

[The ‘stage Indian’ in early American theatre culture]

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[Abstract] *The article deals with the early development of the ‘stage Indian’ as a character in early American drama and theatre. It studies ‘stage Indian’ characters, which reflect historical theatrical conventions rather than being historically accurate representations. It explores early plays depicting Native Americans as the ‘exotic other’. It considers plays involving the myth of the noble savage on the one hand and some parodying of this myth on the other. Finally, it describes various performances involving Native American performers in the United States in the 1890s. These examples show the diversity of the ‘stage Indian’ as a literary and performative construct.*

[Keywords] *Early American drama; stage conventions; noble savage; Native American performance*

This article looks into several plays and performances produced in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries which present an image of ‘the Indian’. These early plays stand at the beginning of a long, culturally productive process involving various representations of Native Americans in the performing arts. In many ways, they have established modes of representation which are traceable in drama, film, and popular culture in general even today. The article identifies several types of theatre stock character known as the ‘stage Indian’, which is in fact much more diversified than the commonly presented opposition of a noble savage on the one hand, and a murderous native on the other (Saxon 122). It presents a typology of stage Indian characters based on ideological implications, as one of its perspectives, and explores the level of projected authenticity of ‘the other’. In other words, the article questions the image of the stage Indian character that a play or performance promotes and to what degree it presents itself as ‘authentic’. The outcome is a study of the construction of stereotypes in various representations of Native Americans in the early period of American drama and theatre, and their development in a diachronic perspective. It enables us to see a rich variety of types of the stereotyped ‘stage Indian’, traceable back to early days of American drama and performance; most of these types can also be identified in present-day works of art, despite recent attempts to revise these stereotypes.

For the purpose of this article, the ‘stage Indian’ is understood as a character that embraces traits understood and/or intended as typical of any smaller or larger group of Native Americans within the context of historical social as well as dramatic and/or theatrical conventions. While it may be argued that a process of fictional character construction always involves various stereotypes of class, gender, age group and so on, it is often the case that representations of marginalized groups verge on caricature. This practice was reinforced especially in 19th-century American theatrical culture by the dominance of melodrama, which uses exaggerations of a certain trait as a typical stylistic feature. A stereotyped ‘stage Indian’ thus becomes an “absolute victim or villain” (Bank 462). Another influence was the popularity of ‘Indian shows’, which met visitors’ stereotypical expectations. These shows reinforced stereotypes of various Native American groups by representing them in an established, conventional way in accordance with expectations regarding their representation, and by presenting this representation as something authentic, which only further contributed to this circularity: a construed representation of a Native American reality is presented as authentic to audiences, thus establishing an image of what is the ‘truth’ regarding this particular represented practice or individual(s), which is then expected from performances, which cash in on self-promotion as authentic shows. In other words, characters of Native Americans of all sorts, besides emerging in a particular social-political context, also came into existence within a frame of conventions characteristic of a given dramatic genre or performative practice.

This article is limited primarily to drama and performance, which continue in a European tradition of theatre; they are highly conventionalized systems of representation and cultural practices. Furthermore, it only deals with works in English. It is a historical fact that a rich variety of forms of the “Native American performance tradition existed in

North America [...] a long time before European settlement” (Wilmer 5). As with a number of other elements of numerous Native American cultures, many of these performances were appropriated by the white European, English-speaking settlers’ cultural institutions of drama and theatre. Various Native American practices were commodified and became a part of contemporary popular entertainment, such as the Lakota Rain Dance (see Wilmer 80–97). Staging practices often employed assorted components of various Native American ritualistic/military equipment such as clothing, masks, or weapons, using them as a mere sign of some abstract ‘Indian identity’, stripped of their original identities, contexts, and spiritual dimensions.

The ‘stage Indian’ became a typical feature of American plays, just like other newly emerged stock characters such as the ‘stage Yankee’ or ‘the Frontiersman’. The range of typically American characters grew even wider in the 1880s with the emergence of the Western as a popular genre. Various types of ‘stage Indian’ continued to be a constant presence in American drama and performance from the Colonial beginnings in the mid-18th century throughout the whole of the 19th century. They were created, transformed and replicated in the course of this lengthy period of time. Some of them ceased to exist; but this is mainly due to developments in the 20th century: its employment of realist modes, the shift away from the paradigm of white-centred audiences, and the growing criticism of ethnocentrism and cultural appropriation.

