

The Yankee Peddler

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AMERICA-IN-PLAY

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Attention, Dear Reader

By Dominic Taylor

Welcome to
The Yankee Peddler!

This is the first communiqué from the new organization America-in-Play. What you are reading is the product of a grand collaborative effort that is an exemplar of all that good theatre can accomplish. Since you are reading this, *you* are our audience, and as with all forms of good news, we implore you to share this communiqué.

I am enamored with the term "communiqué," and it fits appropriately for this docu-

ment. Yes, it is our official bulletin, but in this context I also embrace all of the term's subtextual notions. The term connotes an earlier era. It brings to mind a time of espionage or perhaps double espionage, when



Albert Bierstadt, *In the Yosemite Valley, 1866*

very important information was relayed from one courier to another, often in plain sight of others who had no idea how to decode the information. Occasionally one was alerted to the code, but often it was ignored. Three short taps on a table, followed by three longer taps, followed finally by three short taps, may sound to some like a cry for a manicure, but to the appropriate party it is a signal of distress. The espionage lies in obtaining information about this society that perhaps we

(Continued on pg. 6)

A NEW CONTRAST: The Origins of America-in-Play

By Lynn M. Thomson

Back in 1991, I was looking for a dissertation topic. Since I was required to make an original contribution to scholarship, the most helpful search criteria was obscurity: I hoped to find a tidbit in neglected backwaters. I concentrated first on Restoration comedies and early American plays and, for reasons only having to do with nostalgia, George S. Kaufman. Actually, I was sure that this signal writer had been much

investigated, but I still treasured a collection of his plays given to me by my high school drama teacher. As a teenager, without any critical vocabulary, I simply had fallen in love because Kaufman made me laugh.

In my search, I discovered an odd contrast: remote late seventeenth century English plays were readily available in lovely new editions on open shelves, whereas American comedies that had traveled the boards for more than five dec-

ades in the nineteenth century were . . . where? I also found Kaufman had rarely been a topic for scholarship, despite his having won two Pulitzer Prizes and having had a play (often two or three) on Broadway every season between 1921 and 1942. The missing plays and absent studies seemed connected.

Something was amiss.

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THROUGH ART, MUSIC, FOLKLORE, AND DRAMA, TODAY'S PLAYWRIGHTS CONNECT WITH AMERICA'S BEGINNINGS

By Elizabeth Coen

America-in-Play (AIP) encourages playwrights to examine America's dramatic past as a tool to enrich their current work. Sixteen playwrights have been meeting for nearly a year, and their conversations and work have grown organically from discoveries derived from plays, music, folklore, and paintings.

As we have discovered, many of America's cultural beginnings have been swept under the rug, collecting dust and spider webs. AIP has attempted to find these cultural relics, dust them off, and put them back on their feet. The Yankee—Uncle Sam who was first called Brother Jonathan—has been hidden so long that he's acquired a painful crick in his neck. Mose the Fireman, Jonathan's city-savvy contemporary, hasn't taken a stroll in the Bowery district for years. These characters were once great figures in American popular theater, archetypes of American consciousness and faith. Investigating their stories has become the foundation for AIP's early work.

Where do we see these characters today, and how can they speak to our new artistic endeavors? These questions were considered by the AIP writers during the first workshop in February 2006, which focused on "America's Favorite Stories and Characters/Yankee Comedies." Writers became acquainted with archetypal characters by looking at their images both in the context of early plays, such as Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, as well as through visual renderings—iconographic cartoons,

prints of Uncle Sam through the ages (from amorous and young to old and woebegone), pictures of minstrel shows on stage, and much more—which have served as a springboard for several writing exercises. One of many writing exercises involved looking at images of early archetypes, such as Mose the Fireman and Brother Jonathan. Writers were asked to give these images a voice. Playwright Erin Browne focused on a young Uncle Sam with clothes that seemed too large and came up with "Social Studies Report" about an eleven-year-old giving a school report (see pg. 3).

Another exercise asked writers to look at paintings from the Hudson River School, an early movement of fine art that endowed the American landscape with spiritual wonder. Writers were asked to place an archetypal character within the context of the landscape and create a monologue. In this exercise, the framework of the land was not solely intended to be the setting for a greater action, but rather a tool for conveying an overall experience or sense of identity. Many characters found themselves in conversation with the land itself. Others saw the land as a personification of internal conflict. Playwrights were able to find a complimentary voice for the intricate shadings of the paintings themselves. In Erin Courtney's "The Catskills Mountain House," a painter

yields to the beauty of the natural surroundings (pg. 3).

