

A Journey Across the Atlantic: the History of Melodrama in Western Landscape

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Abstract

Melodrama has long been considered as a genre with no artistic value by theatre/drama historians. It is there to cater the tastes of the lower class or the popular society; thus, it is not a genre worthy of literary scholars. Through New Historicism lens, however, such a consideration is given by people with elitist point of view. As it is discussed in the following paper, melodrama has a lot to offer. It has been a genre with a lot of values attached to it since it's "birth" in France, its development in England, and maturation in the United States. Unlike the other genres, which are not free from values and biases, melodrama is more frank in delivering its messages.

Keywords: *melodrama, history, New Historicism, ideology, genre, values, biases.*

History, traditionally, is the account of the past. It is the reconstruction of the past in terms of its facts, events, chronology, cause and effect, etc. The reconstruction of the past is considered objective so that any historical account is objectively true; and if the truth is still debated, the question is whether or not an account is truer than another. However, we begin to be aware that no historical account is free of values and biases. This contention develops a new way of seeing history, now known as New Historicism. New Historicism declares that "all history is subjective, written by people whose personal biases affect their interpretation of the past" (Bressler, 1999). Therefore, claiming that a historical account is true or truer than another account is problematic since history is no more than an interpretation of the past, not the past itself. An interpretation of the past presupposes that the cultural baggage of the one who interprets plays a significant part in the meaning making. This assertion is quite understandable especially when we deal with arts—in this case theatre—history.

This paper deals with the history of melodrama in the west. As we shall see, I will explore values and biases in the development of melodrama. To do so, I have also to declare that I have my own values and biases, and whether I am aware or otherwise, my values and biases will affect the way I develop the historical account of melodrama in this paper.

A. The Development of Melodrama as a Genre

As a genre melodrama is considered to have developed in France in the eighteenth century. However, some critics contend that the characteristics of melodrama could be traced back to antiquity, in the Golden Age of Greek theatre. They usually attribute melodramatic elements in Greek plays to Euripides, whom Aristotle considered "the

most tragic of the poets”¹ (1961, p. 77). Castellani even argues that some of Euripides’ plays are melodrama, not just melodramatic.² During the 420s and especially the 410s BC, Euripides wrote plays that are “nominally tragedies, . . . yet they are actually “*melodramas*, in part or in *toto*” (1993, p.1). Castellani considers plays like *Iphigenia* and *Helen* to be melodramas, while some others are melodramatic (pp. 1-8). Such business, says Castellani, makes critics who admire classic Sophoclean tragedy call it “*Euripidean degeneracy*” (p. 1).

To William R. Morse (1993), those critics work within an essentialist discourse. Morse argues that even Shakespeare used melodramatic elements in his plays. “Shakespeare’s particular adaptation of the romance tradition to Renaissance tragicomedy clearly reveals a love of what we would now call melodramatic theatre—his late plays are full of passions, journeys, spectacular events, extremes of stock characterization, and utterly improbable surprise” (p.19). Shakespeare’s “melodramatic” plays made Ben Jonson “contemptuous” and Samuel Johnson “at a loss” since both Ben Johnson and Samuel Johnson applied neoclassical standards and the perspective of the Enlightenment (p.19). Like Euripides, who was considered to bring “the great personages of Bronze Age legend down to all-too-human levels” (Castellani, 1993, p. 4), and before the Romantic era Shakespeare was thought to be “pandering” to the popular expectations of his audience” (Morse, 1993, p. 19). In his poststructuralist reading of Shakespeare, Morse contends that “Shakespeare’s embrace of the melodramatic becomes an aspect of his ongoing critique of rationality and the emergence of the essentialist discourse” (p. 20).

