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PREVIEW

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**Percy MacKaye and the Drama of Democracy**

**Bryant, Kenneth Graeme, Ph.D.**

**The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1991**

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PREVIEW

PERCY MACKAYE AND THE DRAMA OF DEMOCRACY

by

Kenneth G. Bryant

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska  
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of  
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Under the Supervision of Professor Tice L. Miller

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 1991

DISSERTATION TITLE

Percy MacKaye and the Drama of Democracy

BY

Kenneth Graeme Bryant

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

APPROVED

DATE

*Tice L. Miller*  
Signature

*July 29, 1991*

Tice L. Miller, Chair  
Typed Name

*Joseph B. Baldwin*  
Signature

*July 29, 1991*

Joseph B. Baldwin  
Typed Name

*William R. Morgan*  
Signature

*July 29, 1991*

William R. Morgan  
Typed Name

*Valdis Leinēks*  
Signature

*July 29, 1991*

Valdis Leinēks  
Typed Name

Signature

Typed Name

Signature

Typed Name



PERCY MACKAYE AND THE DRAMA OF DEMOCRACY

Kenneth G. Bryant, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1991

Advisor: Tice L. Miller

At the turn of the twentieth century, community drama in the form of outdoor pageants and masques became popular with civic groups, high schools and colleges throughout the United States. This movement grew rapidly in the early years of the century and reached its peak just before the First World War. During its apex, the outdoor pageant and masque movement was compared to the festivals of ancient Greece and medieval Europe. Fanciful histories of the pageant proliferated citing the "modern" pageant as a descendent of the festivals of medieval and renaissance Europe and inspired by the romantic novels of Sir Walter Scott. In addition, the movement's proponents assigned to it the power of curing numerous forms of civic ills and injustice, including the improvement of the common man's leisure time and the breaking down of social strata within a community.

This dissertation examines the pageant and masque phenomenon in an attempt to determine why these productions became so popular both with producing groups and with their audiences. Special attention is given to the work of Percy MacKaye, the most important figure working within the movement, and most prolific in terms of articles, essays, books, and scripts. Specific detail is given on MacKaye's theories for a Drama of Democracy which would not only improve the lives and leisure of its participants and audiences, but would also be the impetus for community betterment. The productions of MacKaye's The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis (1914) and Caliban, by the Yellow Sands (1916) are given as examples and described in detail in an effort to determine whether the Drama of Democracy was an attainable goal. The conclusion that the Drama of Democracy was, for several reasons, an unrealistic goal, leads to an attempt to discovering whether this outdoor pageant movement had any lasting effect on the American theatre scene, and what dramatic forms, if any, are its descendants.



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## Preface

As a Harvard senior in 1897, Percy MacKaye delivered a commencement address entitled "The Need of Imagination in the Drama of Today," stating his belief that the American stage had declined in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

After the Civil War the American theater had seen many changes reflecting America's growing technologies. The growth of cities across the country had resulted in the establishment of a theatrical structure which included resident companies throughout the country, and companies which also toured to augment their established periods of resident performances. These touring companies depended on members of the visited resident company to "fill out" their production.

But in the 1880s, the resident company began to deteriorate and the booking agent developed. The principal reason for this development was the growth of the railroads across the country. With more and more towns now within easy access, it became very practical to transport complete companies and their productions for touring. W. W. Austin wrote in Theatre Magazine, "As soon as it became possible to transport complete companies from city to city, dramatic speculators began to rise, and the combination system "sprang to life" (394). It became possible for a producer to demand only

to break even during a New York run because the entire production would be put on the road as a combination company, and all receipts, exclusive of traveling expenses, were clear profit.

In the combination system, a company tours with its stars, a full complement of supporting actors, and scenery; it is therefore no longer dependent on the local actors or the stock scenery owned by the visited theatre. According to Bernheim, owners of theatres outside of New York City realized that they could make greater profits by eliminating their own companies and their related costs and by booking only combination companies to perform in their theatres. This led not only to an increase in the demand for touring companies, but also to businessmen stepping in and handling the growing complexity of touring and booking.

Also arising out of this new demand for touring companies was the development of theatrical "circuits," groups of geographically related theatres that made up logical routes for touring, such as the Sullivan-Considine circuit formed by theatres along the Pacific coast.

After the development of the circuit came the creation of the booking office. As the theatre managers had banded together into circuits to gather more power, company managers saw the advantages of having one

person represent a number of companies. The booking office became the middleman representing several companies who negotiated with the representatives of the circuits.