The second workshop focused on "Minstrelsy" and was curated by Dominic Taylor, playwright and assistant professor of theatre at Bard College, who spoke of the history, the characters, and the structure of minstrelsy. The third session delved into the origins and development of "Popular Mu-



"The Stage Yankee," which inspired *Social Studies Report*, pg. 3

sic," curated by guest speaker Ray Allen, ethnomusicologist and professor of music at Brooklyn College. While the session centered again on minstrelsy, it did so from the viewpoint of music and the collisions that were an important source for a distinctly original American sound. "Comedy of the Early Twentieth Century" was the subject of the fourth group workshop, led by AIP Founder and Artistic Director Lynn M. Thomson.

This past fall, AIP turned its attention to

focusing specifically on the performative nature of the Declaration of Independence. A group reading of the Declaration spurred conversation about the democratic impulses deeply rooted in the theatrical experience of early America, and subsequent workshops centered on the relationship between performer and spectator. A writing exercise from this workshop asked the writers to imagine a situation in which an archetype describes the experience of hearing the first reading of the Declaration of Independence. Playwright Quincy Long drafted a monologue from the perspective of the "Unknown Loyalist" (pg. 3). Facilitators considered the idea of "performing democracy," by looking at different trends in theater practice: performance habits, fringe venues, and theatrical genres such as crook plays. The group also took a field trip to The Shubert Archive—top floor of the Lyceum Theatre—in November 2006, for a private tour of both theatre and archive by archivist Reagan Fletcher. All our playwrights wandered about the stage, then took the small elevator to the wonders of a century of memorabilia, including original play manuscripts nearly one-hundred years old.

Future workshops, with their focus on art, music, and stories from earlier times, will continue to lay the groundwork for future plays and give playwrights much fodder for making connections with America's past.

SOCIAL STUDIES REPORT

By Erin Browne

An eleven-year-old in an Uncle Sam costume stands before an audience with a handful of multi-colored 3x5 cards, the cards are constantly being shuffled back and forth.

Yeeha, yeeha. Come on people. Yeeha! Everyone please. You know, I'm up here. I'm trying. Will you at least? Forget it. No. Mrs. Nelson can you? They won't shut up. I'm trying to educate you. Ed-du-cate. Thank you Mrs. Nelson. When I started writing this report... I, skip, skip. When settlers first arrived on

the shores of what is now called America but really is the United States, because America includes South America and Canada and anyhow. Where was I? We were brought here on boats and we built houses. And then there was the first Thanksgiving... skip, skip.... Um, I know I'm totally running out of time. Mis-sus Nelson. I can't focus, with you-know-who in the front row. And let's see. Trail of Tears. Recruiting for the army. Seriously. Shut it. Sorry, please be quiet. So yeah, then we get to, um... Texas or whatever and The West or was that

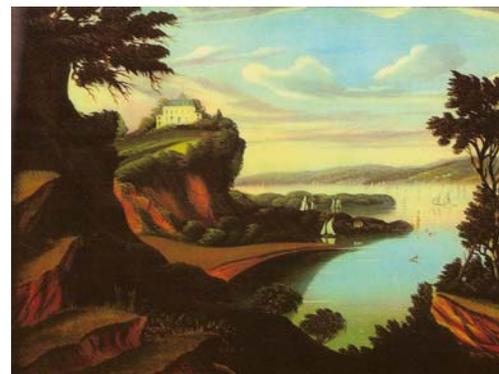
before. Sorry. I think my cards. I want you. Okay, so, Uncle Sam. I am Uncle Sam and I am, well... I want you, is what he said. I just. Okay. And now. Well. Uncle Sam. He represented us all once because once every American would have to wear stripy pants and a hat like this, seriously, no seriously. In a book. I think I read that in a book. I can't remember though. Yeah, I skipped a lot but can I just—it is Mrs. Nelson, I don't want to, um...

UNKOWN LOYALIST UPON HEARING THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

By Quincy Long

Well, I don't know – it was – it really – what he said about the King? Because the King is the King and that. The King is a solitary individual sitting – his – his house – the King's house there, which is on a river with views – views of splendor – of bridges – London bridges. And he's a farmer, you know, the king,

with fourteen children, and a man like that – to disrespect him in that way and to exaggerate on the sins which he done only because it was – it is his duty as the King. And to sodomy tell us falsehoods which he was supposed to commit – how could he commit? How could he do them things, the heart of him which was so large? (Continued on pg. 9)



Hudson River School image which inspired *The Catskills Mountain House*

THE CATSKILLS MOUNTAIN HOUSE

By Erin Courtney

WOMAN

(In hiking gear and a sun hat)

I like to feel a part of something bigger. The leaves are turning and every tree is at slightly different stages of fire – red, orange, yellow, burnt, brown.

(She lies her hands flat on a rock.)

Hello, Lichen. *(She lies down on the rock and looks up into a pink, blue sky. Eventually, she sits up and*

takes an apple out of her sack. She peels it with a knife.)

I like the way the horizon fades into the sky. I like the way I am just one speck among the trees. A cliff. A drop. Just one house. A lake.

(She begins to set up her canvas.)