The one who is thought to have really catered to the popular audience with his “discovery” of melodrama as an independent genre is, of course, Guilbert de Pixérécourt. Pixérécourt’s melodrama developed with revolutionary eighteenth-century France as its background. With a large number of colonies, at that time France was prosperous and was a major power in Europe. However, its wealth was not evenly distributed (Spielvogel, 1994, p. 676), and its position of dominance was considerably weakened by a series of wars and by disastrous economic policies (Brockett, 1995, p. 275). Government finances nearly collapsed due to costly wars and royal extravagance, and the burden fell on the middle and the lower classes (Spielvogel p. 678, Brockett p. 275). All these conditions led to the French Revolution (1789 to 1795).

Growing up at the advent of the Revolution, Pixérécourt led a life that critics consider to have inspired him to develop the genre. He was reported to have had an unhappy childhood despite the fact that he was the son of a noble. As member of the nobility, his father was one of the targets of the revolution. When the revolution broke out, Pixérécourt’s father disposed of his estates and the young Pixérécourt’s was forced to flee to Germany. Although he had to experience one disaster after another, Pixérécourt always survived (Rahil, 1967, p. 6).

Frank Rahil (1967) suggests that the audience Pixérécourt encountered in the Boulevard du Crime was mostly from the middle and lower classes. “(They) were for the most part naïve, ignorant, uncritical, being that unschooled generation which passed its minority in the chaotic years of the Revolution” (Rahil, p. 41). Most of them did not have the experience of attending the neoclassical theatre, “which was exhausted a century

¹ Had the word been coined in Aristotle’s time, he might have called him “the most melodramatic of the poets.”

² A play is considered melodrama when its characteristics fit the definition of melodrama as a genre. It is considered melodramatic when, while in terms of genre it belongs to tragedy, for instance, it has some elements of melodrama. For instance, there is a villainous character in a tragedy.

before" (Brooks, 1976, p. 82). Unlike their upper-class counterparts, Rahil (1967) argues that the middle and lower class audiences "entered the theatres at the Boulevard desiring simply to be amused; their response to a spectacle was not complicated by aesthetic prejudices or intellectual preoccupations" (p. 41).

Yet, the argument the French melodrama's audience was just of middle and lower classes is still controversial. Peter Brooks contends that the classic examples of French melodrama were written for a public that encompassed the lower class, the middle class, and the aristocracy (1976, p. xii). In fact, the makeup of the audience is as controversial as introduction of the genre by Pixérécourt. "[Melodrama] was deplored by some as morally, politically and artistically subversive and welcomed by others as a source of much needed dramatic reform" (Hyslop, 1993, p. 61). Pixérécourt brought melodrama into the de highly critical atmosphere of his contemporary theatre community, and especially into the debate about the neoclassical idea of the dual function of theatre as an entertainment and as Pixérécourt means of instruction. By placing melodrama within this larger neoclassical debate, Pixérécourt and his supporters hoped to establish the respectability of a genre which certain critics regarded as an alarming source of decadence in French theatre (pp. 64-65). This implies that even those who were used to neoclassical theatre also attended melodrama.

Pixérécourt, too, did not create his theatre without any "philosophical" basis. He adopted ideas from Diderot, who defended the dual function of theatre, and interpreted J.J. Rousseau, who ignited the Romantic movement. He saw and utilized the potential of drama as a didactic medium, a highly effective tool in his pursuit of social, religious and political reform, and he combined them with the romantic notion of appealing to the emotions. However, he did not apply neoclassical rules and rejected romantic works. The neoclassical three unities—time, place, and action—are too limiting for melodrama and the romantic works are, to him, "dangerous, evil, immoral plays, devoid of interest and truth" (Pixérécourt qtd in Rahil, 1967, p. 66).

