

Trouping Under Canvas: The American Tent Show Tradition

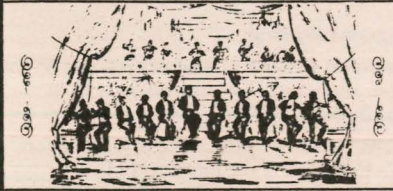
By Glenn Hinson

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 The SUPREME COLORED SHOW of the World
 THE RECOGNIZED REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SHOW WORLD PRESENT THE GREAT
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MA RANIEY, The "Great 'BLUES' SINGER
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A BIRD OF FEATHERS SET IN A CANVAS OF GORGEOUS BEAUTY UN-LIKE ANY OTHER PREVIOUS ATTEMPT IN MODERN TENT SHOWS

THIS SHOW ONLY PLAYS LARGE CITIES AND IS THE BIGGEST ATTEMPT IN THE COLORED SHOW WORLD.

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America's Greatest Singing and Dancing Chorus
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FUNNY COMEDIANS
ACROBATS
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IMPERIAL TROUPE OF TONGUE TURNING/TUMBLING CLOWNS
 in Pleas of Circus

THE BIGGEST BEVY OF SINGING AND DANCING GIRLS YOU HAVE EVER SEEN

In all the world no show like this—it is the only Big Show Coming This Season, and you can't afford to miss it.

Admission Adults	30c
War Tax	3c
Children	20c
War Tax	3c
Reserved Seats	20c
War Tax	3c

Doors Open at 7:00 p. m.
 Performance at 8:15 p. m.

Everything Clean, Moral and Refined
FOLLOW THE CROWD TO THE BIG TENT

1 Poster for a Black variety show featuring Ma Rainey. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

2 Many rural Americans enjoyed tent shows as their primary form of entertainment. PHOTO FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

During the sixty year period centered at the turn of the century, rural communities across the nation enjoyed a uniquely American form of traveling theater – the tent show. These theatrical performances under canvas became, for small-town audiences, the major purveyors of popular entertainment, bringing them a theater that combined elements of the circus, Broadway, minstrelsy, and regional folklife into a form ultimately reflecting vernacular rural culture. Concert and comedy companies, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* troupes (commonly referred to as "Tommers"), repertory theaters, medicine shows, Chautauquas, and Black variety shows set up their tents at railroad whistle-stops and crossroads villages, entertaining the masses ignored by the metropolitan theater centers. For decades, these tent shows criss crossed the countryside and became an integral part of the American cultural landscape.

Tent theater developed as a popular form in the late 1870s, during a period of profound social change brought about by the shift from a rural agricultural to an urban industrial economy. Burgeoning metropolitan areas had become the principal stages of expressive culture, and their theaters mirrored the ethos and concerns of the urban populace rather than those of their more conservative rural neighbors. Those in the small towns viewed the theater with mixed emotions: though the stage was admittedly a vehicle for respectable cultural expression, its urban form was seen as basically disreputable. A rural theater movement that reflected provincial tastes and borrowed heavily from regional folk culture eventually developed out of this tension.

As companies of performers began traveling into the hinterlands, they found theatrical facilities quite inadequate. Though many towns boasted public halls (commonly dignified by the name "opera house"), these were often ill suited for dramatic presentations, being limited in size, poorly lit, and ventilated. In response to these conditions, many troupes began carrying theatrical tents, borrowing the format from the circus and the interior layout from the popular





stage. Transported by wagon or rail, a big top could be erected within a matter of hours, its mere presence making it the center of local attention. When the canvas was up and the ticket box in place, the tent show band (invariably comprised of actors doubling as musicians) struck up a rousing tune, launching into a concert ballyhoo and signaling the opening of the show.

Probably the first play to be popularly associated with tent troupes was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a perennial favorite which, after taking the dramatic world by storm in the early 1850s, became the nation's prime audience-pleaser for more than five decades. Billed as a "great and moral drama," the play was perfectly suited to rural tastes, a point not lost on theatrical managers anxious to open new markets. Shortly after the Civil War, many troupes hit the road with their versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, bringing it to the smallest communities in the Midwest and along the frontier. They freely revised the play, discarding the original manuscript and molding it to reflect regional attitudes and preferences. Popular scenes, such as Eliza's escape across the icy Ohio River, were emphasized and elaborated, while less dramatic ones were purged, often replaced by acts wholly unrelated to Harriet Beecher Stowe's work but enthusiastically received by the theater-goers. Eventually the structure of the drama came to depend more upon the expectations of the audience and the limitations of the cast and scenery than on the plot outline. By this time, troupes presenting the play ranged from small family units performing in cramped circus round tops to the "Ideal Double Mammoth" companies, coming to town with huge casts, separate Black and white marching bands, and tents capable of seating four thousand people.