Such a small canvas for such

a big view. Just a tiny window. Gotta paint fast up here. This light goes so fast. This evening light. Hello, Lichen. Are you cold? I am. My fingers are too stiff to paint today. And look.

I think this is a place Of peace and wholeness.

I think I know who I am

Here. I think. The light The orange The yellow The cold rock The lake The horizon The wind The calm The quiet My soul is quiet here. I won't paint today. Too cold. I'll just listen today. I'm just going to listen. *(She breathes some more and rubs her hands together and looks at the landscape.)*

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHTS

Deborah Brevoort is the author of numerous plays and musicals, including *The Women of Lockerbie*; *Blue Moon Over Memphis*, a Noh drama about Elvis Presley; *The Poetry of Pizza*; *The Blue-Sky Boys*; *Into the Fire*; and *Signs of Life*. She is a two-time winner of the Frederick Loewe Award for Musical Theatre, first for *King Island Christmas*, an oratorio written with composer David Friedman, and then for *Coyote Goes Salmon Fishing*, with composer Scott Richards. Her work has been published by Dramatists Play Service, Samuel French, Applause Books, and others. Brevoort was one of the original company members with Perseverance Theatre in Alaska.

Erin Browne's recent and upcoming productions include *Lucky in Love* at Adelphi and Columbia University, *After* at Chapman and Columbia, *God Exits* at Galapagos: Sticky, and *The Blahs* at the Harrogate. Recent readings include *Menders* at Rattlestick Playwright's Theater through 4Threads, *Not As of Yet* at the Abingdon, *Again* at the Abingdon through Brooklyn College, and *A Meth Play* at Columbia. She has attended NYU's Tisch School of the Arts (Playwrights Horizons Theater School) and is currently attending Columbia University's School of the Arts. Browne's poetry has been published in *Boheme*, *Chiricu*, *Jugendstil(005)*, *Northern Stars*, and at www.beekiller.net. She has written theatre reviews for Propaganda! and GO NYC.

Erin Courtney is a playwright and visual artist living in Brooklyn. Recently her play *Quiver and Twitch* was produced by New York Stage and Film at Vassar and *Alice the Magnet* was produced by Clubbed Thumb at the Ohio. She has been a fellow at the MacDowell colony, a re-

ipient of a NYSCA grant and a MAP Fund grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and a member of the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab. Her play *Demon Baby* is in the anthology *New Downtown Now* edited by Mac Wellman and Young Jean Lee and published by University of Minnesota Press. As a graduate student she studied with Mac Wellman at Brooklyn College. She currently teaches playwriting at Brooklyn College and is an affiliated artist with Clubbed Thumb. She is also a member of 13P, as well as the co-founder of the Brooklyn Writer's Space.

Lawrence DuKore began his career with the Richard Pryor film *Greased Lightning*. His television play *A Mistaken Charity* (PBS/American Playhouse) was nominated for a Writers Guild of America best dramatic writing award. As a book writer, DuKore wrote *The Emperor of My Baby's Heart* and *Scream!* (each with songs by Mark Barkan and presented at the Riverside Church Theatre in NYC). As a lyricist, he wrote with the late Danny Hurd. DuKore has written for daytime TV serials and for Saturday morning television, and has published several novels. He is a member of The Workshop Theatre Company, the Actors Studio Playwrights/Directors Unit, and the HB Studios Professional Playwrights Unit. His plays, produced regionally and off-Broadway, include *Exploding the Swan*, *Spinsters*, and *The Day That Brando Died*. He is the recipient of many awards including several from American Globe Theatre and the Heideman at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

Stephanie Fleischmann is a core member of the Playwrights Center and an alumnus of New Dramatists. Grants/

Awards/Fellowships/Residencies: Whitfield Cook Award (*Eloise & Ray*); Joe Callaway Award; Frederick Loewe Award (*The Hotel Carter*, music by Jenny Giering), Pew Charitable Trust Philadelphia Theatre Initiative Project Grant (*The Street of Useful Things*, dramaturg Lynn M. Thomson); two NYFA fellowships; N.E.A. Opera/Music-Theater (*Far Sea Pharisee*, music by Miki Navazio); Tennessee Williams fellow in playwriting, Sewanee, University of the South; MacDowell; Hedgebrook; Mabou Mines/*Suite*; and HARP (current). Her plays have been produced/developed at venues across the U.S. and published by Playscripts.com; Play, a Journal of Plays; Smith & Krauss; and others. She has collaborated with numerous composers, including Olga Neuwirth. She currently teaches at Bard and Skidmore. MFA: Brooklyn College, where she studied with Mac Wellman.