In order to explore the underlying dynamics of this historical development in the construction of these stock characters and its varieties, the article approaches various construed representations of an array of Native Americans from two perspectives. Firstly, it considers the set of values that the stage Indian promotes. The article identifies these stereotypes and positions characters according to it. This typically involves placing the character either as a positive image (the noble savage) or a negative image (a murderous native). The article shows that these basic types gradually became more complex; this is confirmed by Deloria, who calls this ambivalence a desire “to savor both civilized order and savage freedom at the same time” (3). Secondly, the article considers the level of claimed authenticity. The stage Indian begins as a stereotypical character, a sign of an American environment – a part of the setting, so to speak. Whereas in the earliest plays the stage Indian was a European invention based on prejudices, depictions in the late 19th century were highly realistic, based on an assortment of observable features, as in performances given at the Chicago Exposition in 1893. Yet, despite their realistic components, these performances displayed a fictionalized image, one which was promoted as ‘authentic’ by the producers as well as performers, and which was expected by the white majority audiences. In Deloria’s terms, Native American performers were “playing Indians” for the audience.

In Colonial times, representations of Native Americans appeared in American plays (that is to say, plays with an American topic, such as an American setting) to add a local flavour. They were an ‘exotic’ feature of dramas situated in the New World. They were fictional constructs that resembled some features of various Native Americans on a superficial level. “In New York in 1767, the ‘Natives’ in dramas more often resembled

‘natives’ from other plays – plays written by London playwrights – rather than the hungry, besieged, persecuted, and embattled nations who lived on the American frontier” (Richards 9). The verisimilitude of these characters is very low; this is also emphasized by the fact that only white actors played Indians. Saxon calls these characters “white Indians”, because they “laid claim, not to real Indian practices, of course, but to the idea of native custom” (100). They reinforced stereotypical views of Native Americans, which were merely fictional creations of European (and later, Anglo-American) writers.

The Paxton Boys (1764) is the first known drama with a Native American element written in English-speaking America. Tice L. Miller calls it a “play” despite the fact that “it was not performed” (22) – and, given the standards of the time, it was most probably never meant to be performed. For this reason, some authors call it a “political dialogue” rather than a play (Davis 233), and thus its status as “drama” is rather formal. Nevertheless, this dialogical work is, stylistically speaking, a political farce, which is a traditional dramatic genre. Written by an anonymous author, it depicts a historical incident involving Native Americans, yet without giving them a voice. None of the Native American characters has any lines in the play. It “can be seen as a dramatisation of tensions growing in the colonies in response to French, British and Native American activities” (Saxon 97–8). It is one of several written accounts of a massacre in a local Conestoga tribe village in 1763, when an armed militia murdered several Conestoga. In the drama, the eponymous Paxton Boys, now feared vigilantes, are marching towards Philadelphia after the massacre. Native American characters are depicted as heathens, although in reality the Conestoga were Christians. The focus of the play shifts towards “the theme of sectarian antagonism and religious intolerance” (Richardson 13). *The Paxton Boys* is a drama which is the first of a long line of texts involving characters of Native Americans as the ‘exotic other’, and as a source of exotic localization. Such a presence does not require deep characterization: if a farcical effect was to be produced, an appropriate costume with illustrative props would have sufficed. In case of *The Paxton Boys*, though, any presence of the Native Americans remains purely imaginary, as the play has never been performed.

