

American Theater and the Advent of Electricity
in the Late 19th Century:
the Example of the “Edison of the Theater”
(19世紀末におけるアメリカの舞台と電気の発明：
「演劇界のエジソン」を例として)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: 19世紀のアメリカは様々な分野においてめざましい発展を遂げた。その中のいくつかは相互に関連している。この論文では舞台分野における変化が電気の出現とどのような形で互いに影響しあっていたかについて考察する。特に、19世紀の有名な“regisseur”（舞台支配人、兼プロデューサー）であるSteele Mackaye (1842-1894)の舞台人生に的を絞ることによって、電気が新しいものを取り入れようという彼の意欲を高め、舞台の概念とリアリストとしての理想を促進させ、また文化の担い手としての舞台の役割を大きくしたという点について論じている。この主題へのアプローチはひとつに絞ることはできないが、歴史的な文脈、伝記及び芸術の視点にまたがるものである。歴史、演劇、伝記の一次資料と二次資料を用いて、舞台と電気の遭遇を19世紀文化、歴史、社会のより大きな枠組の中にあてはめてみる。19世紀の舞台と電気の出現の背景を確認しながら、その当時広まりを見せていた社会改良精神に注目し、具体的な例を挙げることによってそれがどのように文化と社会全体を特徴づけていったのかを考察している。電気と舞台が共に変化に多大な刺激を与えている。しかしそうなる為にはそれぞれが独自の‘戦い’に勝たなければならなかった。それは、電気にとっては18世紀以来エネルギーの主たる源であったガスと真新しい発明に対する人々の不安との戦いであり、また、舞台にとっては固定概念とずっと昔からのメロドラマ的なスタイルとの戦いであった。電気と舞台が互いに啓発しあうことによって、相互に利益をもたらしながら19世紀アメリカ社会において主要な役割を果たしたのである。

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The advent of electricity represents a major stage in the technological, economic, and cultural histories of the United States. Reyner Banham has argued that it was “the greatest environmental revolution in human history since the domestication of fire” (qtd. in Trachtenberg 130). Alan Trachtenberg also has stated its significance: “Electricity offered new possibilities of conversion of power into heat, light, and motion, and permitted new efficiencies and economies in the design of factories, including decentralization, dispersion of work areas, and assembly lines” (55). In many regards these new possibilities entered the theater and affected, reinforced or simply determined the modes of representation and the relations of the audience to the theater as a whole.

The significance of electricity in relation to the theater is best pictured when put in a historical perspective. From the time of the dripping and smelling candles in the playhouses of colonial America through the highly fire-risky gas-lighted theaters of ante-bellum America to the electric-lighted theaters of the late 19th century, progress was remarkable. Technically, the progress was from rusticity to sophistication, from a limited to a larger range of possibilities on the stage. The technical advance had cultural and especially theatrical implications.

Taking this evolution as a given, I will focus on the late 19th century with particular interest in the role of electricity from several perspectives: its significance in the creation of spectacle on the stage, its contribution to the development of a native American—in the sense of authentically American—drama and the way in which it affected people’s opinions on the theater as a leisure place, the relation of the audience to the stage, and the theater as a whole. I will hinge this development on the efforts of one “regisseur”—Steele Mackaye (1842-1894)—toward technical innovations, through specific historical events or dramatic productions.

The changes on the stage and the meanings attached to them are to be placed within the larger economic, social and cultural conditions prevalent in the last decades of the 19th century. I will also connect the innovations to these conditions and argue that the integration of electricity to the theater was both a cultural innovation and the expression of some larger cultural tendencies.

A. The Context of the Advent of Electricity in the Late 19th Century

As early as the ante-bellum period, sensing cultural degradation in process,

“the custodians of the culture” (5), to use the expression of John F. Kasson, transformed themselves into reformers and “took it as their mission to discipline, refine, and instruct the turbulent urban-industrial democracy” (4). The late 19th century witnessed an even more rapid and impressive urban and industrial development which both increased social problems and the need for reform. Often aided by the new economic elite, some middle class individuals instituted a number of reform programs. On a grander scale the construction of Central Park in New York in 1858 and the 1893 Columbia World’s Fair in Chicago are considered to be representative samples of their various activities which touched on all aspects of urban and industrial life.

