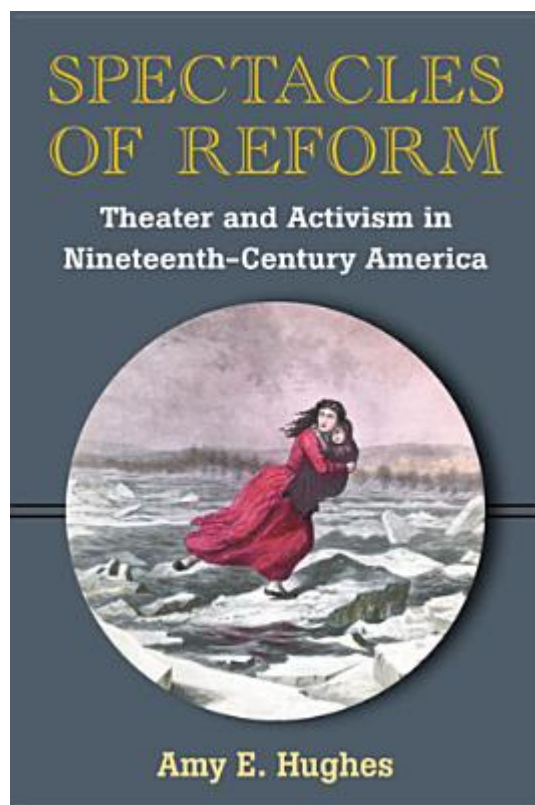


I See, Therefore I Act?



More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle placed “spectacle” (*opsis*, that which is seen) dead last in importance among the six elements he listed as essential to drama when writing his *Poetics*, his notes on dramatic structure. Ever since, scholars and critics of the theater have maintained an uncomfortable relationship with stage spectacle, fearing that its very adoption arrives at the expense of thoughtful, verbal, literary content and, therefore, impedes theatrical performance from reaching some higher cultural purpose. Indeed, “most assume that spectacle’s main function is to decorate and amuse, or believe that it is a voracious vacuum,” Amy E. Hughes writes in *Spectacles of Reform*, “robbing us of our ability to think, feel, or act.” “But spectacle is rarely empty,” she argues, and throughout the mid-nineteenth century, the spectacles realized on the American melodramatic stage were overflowing with socially relevant, audience-activating messaging (166). Identifying and unpacking this previously unacknowledged freight is the mission of Hughes’s carefully researched, methodically wrought monograph.

As an interdisciplinary cultural history operating at the intersection of performance and print, *Spectacles of Reform* comprises at its core three chapter-long case studies that explore how visual images contributed to three nineteenth-century American reform movements: temperance, abolition, and women’s suffrage. Although the point of departure for each case study is a close reading of the so-called sensation scene—a scene of pumped-up emotional affect usually coupled with stagecraft designed to amaze—from a popular mid-

century stage melodrama, the discussion is by no means limited to things theatrical. Print images in books and periodicals, on sheet music covers, stationery, and even decorative kitchenware, rise alongside their theatrical counterparts as Hughes examines their roles in both reflecting and shaping American public opinion on some of the country's most pressing issues of the 1840s through the 1860s. Despite the author's position as a scholar of theater history, her book is as much (if not more) about the conversations these plays' spectacles provoked outside theater walls than it is about the responses and reactions elicited inside them, as the subtitle *Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America* suggests.



It is the spectator's bodily response to bodies in perceived danger—danger effected through spectacle's affective jolt—that compelled melodrama's original audiences to consider, or else to reconsider, the sociopolitical conditions of real-world bodies located outside the orbit of theatrical representation.

Hughes offers a preliminary chapter to orient the reader's gaze upon the human body, which, she posits, can manifest itself as spectacle (in the case of societal and biological "freaks"), *in* spectacle (as performers within sensation scenes), and *at* spectacle (the audiences who behold the first two bodily varieties). Somewhat surprisingly, then, spectacular scenography—what is usually thought of as the primary vessel for melodrama's spectacular excesses—arrives secondary in interest to what Hughes calls "exceptional bodies," those that defy or exceed recognized social norms, in this study the drunkard, the fugitive slave, and the woman suffragist. Furthermore, Hughes argues that it is not melodrama's manufactured distresses themselves (such as the archetypal oncoming locomotive) that make a scene "sensational," but rather the presence of a "body in extremity" (the figure tied to the tracks in the path of the oncoming train) that creates a "rigorous stimulation of the senses" in the spectator (41). Therefore, it is the spectator's bodily response to bodies in perceived danger—danger effected through spectacle's *affective* jolt—that compelled melodrama's original audiences to consider, or else to reconsider, the sociopolitical conditions of real-world bodies located outside the orbit of theatrical representation, and to alter their own personal behaviors in light of what they have seen.

