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Review of *Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier* by Matthew Reborn

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BOOK REVIEWS

Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier.
By Matthew Rebhorn. New York: Oxford
University Press, 2012. x + 207 pp. Illustrations,
photographs, notes, works cited, index. \$65.00.

Important works on U.S. drama have emphasized the radically unstable nature of performance, finding it a shifting and contested ideological space. Despite this recent critical turn, Matthew Rebhorn argues that considerations of the frontier in drama and performance have remained singularly resistant to recognizing the various

meanings that emerged in performances of the frontier. Arguing against the assumption that nineteenth-century frontier dramas were always a straightforward means of forwarding expansionist ideologies, Rebhorn explores how performances promulgated a “much more variegated and diffuse notion of the frontier” than has been heretofore acknowledged, one that sometimes “aimed to undercut the central tenets of Manifest Destiny.” Not merely a historical or geographical space, the frontier is for Rebhorn a “set of performative practices”; that is, he claims that the idea of the frontier was constructed on the stages of theaters along the Eastern Seaboard as powerfully as in the Great Plains. Aiming to rewrite the history of American frontier performance and American theatrical history more broadly, Rebhorn persuasively demonstrates that “frontier performance has always been a heterogeneous constellation of acts that work to settle and unsettle American ideologies.”

Rebhorn’s chapters treat the politics of Edwin Forrest’s well-known performance as *Metamora* in John Augustus Stone’s drama of the same name (1829); the instability of James Kirke Paulding’s frontiersman in *The Lion of the West* (1830); the frontier roots of T. D. Rice’s minstrelsy; the frontier as a space of complicated identity play in Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* (1859); the mediating of national memory carried out by post-Civil War frontier dramas *Horizon* (1871), by Augustin Daly, and *The Danites in the Sierras* (1910), by Joaquin Miller; and an epilogue that brings the book’s purview up to the early twenty-first century, analyzing images of George W. Bush’s presidency and Ang Lee’s film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

Easily the most inventive and significant in the book, Rebhorn’s chapter on T. D. Rice investigates the slippage between the figure of the minstrel and the frontiersman on U.S. stages and the interplay between minstrel and frontier performance traditions. Complicating the theatrical lineage usually traced for minstrelsy, Rebhorn provocatively concludes that “blackface minstrelsy exists as well as a kind of frontier performance.” With insights like this, Rebhorn’s study has the potential to make readers rethink

much of what they thought they knew about the nineteenth-century theater and points to the continued need for scholarship in this vein.

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