Gabrielle Hyslop (1993) contends that the debate about melodrama in Pixérécourt's time was more about its socio-political function than about its aesthetics. At that time the common people had begun to participate directly in public affairs during the Revolution, resorting to violence in the streets in order to fight for better living condition, and demanding direct participation in government. Under such conditions, those who were opposed to melodrama consider it politically useless and socially harmful—they believe that it was responsible for undermining the social hierarchy upon which stability and happiness depended. On the other hand, those who supported it claimed that melodrama reinforced the common people's respect for authority. Pixérécourt, as a member of the ruling class, believed that melodrama discouraged violent behavior and maintained law and order (pp. 65-66). From the debate, Hyslop states, we can infer that melodrama in Pixérécourt's time was a means to entertain as well as to influence the middle and lower classes. When Pixérécourt said that he wrote "for people that did not know how to read," (Brooks, 1976, p. 89) he was even more interested in "educating" them to be law-abiding citizens than in catering to the artistic preference. Therefore, it was a theatre that promoted an ideology.

By the nineteenth century, melodrama spread to other countries in Europe, especially to England. Frank Rahil (1967) suggests that the "formal introduction" of French melodrama to England occurred in 1802 when Thomas Holcroft, actor and playwright, presented the English version of Pixérécourt's *Coelina* under the title of *A Tale of Mystery* (p. 103). However, melodramatic theatre in England was by no means non-existent prior to the introduction of French melodrama. In fact, melodrama was no

novelty for London audience (Rahill 103). Melodramatic theatre actually started in England in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when “domestic tragedy declined in favor” (Brockett, 1995, p. 245). Brockett states that as domestic tragedy declined in popularity, sentimental comedy flourished. He thinks that it might be due to the audience’s preference for seeing characters rescued from misfortune rather than punished for mistakes. One of the examples he gives is Thomas Holcroft’s *The Road to Ruin* (1792), which shows a gambler who is so touched by his father’s shame that he is restored to virtue. Brockett argues that such sentimental drama, with its emphasis on moral teaching through poetic justice, was to develop century into melodrama in the nineteenth century³ (pp. 242-246).

That there was a change of preference in the English audience may be right since comedies were more popular than tragedies at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the Industrial Revolution had more impact on the English audience demography. The Industrial Revolution created a new group of spectators who were to become melodrama’s patrons. During that period, there was a shift from traditional, agricultural economy to a more capital-intensive economy based on manufacturing by machines, specialized labor, and industrial factories. It changed the society and people’s relationship with one another. The development of large factories encouraged mass movements of people from the countryside to urban areas. The creation of the wealthy industrial middle class (or bourgeoisie) and huge industrial working class (or proletariat) substantially transformed traditional social relationships (see Spielvogel, 1994, pp. 705-732). Those who flooded the cities created social problems, and they also needed some entertainment. This enabled melodrama to gain audiences. Not only was melodrama easily absorbed by the working class, but the genre also helped the establishment to “educate” them.

There is a difference, therefore, between the French audience during the French Revolution and the English audience during Industrial Revolution. While French melodrama catered to almost all sectors in the society, “in England, melodrama seemed quickly to have become exclusive entertainment for the lower orders” (Brooks, 1976, p. xii). Understandably, melodrama was more controversial in eighteenth-century France than in nineteenth-century England, since some members of the audience in France went to the theatre with their own aesthetic prejudices and were ready to criticize melodrama. In nineteenth-century England, although criticism might be present, melodrama did not cause much controversy.

As a result, English melodrama grew rapidly to form a distinct genre. Frank Rahill even cynically comments, “Manufacture is a better word than creation for the process by which English melodrama came into being in the early nineteenth century—manufacture of a strictly standardized article” (1967, p.171). With its “overly simplified view of life, particularly of morality” (Wilson, 1982, p. 66), melodrama was mass-produced to satisfy the “unsophisticated workers” (p. 67). Sentimentality was a western European phenomenon, but its infiltration into stage work probably began earlier and became more pervasive in England than on the continent (Rahill, 1967, p. 107). Furthermore, Rahill argues that when we penetrate to the fundamentals of the form, its taste for crime and *diablerie*, its scenic splendors, and its Protestant moral earnestness, we are on what is almost wholly English ground (p. 108).