The process of creating the ‘stage Indian’, just like any other character type, involves stereotyping. Stereotypes of Native Americans expressed in the plays concerned are both positive and negative. Bank identifies several expressions of a positive stereotype: “the Indian in harmony with peaceful Nature, marked by beauty and refinement, brave if male, nurturing and gentle if female, honorable” (464). This stereotype is a dramatic realization of an idealizing view of natives as ‘noble savages’, a view which had been a part of the English philosophical and poetic traditions since the 17th century. It may seem a striking irony that these Indian characters are at the same time also “Indian[s] of assimilation” (464); that is to say, they are destined to cease their existence as savages and become assimilated to the white culture. Such is the destiny of Pocahontas in *The Indian Princess* (1808) by James Nelson Barker, which portrays a “bucolic image... Indian as a child of nature and helpmate to the white male” (Saxon 118). Then there is a negative stereotype: “the Indian in harmony with Nature’s violence, crude, treacherous, intemperate, untrustworthy if male, debauching and unruly if female” (Bank 464). Bank calls such characters

“Indian[s] of annihilation” (464), destined to be punished by death for their villainy. In Barker’s play this stereotype is represented by Miami, Pocahontas’ fiancé, before she falls in love with Rolfe. Miami is an untamed, uncivilized Native who ends up committing suicide after his plot to kill the Europeans fails.

Although the story of Pocahontas has its source in historical events in 1607, it was dramatized several times in versions that fitted the tastes and expectations of the intended audiences, rather than truthfully depicting historical events. The earliest Pocahontas drama is Barker’s musical play *The Indian Princess*. It consists of “a contrived plot in the style of popular stage entertainments of the time, and a happy ending” (Richards 169). This play began a “vogue for Indian dramas” (Bank 481) in the antebellum United States. Popular plays that followed Barker’s drama included *Pocahontas* (1830) by George Washington Parke Custis, and *Po-ca-hon-tas; or, The Gentle Savage* (1855) by John Brougham. The former dwells on the myth of the noble savage; the latter is a burlesque parodying earlier representations of Native Americans. In some respects, Brougham’s play can be seen as a closing chapter in this particular vogue of Indian dramas: “Brougham’s burlesques ‘practically succeeded in chasing... gentle Pocahontas from the American stage’” (Miller 130). Nevertheless, the story of Pocahontas became a part of the American popular culture, and Pocahontas plays and films have been produced since then.

The two depictions of Pocahontas in Custis’ and Brougham’s versions include extreme expressions of the Native American female stereotype. In a sense, they develop stereotypes inherent in Barker’s early version: “Native American women were also stereotyped, as either the noble child of nature, the ‘Princess’, or her brutalised licentious other, the ‘squaw’” (Saxon 122). The character of Pocahontas covers a range from an idealized, sexualized “assimilating maiden” (Bank 481) to a negative extreme. Saxon calls this polarized approach of 19th-century American drama to the character the “Pocahontas Perplex” (122).

To see shifts in representations of the ‘stage Indian’, it is necessary to consider production practices. While early American drama often produced ‘ideal’ constructions of Native American characters, both in the sense of the absolute victim/villain and following from the idea of such a character, theatrical practice involved a more diversified representation of Native Americans. There were white actors wearing make-up and costumes representing Native Americans (the practice known as ‘red-face’), Native American actors, Native American performances in shows presented as daily scenes from life (such as at anthropological exhibitions), and cultural performances (various religious, ritualistic and social practices) transferred to a staged context such as a show. These examples also cover various types of presentation of Indians, from a purely fictional representation of a construed idea of an abstract Native American to an ostensive practice,¹ where a performer does not represent anyone or anything else, but stands for her- or himself.

The following examples present a historical overview and illustrate that individual types of the ‘stage Indian’ are not merely pure inventions, but are always products of their cultural and artistic context, which is constantly reshaped in a dialogue between creators and their audiences. John Augustus Stone’s tragedy *Metamora; or, the Last of the*

Wampanoags (1829) was written and first produced in the midst of the vogue for Indian plays, “which appeared with some frequency in America for the next fifty years [after Barker’s *The Indian Princess* (1808)]” (Richards 169–70). Stone wrote the play for a contest announced by Edwin Forrest, the star actor of the time. Forrest was the main actor and the manager of his own theatre company, and he made the greatest profit from the performances. This was the standard mode of operation of the American star system in the period. Forrest was looking for new, specifically American material to include in his repertory, and so he announced the contest in 1828, “offering to pay five hundred dollars... for ‘the best tragedy in five acts, of which the hero, or principal character, shall be an aboriginal of this country’” (Miller 60). Both Stone and Forrest turned out very lucky with the play: “A distinguished panel of judges... picked *Metamora* over thirteen other plays, and it became Stone’s most popular dramatic work and Forrest’s most successful role” (Miller 61).