This system of booking was advantageous to both theatre owners and company managers. But the system eventually led to the practice of exclusivity on both the part of the theatre houses and the companies. Exclusivity reached its zenith with the Theatrical Syndicate, a group of six businessmen, among them Marc Klaw, Abraham Erlinger, and Charles Frohman. Of the Syndicate, Bernheim wrote that "A new, untried play, unless it seemed to their [the Syndicate's] necessary standards of sure success . . . had no chance at all" (59).

Commercial interests in the theatre, then as now, were not completely against all change. From the middle of the nineteenth century, theatre offerings in the U.S. had moved through several changes. From the poetic and romantic fare of the mid-century, a form of realism began to emerge in the plays of American writers such as Bronson Howard, William Gillette, and David Belasco. These plays, however, are nothing more than melodramas with superficial scenic detail and stereotypical characters. And the charge can be made that stars such as William Gillette and Mrs. Fiske still overshadowed the plays themselves.

With William Vaughn Moody's The Great Divide in 1906, the American theatre entered a new phase, trite and dated when viewed today, in which the character was viewed as an individual capable of good and bad and capable of change.

Percy MacKaye, however, viewed the commercial theatre as too rigid and lamented its domination of the American theatre. He believed that the theatre which had in the past focused on the actor and the script had fallen into the hands of enterprising businessmen. Although often having very little or no actual experience in the theatre, these businessmen, MacKaye pointed out, recognized the opportunities for making vast profits.

MacKaye deplored the plays staged by these businessmen. He believed they failed to recognize and reach towards the "lofty nature of theatre." MacKaye asserted that "the stage of the drama is the mind of man" and equated the imagination to a mirror which reflects "not only the outward actions, but the inner motives of man."

MacKaye believed the American dramatist, because of the theatrical climate of his day, had become mired down, writing melodramatic clap-trap that centered around man as a creature fighting against an evil society and an overly cruel world. He thought the theatre should not present isolated tales of man's struggles, but rather

plays concerning that which man can achieve and be. Simply put, MacKaye believed that man's outward appearance had no relationship to his true self. It was only when man looked into himself and realized his relationship with nature and God that his true self emerged ("Imagination" 140-1).<sup>1</sup> To MacKaye, man is one of God's favored creatures with the ability and responsibility to define and express God's beauty. MacKaye believed this to be the proper subject for the theatre.

Throughout his life, Percy MacKaye never changed his idealistic sentiments concerning what the theatre should be or do. His principal works include twenty-seven theatre pieces, twenty books of poems, and more than ten volumes of short stories, critical essays, and biographies. (For a chronology of MacKaye's works, see Appendix I.) In each of these works, he strives to reflect what he saw as the inward motives of man.

But it was his efforts within the swiftly growing outdoor community drama movement that his attempts to "lay bare the fair and noble essence" of man came closest to his aspirations. From his initial efforts in 1905 as

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<sup>1</sup> What Percy MacKaye wanted to achieve was actually a throwback to the romanticism of the early and mid 1800s, in which there is no need for Freudian delving into the mind of the single character because the mind of the individual only had meaning when understood within the context of a large group.

author of the Prologue for Louis Evan Shipman's St. Gaudens Masque, MacKaye made a name for himself, becoming through his pageants, masques, and critical essays one of the leading exponents of the American outdoor community drama movement.

The American outdoor drama movement lived a relatively short yet vital lifespan at the turn of the century. The following chapters will explore the nature and purpose of the outdoor community drama, the life of Percy MacKaye and his role within the movement, and the theories, focusing specifically on those of MacKaye's that attempted to create a Drama of Democracy within the movement. Final chapters will examine the staging of two productions written by Percy MacKaye, St. Louis: a Civic Masque and Caliban, by the Yellow Sands, in an effort to determine whether the theories of the Drama of Democracy were realistic and possible to achieve, and whether this Drama of Democracy had any long term effect on the processes of the theatre that followed.

## Chapter One

### The Outdoor Community Drama Movement

At the turn of the century, community drama in the form of pageants and masques became popular with civic groups, high schools and colleges throughout the United States. Among important early events were The Peterborough Pageant in New Hampshire, The Gloucester Pageant in Massachusetts, and The Pageant of the Northwest in North Dakota. The number of productions increased dramatically within fifteen years. The American Drama Association listed forty-six different pageant festivals in fifteen various states during 1913 ("New Art" 179). Two years later, Clyde Fitch, chair of the Pageant Committee, reported in the Drama League of America Yearbook (1915) sixty-three productions in twenty-three different states, with an additional two hundred Christmas festival-pageants that same year (49).

