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The Rise of American Theater in the Midst of Commercialism

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ABSTRACT: *This study takes a cultural-historical and ideological-critical stance to analyze how American theater evolved over time in connection to such factors as the growth of commercial society, the expansion of the United States, consumer culture, and the formation of American identity. Throughout the United States' history, from the colonial era to the twentieth century, theater has played a dual role: reflecting and challenging the country's economic and ideological formation. American theater, the article contends, has served as a cultural record of consumerism, industrial capitalism, Manifest Destiny, democracy, and trade, among other things. There is a strong correlation between American capitalism and theatrical production, as seen through the rise of the star system, the growth of traveling companies and showboats, the merger of theatrical syndicates, the Federal Theatre Project, the "little man" figure, and the commercial spectacle of late twentieth-century theater. At the same time, theater has repeatedly offered a counter-space in which national myths, social inequalities, racial politics, class oppression, psychological anxieties, and the contradictions of consumer identity could be staged, examined, and made visible.*

KEYWORDS: *American theater; commercialism; Manifest Destiny; national identity; consumerism; capitalism; cultural history*

I. Introduction: Theater, Commerce, and the American Imagination

I prefer to think that the theater, with its living metaphors of human need and action, with its completely plastic and graphic evocations of human tension and conflict, and with its infinite capacity for transforming the most complex philosophic and moral reflections into highly charged, profoundly emotional recognitions, continues to preserve its potential as one of the foremost tenets of the humanist tradition. (Golden 5)

American theater has long served as a mirror to the soul of the United States. From colonial performance culture and early Shakespearean productions to modern theatrical spectacles comparable in scale to civic festivals and mass entertainment, theater has remained one of the most revealing forms of American cultural expression. Its history is inseparable from the nation's economic life, political self-fashioning, commercial ambitions, and shifting structures of collective identity.

This paper argues that American theater has developed in continuous dialogue with the commercial and ideological energies of American society. Democracy, Manifest Destiny, social reform, capitalism, national identity, subjectivity, and consumer desire have all appeared, directly or indirectly, in the evolution of theatrical institutions and dramatic forms. Theater has not merely represented American life; it has participated in the making of American self-understanding. As Calvin Coolidge, the thirtieth president of the United States, is often paraphrased as declaring, "The business of America is business," a phrase that may be understood less as documentary proof than as a revealing cultural shorthand for the commercial ethos that has shaped American public life. The history of American theater repeatedly demonstrates the force of that ethos, even as the stage has also questioned its consequences.

Yet theater has also complicated this national devotion to commerce. Even when dependent upon ticket sales, investors, touring circuits, and commercial real estate, the theater has frequently exposed the contradictions of the society that sustains it. The American stage has reflected the ambitions of capitalism, but it has also revealed its human costs: alienation, class struggle, racial injustice, psychological fragmentation, and the transformation of citizens into consumers.

II. Colonial Regulation and the Emergence of American Theatrical Independence

Commercial enterprise has always shaped the marketplace, and theater has been no exception. Newsday theater critic Linda Winer observes that "it's terribly sad to have the theater turned over to basically a corporate product as opposed to making shows" (Gold 51). Her remark captures a central tension in American theater history: the performing arts rely on audiences, capital, venues, publicity, and managerial systems, yet these very structures may also limit artistic experimentation and cultural critique.

In the United States, the relative absence of sustained government subsidy for the performing arts has made theatrical production especially dependent upon consumer demand. Theater has often appeared to cross the symbolic boundaries of the American psyche while remaining largely outside direct state control.

Nevertheless, this freedom was not present from the beginning. American theater emerged under British imperial authority, and the Licensing Act of 1737, originally designed to regulate London theater and suppress politically offensive performances, extended its influence into the colonies. The arrival of professional theater in America in 1752, therefore, took place within a system already marked by censorship and political anxiety.

The Continental Congress's decision in 1774 to declare theater illegal further demonstrates that the early American suspicion of performance was not merely aesthetic but moral and political. Although American independence was ratified in 1783, the theater did not immediately flourish. The newly formed republic inherited not only British theatrical traditions but also Puritan distrust of theatrical display. Thus, even as commerce lay at the root of many activities in the new nation, theater had to struggle against an inherited moral atmosphere that made widespread public acceptance difficult.

