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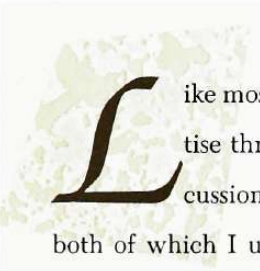
DRAMA AND

Beginning in the fall of 1992, pieces of Minnesota history took center stage in at least three plays mounted by Twin Cities theater ensembles. St. Paul-based Penumbra Theatre Company staged The Last Minstrel Show, a musical centered on the lynching of three African Americans in Duluth in 1920. Also in fall, Minneapolis's Mixed Blood Theater performed King of the Kosher Grocers, which explored the interaction of Jewish, African-American, and Hispanic neighbors in the north Minneapolis area that was home to all three. April and May 1993 saw production in St. Paul of the Great American History Theatre's The Days of Rondo, based on Evelyn Fairbanks's memoir by that title, published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press.

This sudden wealth of history-related entertainment inspired Minnesota History's editors to more than passive enjoyment. We asked William Green, assistant professor of history and African-American studies at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, to attend the plays and comment on their usage of history. In addition to his teaching, which includes local history, Dr. Green has published essays, scholarly articles, and commentary on current issues. He is presently writing an article on the riot trials that followed the Duluth lynchings. After seeing The Last Minstrel Show and The Days of Rondo, he submitted this thought-provoking essay.



D HISTORY

Like most who teach history, I acquire expertise through the rigors of research and discussion. Historical drama and literature—both of which I use in class—often serve to flesh out events, personifying their social and political effects on people. But such plays and novels do not replace the history text, which provides the context needed to understand fully the dramatic moment. Historical context includes a variety of forces, some immediate, some indirect, but all eventually interactive. The historical play and novel capture only a part (however profound) of the whole. This, I believe, is the relationship between drama and history.

And yet, when I think of the ides of March, I think of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, not Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. There is, of course, nothing wrong in this. Our collective memory is shaped most by strong images drawn out of compelling moments in time. But what does one know after seeing the play? How ancient Rome functioned economically? Socially? Politically? Not re-

ally. To be sure, one does know other things that are equally important in understanding the human dynamic: guilt, betrayal, and love. But to know these emotions is not to know Rome in a full, historical context. For the history of Rome, one is better served by reading Gibbon's lengthy study.

Can drama, then, ever encompass historical context? Can historical drama be a reliable means of understanding a period of the past? Is a dramatic memoir—a play about a real person's life—the same as historical drama? Are either the same as a staged rendition of a historical event? I think these three types of drama represent different uses of the past, each with its own focus and effect on viewers.

Drama, by nature, is limited to a single subject—a specific character, group of characters, an emotion, or event. It allows one to mine the recesses of the human spirit challenged by circumstance. In this, the communion between character and audience becomes intensely personal, so that the passion portrayed on stage bespeaks a universal truth about the human spirit—for


William D. Green



The mature Evelyn (Delores Wade) watching young Evelyn (Naima Taaj Ajmal Brown) mourn her dying father (Waymuth Allen Bowen, Jr.) in The Days of Rondo

example, the tentative union of honor and treachery in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Drama, typically, is an exploration inward.

In contrast, history subordinates inward exploration to the experience of a community. History is the study of the ebb and flow of social, political, and economic tensions that determine whether a society declines or flourishes. History includes complex factors and forces that may or may not be related but that coexist in any given time. If the historian is honest with the subject matter, he or she is faced with a cumbersome package.

