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American Theater's Expansion into the Pacific: Revival of the Stock System in Turn-of-the-Century Hawaii

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In 1845, American journalist John O'Sullivan declared that the annexation of Texas by the United States—and, by extension, the expansion across the North American Continent—was part of "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence." This notion of 'Manifest Destiny' became a driving force in justifying and promoting territorial expansion westward. The development of American theater was closely intertwined with this westward movement. Performers and entertainers often traveled alongside settlers, and as towns emerged in the wilderness, they swiftly followed. In the western frontier, as theater became a primary form of entertainment rivaling gambling and prostitution in popularity, demand for performances remained constant. Thus, it was inevitable that theatrical activity on the East Coast would extend toward the West Coast. In this sense, the westward movement of American theater can itself be understood as another manifestation of Manifest Destiny.

While O'Sullivan framed the expansion "to overspread the continent" as America's divine mission, the ultimate goal of this westward movement was access to Chinese markets. The desire for territorial expansion extended beyond the western coastline of North America, toward a broader ambition to "overspread" the Pacific world.

By the 2000s, the rise of globalization began to destabilize the concept of the United States as the center of the world, prompting scholars of American Studies to shift toward a decentralized view of America. Instead of focusing on a 'global' perspective that often carried traces of American exceptionalism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and other scholars proposed new ways of engaging with American literature and culture from the vantage point of the "planet," a more inclusive and decentered framework that incorporates marginalized and previously invisible elements. In this context, the concept of Manifest Destiny reemerges as a key term for understanding the United States not only within its national or continental boundaries but also in relation to external interactions. Applying this new perspective expands the traditional scope of American theater studies—

once confined to North American Continent—into the Pacific world.

Within this recontextualized framework, Hawaii emerges as a significant site for American theater. This paper examines how American theater expanded from the East Coast to Hawaii, focusing particularly on the major shift in theatrical production that began in the 1870s: the transition from the stock system to the combination system. The examination reveals that the westward movement of American theater was not a homogeneous expansion from New York to Honolulu. Rather, theatrical tours in Hawaii adapted to the region's unique geographic and cultural conditions, suggesting that the nature of American theater's presence in Hawaii was distinct from that on the mainland.

1

The United States reached the Pacific Coast by acquiring Oregon in 1846 and California in 1848. While European nations sought overseas colonies to secure markets, the U.S., a latecomer to global colonial expansion, focused on the undeveloped western and southern regions of the North American Continent. These areas functioned as domestic colonies, supplying resources and markets to the agricultural and industrial sectors of the East. The development of this "continental empire" was driven by the transportation revolution, especially through the development of the railroad. In the first half of the 19th century, the United States was a patchwork of isolated communities, which historian Robert H. Wiebe refers to as "island communities" (xiii). However, after the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869, an extensive rail network began to stretch westward, facilitating territorial expansion and enabling the flow of people, goods and information from cities to remote areas. As a result, "great numbers of Americans came to believe that a new United States, stretched from ocean to ocean, filled out, and bound together, had miraculously appeared." By the early 1880s, the word "nation" began to be used "in this sense of a continent conquered and tamed" (Wiebe 11–12). The railroad thus fostered a sense of a centralized, cohesive national identity.

Alongside settlers, entertainers and actors also migrated westward, either independently or in groups ranging from a few to a dozen individuals. As towns developed and permanent theaters were established, local theater troupes began to form. These troupes, known as "stock companies," maintained a repertoire of several plays and staged their own productions. They also collaborated with visiting star actors and performers from the East by playing supporting roles, providing costumes and sets and playing music. This method of local theater production in which a resident troupe performed a variety of plays became known as the "stock system."

The expansion of theater culture from the East to the West became more pronounced after the 1870s with the emergence of the "combination system." In this system, a theater company would produce and premiere a single play in New York, and then tour the country with the same production, performing it exclusively throughout the tour. As a result, local stock companies gradually began to disappear. Although around 50 stock companies still operated in major cities during the 1871 theater season (Bank 65, Bernheim 30), an 1880 newspaper article noted that actors were now traveling with "complete troupes" for touring performances, signaling the decline of the stock system.