Essentially, the reformers espoused, informed, and acted on the teachings of social Darwinism. They believed in the perfectibility of man, in human agency, and advocated education as a means of change: for instance, uplifting the working class and immigrants. They believed that by acting on the environment of the individual, they could act upon him or her, morally and ethically. They believed in the power of cultural experts to bring about these environmental and educational changes. Ultimately, the custodians of middle class culture had faith in progress, and their ideal vision of society was one in which “humans are both morally good and materially well-off” (Nash 645). With a blend of practicality and idealism, they tried to control and direct American culture which at the turn of the century was drifting toward mass culture; a culture dominated by unscrupulous industrialists spurred by the single motive of self-interest; a culture also of consumerism marked by excesses and a serious departure from middle class moral standards. But, altogether, it was a culture that reflected the new industrial life, highly innovative, productive, constraining, and made up of incredible inequalities.

Viewed as “a model of urban recreation developed by the progressive reformers” (Kasson 11), the 1893 Chicago Columbia’s Fair captured the inventiveness of the late 19th century, and the civic and ethical values that the middle class wished to propagate. One of the main innovations and central attractions at that Fair was electricity: “the use of alternating-current electrical power to illuminate the entire fair-ground was one of the event’s unique achievements” (Trachtenberg 215). The Fair, indeed, started with a sensational spectacle possible only with electricity. After reading his address, “President Grover Cleveland ... pressed a button that sent electricity pulsating through the fair site” (Schlereth 169).

Celebrated in 1893, electricity, however, had already penetrated American life with the conception in 1879 of the incandescent lamp. Some cities and homes

were already electric-lighted. But with the Fair, a further and significant step was taken toward what Alan Trachtenberg has called “familiarization with the new technology” and defined as “one of the major cultural processes in the 19th century” (45). The advent of electricity was an index of late 19th century culture in many regards, and its celebration revealed both the cultural transformation then in progress, and the educational task carried out by the custodians of culture.

Soon after electricity came into existence in the 1880s, stage directors began to apply it in the theater. What historical significance does this carry? What changes did this bring about? How did the specialists of the theater cope with this? What meanings were attached to the innovations achieved on the basis of electricity? And how did the audiences react to them? These are some of the questions I will try to answer through the work of Steele Mackaye, one of the most innovative and prestigious stage directors of the late 19th century. To do so, let us first look at the main trends, or characteristics, of the theater in the late 19th century.

B. The State and Nature of the Theater in the Late 19th Century

By the late 19th century, the theater had established itself as one of the most dynamic and popular cultural activities in America. It “had color, vigor, variety, and dimension. [It] was prosperous, enjoying the patronage of large numbers of playgoers everywhere” (Wilson 241). New York had become the center of American theater, which itself had become a source of big business. For instance, in 1896, a group of theatrical entrepreneurs—the Frohmans—created the very well-known Theatrical Syndicate—a manifestation of corporate America—in a bid to monopolize the production of drama. Also, traveling companies had multiplied incredibly and were criss-crossing the country. Two significant developments marked the late 19th century stage: the rise of the regisseur and the stylistic move toward realism.

Under the sway of the movement of realism, the art of the theater—I mean the regular theater by opposition to the popular one—was witnessing a serious, though not a radical, departure from the long-standing melodramatic style which since the end of the 18th century had become the dominant style. In reality, the move toward realism dates back to the mid-19th century. To many, this evolution which followed a clear pattern of maturation, reflected the larger socio-economic and industrial development of America:

The world had changed and the need for a literature relevant to the times was urgent. Everywhere men were becoming aware of the deeply disturbing problems created by the industrial revolution, the urbanization of the population, and the impact of science, especially the conflict between science and religion. The conventions and attitudes of romantic literature were criticized for being outmoded and artificial. A desire for relevance and truth developed. Instead of exotic settings, there was a demand for political liberty, there was demand for social and economic freedom [...]. The new leaders in the art of novel writing and playwriting said that realism could fill the need. They began to campaign to persuade creative writers to abandon the conventions, clichés, and artificialities of romantic writing and to devote themselves to portraying the unglamorized truth.... (Wilson 223-224)