After independence, however, theater began to absorb and express the independent spirit of the new republic. In England, resident troupes had long been important; in the United States, touring and star-centered performance became increasingly influential. By 1810, New York theater managers Thomas A. Cooper and Stephen Price brought George Frederick Cooke to America, contributing to the creation of the American star system (Brockett 412). This development was important to the culture. The star system fit well with the American values of individuality, mobility, and business success. It also predicted that performers would subsequently become marketable personalities.

Individuality was a big part of how the United States was formed, and theater showed its significance by being mostly free of government support. It turned into a nonpartisan cultural place where people could meet others who represented their hopes and dreams as citizens, laborers, dreamers, and moral agents. In its early development, American theater was not yet fully subordinated to commercial calculation; nevertheless, the logic of the marketplace was already present in its modes of circulation, celebrity, and public appeal.

III. National Consciousness, Melodrama, and the Democratic Stages

American plays written for American audiences flourished in the wake of the War of 1812, which heightened national consciousness. A new dramatic repertoire began to express the values, anxieties, and fantasies of a republic increasingly conscious of its own cultural distinction. Between 1800 and 1850, the percentage of American plays in the theatrical repertory increased from approximately 2 percent to 15 percent (Brockett 420). There was a noticeable trend toward dramatic nationalism, even though the rise was still small.

Since it enabled the theater to tackle pressing social issues in emotionally accessible ways, melodrama became one of the most popular styles of play during that time. Conflicts between good and evil, purity and depravity, fairness and injustice could serve to depict issues such as urban poverty, labor exploitation, moral struggle, and slavery. The Native American, who was frequently portrayed via the flawed stereotype of the "noble savage," and the Yankee, a seemingly innocent yet ethically astute commoner who supported democratic values, were two influential figures who kept coming back.

How American theater dealt with the paradoxes of national identity is shown by these figures. The Yankee embodied democratic energy, practical intelligence, and vernacular humor. The Native American figure, by contrast, often functioned as a symbolic projection of the nation's unease about expansion, dispossession, and the violence underlying Manifest Destiny. The stage thus participated in the making of American myth while also exposing the tensions within that myth.

The California Gold Rush, beginning in 1848, provided new narrative material for playwrights and helped connect melodramatic convention to the expanding economy of frontier capitalism; stage works such as Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859), with its sensational use of racial conflict, property, and technological rescue, and popular railroad melodramas such as Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867), with its famous track-rescue scene, show how nineteenth-century theater translated commerce, transportation, speculation, and territorial expansion into emotionally legible spectacle. Stories of frontier hardship, encounters with rivers, mountains, deserts, and Indigenous peoples, and the dramatic making and losing of fortunes became central to theatrical imagination. The expansion of the railroad further intensified this relationship between capitalism, technology, and theatrical sensation. European dramatic models increasingly gave way to melodramas involving frontier danger, heroic rescue, and spectacular scenes such as the hero or heroine bound to a railroad track while an approaching train threatened destruction.

These plots were not merely sensational entertainments. They dramatized the emotional structure of capitalist expansion: risk, speculation, mobility, danger, triumph, and loss. If capitalism was not always explicitly named in American theater, it entered the stage through stories of fortune, movement, and peril. David Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905), for instance, brought frontier mythology into the theatrical mainstream and demonstrated how commercial theater could transform the American West into a marketable dramatic landscape.

IV. Theatrical Syndicates, Monopoly, and the Business of Performance

By the late nineteenth century, American theater had become increasingly organized as a business enterprise. The rise of theatrical touring companies culminated in the formation of powerful managerial networks. In 1896, a group of Philadelphia and New York theater owners formed "The Syndicate," an organization designed to control bookings and local theater managers. Theater became a "highly organized, immeasurably profitable, and deeply cynical business trust" (Golden 20).

This consolidation transformed theatrical production into a system governed by access, distribution, and profit. The Syndicate's influence resembles broader patterns in American capitalism at the turn of the century, when industrial trusts and corporate consolidation reshaped the national economy. In this context, theater did not simply reflect commercialism; it became one of commercialism's institutional expressions.

Yet the very system that made theater profitable also made it vulnerable. By 1915, rising ticket prices, spectator sports, and motion pictures began to draw audiences away from legitimate theater. The number of legitimate theaters outside New York reportedly reached approximately 1,500 by 1915 but fell to about 500 by 1930. The decline illustrates a recurring pattern in American entertainment history: commercial success depends upon public demand, but public demand is unstable and easily redirected toward newer, cheaper, or more technologically compelling forms of spectacle.