> Every Captain must have a full company now, under the new theatrical dispensation, and instead of a star traveling about by himself or herself, the leading tragedians and comedians carry complete troupes with them. (*New York Mirror* June 19, 1880)

By 1900, an average of 339 combination companies were touring across the United States each week (Bernheim 79–80).

Many local theaters were affiliated with one of two major theatrical syndicates—the Syndicate and the Shubert Organization. Local theaters were organized into regional groups known as "circuits." Through these circuits, the syndicates managed the distribution of productions to theaters in various locations and controlled ticket sales. They also streamlined operations by coordinating salaries, transportation and accommodation for actors, performers and backstage personnel during tours. The Syndicate's combination system was particularly powerful, consolidating control over the nation's premier theaters across all major cities.

> The Syndicate controlled nearly all the first-class theatres in the key cities throughout the country, in addition to enjoying exclusive booking control of more than five hundred first-class houses on all the best theatrical routes from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. (Lippman 275)

What emerged, then, was a theater network that effectively "overspread the continent." Since combination companies used New York as their primary base of operations, the city naturally became a hub for actors, playwrights, producers and backstage personnel as well as agents who facilitated employment. Additionally, industries involved in ticket sales, advertising, printing and publishing converged there, establishing New York as the center of theatrical production and promotion.

In the broader context of the late 19th to early 20th centuries, as the United States developed a sense of national identity and consolidated itself as a centralized modern state, a similarly structured and efficient theatrical network emerged. This network extended from the Eastern seaboard to the West Coast, forming what can be described as a “nation” of the American theater.

2

The concept of Manifest Destiny justified and propelled the United States’ westward expansion by interpreting territorial conquest as a divine mission “to overspread the continent.” However, from the outset, the goal of this expansion was the Pacific world. Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William Seward, envisioned an “empire of the seas” with an eye toward expanding trade with China. In pursuit of this goal, the United States acquired Alaska (1867), annexed Hawaii, claimed Samoa (1899) and gained control over the Philippines and Guam following the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Although Hawaii was officially annexed in 1898, American political, economic and cultural influence had already shaped the islands for decades. In the early 19th century, Hawaii was incorporated into America’s vision of the “empire of the seas” and American theater began to flow into the islands. The Royal Hawaiian Theatre was built in downtown Honolulu in 1848 attracting a stream of actors and entertainers from the mainland. A 1904 account lists several more than a dozen of star performers who had toured Hawaii, including Edwin Booth who gave a performance in 1853 (Stoddard 196).[1)] These stars often traveled alone or in small groups and relied on local support for their performances, a practice that mirrored the stock system used on the U.S. mainland at the time. Though theatrical productions in Hawaii were smaller in scale and less frequent than on the mainland, the islands were integrated into the touring circuits of American actors and entertainers even before annexation.

However, as the modern, centralized theater system developed on the mainland in the late 19th century, Hawaii was left out. There are no records of combination companies—specialized troupes that toured with a single play—performing in Hawaii from the 19th century throughout the 1920s when the system itself began to decline. The combination system, which expanded westward from the East Coast, effectively stopped at the West Coast.

The reason for Hawaii’s exclusion was the heavy dependence of the combination system on rail transportation. This system allowed producers to gather the best talent for each production and ensured high-quality performances. Touring with only a single play, combination companies were

1) It should be noted that Stoddard’s reference to Booth’s visit occurring in 1852 is a mistake; the correct year is 1853.

able to refine their acting, interpretation and technical execution through repeated performances. This pursuit of artistic excellence laid the groundwork for the emergence of modern American drama in the early 20th century. However, the system's reliance on a single production also made it difficult for companies to remain in one location for long, as audiences would quickly lose interest. As a result, combination companies were constantly on the move, and railroads were essential for transporting not only actors and backstage personnel but also costumes, sets and other equipment. The rail network also facilitated the formation of circuits along rail lines which companies toured in sequence (Londré and Watermeier 185). The speed of rail travel made even one-night stands feasible. The railroads offered significant discounts for theater companies. Companies typically transported their equipment free of charge, and troupes with more than 10 members received either a two-thirds discount on fares or a rate of two cents per mile (Phillips 243). This infrastructure made it economically viable for companies to tour with a single production across the country.