The play is inspired by events of King Philip’s War, “the bloodiest conflict in the history of the colonies, between the Wampanoag tribe and white settlers during 1675 and 1676” (61). Stone was influenced by historical accounts, but he subscribed aesthetically and ideologically to a Romantic concept of the noble savage. This concept fitted with Forrest’s idea of character depiction, too: “his [Forrest’s] Wampanoag sachem became the template for stage representations of the noble redskin: brave, strong, self-sacrificing, and a child of nature” (61). Forrest, who was a well-built, muscular and expressive type of actor, used his acting technique to produce a grand persona of a remarkable chieftain with an impressive stature, an idealized representation of a Native American. “Forrest’s performance was, in short, a passionate one” (Rebhorn 34). His dominant onstage presence was further supported by a costume (including a feathered headband, moccasins and leather stockings), make-up (dark ‘red-face’) and props (such as a bow and a tomahawk).

Yet Forrest’s onstage depiction of *Metamora*, whom the actor played for the rest of his career (spanning around forty years), was not a purely creative invention. Forrest’s choice of acting style was based on “other personal reasons: he had lived with an Indian tribe during his New Orleans days and had great sympathy for their plight” (Miller 60). In other words, although Forrest created the character based on his personal preferences, the requirements of contemporary acting methods and audience expectations, some of the raw material he worked with as an actor (posture, gestures, and timbre) was mimicking an actual performance of a particular Native American chieftain. “Forrest spent a significant amount of time getting to know Push-ma-ta-ha, the young Choctaw chieftain who was both the specific model for Forrest’s characterization of *Metamora* and the figure in whom Forrest witnessed and from whom he appropriated the basic ‘language’ of the Indian he would represent onstage” (Rebhorn 35). Forrest’s “passionate” (Rebhorn 34) performance of a Native American chieftain became a basis for impersonations of similar characters devised as noble savages and Native American chieftains. What may seem like a typical example of cultural appropriation (a white image consisting of appropriated Native American elements), which became a standard of representation in acting, may in fact be seen as Push-ma-ta-ha’s self-image. It would be too simplistic to say that the

most important 19th-century Native American role – Forrest’s *Metamora* – was a white invention, which became a template for a performance of this particular stage Indian type. Rather, an actual Native American chieftain was acting through Forrest’s impersonation of *Metamora*, thus imposing his cultural performance onto 19th-century American theatre conventions. It is worth considering how much post-Forrest theatre or film chieftains have drawn on Push-ma-ta-ha’s idiosyncrasies, appropriating and adopting them as a conventional style in depicting a character of fictional Native America chieftains.

A stark difference between the image of the Native American chieftain for the stage and the actual situation of Native Americans in the Jacksonian United States can be illustrated using the example of *Metamora*. The actor’s advertisement already assumes that his Indian will meet a tragic end: “There seems to be something rather sinister in Forrest’s urge to look for tragedy in the dramatization of the ‘aboriginal’” (Saxon 119). The character of *Metamora* was conceived from the beginning as one of annihilation. For *Metamora*, the choice lies between civilization or death. As a noble savage of nature, he cannot be assimilated, and therefore he must die in order for civilization (albeit the white man’s) to flourish – no matter how sentimental the white man can be about the noble savage’s uncorrupted ways. In Miller’s words, “*Metamora* also ‘owns no master.’ He wants to live the way his people have lived for hundreds of years, but the advancement of the white man makes this impossible” (61). Another example of the discrepancy is the historical context of the production: “While Manifest Destiny physically and dramatically eradicated tribes across swathes of this new [American] nation, romanticized, sentimentalized or lampooned stage versions [of stage Indians] proliferated in theatres” (Saxon 119). Despite being shaped by an actual Native American performance, the drama brought to life images of Native Americans which did not correspond to historical reality.