P.J. Gibson holds an M.F.A. degree from Brandeis University, studying under a Shubert Fellowship. Published and widely produced, she has penned over thirty plays, many works of fiction and poetry. Recent publications: *Destiny's Daughters: 9 Voices of P.J. Gibson* compilation (1st Books Library Publisher), and several plays and pieces of short fiction in the Alexander Street Press Collections. She has been the recipient of the Audelco VIV Pioneer Award, the National Black Theatre Festival's *August Wilson Playwright Award*, the Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts Seventh Annual "Walk of Fame," and a number of fellowships, grants, awards, and seven commissions. Gibson is a Full Professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.



"Nimrod Wildfire, the Frontiersman"

C.S. Hanson's plays include *Answers* (American Globe/Turnip Theatre Festival); *The Sabbatical* (Pittsburgh New Works), and *Becoming Becoming* (Muse of Fire). Hanson's work has been developed at Ensemble Studio Theatre, New Jersey Rep, The Barrow Group, Around The Block/Al Doblar La Esquina, Polaris North, and FirstStage/L.A. Awards include Actors Theatre of Louisville Heideman finalist for *Extremes*, numerous honors for *The Leak*, and Scriptapalooza award for *Everybody Loves Raymond* spec script. New material has been read at Naked Angels' Tuesdays@9.

(Continued on pg. 5)



"Mike Fink, the Boatman"

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHTS

Les Hunter is a playwright concurrently enrolled as a Ph.D. student in English at SUNY Stony Brook and at an M.A. program in playwriting at Boston University. His play *Antonin Artaud: A Dream Play* was produced by the Brooklyn Playwrights Collective in its Spring Festival. He is currently working on a new full-length, *To the Orchard*, which was workshopped at the "Building Bridges" Festival at Brooklyn College. Hunter also writes theater reviews for offonline.com.

Jenny Levison is a playwright, screenwriter, and documentary filmmaker whose works have been performed and screened in Boston; Washington, D.C.; Portland, Oregon; Philadelphia; Las Vegas; New Jersey; and New York. Her plays include *The Scams of Scapin*, *Home Field Advantage*, *Shtil*, *Mayn Corazon—A Yiddish Tango Cabaret*, *Countdown Bikini*, *Don't Kiss Me, I'm In Training*, *See the Light*, and *Dia de los Muertos*. Levison holds a B.A. in Anthropology and Religion from Bates College, and an M.F.A. in Dramatic Writing from NYU, where she now teaches. She's been an immigrant rights labor organizer, a carpenter, a cook, a family planning counselor, a lead singer, and a movie projectionist. Before all that, she grew up in New England, skating on the frog pond and eating pie for breakfast.

Quincy Long's NY theatre credits include *People be Heard*, Playwrights Horizons; *The Joy of Going Somewhere Definite*, *Shaker Heights*, and *The Virgin Molly*, The Atlantic; *The Year of the Baby* and *Yokohama Duty*, Soho Rep; *The Johnstown Vindicator*, The Harold Clurman; *Something About Baseball*, Ensemble Studio Theatre. Regional credits include *The Lively Lad*, Actors Theatre of Louisville and New York Stage and Film; *The Joy of Going Somewhere Definite*, Mark Taper Forum, Magic Theatre, and others; *The Virgin Molly*, Berkeley Rep. Awards: Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays; ASCAP/Cole Porter Prize for Playwriting; Finalist, Outer Circle Drama Critics Award, Kesselring Prize. Projects slated for 2007: *The Only Child* at South Coast Rep, and *Horse Opera*, commissioned by The Woolly Mammoth Theatre and The Empty Space. Long is a graduate of The Yale School of Drama and a member of New Dramatists, E.S.T., and the

Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio.

Ruth Margraff is writing her fourth Rockefeller Foundation commission in new opera with Fred Ho for the Apollo Theater, a 2006 McKnight National residency/commission with the Playwrights' Center, and a Fulbright award to Greece. Her plays have been developed and produced nationally and in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Russia, Czech Rep., Hungary, Romania, Greece, Turkey, India, Great Britain, and Canada and by Hourglass/Century, BAM Next Wave, CAMI, HERE, Public, Cooper Union, Lincoln Center, The Kitchen, NYTW, Guggenheim Museum, and other NYC venues. She has been published in American Theatre, Theater Forum, Kendall Hunt, Backstage Books, Johns Hopkins, Conjunctions/Bard, Kendall/Hunt, Watson Guphill/Backstage Books, among others. Margraff has taught playwriting at UT/Michener Center, Brown, Yale School of Drama, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and University of Athens. She is an alumnus of New Dramatists and an associate member of Theater Without Borders.

David Myers is the author of the plays *1800 Acres*, *A String of Breath*, *Shatterings*, and *No Man's Land Greenland*, which have received readings and/or productions at The Houston Foundry, The Axiom Theater, EZ Credit Theater, and The Lark Play Development Center. Myers recently returned from Rwanda where he helped develop *Mumugi Watchu*, a play designed to stimulate discussion on AIDS prevention and sexual health. Formerly the literary associate at The Public Theater, he is currently the national coordinator for Suzan-Lori Parks' 365 Days / 365 Plays Festival. A graduate of Brown University, Myers is currently working on a play about the religious figure Abraham.