This explains why combination companies did not travel to Hawaii. Indeed, railroads reached the West Coast and partnered with shipping lines to extend routes across the ocean. For example, Southern Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads partnered with the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, Central Pacific aligned with the Occidental & Oriental Steamship Company and Great Northern Railroad collaborated with Nippon Yusen Kaisha. However, ships could not match the speed, convenience or cost-efficiency of rail, making it difficult to sustain the combination system in Hawaii.

Thus, while the U.S. mainland evolved from a collection of isolated "island communities" into a unified "nation," with American theaters integrated into a modern touring system, Hawaii was left outside this network. As the American theater system became increasingly centralized, Hawaii remained literally and figuratively an "island community," isolated from the theatrical nation taking shape on the mainland.

3

Contrary to expectations, however, touring performances from the U.S. mainland continued to flourish in Hawaii even after the development of the combination system in the 1870s. The opening of new theaters in Honolulu catering to American audiences confirms this trend. Newspaper articles and annual reports from the period document the establishment of several new venues: the Buffum's Hall (1870), the Music Hall (founded in 1879 and renovated into the Royal Hawaiian Opera House in 1896), the Orpheum Theatre (1898), the New Orpheum Theatre (opened in 1910 and renamed the National Theatre in 1916), the Bijou Theatre (1910) and the amateur-focused Lanai Theatre (1917). This raises the question: who were the performers coming to Hawaii during this period?

It was stock companies—the very troupes that were supposedly replaced by the combination system—that made their way to Hawaii. While it is often assumed that the American theater industry transitioned from the stock system to the combination system, evidence shows a “revival” of the stock system during the same period that the combination system flourished. Stock companies re-emerged around 1886 and became particularly popular between the 1910s and 1920s. In fact, 1928 recorded the highest number of active stock companies, with Weldon B. Durham’s research showing that an average of 160 stock companies were operating nationwide between April and December of that year.[2)]

In Hawaii, it was common for actors and entertainers from the mainland to travel alone or in small groups. However, in 1879, the California Stock Company toured the islands marking the first visit of its kind. Touring activity increased throughout the 1890s, reaching its peak in the 1910s when eight stock companies made 14 tours over a span of 10 years staging a total of 562 performances. Advertisements and reviews published in local newspapers confirm that these were stock companies offering multiple plays in rotation.

For example, one of the earliest stock companies to visit Honolulu was the Bijou Comedy and Dramatic Company which performed for three weeks between April and May 1890. During that time, the troupe presented 12 different plays without repeating the same program on any given night. Below is a list of their productions drawn from articles and advertisements published in the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*.

1. “five act comedy drama, A *Dangerous Woman* by Bartley Campbell”
2. “the ideal romance of frontier life, *Davy Crochett*”
3. *Lynne, or the Elopement*
4. “the grand old Irish drama in three acts entitled *Shingawn*”
5. *Widow Bedott*
6. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
7. Tom Taylor’s *Ticket of Leave Man*
8. *Fenchon the Cricket*
9. “Bailey Campbell’s Great Play, *My Partner*”
10. *Lynwood*

2) For a list of stock companies from 1900 to 1930, see Durham 167. The decline of the stock system in the 1930s can be attributed to the Great Depression and the rise of cinema both of which contributed to the stagnation of theatrical productions (Durham 166).

11. “Black Eyed Susan”
12. *The French Spy* [3)]

Similarly, in July of the same year, the Tivoli Company performed nine different plays over the course of a month. In another instance, the William Daly Stock Company staged 18 plays over five weeks in April 1894.[4)] These performances highlight the continued relevance of the stock system in Hawaii where troupes offered diverse repertoires and sustained audience interest through varied programming.