V. Government Intervention and the Federal Theatre Project

If capitalism and popular demand dominated theater through the early twentieth century, the Great Depression created conditions under which the federal government briefly entered theatrical production. In 1935, the Federal Theatre Project was established as part of the Works Progress Administration to combat unemployment among theater workers. Its approximately one thousand productions included the famous "Living Newspapers," which combined factual data with dramatic vignettes in order to address major social issues.

The Living Newspapers focused on problems facing the United States, including agriculture in *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936), rural electrification in *Power* (1937), and slum housing in *One-Third of a Nation* (1938). These productions challenged the assumption that theater should merely entertain. They established theater as a social form that could educate audiences, embody policy, and activate political awareness.

However, politics were a big part of the downfall of the project. Congress refused to fund a similar program in 1939, fearing the politically charged content would lead to liberal indoctrination and a conservative backlash. The Federal Theatre Project thus reveals both the promise and the fragility of publicly supported theater in the United States. In a culture deeply committed to private enterprise, state-supported political theater appeared threatening precisely because it separated theatrical production from ordinary market dependence.

The Federal Theatre Project also supported African-American theater and created important opportunities for Black performers, directors, and playwrights. In the same period, a group of New York actors established the Mercury Theatre in 1937, engaging with race, fascism, and other political themes. These circumstances highlight the ways in which 1930s theater became an essential space for grappling with national crises, racial inequity, and ideological differences:

The theatre, like the human beings it serves as aesthetic agent and commentator, is possessed of the same sort of strengths and frailties that human beings possess. This humanoid character of the theatre is, of course, its greatest source of power, its means of establishing a kinship, a bond of familiarity and compassion between the stage and the spectator that no other art form can accomplish—or, for that matter, wants to accomplish (Golden 5).

This bond between stage and spectator explains theater's enduring capacity to mirror national life. Theater reflects public identity back to the public itself. It makes visible what citizens may fail to recognize in themselves, their institutions, and their historical moment.

VI. Broadway, Real Estate, and the Limits of Artistic Freedom

Business dealings have repeatedly shaped the development of American drama. New theatrical work often depends upon investors, managers, venues, and expected returns. In 1961, New York theater commentator Margaret Jane Fischer described the power of theater owners in explicitly commercial terms:

A realtor can set the figure he expects a production to gross weekly if it is to occupy his theater, and if it falls below that, he can force the playout so that he can book a more promising attraction. Needless to say, the theater owner is not necessarily a person interested in the theater as a cultural venture! (Gard, Balch, and Temkin 5).

Although Fischer's comments belong to a particular historical moment, the underlying issue remains relevant. Business continues to influence theatrical production, distribution, visibility, and audience access. Whether a production makes it to Broadway depends on financial considerations, but it may also be limited to regional theaters, colleges, or experimental settings. A serious or innovative play may possess artistic merit while being

dismissed as financially impractical.

Morgan Himelstein argues that business imperatives shaped Broadway theater between 1929 and 1941. Of approximately 1,500 productions presented by independent Broadway managers during those years, only 74 treated social, political, or economic subjects as primary themes. Audiences, he writes, wanted to be "entertained, not to be educated or converted to a political cause" (215). Himelstein further notes that "escapist" offerings—musical comedies, "bedroom farces," comedies, mystery melodramas, musical revues, and psychological plays—were the preferred choices of Broadway audiences (215).

This preference for entertainment does not mean that Broadway lacked artistic seriousness. Rather, it indicates that theatrical form was conditioned by the economic expectations of its audiences. Broadway's paying public often sought pleasure, diversion, and emotional satisfaction, especially during periods of economic anxiety. The market did not eliminate serious drama, but it compelled serious drama to negotiate with audience desire.

VII. Eugene O'Neill, Broadway Taste, and the Commercial Avant-Garde

Eugene O'Neill occupied a central place in the transformation of American theater in the 1920s. His dramatic experiments with character, psychology, family, guilt, desire, and existential struggle helped move American drama beyond melodramatic convention. Yet O'Neill's artistic seriousness was not wholly separate from Broadway culture. Eric Bentley suggests that O'Neill's "profound" art was inseparable from the sophisticated tastes of his Broadway audience:

They don't all like O'Neill, yet his "profound" art is inconceivable without them. O'Neill doesn't like them, but he needs them and could never have dedicated himself to "big work" had their voices not been in his ears telling him he was big. The man who could not be bribed by the Broadway tycoons was seduced by the Broadway intelligentsia (Mordden 84).