Dominic Taylor is a writer, director, and professor of playwriting. His plays have been developed by Ensemble Studio Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, The Public Theater, Hartford Stage, New York Theatre Workshop, The Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, Crossroads Theatre, The African Continuum Theatre, and The Kennedy Center, among others. Published plays include *Personal History*, *Wedding Dance*, and *UpCity Service(s)*. Taylor directed the cantata *Negroes Burial Ground* (libretto by Ann Greene, music by Leroy Jenkins) at The Kitchen, and the

parody *Uppa Creek* (by Keli Garrett) at Dixon Place. He is a member playwright as well as a board member of New Dramatists, and a Usual Suspect with NY Theatre Workshop. Taylor is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Bard College.

Susan Tenneriello has written numerous plays and is delighted to be part of American-in-Play. Favorite works include *He Who Makes Water*; *Oh, Miss*; *Each to Each*; *Tick Tock*; *What If You Never Saw the Moon Again?*; and *Grave Matter*. She writes extensively on theater, dance, and visual art, pursuing interdisciplinary work in cultural aesthetics. Recent studies include the laboring body in Edgar Degas's ballet images and eighteenth-century traditions of farce and allegory in comic opera. Currently, she is examining the roots of American cultural attitudes in mass entertainment and spectacle production. She received a Ph.D. from the CUNY Graduate Center and teaches in the Theater Department at Brooklyn College.

Anne Washburn's plays include *Apparition*, *I Have Loved Strangers*, *The Internationalist*, and *The Ladies*. Her work has been produced or developed by 13P, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Cherry Lane Theater, The Civilians, Dixon Place, New York Theatre Workshop, The Public, Soho Rep, Vineyard Theatre, and the Williamstown Theater Festival. Her work is published in *New Downtown Now*, edited by Mac Wellman and Young Jean Lee and published by University of Minnesota Press, and in the upcoming *New York Theater Review* edited by Brook Stowe. She is an associated artist with 13P, The Civilians, and New Georges, and a member of New Dramatists. She founded the Pataphysics Playwriting Workshops at the Flea Theater NYC.

Gary Winter's play *At Said* was performed at P.S. 122 in May 2006. He is a member of the Obie Award-winning 13P. His other plays have been seen or heard at HERE, The Flea, Brick, Playwrights Horizons, Long Wharf, NYU, Little Theater, Geva, Relentless Theater, The Cherry Lane Alternative, and Ensemble Studio Theatre.

ATTENTION, DEAR READER

(Continued from pg. 1)
are either unaware of, or do not wish to share. Our challenge is to get that information out to its appropriate parties.

America has had many cultural markers to help us come to terms with what it means to be an American. Theatre is not an ancillary form of information, but a primary one. This document is a reflection of the series of products that twenty-first century artists are developing as they examine early American drama. For more than a year, America-in-Play has been looking at the theatrical work that was developed during the early development of this country to help answer the yet-to-be-answered question: What is it to be an American?

This communiqué examines some of the things that America-in-Play has done and introduces what it will be doing in the near future. It attempts to paint a portrait of the artists involved and the work that has been and will be done; if you look carefully at the portrait, you may find additional truths. In the same way, the portrait of grandmother over the mantle in the living room may be a mere likeness to many, but if you are alerted, you may notice that there is information on grandmother's hip. Perhaps you will see it immediately, or you may see the message when you look at the portrait in reverse through a mirror.

We hope this communiqué piques your curiosity so that you examine not just America-in-Play as an organization but early American drama as an art form. To know that the early work is not merely waiting for the twentieth century to show up, but that the work is beautiful and has information for all who care to look for it and towards it.

I ask you to share this communiqué with all, including theatre practitioners, theatre appreciators, and people who mistakenly believe that theatre in America has no past. Different people will take away different pieces of information, but if you are one of the gifted, you will see more. We sincerely hope that you enjoy the *Peddler* and if you have any comments, please e-mail them to America-in-Play@hotmail.com.

Best Regards,

Dominic Taylor
Associate Artistic Director, America-in-Play

Dominic Taylor is a writer, director, and professor of playwriting.



“The Stage Yankee Becomes Uncle Sam”

MEET THE DRAMATURGS

Jennifer Leeson is Dramaturg for America-in-Play. Leeson is a freelance dramaturg and theatre educator based in New York City. She received her B.A. in Dramatic Literature from The George Washington University and will graduate this spring with her M.F.A. in Dramaturgy and Theatre Criticism from Brooklyn College. She is a Graduate Teaching Fellow at Brooklyn College and teaches at the Smithsonian Institution through the Smithsonian Associates Summer Camp program. Recent production dramaturgy credits include *UBU®* and *On the Verge*. Leeson is currently curating the souvenir essay guide for the upcoming Broadway production of *Inherit the Wind*.