The inroads made by "Tom" shows in rural America were soon exploited by companies presenting other "moral dramas," notably the temperance play *Ten Nights in a Barroom*. These and other time-worn melodramas set the tone for a genre of plays that became increasingly popular in the South and Midwest. As

In the days before television and film, Chatauqua and other shows travelled across the country, performing under canvas. PHOTO FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



1 Billboards such as this one signalled the arrival of dance, music, and comedy for small towns. PHOTO FROM LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

2 The George Sweet Players, a large travelling repertoire show. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF REPERTOIRE AMERICANA MIDWEST OLD THRESHERS

theatrical troupes expanded their repertoires, they added dramas and comedies that reflected rural attitudes toward morality and the outside world. With increased offerings, tent companies were able to stay in town for longer periods, presenting a different play each night of the week and thus avoiding the hardships imposed by one-night stands. By the first decade of this century, such tent repertory organizations (commonly called “rep companies”) were springing up across the country, playing under canvas during the summer season and moving into local opera houses for the colder months. Within twenty years there were more than four hundred such rep companies on the road, performing to an annual audience of seventy-eight million people.

Borrowing from circus and minstrel traditions, tent rep companies usually opened the show with a band concert and interspersed variety specialties, ranging from juggling to ventriloquism, between the three or four acts of the play. The dramas themselves were often built around the ideological conflict between country and city life, idealizing the common man in a way that appealed to rural audiences. Certainly the most enduring character to rise out of this dramatic genre was that of Toby, a redheaded, freckle-faced country boy whose humorous antics and recurrent, though at times unwitting, triumphs over the forces of evil made him a favorite. With a personality drawn directly from American folklore, Toby captured the hearts of rural theater-goers and became so popular that many tent rep companies regularly included a Toby bill in their weekly fare.

While rep troupes offered folk-based entertainment, tent Chautauquas presented formal programs of an educational and morally instructive nature. Deriving its name and philosophy from the New York educational institute, the Chautauqua movement brought well-known lecturers, musicians and, in later years, actors to rural communities, proffering two or three different programs a day for a week’s span. Unlike other tent theaters, Chautauqua appeared only in towns whose citizenry had guaranteed the advance sale of a minimum number of tickets, thus their circuit was always determined a year in advance. Always opening with singers ranging from operatic contraltos to Swiss yodelers, the presentations initially focused on speakers – politicians, humorists, preachers and inspirational lecturers (known on the circuit as “mother, home and heaven” orators). In subsequent years, Chautauquas shifted their emphasis from lecturers to entertainers, increasingly presenting short dramas and refined variety acts.

Whereas these tent shows were largely made up of white performers, a distinct Afro-American entertainment tradition also thrived under canvas. From



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the 1920s through the 1940s, large troupes of Black musicians, dancers, and comedians traveled through the South in variety shows such as the Silas Green or Florida Blossom minstrels. Using a format that merged minstrelsy with vaudeville, these tent spectacles presented fast-paced revues of classic blues singers, jazz bands, tap and eccentric dancers, comedy teams and choruses of dancing girls. Blues singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and comics such as Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham and Butterbeans and Susie spent much of their careers on the tent show circuit, performing material firmly rooted in Black folk culture to enthusiastic Afro-American audiences.

Countless other entertainment troupes also appeared in tent theaters. Many of the larger medicine shows sold their tonics and liniments under canvas, attracting the audience with traditional music, variety acts and short farcical skits. Some entrepreneurs traveled with tent cinemas, performing vaudeville sketches between reels and after the movie. All of these tent shows flourished on small-town circuits, relying upon the sales of ten-, twenty- and thirty-cent tickets to their rural patrons. With the Depression, however, these revenues evaporated, striking a crippling blow to the tenting tradition. The development of efficient transportation networks and the popularity of radio and television added the finishing touches, allowing the populace to travel to larger entertainment centers while at the same time bringing high-quality performances into their living rooms. By the end of World War II, the number of tent shows on the road had markedly decreased; most of the survivors have since disappeared, leaving only a vestige of the tradition.

In the course of their history, tent shows brought pleasure to millions, offering entertainment reflecting the rich folk culture from which they evolved while creating and popularizing new heroes, songs, jokes, and dances. By presenting performers from the tent show tradition, we hope to celebrate this oft-forgotten era of American folk and popular entertainment history.

Suggested Reading

Birdoff, Harry. *The World's Greatest Hit - Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York: S. F. Vanni, 1947.

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Slout, William L. *Theater in a Tent: The Development of Provincial Entertainment*. Bowling Green, Ky.: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972.

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