Another example of the difference between an idealized type (as performed by Forrest) and an actual historical figure is a public performance by William Apes (or Apess) of the Pequot tribe, who also took King Philip as a model for his *Eulogy on King Philip*. He read this long speech out publicly alongside *Metamora* at the Odeon in Boston on 8 January 1836. In the *Eulogy*, an alternative view of King Philip (*Metamora*) is presented. It presents the sachem not as a romanticized Indian of annihilation, but as a possible partner for collaboration with the colonizers – had “God... touch[ed] the pilgrims’ heart, and save them from cruelty, as well as the Indians” (Apes 39). The speech gave a very different representation of the same historical figure, such that it promoted “justice and humanity for the remaining few” (Saxon 122), and included moments of cruelty by the colonizers. Furthermore, the performance “challenges beliefs that extinct Indians could never responsibly participate in the community” (122). Undoubtedly, this representation was considered much more realistic by Apes than that found in Stone’s drama.

A further instance of the discrepancy regarding *Metamora* concerns the audience. In the 19th century, when the production was performed, representatives of Native American nations often visited theatres as a part of the cultural programmes of their stays in American cities when dealing with U.S. government representatives. For example, “tribal spokespersons were often invited to see theatre performances as a part of their

programs” (Saxon 121). For them, “*Metamora* was not a direct referent to an authentic chieftain; but the context of memorialising a heroic chieftain bore performative similarities to tribal tributes to the dead” (Saxon 122). It is hard to assume that Forrest would have consciously performed a ritual of remembrance for the dead onstage, yet the theatrical practice with its ritualized elements was a reminder of this cultural performative practice.

There were various presences of Native Americans at performative events in the U.S. during the 19th century. Besides Native American audiences, who may have put some pressure on red-face as well as Native performance regarding the verisimilitude levels of their performances, Native Americans found themselves in several kinds of onstage identities. They were actors playing fictional stage Indians, performers reproducing actual historical events, performers re-enacting their own actions from the past, and performers exhibiting their cultural practices.

After the Pocahontas/*Metamora* vogue faded, new stage Indians began to appear together with the development of the Western. While an Indian character was often a mark of the ‘Americanness’ of a play, an exotic flavouring for a piece or a playwright’s construct promoting positive or negative stereotypes of Native Americans in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Western brought a new vogue of interest in Indian affairs (as well as many other issues, it must be said). The Wild West Show led by William “Buffalo Bill” Cody between 1883 and 1913 was one of the most popular performative events of the era, reaching a peak of interest at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

To characterize it very briefly, Buffalo Bill’s show presented a series of scenes depicting frontiersmen’s adventurous lives. The productions involved a lot of acrobatics, horse-riding, shooting on target and action scenes involving dozens of animals and stunts. Many of the performers were Native Americans; for a run during the Columbian Exposition, Buffalo Bill “wanted his Chicago show to be grander than any before, so he hired an additional 12 Lakota, bringing the total number of Native American performers to nearly 200” (Rinehart 420). The show seemed to be presenting an authentic image of life on the Frontier, but besides re-enactments of actual historical events (such as a famous scene titled “Raid on the Deadwood Stagecoach by Native Americans”), it also promoted an image of Native Americans who “lived in tribes, slept in tipis, wore feather bonnets, rode painted ponies, hunted the buffalo, skirmished with the U.S. Cavalry, and spoke in signs” (Moses 1). This seemed to be an authentic representation of Native Americans, as the performers were allegedly demonstrating their personal ways of life and experiences. However, while a large portion of the performance was ‘real’ due to the action-based nature of the show, it also included many inauthentic features. The audiences were getting what they expected: an idealized image of the frontier, which turned history, traditions and identities into show-business commodities for sale.