The first case study centers on the "spectacular insanity" of the *delirium tremens*, a violent, hallucinatory fit, invoked frequently throughout the nineteenth century as a cautionary result of excessive alcohol consumption. Along the proverbial road to ruin, mapped out visually by socially conscious lithographers, the "DTs" (in the common shorthand) marked a mere step away from destitution, and a mere two steps from death. Though the condition was typically experienced as a private episode, plays like W.H. Smith's pioneering temperance melodrama *The Drunkard* (1844) seized on the affliction's inherent theatricality and provided audiences with dynamic public exhibitions of its alcohol-induced hysteria. Hughes underscores that such displays were often made all the more effective as tools for reform by dint of their performers' own

personal histories of alcoholic indulgence, which seemed to enhance their credibility. This was the case for Smith, who himself portrayed the drunkard he authored, as well as for John B. Gough, who famously slipped back into drink while touting abstinence in autobiographical “lectures” featuring dramatic recreations of his own DTs. Whereas most scholarship on temperance drama has tended to privilege the image of the reformed drunkard’s ultimate return to a “normal” state of bourgeois domesticity, Hughes intentionally focuses on the threat of the unreformed drunkard’s withering-away in the country’s newly formed insane asylums—of which she provides a brief social history.

Next Hughes considers the case of the fugitive slave, typified by the image of Eliza crossing the ice in several theatrical adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), including the best-known stage version, by George L. Aiken, which premiered only months after the novel’s publication. These plays’ varying melodramatic depictions of Eliza are made spectacular via the character’s “excess of potential,” explained as the surpassing of “racist, culturally constructed expectations of [her] innate abilities and proclivities” (23). And it is not the stage machinist’s realization of the Ohio River ice floes that makes the scene sensational, but rather the Eliza character’s precarious journey across them which does so. Assessing Stowe’s original construction of this episode as an artistic response to the Compromise of 1850 (legislation that toughened the Fugitive Slave Act, demanding the return of escaped slaves to the South even after they’d reached free Northern territories), Hughes reads in sensational renderings of it—both on stage and in print—the character’s fundamental transformation from being another person’s property to being an autonomous human being. The famous scene, therefore, offered a corrective to the period’s rampant dehumanization of fugitive slaves, frequently represented as chattel and reduced to stock typographical ornaments in print advertisements seeking their return.

The final chapter, at once the most ambitious and satisfying, finds its theatrical root in the sensation scene of playwright-impresario Augustin Daly’s *Under the Gaslight* (1867), the melodrama that inaugurated the trope of the railroad track rescue. Despite the seeming disconnect between railway accidents and gender politics, and her own caveat that the politics of the play “have been lost to us over time,” making them “harder to detect than those of the temperance play or abolitionist drama,” Hughes reads in this scene a timely exhibition of female potency (119). In Daly’s play, the gender roles now typically assigned to victim and savior are swapped: it is the strong-willed Laura Courtland who rescues a male Civil War veteran from the path of the speeding train, a daring subversion of expectations one year after Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony founded the American Equal Rights Association and one year before the implicit denial of women’s suffrage in the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment. In the context of this historical moment, Hughes argues a dissenting critical perspective, that the liberal politics of the victim’s reaction to his deliverance (“And these are the women who ain’t to have the vote!”) and Laura’s excessive display of progressive traits (not the least of which being her ability to wield the masculine “American axe” during

the sensational rescue) could not have gone unnoticed by the play's original audiences. Women had proved to be an indispensable force in aiding the earlier temperance and abolition movements, but resistance to their right to vote held fast. And whereas most voting-rights plays of the era sought to cement the status quo, Hughes claims that the audacious visual spectacle of Daly's pasteboard train provided a shock to the senses that allowed for the delivery of an alternative political message.

The author's close readings, both of the melodramas themselves and of their related extratheatrical images, demonstrate an impressive ability to weave together remarkably heterogeneous archival materials into a fluid scholarly narrative, of interest well beyond theater history. Her explanatory and bibliographic notes alone (which make up a fifth of the book) make *Spectacles of Reform* an invaluable reference, as does its trove of thoughtfully selected images, pulled largely from the periodicals collections of the American Antiquarian Society and New York Historical Society. In the analysis, however, there lurks on occasion a tendency to suppose the political intent of dramatic moments that were influenced, no doubt, by a number of factors, making conclusory leaps that might be taken with more cautious footing. For instance, her reading of *The Drunkard's* inclusive final tableau—"that every American, despite personal failing and lapses in respectability, could rehabilitate and join the ranks of ordinary citizens once more"—is perhaps not inadmissible, but the the ensemble finale likely has as much, if not more, to do with plain old melodramatic stage conventions than with politics (65). To this point, it is sometimes more implied than explicated just how the social and political content located in these plays translates into direct real-world social or political action, leaving the subtitle's promise of *Theater and Activism* more of a laying-out of the two side by side than an argument for the theater as a driving agent of reform.

Nevertheless, when Hughes lifts her gaze from the past to consider how the nineteenth century's spectacular fascinations remain at work in our own spectacle-obsessed world of today—making, for example, an ingenious connection between the “freakish” bodies of *The Octoroon* (the racially charged Dion Boucicault melodrama from 1859) and the so-called Octomom (Nadya Suleman, who in 2009 gave birth to eight children in one pregnancy)—these reservations dissolve, and the project affords her entire subject refreshed relevance. American melodrama is so frequently relegated to the category of disposable, sub-literary entertainment that any attempt to treat it otherwise can feel like a *de facto* exercise in inconsequence. But by showing in transhistorical flashes how “the spectacular instant [that] offered producers, reformers, audiences, and consumers a unique opportunity to articulate ideas” still does (44), Hughes helps to close the temporal gap between her reader and the works she discusses, making the nineteenth-century popular American theater a little more relatable, a little more worthy of our attention. And that is no little achievement.