau Sickman; or, The Bushwhackers of the Potomac* (July 1864).

The image of war presented in the military play was a highly romantic one, in which youthful heroes engaged a treacherous foe in mortal combat, for the honor of their country and the love of their womenfolk. Much the same outlook prevailed, in cruder form, in the major music hall hits of the time, such as *Our Volunteers*, *The Seventh Street Dress-maker; or, The Union Martyr Girl*, and *The Dangers of a Dancing Girl*. The latter piece was a wild potpourri of patriotism, mother love, and sex, which well illustrates the depths to which wartime sensation drama often sank. The management of the Varieties Theater summarized the plot for the benefit of prospective patrons:

The Home of the Dancer—The Phantom Mother—The Explosion in the Theater—The Blockade-runner's Den—The Abduction of the Danseuse—Death before Dishonor—The Duel by Torchlight. Also Double Music Hall Show.¹²

One other class of popular amusements exploited the war as a romantic spectacle. Beginning in the spring of 1863 Washington audiences were treated to a succession of "dioramas," "great stereoscopic panoramas," and "PANTECHNOPTOMON WAR ILLUSTRATIONS." By whatever name they were called, these programs featured a series of large-scale paintings depicting major battle sites and other locations connected with the war. The Washington Theater and Odd Fellows' Hall served as exhibition centers, with nightly performances resembling something between a modern light-and-sound production and an early moving picture display. Sometimes elaborate mechanical effects, such as moving figures re-enacting the strategy of a particular battle, added a third dimension to an otherwise static pictorial background. The public paid standard music hall prices to see these shows, whose promoters could ordinarily count on an engagement of several weeks, together with the possibility of an equally successful revival at some later date.

While advertisements proclaimed the accuracy of their specific

¹¹ *National Intelligencer*, Oct. 23, and 24, 1862.

¹² *Washington Evening Star*, Sept. 19, 1864.

details, the overall effect of the panoramas was anything but realistic. Most artists showed a preference for bathing their battlefields in moonlight or for paying undue attention to what one poster described as "VIEWS OF RUINS, SCENERY, EXQUISITE STATUARY, &c."¹³ The grim face of war was concealed behind a welter of gadgetry which reduced the scale of violence to lilliputian proportions, in which form it afforded pleasurable vicarious thrills to stay-at-home audiences. "Go and see the fort blown up and the troops swallowed down," wrote an enthusiastic newspaper critic after a visit to Baum's diorama in 1864. "It is really a gigantic and exciting scene."¹⁴

These romantic tastes persisted down to the closing days of the war, when the last and greatest of the dioramas announced as its climax:



Ford's Theatre, Washington, D.C. 1893.
Maryland Historical Society Graphics Collection.

¹³ *Ibid.*, May 19, 1863.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Nov. 22, 1864.

GRAND BATTLE SCENE,

With an accurate view of the lines in front of Petersburg.

THE BATTLE FIELD AT NIGHT.

Introducing the most wonderful piece of mechanism, the DYING OFFICER AND HIS FAITHFUL STEED.¹⁵

Such sentimental idealism, echoed from pulpit and press as well as from the stage, goes far to explain the peculiar brutality and ruthlessness that characterized the "real" Civil War.

But if theatergoers viewed the battlefield through a reverential haze, they were uncommonly well informed concerning the seamier side of the war on the home front. In this area sensation dramatists, building upon a prewar tradition of urban muckraking plays, undertook to expose the manifold corruptions of wartime Washington, to the unending delight of crowded houses. A regular series of low-life melodramas developed to meet the demands of legitimate theaters as well as music halls: *Three Fast Men of Washington* (1862); *Belle of Washington* (1863); *The Female Pickpocket of Washington* (1864); and *The Workmen of Washington* (1865).

The most successful of these efforts proved to be *The Female Pickpocket*, which also appealed to the broadest cross-section of occupational groups:

MERCHANTS, STATESMEN, POLITICIANS,
TRADESMEN, MECHANICS, FIREMEN,

Go See Yourself on the Stage!

Rich Revelations Developed!

Now Let the Evil-Doers Tremble!

Ye Men of Guilt Yet High in Trust!

The Great Exposé of the City! The Life Local Drama of
the Capital!¹⁶

"If it is true," declared a bemused critic after attending an early performance, "it shows the existence of more crime than has been dreamed of, and if it is a work of the imagination it is very well got up. In either case it is worth seeing."¹⁷

Audiences apparently agreed, for *The Female Pickpocket* en-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Mar. 21, 1865.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Mar. 21, 1864.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Mar. 23, 1864.

joyed an initial run of three weeks at the Varieties Theater in the spring of 1864, and was successfully revived for a week during the fall season.