During the movement's apex, members such as Mary Porter Beagle and Esther Willard Bates, who wrote histories of the movement in the United States, sometimes compared the American pageant movement to the drama festivals of Greece and medieval Europe. Fanciful histories of the pageant proliferated in magazines and books throughout the teens and into the early 1920s. An article in the June 1, 1916 Nation traced the pageant form back to the costumed processions of the



Plantagenants and the morality plays of the Tudor era through a "much broken line" (586).<sup>2</sup> The reader was to accept as fact that the pageantry and chivalry found in such novels as those of Sir Walter Scott were authentic descriptions of medieval events, and that people such as Louis N. Parker consciously used these descriptions as a guideline when staging their own "modern" pageants.

Thomas H. Dickinson supported this link to Scott in his book, The Case of American Drama. He wrote that the pageant arose in nineteenth century England because of the increased interest in chivalry and the antique "of which romanticism was the expression and the impulse." Scott's novels such as Ivanhoe, The Talisman, and Kenilworth contained detailed descriptions of pageantry and ceremonies.

Dickinson asserted that another inspiration for the rise of pageantry may have been the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1832. The festivities for Victoria's investiture included tournaments, pageants, and festivals which may have themselves been inspired by Scott's books. Two years after the coronation, the Eglinton Tournament

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<sup>2</sup> In other words, the "broken line" has the same effect on the pageant's ancestry as a broken line on a person's family tree: it denotes that there is, in reality, no proven lineage from the spot before the break through to the remainder of the chart. Proponents of the new pageantry would like to have been able to link their productions with those of the medieval period or even Greece, but could find no direct link.

in Scotland, still officially a part of the coronation festivities, included "chivalric jousts" and processional pageants.

The staging of the tournaments and pageants became a popular pastime with the monied families of both Britain and the United States during the succeeding years. In Britain, the vogue of presenting tournaments and pageants declined, but in the United States, wealthy southern families proud of their British ancestry continued to present tournaments right up until the time of the American Civil War, when the cost of presenting such festivals became impossible to justify (158-9).

While Southern memories of tournaments and pageants may have had some small role in the rise in the popularity of the modern pageant, the linking of American twentieth century pageants to the festivals supposedly held in the sixteenth century is tenuous at best--an attempt to give American pageantry a glorious and colorful history.

Most chroniclers trace the beginnings of the modern pageant and the community drama to late nineteenth century "Son et Lumiere" productions of Europe. These "Sound and Light" stagings were open-air historical pageants based on the annals of a particular place, such as the cathedral of Notre Dame or the city of Bruges.

In 1895, Maurice Pottecher founded his Theatre de

Peuple in Bussang, a small town in eastern France. This was to be a theatre for the "common man," and each summer Pottecher mounted a new production using actors and other personnel drawn from the community. In 1903, Romain Rolland published his book, The People's Theatre, in which he suggests that each community should stage productions dramatizing local and national history, thereby inspiring the people in the audience (Brockett 224).

The idea of the community drama spread to England where, starting in 1905, Louis N. Parker produced several successful pageants, at Sherbourne in 1905; St. Albans in 1907; Oxford in 1907; and at Chester in 1910 (Needham 46). Parker combined the idea of community-produced festivals with the earlier "aristocratic pageantry" and staged historical processional pageants using townspeople as the participants.

The zeal for community drama spread to the United States. Louis Burleigh writes that the U.S. became enthusiastic about the pageant drama because of news about the successes of Louis N. Parker (32), presumably spread by newspaper and periodical accounts, and the influx of British immigrants, whom Elmer Rice credits with influencing the American theatre scene (86). Ralph Davol, a Massachusetts newspaperman who covered numerous outdoor pageants and festivals, wrote of the

growth of community dramas and pageants in his book, A Handbook of American Pageantry: "With characteristic impetuosity, America rushed headlong into this communal pastime, obeying the impulsive force inherent in a new affection" (11).

The first use of the name "pageant" given to a modern production in the United States was applied to a community festival in Marietta, Ohio, on July 17, 1888. The Pageant of Marietta celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the town of Marietta, and was a conscious effort at educating the people of Marietta about their local history. The men and women of the town participated in the processional pageant, which presented scenes from the "vivid history" of the town, including re-enactments of the early settlements, the arrival of the immigrants, the organization of the local government, the struggles of the settlers with the "red man," and the treaties of peace. The production drew large enthusiastic crowds, and "official delegates" from eight other states were present to witness the celebration (Bates and Orr 13).<sup>3</sup>

The germ of pageantry was manifest in the outdoor

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<sup>3</sup> The Pageant of Marietta was also the first modern pageant to invite "delegates" from other cities, states, and organizations. Succeeding pageants, including The Pageant and Masque of St. Louis, made special points of inviting people from other places in order to witness what their city or town was doing.

dramas and presentations that gained popularity at the end of the nineteenth century. There were successful annual outdoor productions such as the Midsummer Redwood Play, better known as the "High Jinks," of the Bohemian Club of San Francisco. Other annual festivals and activities were the Oregon Round-up, the Mountain and Plain Festival of Denver, the Arizona Snake-Dance, the Frolics of the Artists' Guilds of Chicago, the Veiled Prophet of St. Louis, the Revels of the Copely Society of Boston, and of course, the Mardi Gras Fete of New Orleans. The outdoor drama movement was seen as a "movement leading drama back to its original beginnings in nature" ("Return" 312).