Rebhorn discusses at some length another Wild West show, which was performed at the same time as Buffalo Bill’s: Gowongo Mohawk’s *Wep-Ton-No-Mah, the Indian Mail Carrier*. Rebhorn points out the fact that the two enterprises express a similar aesthetic image of the Wild West, but they handle especially the presentation of gender in opposite

ways. Annie Oakley, the white female star of the Wild West show, acted in very feminine ways (her costumes emphasized her femininity, she blew kisses and waved a handkerchief at the audience), while the Native American performer Mohawk crossdressed as a young Native highwayman and wrestled and fist-fought with her fellow performers. Further, they were both sharpshooters and excellent riders, and these skills were essential for their Wild West characters. Rebhorn points out that

While both Oakley and Mohawk performed roles that destabilized gender, Oakley rode sidesaddle during her feats of horsemanship to insure her audience understood how essentialized her gender was, how a ‘domestic goddess,’ in short, was handling that rifle. The crossdressed Mohawk, by contrast, defied these conventions by not merely giving up the feminized sidesaddle but in forgoing any saddle whatsoever. (Rebhorn 8)

Mohawk was defying gender conventions of her time, but she also showed Native American cultural practices, such as riding without a saddle. However, her crossdressed performance drew the attention of the audiences to her body, as she emphasized in dialogue the masculine features of it, while actually showing her female body. By complicating gender representation, the show managed to give an alternative view of Native Americans (and Native American women in particular) and challenged the masculine identity of the frontier, as well as the “equation of women and property” (Rebhorn 10) which was common for many other Wild West plays.

The 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition also offered an ostensive presentation of Native American culture, including social practices and rituals, presented by Native Americans with no overt role-play, but rather in the form of a display. These displays of Native Americans were in sharp contrast to exhibits of the latest technological developments: “Native American exhibits were organized as if to portray an ancient culture no longer in existence” (O’Loughlin 50). There was an ‘Indian village’ and various exhibits, which involved Native Americans showing their customs and performing various rituals. In the context of these activities, it is often difficult to distinguish between an authentic cultural performance (for example, a prayer) and role-play (for example, mimicry of a religious rite such as a prayer). Sometimes it is impossible to distinguish between them, or the boundary becomes so blurred that it virtually ceases to exist for the performer and/or the audience.

However, one aspect of such performances remains certain: the requirement of having a sense of its authenticity among audiences. In her study subtitled “Native American Representation and Resistance at the World’s Columbian Exposition”, Rinehart covers a wide range of displays of Native American cultures. Among other topics, she focuses on Antonio Apache, a Native American assistant to the ethnographer and archaeologist F.W. Putnam, and his act of resistance during an “Indian pageant” (403). She describes how Apache bought wigs to cover his short hair in order to look more authentic, and then threw them away after he heard visitors’ remarks about his and his companions’ savage looks (403). This shows that authenticity is a problematic concept: audiences consider as ‘authentic’ something that corresponds to their expectations.

All ‘authentic’ exhibitions and displays are thus performances – they also become theatrical events. Such a view of staged rituals may be seen as a case of “social drama” and critically assessed by an anthropological conception of performance theory (Turner 25). Exhibitions such as the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 served to present Native American cultures as authentic, but in doing so, they also contributed to preserving visitors’ numerous stereotypes and expectations. What at first glance seems a clearly authentic performance in fact always includes a certain amount of artifice. Rinehart explains: “The line between self-representation and self-preservation was assuredly blurred at times” (427). Tens of thousands of Native Americans came to Chicago to perform nothing but themselves and to be paid for doing so. In other words, they became actors, and what they performed was an image of a Native American – a version of the ‘stage Indian’.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offer many different types of characters of the Native American in drama and theatre, as well as many other forms of public performance. When a character of a Native American is presented as a type, he or she encompasses numerous properties which are less or more authentic on the one hand, and which correspond to stereotypes of Native Americans that are more positive (idealized) or negative on the other hand. Seeing these ‘stage Indians’ from this perspective, the history of early American theatre and performance gave birth to a wide spectrum of character types that have often ceased to exist; but at the same time, it produced certain types that have survived till the present.

[Notes]

- 1 By ostension I mean the practice of “showing” without the use of a symbolic language (such as theatre conventions), as defined, for example, by Umberto Eco (1976): 224–27.

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