Elizabeth Coen is America-in-Play's Associate Dramaturg. Coen is finishing her M.F.A. in Dramaturgy and Theatre Criticism at Brooklyn College. She interns at The Public Theater as an assistant to playwright John Guare and reads plays for New York Theatre Workshop. Coen has written for *The Village Voice* and is currently doing work for a new text book on performing arts management by Tobie Stein.

A NEW CONTRAST

(Continued from pg. 1)

Eventually I learned that a stunning number of these elusive American plays had been lost and, then, that some were to be found in a microfiche edition titled “Columbia Readex Microprint of Early American Plays, 1831-1900” in *English and American Plays of the Nineteenth Century*. New York University possessed this collection, but I could not locate it. With a puzzled librarian in the lead, I went deep down to a remote corner on the lowest floor in the Elmer Bobst Library. There, we found shelves of microfiche in storage boxes. In a moment that seemed too much of a cliché to be real, the librarian cautiously blew the dust off one box and I fell in love again and only wanted to adopt these orphaned plays.

So, I began seeking out and reading these comedies in bulk. I knew of course the two plays from the period much anthologized, *The Contrast* (1787) by Royall Tyler and the later *Fashion* (1845) by Anna Cora Mowatt. Now, I read *The Stage-Struck Yankee* by Oliver Durivage (1847); *The Green Mountain Boy* by Joseph S. Jones (1833); *The People’s Lawyer* by Joseph S. Jones (1839); *The Vermont Wool-Dealer* by Cornelius Logan (1838); *Tears and Smiles* and *The Lion of the West* and *A Glance at New York*; and . . .

And I rediscovered the primal American character, Jonathan, aka Jedediah Homebred and Deuteronomy Dutiful and Jonathan Postfree and . . . Yankee progeny, as Mose the Fireman and his girlfriend Lise, and Mike Fink the boatman in African-American and white versions . . . and Nimrod Wildfire (a frontiersman) and yet more and more titles I never knew. Do you know *The Forest Rose* by Samuel Woodworth (author of *The Old Oaken Bucket*)—a play that starts with music evoking nature at the day’s dawn, as in the so much later *Oklahoma!*?

I soon realized what scholars would reify, that the characters and stories found within these comedies were larger than any one individual play. The writing was a direct reflection of a crucial moment in our history: the fervor in the fledgling country to discover its own identity. Unlike contemporary plays, which pride themselves on originality of story and character, there was an intentional reiteration in the stories and characters of this early canon. The performances of these early plays were a dramatic and communal exploration of what it meant to be American.

I learned our greatest fable was about the contrast between city and country and the faith in our innocence . . . and so much more. I learned that a currently denigrated American popular culture had always been demeaned both from within and abroad because of inapt comparison with contemporary English culture. These early comedies were really our folk drama. The result of this legacy of disdain is that we have deprived ourselves of what other world

citizenry has: the beginnings of the culture and works that keep the power of the people alive. I also learned that throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, farces continued to allow country bumpkins to vanquish city slickers and so heralded democratic ideals, including the rights and glories of the common man and guarantees of American life, such as self-determination.

Oh, and yes, I found my dissertation topic and therein is another contrast: the subject was not obscure or in a backwater, but rather in plain sight on Broadway and the map of our dramatic history. I learned that Kaufman’s work was parody of traditional American comedy. In his time, Kaufman was considered a brutal, bitter, angry satirist—a startling contrast from his reputation today as a genial and patriotic showman writing inoffensive traditional plays. No, he was actually a debunker of such comedies, a fact commonly known in his time because the plays he kidded were still written and performed. But to understand a parody, one must first understand its object; Kaufman is not now considered a parodist, because the rich past that informed his writing has been so neglected. That understanding eventually led me back once again to those early American comedies; my ignorance, I realized, was shared.

I also started to understand how profound a loss—and find—I had stumbled into. I thought often about the cultural starvation from ridiculing what is labeled “popular” when the root of that word is, after all, “the people.” Fortuitously, during all the time I was researching, I was also a literary manager and dramaturg and director specializing in *new* American plays. While watching writers struggle to find subject matter, I observed that those who sought out structure or story or character in family legacies from other and ancient cultures were richly fueled. I made the obvious and thrilling connection, that while our culture wasn’t so ancient, we too had shared legacies, a common ground of American myth (not meaning a lie but a story about a shared perception of truth) and mystery.

As a part of my Kaufman research, I put together a reading of selections from plays written between 1776 and World War I. The reading took place in 1995 and involved actors of all ages and ethnicities who initially thought these plays alien. But from the moment the reading started, even with the barriers of language, situation, and culture, the actors instinctively hooked into the work. They knew innately how to perform these texts in a way that doesn’t happen when actors first approach Shakespeare or the Greeks. The artists understood the writing because it was fundamentally their culture.

