

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chicago was home to some of the first theatres in America to introduce the independent theatre movement, an alternative to the large-scale, commercial theatre of the day. Two of these, Hull House and the Chicago Little Theatre, produced ancient Greek plays. At the same time, however, in more commercial theatres, Chicagoans were being regularly entertained by a variety of shows influenced by the ancient world. These are plays, burlesques and revues built on stories or myths from antiquity and staged in popular, commercial theatres, the very theatres against which the independent theatre movement rebelled.

Chicago has been of interest to scholars of theatre in the Classical Tradition in large part because of the important work by Jane Addams in her settlement house theatre at Hull House and by Maurice Browne in the Chicago Little Theatre, an organization that aimed to avoid the monopoly of the popular, commercial theatre. Jane Addams, as she describes in her own book on the settlement house, encouraged the staging of plays, both to keep youth from patronizing disreputable play houses and to help the local Greek community develop a sense of belonging. In the 1890s, Hull house produced an 'Electra' and a play 'The Return of Odysseus' in ancient Greek to some acclaim. Shortly thereafter, with a mandate of a simplified, non-commercial theatre, Maurice Browne produced 'Trojan Women,' which he took on tour during the war years, funded in part by the anti-war women's movement of Jane Addams. This history, which casts Greek plays in the part of social conscience and rebel, has been discussed by, for example, MacDonald 1992, Hartigan, 1995, Wiley 1999, and Christiansen 2006. The important work of these scholars reveals that Greek tragedy has become increasingly popular on the American commercial stage. What none of these works seriously address, however, is that the popular, often low-brow, theatre against which the early small arts movement reacted also rooted itself in large part in antiquity.

From evidence drawn from programs and scrapbooks in Chicago archives, I sketch the history of popular mainstream plays based on antiquity and performed in Chicago between 1868 and 1930. These range from ridiculous skits in variety shows to tragedies on heroic themes. I then examine in greater detail the Chicago production of two kinds of plays: the mythological burlesque and the Roman heroic saga. Of the former, one of the most striking is the touring burlesque of Ixion, which, even in the jokes noted on the program, presumes a working knowledge of Latin among its audience (Venus: "it has been said by a great authority that 'Venus orta mari', which being translated, is 'Venus ought to marry'"). Of the latter, gladiator plays are particularly popular. For example, two different plays, both entitled 'The Gladiator,' were performed in 1875 and 1881 at McVicker's Theatre.

Perhaps the forerunners of immensely popular movies based on classical themes, these shows from the commercial theatre reveal that the theatre-going community as a whole was closely engaged with antiquity. This popular engagement may have aided the renditions of Greek tragedy proper to gain some purchase on the popular imagination.

Brief Bibliography

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