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   The Portable Theater: American Literature &amp; The Nineteenth-Century Stage by Alan L. Ackerman, Jr.
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Snyder makes his points in a readable and scholarly study. He also includes a section with photographs that leaves the reader wishing for more.

MARY C. HENDERSON
Congers, New York


For some time now, a persistent and lamentable backlash against the literary text has been widening the gulf between literary criticism and performance studies. The great merit of Alan Ackerman’s timely study The Portable Theater resides in the fact that it bridges the gulf between a theatre or performance studies hostile to the literary text and a literary studies uninterested in the theatre and theatricality. Ackerman’s primary authors—Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, William Dean Howells, Louisa May Alcott and Henry James—share one feature: they either did not write for, or did not succeed on, the stage, deeming the theatre industry uncongenial to their literary pursuits. This does not mean, however, that their work should be read without a knowledge of theatre history, for their gesture of rejecting the theatre inevitably ties their literary work—poetry, novels, dramatic criticism, and even drama itself—to the very theatre against which they protest. The “portable theater” describes a theatricality that has been displaced from the stage, but also a type of literature that writes back to the theatre.

Ackerman’s study answers two questions: where the theatre went when it was displaced from the stage and what effects this displacement had on the literary canon of nineteenth-century American literature. A compelling introductory chapter vividly describes the nineteenth-century American theatre with its melodramas, its imported well-made plays, adaptations of novels, and, later on, its struggle with the emerging realism. In addition, we get a description of the star-system, and, of course, the theatre riots, which still loom large in the imagination of present-day downtown theatre. This is the world of the theatre that presses from all sides onto those literary writers who cannot, or do not want to, free themselves from its influence, even when they turn their backs on it. When placed in this context, familiar and canonical texts of the nineteenth-century canon suddenly emerge in a new light. Whitman’s obsession with voice, for example, appears not only, as it often does, as a nostalgia for some kind of Greek rhapsody, lost to the onslaught of the printing press and the typewriter, but as a response to the theatre, which has always been intimately tied to oratory and literary speech. Melville, on the other hand, becomes important for the study through what one could call the theatricality in the novel. A fantastic reading of Ahab as a star-performer who carefully calculates his appearances and exits and an analysis of James’s use of dramatic scenes demonstrates how central the category of the theatre is for the representational practices of the novel. Related to this more formal question is the depiction and evaluation, in the novel, of theatrical events—for example the theatrical in Alcott, which Ackerman also compares to the paradigmatically anti-theatrical Mansfield Park. One of the strongest chapters is the one on James because it brings together theatre history, the history of modern drama (including a compelling discussion of Henrik Ibsen’s influence on James) with questions of narrative and dramatic conventions as well as their relation to realism. Ackerman thus shows the extent to which drama and the notion of dramatic realism exerted a vital influence on Howells’s dramatic, novelistic, and critical oeuvre. Here again Ackerman demonstrates with great acuity how indispensable questions of drama and theatre are for comprehending the emergence of American realism at large. The Portable Theater is bound to make such an impression on the field that the study of nineteenth-century American literature will no longer be able to ignore the theatre despite, or even because of, the fact that American theatre did not produce a major successful dramatist until the twentieth century.

As Ackerman observes in his preface, The Portable Theater is a historical study and not a theoretical one. This is a great merit, for it is precisely an ahistorical notion of theatre and theatricality, shaped by our contemporary notion of theatrical spectacles and performance, that had caused the “displaced” theatre to be so severely neglected, seeing it as either “untheatrical” theatre or simply as literature with no relation to the theatre whatsoever. At the same time, however, this careful reconstruction of a historical and largely ignored type of theatre and theatricality opens up for us today a host of generic and disciplinary—call them theoretical—questions, ranging from the relations among novel, poetry, and drama, to the role of theatre studies for literary criticism and vice versa. For this reason, I found myself hoping for a more extended discussion of genre theory (Mikhail Bakhtin would have a lot to say about the sudden appearance, in the “Midnight-Forecastle” chapter of Moby Dick, of the drama...
within the novel). Along the same lines, this study provides excellent material for, but does not itself pursue, a systematic investigation into anti-theatricalism. This reader’s desire for such discussions, however, is but a tribute to the new historical, but also conceptual, ground broken by The Portable Theater.