(Continued on pg. 8)

A NEW CONTRAST

(Continued from pg. 7)

The project was dormant for about a decade, although I often talked about my discoveries. Over and over, I encountered delight and, yes, recognition, when people discovered that there was this rich dramatic history prior to the standard benchmark of Eugene O'Neill, a history so rarely taught in our own colleges. A homecoming. Furthermore, people almost immediately recognized examples of the early archetypes in film and television successes: from *It's a Wonderful Life* to *Forrest Gump*, from *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres* to *City Slickers*.

I was given the opportunity to host a panel at New Dramatists during a year there as a resident director. In the spring of 2005, I curated an evening focused around the characters, stories, and obsessions of early American drama. The writers of New Dramatists are a highly educated, rigorously selected group of some of the country's finest contemporary playwrights. I did a casual survey of who knew what about early American drama. Of the group, only two were familiar with pre-Eugene O'Neill American dramatic traditions or plays.

During the evening at New Dramatists, I introduced images and texts from early drama. I set a context in art, especially the Hudson River School, and music. The panel became a platform for a broad discussion—from our dramatic

past to our national identity to the war in Iraq. Some noted that President Bush had made himself into the oldest American archetype—the character of the Yankee. Despite the expected remoteness of these plays, the audience laughed with recognition and applauded at excerpts from *The Contrast* and *The Vermont Wool-Dealer*. And an even more surprising contrast with expectations was that with only a cursory knowledge of this heritage, the conversation became a platform to discuss huge contemporary issues in a new light and with a deeper understanding. Writers were making connections to the past, which in turn were informing their experience of the present.

Some weeks later, I experimented with writing exercises that would allow modern playwrights to have conversations with the writing and writers of the past. This workshop, co-curated by playwrights Dominic Taylor and David Grimm, was a crossover moment for me. I gained the conviction that I wanted to start a project that would connect current writers with their dramatic past. The seeds which had been planted more than a decade earlier finally grew above soil.

Coincidentally, I had just been given a two-year residency to develop a musical at the TRIBECA Performing Arts Center (TPAC). Linda Herring, Executive Director at TPAC, who had attended the New Dramatists panel, agreed to my adding this

project to my residency.

I invited two student dramaturgs from Brooklyn College (Jennifer Leeson and Elizabeth Coen) to assist me and I put together the structure for four workshops. In December 2005 and January 2006, I solicited the participation of playwrights through a flyer. I received a small grant from Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas to support the work. Beginning in February 2006, I, the dramaturgs, and playwrights took a journey through early American drama, iconography, music, and culture.

The writers discovered new entries to their work—structures and stories and characters as rich provocative sources. The writers learned to appreciate that their own impulses often held unsuspected folk origins. We learned to decode the old plays. We all learned more about who we were and gradually developed a communal vocabulary out of which we can make work. Today we find ourselves laughing deeply at “inside jokes” we would not have understood, or even made, a year earlier. We are building a new, a contrasting, relationship with our own culture.

And so, in the fall of 2006, I went ahead with four more workshops and was honored to have Dominic Taylor join me as an artistic partner and Jennie Greer help with a business plan. We have now commissioned sixteen playwrights to write ten-minute plays.

On three evenings—March 19, 26, and 27, 2007—we will share this work in readings and inaugurate to the public America-in-Play. These plays together are meant as a new contrast, a new starting point to enrich the cultural conversation about who we, the people of America, are and what we want.



Alvan Fisher, *Niagara Falls*, 1829

“I learned our greatest fable was about the contrast between city and country and the faith in our innocence . . .”

Meet Lynn M. Thomson, Founder and Artistic Director, America-in-Play

Lynn M. Thomson is a dramaturg, director, teacher, scholar, and arts advocate. She received an M.F.A. in Directing from Temple University and a Ph.D. from New York University. For the last twenty years, she has devoted herself primarily to the development and production of new American plays.

As Associate Artistic Director of the Philadelphia Theatre Company, she created/administrated "Stages," a new play festival. From 1991 to 1995, she was Dramaturg at Circle Repertory Company, where she worked with Craig Lucas, Paula Vogel, Joyce Carol Oates, Regina Taylor, Anne Bogart, among many other significant American writers and directors.

Thomson has been Dramaturg on numerous productions, including *Rent* (Broadway and Off-Broadway). In theatres throughout the U.S.A., she has directed over 100 productions, as well as innumerable readings and workshops of new plays. Theatres include The Philadelphia Theatre Company, Woolly Mammoth Theatre, and Circle Repertory Company.

She co-founded and edited *The Script Exchange* for Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the

Americas. She co-authored the first set of professional employment guidelines for dramaturgs.

Thomson has taught at New York University, University of Evansville, and currently at Brooklyn College, where she is now a tenured Associate Professor. Her articles have been published in *Journal of American Drama and Theater*, *Theatre Topics*, *American Theatre*, *Parabasis*, and *Lincoln Center Review*. Her book *Between the Lines: The Process of Dramaturgy*, co-authored with Judith Rudakoff, was published in 2002.