Melodrama played an even more important role in English society (and Europe in general) when the idea of nationalism merged with imperialism. Michael Booth (1996)

³ Oscar G. Brockett does not discuss melodrama any further.

notes that in the early nineteenth century, the Drury Lane Theatre staged melodramas about patriotism and the glorification of British soldiers and sailors, such as *The Siege of Gibraltar* (1804), *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1806), *The Battle of Waterloo* (1824), and *The Invasion of Russia* (1825) (pp. 5-6). Booth further discusses imperialist propaganda on British stages—which is in a way a post-colonial—in plays like *Freedom* (1883) or *At Duty's Call* (1898) (pp. 7-15).

Thus, as in Pixérécourt's time, English melodrama was heavily laden with ideological messages. "With its dramaturgic apparatus of villain-heroine conflict, ". . . [D]uring the nineteenth century this instrument (melodrama) was pressed into service of innumerable crusades; national patriotism, anti-clericalism, abolition of slavery, prohibition, and even tax and prison reform, to name only a few" (Rahill, 1967, p. xvi). As an instrument it served anybody, either those who were for the establishment or for those who had radical thoughts. However, in actual practice melodrama has come to be associated with the populist political views of its mass audience (Morse, 1993, p. 26). While it successfully serves the establishment, either in the form of "bourgeois" or "socialist" melodrama⁴, for a critical or radical ideology it tends to be "counterproductive, exactly because it is popular" (p. 28).

B. Melodrama : Coming to America

"The United States and melodrama came into existence at almost the same time—the late eighteenth century—and for much the same reason—the democratic revolution in thought and feeling," says Daniel C. Gerould (1983, p. 7). When melodrama as a genre was born, the idea of a country which later became the United States of America was still in the rebellious minds of some people in the Western Colonies (North America) of the British Empire. A couple of decades earlier than the French Revolution, the American Revolution began when thirteen British colonies along the eastern seaboard revolted against the mother country, resulting in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 (see Spielvogel, 1994, pp. 670-676).

Theatre, of course, had lived in North America prior to the Revolution. However, even decades after the United States of America came into being in 1788, "theatre remained a colonial appendage of the mother country" (Rahill, 1967, p. 225). It was due to "cultural dependence on all things Europe, particularly British" (Wilson, 1982). Wilson further notes:

The colonies were exactly that; colonies—dependencies of Great Britain. The professional players were all imports from the London stage; the repertory of plays was exclusively British. Even after political independence was won, British actors, playwrights, managers, and stagecraft continued to dominate the American stage and to claim a vast superiority over anything of native origin. Despite the aggressive patriotism of many citizens of the new nation, most Americans accepted the claim of British superiority and felt a deep sense of cultural inferiority (p. 35).

Frank Rahill (1967) further notes that the ratio of imported to native drama was perhaps fifty to one if pieces written by foreigners in the United States are included (p.

⁴ Bourgeois melodrama is considered to have developed in Western Europe and socialist melodrama in Eastern Europe.

225). Therefore, dramatic life in the United State was wore like that in England, its mother country.

However, “as theatre multiplied, as audiences grew and equipment improved, native playwrights appeared in greater numbers and with greater confidence and skill” (Wilson, 1982, p. 65). Garff B Wilson suggests that as the native playwrights appeared in greater numbers, the authentic American theatre was beginning to develop. Yet, hoping to write a master narrative about American Drama and Theatre history, Wilson shows his disappointment about the fact that melodrama took the center stage in American theatre (pp. 65-79,123-137).

But unfortunately, the same blight that was afflicting in England, Germany and France spread to American dramatists. It distorted and stunted their work to such an extent that, with a few exceptions, no enduring dramatic literature was written for a hundred years. The nineteenth century was immensely fruitful in many ways; in playwriting it was a disappointment.

The blight that perverted American dramaturgy was the love of melodrama (p. 65).