Bentley's observation points to a crucial paradox. O'Neill's work challenged commercial formulas, yet his authority as a major playwright depended in part upon the very theatrical culture he resisted. His plays drew theatergoers from smaller, artistically experimental spaces into more prominent venues. Commercial producers initially rejected his work, but once he achieved a Broadway breakthrough in 1920, the market became capable of supporting, absorbing, and legitimizing his dramatic innovation.

O'Neill's career, therefore, reveals that American commercial theater has never been a simple enemy of art. It may resist innovation, but it may also incorporate it once a new form of seriousness becomes culturally valuable and economically viable.

VIII. The "Little Man," Antiheroism, and the Crisis of American Individualism

The figure of the "little man" became increasingly important in American theater during the 1920s and 1930s. This character existed at the threshold between comedy and tragedy, between democratic identification and social invisibility. Like Charlie Chaplin's cinematic persona, the theatrical "little man" was trapped in routines and ambitions no longer truly his own but imposed by the larger society. Golden describes such a figure as "a wind-up toy, clicking and whirring toward disaster without half realizing it" (88).

The "little man" was an antihero. In the 1920s, he could be funny, harmless, and strangely resilient. He could confront impersonal forces such as big business, bureaucracy, the military, or the Internal Revenue Service, yet he remained too comical to seem dangerous. His apparent insignificance made him theatrically useful: he could challenge power without threatening the structures that produced him.

After the rise of European fascism in the 1930s and the global crises of the 1940s, however, the "little man" lost much of his comic innocence. In Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, this figure became tragic. The dreams of upward mobility, personal success, and economic self-making collapsed into exhaustion and delusion. American commercialism, once associated with opportunity and expansion, now appeared as a force capable of destroying the very subject it claimed to liberate.

The stock market crash of 1929 intensified this transformation. The national imagination could no longer rely upon fantasies of unlimited prosperity. Stocks, savings, and personal security evaporated, and the public required drama that could register the fragility of American dreams. The "little man" became the bearer of this cultural disillusionment.

The Federal Theatre Project also used the "little man" in its Living Newspapers. He served as a guide for the audience, leading spectators through the news of the day, dramatizing social problems, and making policy consequences emotionally intelligible. These productions did not need to be commercially successful in the conventional sense because they were federally funded. However, the political nature of the project made it vulnerable, and its short existence demonstrates that the "little man" could not withstand congressional suspicion indefinitely.

Tennessee Williams adapted and transformed the "little man" in a different register, exploring fragile individuals caught in systems of desire, illusion, memory, and social judgment. Theater critic Robert Corrigan

considered this moral and psychological territory dangerous:

Let us watch our playwright in the process of creation…doesn't he feel that there is a danger in passing a moral judgment on individuals? In fact, how can there be a moral pattern to human experience in such a world? (Golden 98)

Williams's drama suggests that modern American identity cannot be understood only through economics or politics. It must also be understood through wounded interiority. By the mid-twentieth century, the frontier of American drama had moved inward, toward psychology, repression, sexuality, memory, and the unstable self

IX. Depression-Era Theater and Social Reform

In spite of its ambivalence, the "little man" helped shape the 1930s and 1940s dramatic imagination around social reform. In addition to providing jobs for artists, the Federal Theatre Project aimed to include low-income and unemployed individuals in public cultural activities. For the economically disadvantaged, theater became a voice to be heard.

A lot of American theaters saw the effects of the Great Depression. There were 240 Broadway productions in the 1929–1930 season, but by 1938–1939, that number had dropped to just 89. American theater, facing a society in crisis and fewer shows, challenged the relationship between capitalism, social misery, and democracy more and more. In her 1934 play *The Children's Hour*, Lillian Hellman foreshadowed the fears that would resurface during the Communist Red Scare by analyzing the damaging effects of defamation. A violent strike in a Midwestern industrial town portrayed anti-capitalist emotions in *Her Days to Come* (1936).