In the years following World War I, Minnesotans witnessed labor tensions, political corruption, virulent nationalism, and xenophobia. Racism against African Americans existed mostly beneath the surface, partly because of the small size and nonthreatening presence of Minnesota's black community. Yet in the summer of 1920, a mob stormed the Duluth police station and lynched three of six black men being held on suspicion of raping a young white woman. Did this make Duluth a racist city or Minnesota a racist state? The answer is equivocal. Governor J. A. A. Burnquist was also president of the St. Paul Branch of the NAACP. Charles W. Scrutchins, one of northern Minnesota's most successful attorneys (he specialized in representing landowners against tenants),

was an African American from Bemidji; he won acquittal for one of the black prisoners before a Duluth jury.¹

That the lynching occurred explains only a little about the times. The job of the historian is not to snip off these seemingly contradictory loose ends, but to understand them. Drama, on the other hand, requires a story to be cast within simple parameters—a beginning, middle, and denouement. It is necessarily as finite as the dramatist's vision and as constricted as the stage on which the play is enacted.

I do not believe, however, that drama is inherently unreliable for understanding a historical period. *The Last Minstrel Show* aptly portrays the carnivalesque intoxication of mob violence, just as witnesses of the event reported it. Lynch law was indeed pervasive in America at the time. From 1918 to 1920, black men were lynched monthly somewhere in America. And in Minnesota, lynch law on occasion was tolerated against union organizers and aliens accused of un-American beliefs. During the trial of the Duluth lynchers, a seventeen-year-old boy was almost lynched for the alleged rape of a fourteen-year-old girl in the nearby town of Carlton. Both were white. In this context, the play accurately portrays a characteristic of the times—a disrespect for due process.²

The Days of Rondo further illustrates the point that drama can be historically evocative and accurate.

¹*Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, June 20, 1920, p. 1; Michael W. Fedo, "They Was Just Niggers" (Ontario, Calif.: Brasch and Brasch, 1979), 121; *Duluth Herald*, Dec. 2, 1920, p. 1.

²*Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 17, 1920, p. 1–2; *Duluth Herald*, Sept. 2, 1920, p. 1; Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety During World War I* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), 274–76, 289–91, 307, 326.

Based on the life of Evelyn Fairbanks, an African-American woman who grew up in St. Paul, the play offers a glimpse of the city's black community between 1930 and 1950. Moreover, it contrasts the quality of life for blacks in St. Paul and Georgia. In one amusing scene, for example, when the teenaged protagonist and her friend sit in Bridgeman's soda parlor, an employee first denies them service because of their race, then with prissy reluctance serves them anyway. In that scene *The Days of Rondo* illustrates the ambiguous quality of racism, St. Paul style, in a manner that cannot be presented effectively in a scholarly account.

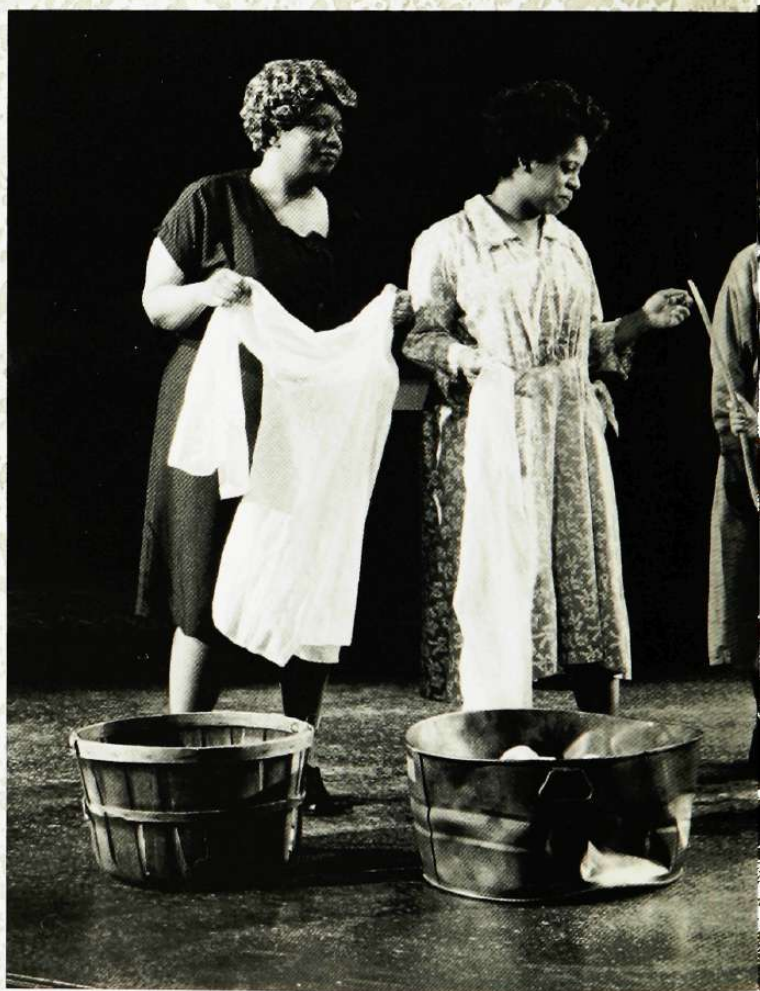
I do not think, however, that *The Days of Rondo* is an example of historical drama, despite the play's apparent reliability. Rather, it is a dramatic memoir principally intended to be biographical. As young Evelyn experiences the loves and losses in her life, the audience sympathizes with her. But the events remain largely her own, a black girl's life in black St. Paul. The poignancy of her story grows out of an experience that few know and intimately understand. The dramatic memoir is a remembrance of things past, slices of the central character's life.