The American ‘love of melodrama was not without precedents. The United states population were mostly middle and lower class European immigrants. As they came to America they, of course, brought their preferences, including the type of entertainment the liked. Wilson notes that during the nineteenth century immigrants continuously flooded the united State.

Before 1840 immigrants arrived at the rate of about sixty thousand per year. In 1840 the influx tripled, and in the late 1850s it quadrupled. In every decade thereafter, from 1850 through the 1870s, more than two millions aliens arrived. In the 1880s more than five millions pour in. By 1890 Chicago’s foreign born numbered as many as had the entire population of the city ten years earlier. In New York City there were was as many Italians as in Naples, as many Germans as in Hamburg, twice as many Irish as in Dublin, and two and a half times as many Jews as in Warsaw (p. 113).

The popular preferences they brought from home ad the variety of languages they spoke made the forms of entertainment that used minimal language sell well. It was because of such a condition that P.T. Barnum had a great success in show business. Barnum shrewdly realized that show business included the exhibition of a monkey—and ten thousand other little variety acts, burlesque skits, minstrel shows, animal exhibitions, and circus performers (p. 122).

The same immigrants “swelled the ranks of those who enjoyed melodrama” (p. 67). In fact, their journey across the Atlantic was in itself a melodrama, no less melodramatic than American history itself (Gerould, 1983, p. 194). “Anyone who crossed the Atlantic and braved the challenge of an unknown continent had to be optimistic. The cowards never started; the weak died on the way” (Wilson, 1982, p. 81). As they arrived in the new land, they developed their own patriotism and nationalism. “In thousands of speeches and in hundreds of theatrical performances, they ‘made the eagle* scream’ by shouting praises of their country and by affirming their faith in the American Dream” (p. 81).

Along with other forms of entertainment, then, melodrama became a part of show business. “Crude, violent, dynamic in action, psychologically and morally simplistic, reliant on machinery and technological know-how for its powerful effect” (Gerould, 1983), melodrama matched the American “democratic revolution in thought and feeling” (p. 7). Therefore, for Europeans it became a big commodity. “[As] a saleable commodity,

manufactured first in France, then perfected in England, melodrama was a product well-suited to export to the New World, where it could be easily adjusted to the rough and ready ethos of nineteenth-century Americans" (p. 8). As it landed on the fertile American soil, melodrama quickly "grew acclimatized" (p. 7) and became prosperous.

C. Melodrama: Rejected and Found a New Home

After over a century occupying the center stage of the American theatre, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century melodrama met a challenge. The challenger was realism, which pushed melodrama into the periphery of American dramatic discourse. Traditional critics or historians consider the shift from melodrama to realism in theatre discourse as a transformation from "immaturity" to "maturity." It is the emergence of drama of sincerity out of a popular theatre of sensationalism and sentimentalism (Cheney qtd in Postlewait, 1996, p. 39).

Garff B. Wilson even calls it "The Theatrical Renaissance of the Twentieth Century" (1982, p. 186-205). Wilson related the "renaissance" with the growth of new ideas in the United States, although still under European influence. The influence was mostly from "the four giants—Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekov, and Shaw" (p. 193). America effected this renaissance through the growth of a number of theatre groups who "rejected the slick, superficial entertainment that the merchants of Broadway were turning out" (p. 199). Wilson divides the theatres in this period into three groups: College Theatres, Community—or little—Theatres, and Commercial Theatres. Although at first College theatres and Community theatres grew separately, they often became partners as alternatives to the Commercial theatre (p. 197-201).

Like any other traditional critics or histories—who actually grow from the same modernist movement—Wilson considers Eugene O'Neill the cornerstone of the emerging serious American drama. O'Neill started the new style of theatre that "represents the awakened social consciousness of the American public" (p. 189). This movement started to influence the development of the American theatre. Implicitly, American theatre began to develop a clear stratification; serious theatre on the one hand and popular theatre on the other. Within this stratification, American melodrama—which clearly falls into popular theatre—experienced the same fate as those in France and England. Even worse, it was treated as an unwanted child of American culture. In some master narratives such as that written by Oscar G. Brockett (1995), for instance, it does not even merit a one-page discussion.