Other playwrights addressed racism, prison reform, and class oppression. John Wexley's T*hey Shall Not Die* (1934) and *The Last Mile* (1930) engaged subjects that would become central to American political consciousness in later decades. Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End* (1935) exposed slum conditions and poverty through melodramatic form. Although Broadway is primarily a commercial venue, these pieces show that social commentary might find a home on the stage when the time was right.

The theater's function as a mirror of national life became especially significant in this period. It allowed audiences to encounter inequalities and injustices that might otherwise remain invisible or emotionally unmanageable. In this way, theater became more than just entertainment; it became a way for people to be recognized by others.

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X. Theatrical Syndicates, Monopoly, and the Business of Performance

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XI. Manifest Destiny, Expansion, and the Commercial Nation

American theater and national identity were both profoundly impacted by the Manifest Destiny ideology. There was an ethical, political, and economic rationale for territorial expansion based on the assumption that the US was bound to spread across the continent. Native Americans and other nearby tribes bore a disproportionate share of the heavy human toll that this expansion exacted.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century afflictions such as nervous exhaustion reflected the pressures of a society organized around productivity, expansion, and self-discipline. Philip Cushman argues that such conditions:

Unintentionally reflected the need of the state in America to settle the continent, develop an industrial economy, and build a nation…Illness was the absence of initiative, the inability to work, that was considered sickness (Cushman 134).

The classification of neurasthenia, or nervous exhaustion, by New York neurologist George Beard in 1879 suggests that the demands of modern American life produced psychological consequences. The individual had

to be "continually repaired, expanded, and especially replenished so that society could continue and the individual could survive and be successful" (134). This logic encouraged the rise of consumer culture, which promised replenishment for selves made empty by labor, competition, and social expectation.

Cushman further argues that psychoanalysis contributed to the consumerization of American life. "The unconscious became a vehicle for the single most important cultural dynamic of the twentieth century: the consumerization of American life" (143). In this process, Freud's ideas were absorbed into a commercial society that sought to create and satisfy desire. Such a development would have "appalled" Freud "had he known how his concept would be used by American business" (143).

Theater and art offered spaces in which society could encounter its own repressed needs. Psychologist Erich Neumann's concept of "participation mystique" (Tucker 97) helps explain how artistic experience can bring repressed elements of personality "into the play of creative vitality" (97). Theater allowed audiences to experience lack, desire, anxiety, and transformation collectively. It offered a ritualized form of psychic replenishment within a commercial culture that constantly produced new forms of dissatisfaction.

XII. Consumer Desire, Advertising, and the Interior Frontier

In the second half of the 1800s, business became more and more important in the United States. Productivity in factories went up, businesses got bigger, national advertising campaigns started, and a consumer economy started to take shape. These developments were accompanied by political corruption, labor conflict, racial exploitation, and urban inequality. In the twentieth century, especially after World War II, advertising became one of the most powerful forces in American cultural life.

The rise of national advertising in the 1920s coincided with major changes in theater. Ronald Wainscott describes this as a period in which artists "redefined the direction of the American theater for decades to come" through plays "characterized by the violent, the pathetic, the satiric, the outrageous, or the incomprehensible" (1). Still marked by the aftermath of the First World War, American drama increasingly presented "the violent or overwhelming nature of the world" (2).

At the same time, corporations developed new forms of influence. As overt physical violence against workers became less acceptable in the early twentieth century, business culture turned increasingly toward psychological management. Cushman describes this as the capacity to "plant a vast field of consumer desire and reap the ongoing harvest" (145). The commercial manipulation of desire became central not only to advertising but also to mass entertainment.

Any art form that gathers an audience participates, to some degree, in this economy of fulfillment. Audiences attend plays, films, operas, and spectacles expecting to be moved, entertained, informed, or emotionally completed. As David Spurr writes, "The audience's role is largely passive and consuming, though appreciative of what it perceives as the satisfaction of its desire for information and amusement" (45).

Theater grew significantly in the 1920s, but radio and cinema altered the entertainment economy in the 1930s. These newer media offered broader access, lower costs, and more technically persuasive illusions. Wickham describes the competition between theater and film as a struggle over spectacle: "It was fought over the question of which of the two media could supply the most convincing illusion in the most spectacular and entertaining manner" (202). Motion pictures ultimately served the public imagination more powerfully and helped extend American consumerism globally through the mythology of Hollywood glamour. By the twentieth century, America had moved from "an ethic of production to an ethic of consumption" (Farra 29).

