

EDITORIAL

## On Dramatic Literacy

This issue of *Theatre Survey* casts a sustained gaze at Anglophone performance cultures of the nineteenth century. Across a range of performance and critical sites, the authors in this issue trace legacies of performance that continue to influence the present day artistically and conceptually. Meredith Conti's essay on the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago documents the ways that varying modes of labor, consciously made visible and invisible, helped to register the imperialist logic of both Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas and the subsequent narrative of "progress" led by Eurocentric principles of advancement—and erasure. Comparing the raced, classed, and gendered dynamics of the construction of the pavilions comprising the White City with the construction and habitation of the ethnic villages within the Midway Plaisance, Conti attends to the racially stratified value—both economic and cultural—of bodies conspicuously at work. According to Conti, an overwhelmingly white and male construction workforce, on paid display as they transformed Jackson Park before the official start of the exposition, embodied values of settler colonialism, progress, and commodification before their labor disappeared. That display of labor was replaced by the spectacle of nonwhite people, especially those in the so-called Eskimo Village, engaging in domesticated labors that were simultaneously romanticized as symbols of cross-cultural unity and stigmatized as inescapably foreign curiosities.

Lisa Freeman's essay on multihyphenate talent Elizabeth Inchbald highlights a key period in the history of formal dramatic criticism, a scholarly mode that helped pave the way for the positions that many of us hold today, writing to illuminate the significance of dramatic literature in and as performance. Inchbald's prolific and wide-ranging oeuvre offers early examples of critical engagement with themes that continue to hold a leading place in theatre studies, such as the relationship between text and performance, the criteria by which to assess the excellence of a script as literature versus its richness as a springboard for theatrical realization, and the relationship between commercial success and artistic rigor. Freeman's scholarship here helps to rewrite the history of dramatic criticism in English by "position[ing] Inchbald, without apology or qualification, as the foremost theatrical theorist of her time." Furthermore, Freeman posits that one of Inchbald's signal contributions was the notion of "dramatic probability," a concept honed through the writer's ability to marshal prior experience as a performer and as a playwright to guide her assessment of the works she was hired to review. Inchbald's writings serve as a valuable archive of both the author's consolidating aesthetic philosophy and the tastes predominant among theatregoers and producers of the time.

If Freeman's essay underscores the ways that Inchbald's work anticipated and helped to anchor aspects of the field of text-based dramatic criticism, Tara Rodman's essay about Thomas Dilworth, widely known as "Japanese Tommy," notes the ways that the ignominious tradition we call yellowface performance had precedent in Dilworth's cross-racial signification on tropes of othering. To mix material metaphors, Rodman weaves a fascinating history of the Japanese practice of lacquering, the skillful application of a deeply reflective surface to wood, and its derivation, Japanning—a cheaper, less durable substitute designed to satisfy Eurocentric appetites for foreign "Others"—with the practice of yellowface performance, the application of a shallow, racially exotic "skin" meant to satisfy American appetites for such "Others." As Rodman notes, Dilworth's Blackness and dwarfism worked together to complicate the meanings his stage name intended to signal. Among other things, the essay asks, without the physical signifiers of racial difference that were later codified as yellowface, how did Dilworth's dark-skinned, diminutive body in performance leverage a different racial alterity to satisfy a mostly white audience's desire to consume a multiply othered stage figure?

England's famous Kemble acting family makes a brief appearance in Lisa Freeman's essay, but one of its daughters is the primary subject of Chandra Owenby Hopkins's essay: the plantation diaries of Fanny Kemble shed light on the ways of Southern American whiteness from the perspective of a racial insider who is a national outsider. Hopkins offers close readings of Kemble's *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation* from the period of her brief, tumultuous marriage to Pierce Butler, an American slaveholding planter, highlighting the variations in how people live racial identities across and between national contexts. In particular, Hopkins attends to Kemble's detailed descriptions of the Sea Islands' natural landscape for the ways in which they revealed Kemble's sense of what was natural and unnatural about her new environs, both horticulturally and ethically, and thus fostered—or at least paralleled—Kemble's nascent abolitionism.

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Fanny Kemble relied not just on her knowledge of nature but also on her deep knowledge of dramatic literature and her belief in the abolitionist potential of the theatre to make sense of the scenes of subjection that she witnessed on Butler's plantation. Then, as now, dramatic literacy offered an important tool for making sense of tumultuous times. Deciphering narrative structure, conflict, suspense, character motivation, and even the probabilities inherent in social dramas are all skills that we hone through our engagement with performance, and with the scholarship of those who work to make its subtleties legible, even and especially in times of upheaval. Despite crises swirling around us, like millions of deaths attributable to COVID, the first anniversary of a shutdown of the norms of public culture, the unprecedented attack on the US Capitol and the democratic workings of electoral politics, and the equally unprecedented election of a woman of color to the second-highest position in the US government, academic knowledge producers toil to ensure that the pleasures and lessons of performance continue to circulate. I am

immensely grateful to all of the authors, peer reviewers, and editorial and production staff who continue to work through crisis to make it possible for scholarly knowledge to reach you on schedule.

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**Cite this article:** "On Dramatic Literacy," *Theatre Survey* 62.2 (2021): 135–137. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S004055742100003X>.