"Mose the Bowery B'ho'y"
from
A Glance at New York

U N K O W N L O Y A L I S T . . .

(Continued from pg. 3)

And to use it as a doorstep against God? To keep God out while you deliberate with the devil in Philadelphia just because you think you can? Think you must? These truths are not self-evident. Not to me. No. These truths are the making of a tall red-haired man sitting in a room by himself too long with a pen. That's what they are, and if he wasn't such a fop of a man I'd drag him out by his undershirt and thump him, yes sir, for this is – this Benjamin, this Samuel, this – this is beer. Good beer, maybe. Foamy beer. Beer with amber. Beer that makes you feel like you can yell at England. Yell at God. But you can't yell at God. Because God will get you. God will burn your house and degenerate your children and your childrens' children and cause problems down the generalizations which will emphasize not the righteous goodness you so hope to please your fellow man with – your fellow candy striper, your catfish sucking son of William Fletcher Peabody Institute of Brotherly Love –

no. They won't even know two days from now what was enunciated there in the Bowery. Because our loyalties – yours and mind and baby makes three – our loyalties are catamount with the apostles of Jesus in a straight line from Jesus to George III through the auscopies of the Anglican Episcopacy – through ... and these fools, these brigands, these make pies, these "Thomas give me liberty or give me tweezers!" Phooey. This is parliament from a place that needn't be named in police company. These was words that I expounded from my memory the moment I heard them, so that their evil kenevil would not seep into my soul and distract me from my King, my George by George, who is my lord and my protector. No revelation without representation, and nobody asked me. Nobody said "Hey." Nobody said anything til now, and now it's too late. So, I'm disappointed. What can I say? I'm going back in my house and shut my door and write my own Depredation of Constipation, and they'll feel it, too. They'll stop their hooligans from separating me from mine – my life, my blood, my home, my King and Jesus ever more. Amen.

"Well, I don't know – it was – it really – what he said about the King? Because the King is the King and that."

“The Yankee Peddler”
Editorial Team

Editor: Lynn M. Thomson
Managing Editor: C.S. Hanson
Associate Editor: Dominic Taylor
Assistant Editors: Elizabeth Coen, Jennifer Leeson
Designer and Webmaster: Les Hunter

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Directions to TRIBECA Performing Arts Center (TPAC):

Subway

1, 2, 3 to Chambers Street stop, walk 2 blocks west on Chambers, entrance is up the ramp through main doors.

4, 5, 6 to Brooklyn Bridge stop, walk 6 blocks west on Chambers...

J, M, Z to Chambers stop, walk 6 blocks west on Chambers...

A or C to Chambers Street, walk west on Chambers...

Questions? For more information about TPAC, visit www.tribecapac.org. For more information about America-in-Play, visit www.americaninplay.org or email America-in-Play@hotmail.com.

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PLAYS TO BE PRESENTED MARCH 19, 26, & 27

MONDAY, MARCH 19
7:00 P.M. Theatre 2 TPAC

MONDAY, MARCH 26
7:00 P.M. Theatre 2 TPAC

TUESDAY, MARCH 27
7:00 P.M. Theatre 2 TPAC

**FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA:
American Landscapes**

In its beginnings, America was imagined as “Paradise Found,” a new Eden—perhaps even the original. America-in-Play artists started work through exploring the imaginative, primal landscapes of the Hudson River School painters and the folk characters born out of “this land.” Plays on this evening carry the pulse of all those beginnings in landscapes both rural and urban.

-*Farmer’s Quartette* by Erin Browne
-*The View from Here and Just Folks* by Lawrence DuKore
-*Lion of the East* by Les Hunter
-*The Next Big Thing* by Jenny Levison
-*Deleted Scenes from the Love of John Smith and Pocahontas* by David Myers
-*Literal Lineage with some ROOTS* by Dominic Taylor

**YANKEE DOODLES:
From Crackerbarrel Philosophers to
Silk Crooks**

Out of this land of many contrasts arose a pantheon of archetypal characters to examine and specify our national identity. This night’s plays continue that search.

-*Argue the Ocean* by Erin Courtney
-*Collette Duval* by P.J. Gibson
-*Falutin* by C.S. Hanson
-*Falderal* by Quincy Long
-*Banana and Booh in SECURITY* by Susan Tenneriello

**TALL TALES,
or Performing Democracy**

This evening investigates how we “stage-struck Yankees” enact rituals of democracy in life and art.

-*The Cheechako Treatment* by Deborah Brevoort
-*the orchard, the handkerchief & the carbon copyists* by Stephanie Fleischmann
-*Over the Garden Wall* by Ruth Margraff
-*Onkel Toms Hütte* by Anne Washburn
-*American in Play* by Gary Winter