In a historical drama, on the other hand, the subject's passion takes center stage and becomes, through its universality, our own. When Elizabeth, in Maxwell Anderson's *Elizabeth the Queen*, cries out at the discovered treachery of her beloved Lord Essex, we do not hear a soliloquy on history or politics: "Where I walk/ Is a hall of torture,/ where the curious gods bring all/ Their racks and gyves, and stretch me there to writhe/

Down South, from The Days of Rondo: Mrs. Edwards (Stephanie Lusco), Aunt Good (Brenda Bell Brown), young Evelyn (Naima Taaj Ajmal Brown), mature Evelyn (Delores Wade), and train passengers (April Anderson, Joyce McKinley, Donahue Hayes).

Till I cry out. They watch me with eyes of iron/ Waiting to hear what I cry! I am crying now . . . / Listen, you gods of iron! He never loved me." We are hearing the torment of a love betrayed, a truth that is universal, a pain shared by Morris, Evelyn's cousin in *Rondo*, who accuses his lover of cheating on him. The queen's anguish is visceral, known or knowable regardless of one's race, sex, and station in life.

As to the use of history in historical dramas, the dramatist selects a place and time in the distant past for a variety of reasons. One principal reason is that a particular historical epoch offers added dimension to a deeper truth; the time period at once lends color, heightens contrast or irony, or reflects some aspect of



the demon with whom the central character must do battle. In this, the historical period never becomes the central character but the hum in the background, the mist after battle, the disembodied voice whispering in the ear. History, thus, is ethereal.

The central focus in *The Last Minstrel Show*, however, is anything but ethereal. This play is not so much a human drama, such as *The Days of Rondo* or *Julius Caesar*, as it is a rendition of a historical event. The play is clearly about the Duluth lynching. It neither humanizes members of the mob in a manner that would shed light on the darker recesses of our own souls nor develops fully the characters of the men lynched. The act of lynching stands as the sole force with which

the audience must reckon. History is reduced to the singularity of this murderous act, as if the play intended to dramatize the phrase "permission to hate," quoted by historian C. Vann Woodward when he described the mood of the era. It is a play with a mission: To right the wrong of forgetting a dark chapter of our history. To inform us of the sins of "our" fathers. To comment on the state of race relations today. All as a necessary means to expiation.

To accomplish this task, the play offers a fashioned history trimmed of contradictory social and political factors in order to tell a story that the playwright wants to tell. It is broadly served in a witch's brew of horror, seasoned with music, wit, and comic relief. While the historical drama offers an experience that invites personal insight, the rendition of a historical event conveys a political, rather than pedagogical, message.

