

1949

American Regional Theater

T. M. Pearce

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Recommended Citation

Pearce, T. M.. "American Regional Theater." *New Mexico Quarterly* 19, 3 (1949). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol19/iss3/17>

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graphically each chief character. He owes much of his skill in these matters to long residence and extensive travel in the regions involved. His own facility in expression, plus his careful training, his laborious research, critical interpretation and adequate material and personal assistance have enabled him to put forth the best life of Bolívar so far available in the English language. This is another scholarly feat to be credited to a European in exile. His American confreres welcome this recruit to their professional ranks.

T. M. Pearce

AMERICAN REGIONAL THEATER

“THE FIRST company under the patronage of this house had a long and wholly provincial career,” writes E. K. Chambers, the famous authority on the Elizabethan stage. He is speaking of the Earl of Worcester’s Men, a stage company for which there are records in provincial towns from 1555 to 1603, a period covering the entire reign of Queen Elizabeth. Subsequent to Elizabeth’s death, the company came under the patronage of Queen Anne, and references to them appear as performing in London at the Red Bull Playhouse, the Curtain, the Rose, the Cockpit, even at Court. Associated with this provincial company are the names of Will Kempe, famous wit and clown-jester; Edward Alleyn, one of the great tragedians of the time; Christopher Beeston, another outstanding actor; and Thomas Heywood, both actor and playwright. The “wholly provincial career” referred to meant performances

either at towns like Newcastle, Bath, Nottingham, Gloucester, Abingdon, Southampton, Coventry, and Norwich, or at aristocratic manor houses like Hadden Hall, Derbyshire, the estate of Sir George Vernon. Records dealing with actors in the company refer to their stocks of apparel and to play-books in their possession. Such men as Alleyn, after 1589, served in prominent London companies, like the Lord Admiral's, for which Christopher Marlowe was writing plays, and Lord Hunsdon's, for which Shakespeare wrote.

The significant thing about this data is that for more than forty-eight years a company of players in sixteenth century England carried on an active career in the theater *outside* London. Worcester's Men found playwrights, rehearsed plays, collected costumes and essential properties, arranged for playing places and found audiences all over England, from Stratford, a prosperous farming community and leather center, to the more important coastal community of Ipswich, or the inland metropolis of York. Drama was important and thriving in the regional centers of English life. Playwrights came from these centers: Robert Greene from Norwich, Shakespeare from Stratford, Thomas Heywood from a town in Lincolnshire, Thomas Nashe from neighboring Suffolk, John Lyly and Christopher Marlowe from Canterbury in Kent. The English playwrighting tradition, which converged on London to make it the greatest theatrical center in Europe from 1580 to 1620, was a drawing together of materials from all England. Too little has been made of this. We read the history of the *London* playhouses and the *London* playwrights. Most of them were not Londoners at all! George Peele, Thomas Kyd, and Ben Jonson were the London "boys who made good" in the theater. The others were all young men from the provinces, who brought with them their genius, their education (in the cases of Lyly, Greene, Marlowe and Nashe, by way of the two *provincial* universities) and their background of experience. Some of them may even have found their way to

London with traveling companies of players. Certainly the gift of these men to the English stage needs to be understood in terms of Elizabethan regional culture, as well as in terms of the encouragement and resources offered the theater by metropolitan London.

Dr. Felix Sper, of Hunter College, in his book *From Native Roots*,* has written the story of the American regional theater, what drama critics call "the tributary" stage. This term means, I judge, "contributory," or feeding the theater in metropolitan centers, especially the stages of New York City. Such a book has long been needed, for, in thinking about the American stage, we are prone to make just the mistake we have made in thinking about the stage in Shakespeare's day—that it was a literary and social phenomenon inspired by city rather than rural life and that New York, like London, did the job largely from the genius supplied by its sons and the resources within its neighborhood. From Dr. Sper we learn that Lulu Vollmer, author of the Broadway success *Sun-up*, drew material for this and other plays from the laboratory of folk experience and character in the Carolina mountains; that Paul Green, author of successes like *In Abraham's Bosom* and *The House of Connelly*, grew up, in terms of the theater, at the Chapel Hill Play-maker's Theater under Frederick H. Koch, where a strong school of playwrights originated; that plays by Lynn Riggs were being produced by college dramatic clubs and in community playhouses before *Green Grow the Lilacs* was a success on Broadway and long before that play flowered into the musical revue *Oklahoma*.

The drama of regions in the United States speaks in terms of hard-bitten New Englanders, like those in *Ethan Frome*, as dramatized by Owen and Donald Davis, or of conscience haunted, Bible quoting figures in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*. *Rip Van Winkle*, as written by Don Boucicault brings the voice of region from the Catskills of New York state, and *Papa*

* The Caxton Printers, Ltd. Caldwell, Idaho, 1948.

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Is All, by Patterson Greene, speaks in the vocabulary and rhythm of the Plain People of Pennsylvania. The Negro region of the South retells the Bible story in the theater through *Green Pastures* by Marc Connelly, and *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward has left the immortal stamp of Catfish Row and the Gullah dialect upon the American stage. *Tobacco Road* by Jack Kirkland with Jeeter Lester and family in their tumble down shack leaves indelible pictures of rural Georgia in the memory of every theater goer.

In fact, so inclusive has been the collecting of documentary materials by Dr. Sper, so broad his coverage, the reader wonders what is left for the theater that does not bear the regional stamp. Plays like *Life With Father* or *State of the Union* (not listed in *From Native Roots* because of their metropolitan setting) still are marked by provincialities which endear them to audiences from every corner of the land. Dr. Sper lists scores of amateur efforts, dealing with local episode and custom, that failed to have much audience appeal either at home or away from home. The inevitable conclusion is that location, of itself, will not have sufficient appeal to guarantee life to a play. The playwright must know the tradition of the stage and have acquired the craft of structure and the art of characterizing dialogue. This professionalism, of course, belongs to Broadway where play production is continuous. But Dr. Sper points out how many college and community theater centers there have been and still are in the United States with sustained play production and stage instruction. Undeniable, in the face of his evidence, is the dependence of the American stage upon popular traditions, largely non-urban, for themes and motivating characters in the theater. This book opens a door to the appraisal and enjoyment of the contribution of America to the most democratic of all literary institutions, the stage.