A definition of a pageant would imply that it should be presented in the outdoors and in a natural setting. In his book, Open-air Theatre, Sheldon Cheney wrote, "The current move outdoors is a spontaneous growth, arising on the one hand, to the rediscovery of the out-of-doors as a corrective to an over citified and artificial life" (5). Nature, to Cheney, was a "great revivifier." This romantic notion of Nature against urban technology linked Cheney to the Recreation Movement which saw structured outdoor activities as a cure for the stressful lives of city dwellers.

To others, the popularity of outdoor performances,

and eventually the outdoor community drama, could be attributed to the efforts of professional actors and actresses and acting companies. In his article, "American Pageants and Their Promise," Percy MacKaye wrote that the outdoor drama was "spurred on" by Edith Wynne-Matthison and Ben Greet's outdoor production of Everyman touring throughout the United States in 1908 (34). The Craftsman Magazine also traced the rise in popularity of outdoor performances to the arrival of Greet's company in 1902, and their subsequent tours during which they performed predominantly outdoors, or "al fresco." During these tours, Greet's company staged As You Like It, A Midsummer's Night Dream, Twelfth Night, Much Ado About Nothing, and The Merry Wives of Windsor. These plays were chosen because they were suitable for production out-of-doors, or they were "fitted out," or edited and re-arranged, so that they lent themselves to performance "al fresco" ("Ben Greet's" 620).

Influenced by Greet's al fresco performances, the Coburn Players were founded in 1906. For more than thirty years they performed almost exclusively out-of-doors, staging a repertory of predominantly Shakespearean plays, in forests, in parks, and in college stadiums. In June of 1909, actress Maude Adams succeeded in her production of Joan of Arc, staged in the stadium of Harvard University ("Outdoor Plays" 1233).

Why would professional companies choose to perform in the outdoors rather than on an indoor stage where they would be protected from wind and rain, and where they would have greater control over the lighting, thus achieving greater impact? Sybil Thorndike, who toured with Greet's company as an actress during the 1902 tour, provides one answer.

Mr. Greet's idea of playing Shakespeare out-of-doors was inspired not less by his interest in a revival of true Elizabethan presentation than by the artistic possibilities of natural art, recognizing the superiority of natural scenery to artificial; real trees and skies to painted ones. ("Ben Greet's" 62)

Miss Thorndike suggests Greet believed that the mounting of Shakespearean plays outdoors may have been historically correct. Perhaps Greet, who began staging productions outdoors with the founding of his Woodland Players in 1866, imagined that troupes of itinerant players traveled the English countryside performing Shakespeare in natural idyllic settings. It is certain that Greet believed that his audiences would prefer live trees over false ones.

Miss Thorndike continued, noting the positive effects that performing outdoors can have on the performance itself:

The play takes on a new life, as it were.  
None of it is like acting, but is as if we

were actually privileged to change places for a time with Shakespeare's men and women in their natural environment. ("Ben Greet's" 62)

Not everyone was willing, however, to believe that performing outdoors was preferable to performing indoors. In her biography, Ben Greet and the Old Vic, Winifred Isaac discusses various views of outdoor performances. To certain critics, the novelty of performances in the open air lent plays charm, but the constant presence of real sky, real trees, and all the "natural surroundings of real life" caused them to lose a great deal of the "unrealities" that art should possess and which "can only be produced in an artistically equipped theatre" (81).

Nonetheless, people continued to extol the advantages of outdoor drama. Arthur Rowe wrote that "in the outdoor theatre, the poetic can spread its wings and fancy is unhampered." He continued: "It is impossible to produce an untrue play outdoors" (21). To some, the move towards the outdoor performance was an answer to Gordon Craig's decree that the theatre had begun to die when it moved indoors. According to Eleanor Duse, "We should return to the Greeks, play in the open air; the drama dies of stalls and boxes and evening dress and people who come to digest their dinners" (Rowe 21).

Whereas some saw the move outdoors as a return to