Of course, these categories—the historical drama, the dramatic memoir, and the rendition of a historical event—are not wholly distinct. In some instances, an event and the inward struggle of the central character share the focus of the drama.

Shakespeare's *King Henry the Fifth* illustrates the qualities of both historical drama and a rendition of a historical event. Consider the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, the central scene of the play, when the king beseeches God to "steel my soldiers' hearts/ Possess them not with fear; take from them now/ The sense of reckoning, if the opposed numbers/ Pluck their hearts from them." This is a personal entreaty that members of the audience know they too will pray in time, when faced with the stultifying fear of abandonment at their moments of truth—at the moment of giving birth, at the moment of one's own death.

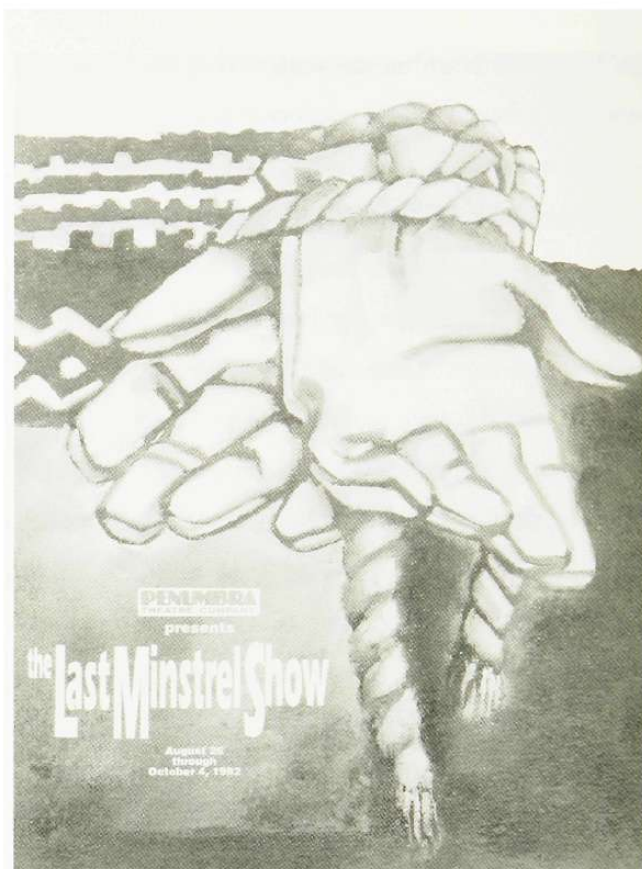
Yet what shares the stage with the king, larger than



life itself, is Agincourt, the site consecrated by the blood of brave Englishmen, a fact that transforms the name into the most significant word for English nationalism and, as Shakespeare (writing for an English audience) did not need to elaborate, the starting point for the English conquest of French soil. The magnitude of Agincourt and its effect on the Hundred Years War indeed exceeds the limiting boundaries of the stage.

What, then, ought students of history expect to encounter when viewing history plays of any variety? This is a deceptive question. Like the lawyer who, instead of laughing at a funny joke, considers both sides of the issue, historians can become humorless, unimaginative, and boring when faced with the way history is used in dramas. I speak from experience.

In a discussion that I led on Minnesota history, I fumed at students who took positions based exclusively on a play they saw. When I finally decided to see the same play, I went fully prepared to feel righteous indignation at all the “inaccuracies” I would see. I intended, in other words, to blame the play unfairly for what it was not supposed to be—a product of empirical research. Eventually I came to realize that the job of the dramatist was, simply, to present a vision of the world.



The theater did not seek to supplant the academy. Truth, as depicted on stage, resided in poetic license and metaphor. This would not change my job, which is to teach students how to think historically and analytically and to see reality in its most untidy form. Meanwhile, during my night at the theater, I would suspend the critical eye of scholarship, sit back, and be moved.

History would survive.

*Rondo photographs courtesy of Great American History Theatre;
Last Minstrel Show playbill courtesy Penumbra Theatre Company.*



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