In addition to full-length "local dramas" of city life, conditions in wartime Washington encouraged the production of a large number of topical skits and satires directed against bureaucratic mismanagement of the war effort. These comedy routines formed a staple ingredient of music hall programs and were sometimes presented by the legitimate theaters as curtain-raisers or short after-pieces. Some representative titles suggest their range of interest: *The Raw Recruits*, *Dr. Lincoln Outdone*, *J. J. of the War Department*, *Ten Days in the Old Capitol*, *Young America and Old Ireland*; or, *The London Correspondent in Camp*, *The Returned Volunteer*, *The Government Speculators*, *The Conscript*, *The Fortunes of War*; or, *The Boy of the Irish Brigade*, *Government Dispatches*, *Uncle Sam*, and *How to Avoid the Draft*.

While several of these sketches were built around an Irish character (such as "Paddy Murphy of the Irish Brigade"), most writers showed a preference for the stage Negro as a mouthpiece for their humorous commentary. The Civil War in fact coincided with the Golden Age of the "Ethiopian delineator," the white comedian who donned burnt-cork make up and frizzled wig to interpret the "mischievous darkey" for admiring audiences. Scarcely a month passed during the war when blackface comics were not displaying their "Negro eccentricities" somewhere in the Washington area. Whether they performed as individuals or in comedy teams at the music halls, or took the low-life roles in legitimate dramas, or appeared with traveling minstrel troupes, their influence was ubiquitous. They were the one permanent fixture of the wartime theatrical scene.

But the astonishing popularity of the stage Negro did not imply a corresponding public interest in his real life counterpart. Like other stock characters of the sensation drama, the happy darkey was an impossibly romantic creation, born in the minds of Northern white men whose sole object was to entertain. Ethiopian delineators sang, danced, and told funny stories; they burlesqued the foibles of white America; but they never attempted to penetrate into the black man's world or to understand his problems. Their prevailing mood was well captured by the playwright John F. Poole, a favorite with patrons of

Canterbury Hall, who managed to poke fun at both Jefferson Davis and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in a typical blackface skit:

WHITE FOLKS? BRUDDERN AN' SISTERN, FELLER-CITIZENS, AN' ODER ANIMALS:

—De text for dis evening's discourse am taken from de ninety-fust volume of Shakspeare's comic song-book called Uncle Tom's Cabin. Has any ob you ladies or gemmen got de book wid you? If you has, open it at de nine hundred an' forty-fifth page, an' dar you will find it. De text am dis:

Let dogs delight to bark an' fight,
For 'tis deir natur to:
Let fleas and bedbugs nip an' bite,
An' skeeters suck you frough;
But Jeff Davis, you should never let
Yourself on treason sup;
Your little hands was never made
To bust de Union up!¹⁸

Even the exceptional dramatist who purported to deal seriously with the slavery issue ended by yielding to the familiar stereotype of Negro attitudes and behavior. Dion Boucicault's melodrama, *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana*, sidestepped the worst aspects of black slavery by concentrating on the tragic love of the young planter George Peyton for his "almost white" slave Zoe. The play, which was first performed in 1859 and subsequently revived many times during the war, owed its success in part to its air of benevolent neutrality concerning the deeper implications of the race problem. "The truth of the matter," wrote Joseph Jefferson, who played one of the leading roles, "is that it was noncommittal. The dialogue and characters of the play made one feel for the South, but the action proclaimed against slavery and called loudly for its abolition."¹⁹

Pete, an old Negro, expressed for Boucicault the feelings of the average slave toward the approaching sale of his master's debt-encumbered plantation:

¹⁸ John F. Poole, "Dat's What's De Matter," reprinted in Richard Moody (ed.), *Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762-1909* (Cleveland, 1966), p. 490.

¹⁹ Quoted in Arthur H. Quinn, *A History of the American Drama from the Beginning to the Civil War* (New York, 1943), p. 374.