Thus, as a dominant feature of late 19th century American drama, realism was the stamp of the period. What occurred in playwriting necessarily also happened on the stage; that is, where drama fully attains and fulfills its nature as a communal and social art. David Belasco, one of the most prominent figures of the turn-of-the-century theater, pointedly observed:

It is inevitable [...] that the theater be sensitive to the thought, movements, and proclivities of its own time. The stage is a mirror in which are reflected the manners and peculiarities of its contemporaneous day. So the drama is always affected to a large degree by the thought and by the social, political, and economic customs of the generation from which it springs. (251)

This new mode of perception that was transforming the theater in the late 19th century resulted in the development of a completely new set of stagecraft to help the theater fulfill its function as a mirror of its time. But, then, productions became very expensive.

Becoming the preponderant trait of the stage, realism indeed imposed its constraints on the producer, starting from the simple use of contemporary material to the most intelligent and sophisticated re-creation of reality in its true nature.

In the late 19th century electricity became reality as a new source of energy for both motion and illumination. By the end of the 1880s, like most industries, all main theaters had installed electricity (Wilson 251). It entered the theater with all

its potentialities at the disposal of the producer, the stage director, and the architect. Electricity encountered the theater in all its dimensions, and allowed for significant innovations. Steele Mackaye's stage life will provide some enlightening illustrations.

C. Steele Mackaye, the Theater, and Electricity

Steele Mackaye (1842-1894) "was one of the most gifted and idealistic men ever to grace the American stage" (Wilson 249). No one who has read his biography would find any exaggeration in this definition. Mackaye touched on all aspects of the theater. As a playwright, he produced some successful plays. An actor himself, he created a school of dramatic art where he taught a specific method of acting. He was also a theater builder, manager, and stage director. And in all these activities, specially in stagecraft and theater architecture, he is remembered as an innovator and inventor. At the peak of his career, he was significantly called the "wizard of the theater craft" or the "Edison of the theater" (Mackaye 431) after his friend Thomas Edison, then, an icon of inventiveness in America.

As a manager-producer, Mackaye embodied one of the most important developments of the late 19th century theater. He exemplifies the new master director or regisseur who arose to replace the actor as the "deciding voice in production" (Wilson 243). The sophistication of the audiences required more and more complicated productions based on "realistic, authentic scenery, and stage effects" (Wilson 244), and the regisseur came as the "strong and resourceful" person able to meet the new demands. Steele Mackaye demonstrated his strength and resourcefulness on several occasions through his career. The following four main events in his stage life will help us to show how the use of electricity both enhanced his innovative spirit and affected his inventions: the opening on February 4, 1880 of the Madison Square Theater, the opening of the Lyceum Theater on April 6, 1885, his ill-fated gigantic project denominated the Spectatorium of 1893, and his smaller scale production of the Spectatorium, called the Scenitorium, on January 26, 1894.

Mackaye's career as innovator in stagecraft and theater architecture began, properly speaking, on February 4, 1880, with the opening, after several postponements, of the Madison Square Theater. None of Mackaye's inventions or

innovations at the Madison Square Theater relied on electricity, but this event deserves consideration here because of its historical and personal—for Mackaye—importance. The opening was long and impatiently awaited because Mackaye was launching what the *New Orleans Picayune* described the next day as “an experiment commanding universal attention” (qtd. in Mackaye 342). New York was going to prove that it “was rapidly becoming the theatrical center of the world” (qtd. in Mackaye 342). All New York could not wait to discover the great improvements in theatrical decorations and mechanisms that made the Madison Square Theater “a paradise of theaters” (qtd. in Mackaye 335), according to Edwin Booth, a respectable figure of the theater at the time. Among the innovations were a new gas lighting apparatus and a new stage system called a combination stage that required four persons for its operation. For Mackaye himself the event had so much significance that he took heed of his mother’s fear that failure might compromise his future and changed the name from the Mackaye Theater to the Madison Square Theater. Thus, despite the absence of electricity, with the Madison Square Theater, both Mackaye and the theater proved that they belonged to their time. In the 1880s many people like Mackaye were displaying much ingenuity in terms of mechanization.