The Portable Theater is an important step out of a dead-lock between literary and theatre studies. Its conceptual vision and acute analysis will be indispensable for studies in any period devoted to analyzing the relation between the literary text and the theatre. It should, therefore, be required reading not only for Americanists, but also for students and scholars of drama at large, as an exemplary study of how indispensable a knowledge of theatre history is for an adequate understanding of literature.

H. MARTIN PUCHNER
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Karl Toepfer’s Empire of Ecstasy is an informative book, exhaustively researched and extensive in its scope. It documents the breadth of movement practices in early twentieth-century Germany, with particular attention to ones which used nudity or dance. There is a deeper goal here, however, than merely posting a list of dancers and forms. Toepfer states that his “main concern is to offer a fairly comprehensive description and interpretation of specific achievements peculiarly associated with Germanic ideas about what makes the body modern” (6). In the end, he says, the “empire of ecstacy” which the book documents is revealed as “a great constellation of competing schools, individuals, societies, and performances, and its appeal rested upon its power to align ecstacy with modes of difference rather than with modes of unity” in which “the body was an empire in itself” (384).

Examinations of the body’s relationship to German culture have traditionally been found primarily within studies of National Socialism. The works of scholars like George Mosse, Klaus Theweleit, and more recently, Harold Segel, have charted a series of evolutionary courses for the “national body,” usually originating with the wandering youth groups of the fin-de-siècle, travelling through the heroic war novels of the post World-War-I era, and culminating in Nazi performance spectacles like the Nuremberg rallies. Toepfer is careful to point out, however, that the German fascination with the body was not a uniquely Nazi phenomenon, although they did give unprecedented attention to the body in their writings and cultural productions. To Toepfer, what constitutes the difference between these spectacles and, say, Rudolf Laban’s utilization of movement choirs, was not the form, but the function: “The totalitarian identity of mass movement therefore does not reside inherently in the formal qualities of such movement in itself but in the content of the movement? The symbol, not the movement, subsumes all difference” (319–20). This is a much different attitude than those taken by most scholars, who portray mass spectacle as a precursor of National Social ideology, and not an independent form of expression co-opted for promulgating its precepts. Toepfer opens the door for new interpretations of the relationship between spectacle and the formation of national identity, particularly in regards to the function of the body.

The book’s analysis is divided into two main sections—nudity and dance—with supplementary chapters addressing dance schools, music, photography, and dance criticism. Chapters two through six address aspects of Nacktkultur (nude culture) such as outdoor gymnastics, erotic dance, nude ballet, and use of nude dance to promote “a new, modern identity for women” (39). Chapters eight through twelve cover various forms of Ausdrucktanz (expressive dance), including solo, pair, group, theatrical, and mass dancing. (The distinction between the two spheres, however, was not clear cut, a point emphasized by Toepfer in the text.)

Toepfer meets admirably his first goal of description. He has compiled a wide array of sources and figures from the diverse spectrum of what he terms “German body culture” (5) with information on practitioners of nude dancing, gymnastics, eurhythmics, and Ausdrucktanz from both inside and outside Germany. The chapters read like a “Who’s Who” of German movement, containing information on everyone from a wide variety of artists, including Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman, Jacques Dalcroze, Celly de Rheydt, and Mata Hari. As indicated in his acknowledgments, Toepfer has spent a great deal of time combing through European and American archives searching for obscure denizens of dance history, in his desire to weave a tapestry which reflects the intricate matrix of German dance culture in the early twentieth century. Toepfer’s second goal, the “interpretation of spe-