

Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760-1850

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Review

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Gibbs, Jenna M. *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760-1850*. John Hopkins Press, \$55.00 ISBN 9781421413389

Acting out Liberty and Slavery in Antebellum Britain and the U.S.

Over the past two decades social and theatre historians have begun retelling the history of American performance culture as a critical element of the country's political evolution. Only recently, however, have they begun interrogating slavery's influence on the popular theatre (with the notable exception of minstrelsy). Jenna M. Gibbs, in her excellent *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760-1850*, adds a major chapter to this history. By linking the two largest cities of the British Atlantic together as part of a theatrical network, Gibbs illustrates how stage performances both reflected and affected the transatlantic debate over abolition.

Gibbs begins with two performances: a 1787 staging of the abolitionist opera *Inkle and Yarico* in London and an 1807 Philadelphia allegory called *The Spirit of Independence*, in which the actors displayed a "Temple of Columbia" without the slaves sometimes featured in such images. These performances highlight Gibbs's first three chapters, in which abolitionist discourse onstage interacts with both British and American political hypocrisy. Her first chapter traces the evolution of Columbia as a recognizable emblem for abolitionism onstage alongside the continuing popularity in America of parodic blackface characters in the theatre and lampoons on Philadelphia's free black population. The second chapter considers black comic characters as markers of British anxiety over imperial decline and the use of abolitionism to recuperate British liberalism after the republican revolt in America. In her third chapter, Gibbs examines how the largely symbolic abolitionist measures passed by both countries produced imperialist images of freedom in the early-nineteenth

century, with Americans eager to “civilize” Africa through colonization and Britons eager to spread both the gospel and the Royal Navy there.

In the nineteenth century, the cultural interchanges in Atlantic print and performance culture become both more direct and more pernicious. In chapter four, Gibbs illustrates how the popular print and theatrical sketches of London life that she describes as “urban picaresque” spread to Philadelphia in the 1830s, where the cartoonist Charles Clay adapted them and added the popular racist stereotype of the black dandy. Chapter five follows a similar evolution of both Yankee and blackface characters in the plays of Charles Matthews, whose gradualist abolitionism contrasts ironically with the brutal caricatures inspired by his comedies, such as *The Yankee in England*.

Gibbs’s remaining chapters may feel more familiar to students of nineteenth-century history as she addresses better-known figures such as Edwin Forrest and T.D. “Daddy Rice,” the creator of the minstrel character “Jim Crow.” In her sixth chapter Gibbs situates Forrest’s star vehicle *The Gladiator*, in which he played Spartacus, within both the sharply divided politics of the antebellum United States and Great Britain in the wake of the continental revolutions of the 1840s, with the play’s slave revolt counterpointing Rice’s racist nostrums. Her closing chapter chronicles the efforts of authors such as G.D. Pitt, author of a British play about Toussaint L’Overture with obvious Chartist undertones, and the Philadelphian George Lippard, whose heroic stories of the American Revolution featured multiracial *dramatis personae*. These playwrights paved the way for the stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that would seize the stage at mid-century, albeit without ever shedding the stage vocabulary of comical blacks and noble white abolitionists that they inherited from the eighteenth-century theatre.

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