The advent of electricity, however, remained the most impressive invention, and its application to social, economic and cultural life became the new challenge to meet. Having developed the incandescent light bulb in 1879, Thomas Edison soon “opened the world’s first central generating station in 1882” (Schlereth 115). Two years later, “five hundred New York homes and several thousands businesses used electric lamps, wire, switches, and sockets” (Schlereth 115). Very early, electricity entered both public and private spaces. But, of course, this did not happen without some difficulties. Fear of the new invention was a source of reluctance for many people. And, electricity still had to win the “energy war,” to employ the expression of Schlereth (115), against gas, which had been in use since the 18th century.

Steele Mackaye, who was a friend of Edison, was quick to see the possibilities that electricity would offer in the theater. For sure this friendship benefited Mackaye in some respects, but personal conviction remained the prime mover to his endeavors. Having quit the management of the Madison Square Theater some time earlier, he undertook to build a new theater—the Lyceum Theater—which he opened on April 6, 1885, with as much success as with his old theater five years back. But there was a new reason for the success this time: he had

improved his earlier inventions and made new ones that integrated electricity.

The people who flocked in for the opening were agog with admiration and the newspapers filled their columns with laudatory and sensational comments. One could read in the *Morning Journal* the next day that “Lighted up, the theater formed a very brilliant gem—The play, scenery, theater, are successful” (Mackaye 9). The success of the opening insofar as lighting was concerned can be explained by the fact of novelty. Percy Mackaye argued that it was the first time ever that a theater was being “lighted by electricity (both for stage effects and for the auditorium)” (Mackaye 482). There is, however, a debate about firstness in the matter (Wilson 251). In any case, the use of electricity at the opening of the Lyceum Theater was rather limited and mostly confined to lighting purposes; at least, this is the impression one gets reading the reviews in the newspapers. William Winter’s remark that “the light was soft and pleasant” (qtd. in Mackaye 10) is a representative sample. Percy Mackaye was one of the rare persons to point out the artistic function of light; but he was writing much later. “The changes in the colors of the lights are cleverly arranged” (Mackaye 11), he asserted. Also, some observers noted that Mackaye used footlights, which one might count as having artistic purposes. In any case, at the Lyceum, things were at an inception stage and Mackaye was cautious. No wonder then that, though benefiting from the collaboration of Edison to set up the electric system, Mackaye chose to install a system of gas lighting “in case of accident” (Mackaye 482).

All in all, the opening received general applause, which was important. Mackaye had made a giant step in the pursuit of his artistic and theatrical visions. The introduction of electricity in 1885 had taken him closer to his objectives. By the 1893 Columbian Exposition, apparently, he had reached a remarkable stage of perfection, because as a certain Moses P. Handy has pointed out, he [Mackaye] “was, for once and all, to link his life with Chicago and make that city the scene of the culminating effort of his genius” (Mackaye 311). To some extent, this was true, but Mackaye also met in Chicago, perhaps, his greatest frustrations ever as an artist.

The Chicago Fair had profound historical and cultural significance, and its organizers intended the message to be clear. It was, for instance, an ambitious attempt to ally “experimental science and industrial capitalism” (Trachtenberg 68). Steele Mackaye went to the Fair animated by the same spirit. No wonder, to his own surprise, the proposition of his project was readily and quickly accepted. He imagined a gigantic theatrical project which he called the Spectatorium

in which he would represent a play called *The World Finder*, a pageant dramatization of the life and achievement of Christopher Columbus.