Cum, for de pride of de family, let every darkey look his best for the judge's sake—dat old man so good to us, and dat ole woman—so dem strangers from New Orleans shall say, Dem's happy darkies, dem's a fine set of niggers; every one say when he's sold, "Lor' bless dis yer family I'm gwine out of, and send me as good a home."²⁰

More bite might have been expected from *Cudjo's Cave; or, The Battle-cry of Freedom* (1864), based upon a celebrated abolitionist novel by John T. Trowbridge. Unfortunately, in its transition from the printed page to the theater, it fell into the hands of John F. Poole, who turned it into a spectacular music hall attraction, complete with songs, patriotic tableaux ("The Old Flág Floats Again in Tennessee") and a thrilling forest fire scene which climaxed the second act. Among so many superfluous frills, the original message seems to have been lost; for, as one reviewer described the impact of the piece: "Curtailed as much as possible of all partisan allusions, its many excellent and amusing points must be seen to be appreciated; we promise all those who witness it a treat rich and racy."²¹ Significantly, the same program heralded the "Return of the favorite Ethiopian Comedian, Billy West," who was to appear in a separate burlesque skit along with John Mulligan, "the unequalled Ethiopian."²²

Only one other play brought the slavery question to the attention of Washington audiences during the war years. This was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, probably the most successful work of theatrical propaganda ever performed in America. It had a curious and complicated history of production. After its premiere in Baltimore on January 5, 1852, a number of distinct versions appeared in theaters around the country. The popularity of the piece varied from script to script and from city to city. It was not a favorite in prewar Washington, and no attempt was made to revive it until the spring of 1863, when the Washington Theater performed it under circumstances that were admittedly risky, from a box office point of view. "The production of this play on Monday last," observed the *Star's* drama critic, "was an experiment, for the management were not

²⁰ Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana*, reprinted in Arthur H. Quinn (ed.), *Representative American Plays* (New York, 1922), p. 449.

²¹ *National Intelligencer*, May 19, 1864.

²² *Washington Evening Star*, May 16, 1864.

fully aware how it would be received in this city."²³ In fact *Uncle Tom's Cabin* enjoyed a modest success, running for eight days to the accompaniment of a barrage of patriotic appeals from the management:

AN ERA IN HISTORY!

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN
AT THE
NATIONAL CAPITAL!

FREE SPEECH!

FREE PRESS!

FREE PEOPLE!²⁴

During the rest of the war the play was reintroduced only once. In August 1864 Canterbury Hall brought out a truncated version, emphasizing cake-walks, walk-arounds, and other minstrel show perversions of the plantation scene. In this form *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played for a week, along with a variety of shorter music hall acts.

The better adaptations of Mrs. Stowe's tale (such as the one by George L. Aiken) sought to portray a wider range of relationships within the Negro community than had previously been seen on the stage. Certain aspects of the conventional Negro stereotype came under attack as an effort was made to focus attention upon the basic humanity of the slave rather than upon his grotesque qualities. The new look was most evident in the case of the rebellious George Harris, a major character of heroic stature who defends himself against the charge that he is breaking the laws of his country by running away from his owner:

My country! Sir, I haven't any country any more than I have any father. I don't want anything of *your* country, except to be left alone—to go peaceably out of it; but if any man tries to stop me, let him take care, for I am desperate. I'll fight for my liberty, to the last breath I breathe! You say your fathers did it; if it was right for them, it is right for me!²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, May 23, 1863.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, May 20, 1863.

²⁵ George L. Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, reprinted in Moody, *Dramas*, p. 371.

Harris, however, is a light-skinned mulatto who can pass for white; and the same is true of his wife Eliza. They represent an elite leadership group among the slave population, whose more typical spokesmen are loyal old Uncle Tom (a close relative of Boucicault's Pete) and Topsy, a teenage version of the mischievous darkey of the music halls. Even the most compelling abolitionist drama could not avoid the preconceptions of a romantic age, and it is notable that when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* returned to Washington in the postwar years it was generally billed as a "startling sensation play."

With the coming of peace the nation's capital sank once more into cultural somnolence. As the flood of temporary residents receded, one wartime theater after another closed its doors. By the end of the decade only a single music hall and a legitimate theater were in active operation. The war itself had produced no enduring dramatic literature, and the old repertory favorites reappeared season after season, along with minstrel troupes and Ethiopian delineators. The Happy Darkey, who had presided symbolically over the course of the war, continued to mock the government's reconstruction efforts. While lawmakers struggled to hammer out the provisions of early civil rights bills, the general public flocked nightly to see the "laughable farce" of *Julius Crow's Trip to Congress*. In the sequel legal rules, which had failed to avert the schizophrenic crisis of 1861, proved no more of a match for the romantic imagination of postwar America.