Therefore, critics like Thomas Postlewait (1996) suspects such a historical account. "This historical opposition, whereby realism or realistic drama wins the genre wars, not only begs the question of whether the concept realism can be defined as a genre but also posits a questionable idea of historical process" (p. 40). Such narratives can be just "scholarly consensus" (p. 41) in the modern, essentialist discourse. In such a discourse, it looks as if melodrama is insignificant within the American theatre context. Part of the trouble, says Postlewait, stems from our tendency to take the "primary" evidence on its own terms, as if the initiating agents who produce the documents were objective observers and participants, without any self-serving motives, ideas, and purposes (p. 40).

At this point we need to stop thinking about what melodrama really is. Is it a completely crude and superficial art as some critics or historians suggest? Is it so insignificant an art form in the U.S. that it is not worth any academic discussion? Ira Hauptman (1993) defends melodrama by arguing that it is neither better nor worse than

“realism”⁵ (p. 282). Hauptman begins his defense with the definition of melodrama given by Frank Rahill (1967):

Melodrama is a form of dramatic composition in prose partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime, and spectacle, and intended for a popular audience. Primarily concerned with situation and plot, it calls upon mimed action extensively and employs a more or less fixed complement of stock characters, the most important of which are a suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain, and a benevolent comic. It is conventionally moral and humanitarian in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished. Characteristically it offers elaborate scenic accessories and miscellaneous divertissements and introduces music freely, typically to underscore dramatic effect (p. xvi).

This definition, according to Hauptman (1993), tends to reinforce the feeling of strict opposition with “realism,” which is thought to have a “quiet truthfulness and more or less disinterested social analysis” (p. 281). Yet, in terms of its being moralistic, for instance, Hauptman argues that melodrama is more sincere than “realism.”

“Melodrama is too moralistic. Of course. But if moralism is an objectionable quality, then ‘realism’ with its seemingly endless round of thesis plays designed for the betterment of society is even more unbearable in its oral earnestness than bumbling melodrama” (p. 283).

The difference is, to him, that melodrama applies religious moralism while “realism’s morality is totally of this world, and in fact of this society” (p. 283). Melodrama preaches poetic justice and the human’s spiritual place in the spiritual order of the universe, while “realism” defines human beings by their relationship to other human beings (p. 283).

A more useful analysis of melodrama is given by William Sharp (1993), who compares three genres: tragedy, comedy, and melodrama.

Tragedy focuses on a hero who is better than society, who rises above the social bond, but finally must accept the price of such behavior which is either death, or disgrace and expulsion from society. Comedy focuses on the foolishness of the hero who thinks he can live outside of the society and laughs at him for his presumption. . . . Melodrama is different from both tragedy and comedy. It focuses on the nobility of a hero who would change society, not his foolishness. Unlike tragedy in which society rejects such a hero, melodrama reclaims him, either because he is willing to change or because society realizes it must change, or at least must try. In melodrama one has either a rotten society that must somehow be cleansed or an inadequate hero that must somehow change his behavior to conform to that society (p. 270).

In this analysis, Sharp suggests that tragedy, comedy and melodrama are just different; neither one is better than the others. The problem is, argues Sharp, we tend to use the term tragedy for a good serious play and melodrama for a bad one. Melodrama is usually only associated with *Batman* or *Superman*-like stories with snarling villains and an unconquerable hero. To Sharp, it is very misleading. It is not the fault of the form, but it is the clichéd and sentimental way it is used (p. 271). Moreover, in some cases genres mix. Not all tragedies are without villains such as in Sophocles’ *Oedipus* or Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* has villainous

⁵ Hauptman puts realism between quotation marks because he considers it a style, not a genre.