This transformation must be understood in relation to America's broader expansionist confidence. Aside from physical expansion, the ideology of Manifest Destiny also represented a sense of national purpose, cultural dominance, and economic inevitability:

Manifest destiny, in its evolution as a body of American thought, expressed a spirit of confidence and a sense of power. It set forth in extravagant language a vision of national greatness in territorial, political, or diplomatic concerns. It proclaimed a national mission to the downtrodden and oppressed, designed to rationalize in terms of a higher good the nation's right, and even its duty, to dispossess neighboring countries of portions of their landed possessions. Those who preached the crusade created fanciful dreams of the Republic's future; they ignored specifics and were unmindful of means, such as the economic, social, and political consequences of their expansionist policies. They were ideologues, not statesmen (Graebner lxvii).

Emerson expressed a related confidence in historical destiny: "Gentlemen, there is a sublime and friendly destiny by which the human race is guided—the race never dying, the individual never spared—to results affecting masses and ages" (Emerson 9). For Emerson, American expansion was linked to transportation, education, engineering, agriculture, architecture, commerce, and the imaginative capacity of citizens to meet historical challenges. Yet such confidence must also be read critically. As Spurr observes:

The colonizing imagination takes for granted that the land and its resources belong to those who are best able to exploit them according to the values of a Western commercial and industrial system (Spurr 31).

The violence behind the expansion was immense. Native American peoples were dispossessed, displaced, and

often killed. President George Washington declared, "We are more enlightened and more powerful than the Indian nations," (de Tocqueville 89), a statement that reveals the paternalistic and hierarchical assumptions behind federal Indian policy. The Rev. Jeremiah Evarts similarly wrote:

> In a quarter of a century, the pressure on the Indians will be greater from the boundless prairies, which must ultimately be subdued and inhabited, than it would ever have been from the borders of the present Cherokee country (Jackson 100).

American democracy was therefore built within a contradiction: it celebrated liberty, progress, and self-government while expanding across lands already inhabited by others. Theater, as a cultural institution dependent upon movement, settlement, transportation, and audiences, developed within this same historical contradiction.

XIII. Transportation, Showboats, and Theatrical Expansion

Theatrical productions were impacted by the United States' territorial expansion. Several western theaters along the Mississippi River were situated between 1835 and 1853 as the nation expanded. Theaters were able to attract more customers after the development of toll roads, railroads, steamboat routes, and canals. By 1846, approximately 1,200 steamboats operated on the Mississippi and its tributaries (Brockett 415).

Before the development of showboats, itinerant companies often created temporary theaters in towns. In 1831, a flatboat was used from Pittsburgh to New Orleans, and in 1836, a steamboat began towing showboats along the rivers. Although the Civil War temporarily interrupted this form of entertainment, showboats flourished after the war, especially between 1875 and 1900 (Brockett 415). These "floating palaces" reveal how theater traveled through the same commercial arteries that carried goods, people, news, and national myths.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the continental frontier had largely closed. Frederick Jackson Turner declared in 1893 that the western frontier had ended, leaving what Cushman calls the "internal, psychological frontier" (149). This shift from external conquest to inward exploration provides a crucial hinge in the history of American theater: once territorial expansion could no longer function as the dominant symbolic horizon of national destiny, American culture increasingly relocated its dramas of desire, conflict, mastery, and self-making within the interior life of the individual. The same expansionist energy that had once been projected onto land, transportation, settlement, and empire was redirected toward personality, consumption, sexuality, advertising, and psychological depth. This inward turn reshaped American culture. The frontier of land gave way to the frontier of desire, personality, consumption, and self-invention.

This interior frontier affected theater profoundly. It contributed to the psychological drama of O'Neill, the erotic intensity associated with performers such as Marlon Brando, and the commercial use of unconscious desire in advertising. Cushman writes that "the urges and drives of the unconscious were thus more easily used in service of a soon-to-be-developed twentieth-century corporate strategy for psychologizing labor conflicts and consumerizing the economy" (150). American business learned to sell not merely goods but identities, fantasies, and emotional states.

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XIV. Media, Consumerism, and the Late-Twentieth-Century Stage

"Individualistic enterprise is the rockbed of the American economy and way of life" (Umphlett 90). Mass media intensified this commitment to individualistic consumption. Cinema's popularity expanded through fan magazines and the creation of star culture, while theater relied more heavily on word of mouth, location, and direct attendance. Desire became more associated with ideas of manhood, adversity, sexual strength, independence, and self-actualization as advertising proliferated in American culture.