While the revival of the stock system was also observed on the U.S. mainland, Hawaii provides an ideal case for examining the reasons behind this phenomenon. This is because the primary drivers of the revival—geographical isolation and remoteness—are even more pronounced in Hawaii than in rural towns on the mainland. One key reason for the revival was that combination companies typically only toured major theaters leaving rural areas to rely on local stock companies or visiting stock troupes for entertainment. As prior research has often suggested, stock revival has frequently been dismissed as a “compensation” in the word of Alfred L. Bernheim, one of the first scholars to mention this phenomenon. While the quality of stock productions was lower than that of New York productions, they were far more than mere replacements.

In Hawaii, for example, combination companies would face significant challenges in generating profits because they could only perform a single production. Furthermore, unlike mainland audiences, Hawaiian audiences lacked the option of traveling by train to theaters in neighboring towns. Thus, stock companies with their large and varied repertories became essential. An illustrative case is that of the Neal Stock Company which toured Hawaii from San Francisco in 1900. The troupe’s leader, James Neal, emphasized the importance of variety noting that “you cannot give the same play twice during your engagement.” In Honolulu, he remarked, it was essential to draw “the same people” repeatedly.

> One peculiarity is that you cannot give the same play twice during your engagement. The public will not go the second time and you have to depend very largely upon drawing the same people at every performance if there are enough hacks and if the ladies have enough changes of dress. (*Pacific Commercial Advertiser* May 9, 1900)

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3) See *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* April 9, 18, 22, 25, 28; May 2, 5, 10, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29, 1890.

4) Both companies came from San Francisco. See *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* July 3, 10, 12, 15, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25, 28, 30; August 1, 1890, and *Hawaiian Bulletin* April 18, 1894.

The need to avoid repeating the same production forced actors to play a wide variety of roles which, in turn, helped cultivate a loyal audience base. Although the audience pool in Honolulu was small, the ability of fans to repeatedly watch the same actor in different roles—and to compare those performances—encouraged repeat attendance, contributing to the financial sustainability of stock companies.

> The playgoer, fond of the leading man, takes unvarying pleasure in following his new roles as he changes from bill to bill, in measuring his progress or retreat. The element of comparison is one of the principles on which the stock company is founded. (*The Minneapolis Tribune* September 4, 1898)

In this way, a form of theater emerged in Hawaii that responded to specific local needs unmet by the mainland theatrical system. Combination companies did not tour the islands, nor did audiences have the option of easily attending performances at other theaters. The limited audience size made it difficult to sustain multiple professional theater companies. However, there was strong demand for American theater, particularly among the English-speaking American residents. The revival of the stock system in Hawaii arose as a response to these distinct needs within the island's unique context.

4

Conventional scholarship holds that the stock system gave way to the combination system after the 1870s. According to the widely cited account of Alfred L. Bernheim, by the 1876 theater season, nearly 100 combination companies were touring nationwide, while only seven or eight regional stock companies remained by 1880 (Bernheim 30).[5] This shift has been emphasized framing the development of the theater industry as a narrative of "evolution" from the stock system to the combination system. Such interpretation reflects an exceptionalist logic that equates modernization with progress. However, in reality, a more complex phenomenon occurred, with regional demands giving rise to outcomes that did not align with the dominant narrative.

Furthermore, even studies on the revival of the stock system have overlooked the crucial insight: the revival extended into the Pacific. American theater studies and theater history have

5) However, according to Bank, these figures lack reliability, suggesting that there were likely more stock companies or transitional forms of theatrical production than the data indicates (68–69).

paid less attention to regions west of California.[6] While much attention has been devoted to Asian American theater, such studies tend to focus on the activities of Asian-origin artists within the United States often overlooking the negotiations, power struggles, reception and transfigurations that accompanied the westward expansion of American theater into the Pacific. American theater scholarship often links the development of 19th-century theater to the expansion of the transcontinental railroad, but it has overlooked the importance of ships extending beyond the railroad's western terminus. Both territorial expansion and theatrical culture expanded across the ocean continuing the westward movement.