Clytemnestra and Shakespeare's *King Lear* has Edmund, the tricky Bastard, Regan and Goneril.⁶

The idea that only plays like melodrama propagandize ideologies and values is now also questioned. George H. Szanto believes that all theatre is propagandistic (qtd in Basuki, 2002, p. 98). Whether or not there is an awareness on the part of the playwright, producer, actor or even the audience, theatre offers values. "Any play assumes a set of values—whether it affirms or attacks them—shared among its participants, who represent their culture, speak for it and respond to it" (Mason, 1993, p. 16). Szanto (qtd in Basuki, 2002) categorizes theatre's propaganda into three types; agitation propaganda, integration propaganda, and dialectical propaganda. The first "is most often subversive propaganda and has the stamp of opposition. It is led by a party seeking to destroy the government of the established order" (p. 98). The second is "a self producing propaganda that seeks to obtain stable behavior, to adapt the individual to his everyday life, to reshape his thoughts and behavior in terms of a permanent social setting" (p. 98). The third is "a theatre which attempts to demystify the basic elements which comprise a confused social or historical situation"⁷ (p. 99).

While melodramas can be radical (Winkler, 1993, p. 262) so that some melodramas can fall into the first category,⁸ in general melodrama belongs to Szanto's second category. If we recall Pixerecourt's intention with his French melodrama, we can see that it fits this category. Sharp's explanation that melodrama attempts to change society seems to contradict Szanto's second category. In melodrama, though, the change is actually toward order. For instance, melodrama may be set in a "rotten" community. The rotten community is eventually changed by the hero into a better one so that it conforms with society's ideology.

From this discussion we can see that melodrama is not insignificant in American culture. In fact, it has occupied the minds of the American people, consciously or otherwise, and has entertained as well as "educated" them. Melodrama has never disappeared, either. If it does not stand by itself, it gives color to other genres by making them melodramatic. As Sharp suggests, neither is it always crude. Just as there are good or bad tragedies or comedies, there are also good or bad melodramas. Although he implied that tragedy is better than melodrama, George Bernard Shaw himself once wrote, "A good melodrama is a more difficult thing to write than all this clever-clever comedy: one must go straight to the core of humanity to get it" (Qtd in Plottel, 1980, p. v). In its development, "melodrama grew sophisticated and was cross-fertilized by other genres, not inferior, can be justified. Yet, all those statements are argumentative and, therefore, are debatable. One thing I hold reasonable for the sake of this study is that melodrama is an artifact through which we can read American ideology.

Nowadays, Sharp wonders if "melodrama has left the stage" (1993, p. 247). It may have. But whether or not it has left the stage, it finds a more suitable place for itself: first in movies and later in television! Although film differs from theatre in that it is not live, it can also accommodate the dramatic arts (Monaco, 1977, pp. 33-37). Melodrama's retreat from American stages in the first half of the twentieth century coincided with the development of film. Before the introduction of television, film developed in such a way that it replaced theatre as the main "stage" of popular

⁶ Some critics may disagree that these characters are villainous.

⁷ Szanto considers that Brecht's epic theatre belongs to this category.

⁸ Wringkler suggests that Irish melodrama has such a tendency.



entertainment. "The triumph of films was more of a disaster for the popular theatre than it was for melodrama" (Mason, 1993, p. 297). Film gave a landscape "for twentieth-century investigation of the genre" (Plottel, 1980, p. xi). More than any other medium, motion pictures satisfied melodrama's boundless hunger for the visually spectacular and quickly superseded the stage as the source of thrilling and simplistic morality for mass audiences (pp. xi-xii)

Although popular theatre did not die, its share as a medium of cultural enactment has shrunk considerably. Its audience was drawn by the magnetic power of motion pictures, for film could provide what they enjoy. That melodrama has lost "the genre war," therefore, is worth questioning. Melodrama may not be on the central stage of the American popular theatre any more, but its future is brighter on screen.

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