Magazine and television advertising campaigns for Marlboro and other brands carried on the theme of Manifest Destiny after WWII. This imagery featured a strong, independent man who was unafraid to move about and create his own destiny.

. By the 1980s, credit cards further expanded consumer identity by enabling individuals to purchase beyond immediate income. Consumption became a way of crossing social boundaries, performing aspiration, and participating in the national fantasy of abundance.

Gary Cross argues that the 1980 presidential elections elevated a political rhetoric of "only growth without limits" (239). Ronald Reagan's campaign question—"Are you better off today than you were four years ago?"—framed political identity in economic and consumer terms. In this logic, national health could be measured by purchasing power, growth, and private prosperity. The poor and marginalized, because they contributed less to consumer expansion, were implicitly positioned outside the dominant model of American success.

Yet consumer culture carries social costs. Cross writes that American consumption shifted historically from community-based purchasing to family-centered goods and finally to individual products. He warns:

Despite the convenience and personal liberty that products have brought, Americans still want a balance between the individual and the social and will seek to find it in new rituals of sharing and cross-

generational activities. We have seen to what extent spending is a ritual…only rules imposed on the competitive consumer society as a whole can save them from the excess of their individualism (250).

Theater in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries must be understood against this background. It competes with television, cinema, the Internet, global media, professional sports, social media, and other mass entertainments. It also participates in the same commercial systems that produce national identity. In an earlier era, a person in a small American town might have relied on a weekly newspaper and a local theater company to imagine a connection with the nation. By 2005, Americans were constantly surrounded by images, sounds, brands, and narratives that produced national belonging.

Commercial enterprise increasingly manufactures identity by mobilizing food, entertainment, sports, political events, tragedy, celebrity, and spectacle. The September 11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that tragedy could unite the country emotionally; at the same time, national unity was also produced through commercial events such as the Super Bowl, the World Series, blockbuster films, and mass trends. Americans are now offered national identity daily through commercial culture.

Helena Norberg-Hodge describes the contradictory movement of contemporary society:

In many ways, American society seems to be moving in two distinct and opposing directions. On the one hand, mainstream culture led by government and industry moves relentlessly toward continued economic growth and technological development, straining the limits of nature and ignoring fundamental human needs. On the other hand, a counter-current…has kept alive the ancient understanding that life is an inextricably connected continuum (Norberg-Hodge 579).

This contradiction is also visible in theater. On one side stands mass-marketed theatrical spectacle, including Disney-inspired productions such as The Lion King, which renew the American "can-do" spirit through affective pleasure, technical polish, and marketable optimism. On the other side are theaters, playwrights, and performance traditions that continue to resist commodification by staging social critique, minority experience, ecological anxiety, historical trauma, and the instability of identity.

Such commercial spectacle often supports the American belief in interior goodness, healing, and emotional liberation. Cushman describes this tradition as a belief in "the imperative of healing the inner self to grow, prosper, and be liberated by becoming more emotionally expressive" (221). In this sense, even the theater of consumption retains a therapeutic dimension. It promises emotional renewal while remaining embedded in the structures of consumer capitalism.

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XV. Conclusion

The history of American theater cannot be separated from the history of American commercialism. From colonial regulation and early touring companies to the star system, melodrama, showboats, theatrical syndicates, Broadway real estate, the Federal Theatre Project, Depression-era social drama, psychological realism, and late twentieth-century commercial spectacle, theater has both reflected and shaped the nation's economic and ideological development.

American theater has repeatedly mirrored the central contradictions of the United States: democracy and dispossession, individuality and mass culture, artistic freedom and market control, civic critique and commercial entertainment, national identity and consumer segmentation. It has served capitalism, depended upon capitalism, criticized capitalism, and transformed capitalist desire into dramatic form.

Consumerism now categorizes individuals and helps determine how Americans imagine their place within national identity. It also sustains the belief that American values, goods, images, and cultural forms possess a quasi-destined power to expand outward. In this respect, the logic of Manifest Destiny survives not only in territorial history but also in global consumer culture. American theater, at its best, continues to make this history visible. It reminds audiences that the nation's soul is not only found in its ideals, myths, and ambitions, but also in the commercial structures through which those ideals are staged, sold, resisted, and remembered.

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