Even when emphasizing the uniqueness of theatrical practices in Hawaii, it is clear that touring stock companies were part of the expansionist westward movement in American theater. The United States was "a Pacific colonial power" that, as Ahrens and Dixon assert, "looms large in any analysis of trans-Pacific cultural, social, or economic exchanges" (2).

At the same time, the theater in Hawaii during the turn of the century diverged from the accepted framework of American theater studies and theater history. The historian Gary Y. Okihiro has questioned the hierarchical relationship between "continent" and "island" in narratives of Hawaiian history. Drawing on the theory of plate tectonics, he argues that both continents and islands rest upon the same mantle dissolving distinctions between them. In this view, the island emerges as an active force that "acts upon and moves" the continent. Indeed, Hawaii has caused what Okihiro describes as "convulsive change" both in mainland America and beyond, suggesting the possibility of reframing American history from Hawaii.

> From that perspective, the island acts upon and moves the continent. Moreover, from that viewpoint of Island history, we come to understand that the mental separations of water from land and islands from continents are inventions…. (Okihiro, *Island World* 211)

Following Okihiro's historical framework, the rediscovery of revival of stock system in Hawaii challenges and reshapes the boundaries of American theater studies and theater historiography. It demonstrates how Hawaii—an island— "acts upon and moves" the mainland, expanding the scope of American theater research and revising conventional narratives within theater history.

6) Previous studies include for instance, Imada, Adria L. *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire* (Duke UP, 2012); Steen, Shannon. *Racial Geometries of the Black Atlantic, Asian Pacific and American Theatre* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Whittmann, Matthew W. "Empire of Culture: U.S. Entertainers and the Making of the Pacific Circuit, 1850–1890." Ph.D. Dissertation (U of Michigan, 2010).

5

The goal of the westward movement, supported by the concept of Manifest Destiny, was not just "to overspread the continent" but the expansion across the Pacific world and ultimately the completion of a global circuit establishing American dominance over the entire world. In 1845, Asa Whitney, a key advocate for the construction of the transcontinental railroad, declared before the Congress that the railroad would allow the United States to become "the center of the vast world": "Europe on the one side, and Asia and Africa on the other compelling all Europe to pass through us to Asia and Africa…I ask that our destiny as a nation may be accomplished." (quoted in Perry 122)

Now that this study has traced the extension of the combination system westward from New York across the continent and the tours of stock companies from the West Coast to Hawaii, the next logical question arises: where did American theater go after reaching Hawaii? While the transcontinental railroad connected the West Coast to Hawaii via shipping routes, these routes also extended further into Asia in pursuit of trade with China and ultimately around the globe. For American performers and theater companies venturing abroad, Hawaii functioned as not only a destination but a vital stopover on the way to other international ports.

For instance, Joe Tayler, a minstrel show performer, toured extensively across the Pacific beginning in the 1850s. In 1856, Tayler and six other performers made their first trip from San Francisco to Honolulu. Subsequently, Honolulu became a frequent stop during his tours, whether en route to New Zealand or as part of a larger journey to Shanghai in 1861. According to Tayler's travel account, during tour to Shanghai, he persuaded the ship's captain to make a brief stop in Honolulu. Despite having only one day for his performance, Tayler quickly posted flyers around the town, invited King Kamehameha V and achieved great success with the impromptu show (72). This anecdote highlights how early American actors, entertainers and theater companies were remarkably agile, frequently undertaking international tours with flexibility and ease.

While Tayler's tours exemplify American theatrical movement throughout the Pacific, many other performers from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century also stopped in Honolulu as part of global tours. Using the concept of Manifest Destiny as a framework, further exploration of these American theatrical ventures beyond North American Continent can redefine the scope of both American theater and its historiography. This broader perspective extends the study of American theater from Hawaii into the wider Pacific world—and, ultimately, across the globe.

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