The project started with a budget of \$500,000, but this soon proved insufficient. The gigantic nature of the Spectatorium lay both in the structure of the building which was planned to seat 10,000 people and in Mackaye's ambition to include all of his inventions and innovations that far. The use of electricity stood prominent. And this time all levels of the theater—the stage, the auditorium, and the building—were involved. The different possibilities of electricity for lighting and motion were to come into play at both artistic and utilitarian levels. Mackaye's own commentary on his lighting project provides an interesting picture of the scope and purposes of his innovations:

An entirely new system of lighting was to be used in connection with these stages [the Spectatorium was to comprise 25 telescopic stages], the aim being to arrive at a close reproduction of the subtle light effects of nature as modern mechanism made possible. It would have required, to produce these effects, an amount of light equal to over 500,000 candle power, and all the mechanism by which this light was to be managed was entirely new in design and character. (qtd. in Mackaye 347)

The stage machinery was to operate on electric power, and it was equally impressive, as Steele Mackaye also explained:

There is also the cyclone machinery, the running of which would have required 400 horse power, and the immense current-and-wave makers, requiring an equal amount of force. There would have been moments when the mechanism, which would have simultaneously been active in producing some of the effects, would have required over 1,600 horse power, or more power than was used in the great machinery hall of the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. (qtd. in Mackaye 347)

The use of electricity in the Spectatorium was to mark a historic moment. Unfortunately, due to the 1893 financial panic the project had to be abandoned. But notwithstanding this cancellation, Mackaye remained a pioneer; for there is much truth in the statement of his contemporary Daniel Frohman that "his inventions and contrivances in stage illumination which the Spectatorium could

have borne within its walls anticipated by many years the present system now in vogue in many houses” (Mackaye 323).

The Spectatorium was not built but the project did not remain fictive. On June 6, 1893, Mackaye, reported in the *Chicago Times*, asserted that “the machinery is all made and the details of the great Spectatorium show are in fair order...” (Mackaye 388). On March 19, he held an exhibition of it, and some privileged critics and reporters could discover the essentials of the project. The *Nebraska State Journal* of April 23, 1893, published an exhaustive account of the machinery mechanism and illumination system. A year later, with the help of some of the financiers of the Spectatorium, Mackaye built a small replica of it which he called the Scenitorium. With the opening of the Scenitorium on February 5, 1894, he was “fully redeemed” (Mackaye 445), according to the *Chicago Post*.

At the Scenitorium both critics and audiences got a true measure of electricity in action, as Mackaye devised it. Though of a smaller size, the Scenitorium required “more lineal feet of electric wire than [were] used in all the theaters in New York City combined,” reported the *Chicago Evening Post* on January 27, 1894 (Mackaye 437). This clearly suggests the importance and scale of both the dreamed project—the Spectatorium—and the realized one—the Scenitorium.

There is no clear evidence that electricity was used outside the building for decorative purposes, but we may imagine this to have been so (the case of the Lyceum Theater is an example). On the other hand, within the building, in the auditorium as well as on the stage, we have accounts of the use of light for diverse specific aims. In the auditorium, noted a reporter after the exhibition night in the *Chicago Evening Post* above quoted, “the lights at the back [...] will not be pervasive enough to affect the scenes on the stage, while ample for all purposes of illuminating the interior...” (Mackaye 439). Mackaye was obviously mindful of the comfort of the audience, but he also sought to impress them.

From within the subdued light of the auditorium, the audience could admire, before the beginning of the performance or during the Act changes, the “colored electric lights” that bordered the sliding doors of the proscenium. The proscenium of the Scenitorium had sliding doors but Mackaye did not do away with the idea of a curtain. On the contrary, he provided the stage with a revolutionary curtain of light that he called the luxauleator. The audiences, at both the exhibitions of March 19, 1893 and January 26, 1894, and at the opening of the Scenitorium of February 5, 1894, had the privilege of discovering this invention—its dazzling beauty and its efficiency in blotting out the scene behind it.

When the doors slid apart and the curtain of light was turned off, the audience had still much to delight their eyes, in terms of ingenuity in related electric inventions. Reporters on the three occasions mentioned above noted the complexity, subtlety, and success in the use of electricity for stage effects. There were “lots of novelties before and behind the curtain of electricity,” summarized the reporter of the *Chicago Evening Post* on January 27, 1894 (Mackaye 439). From the prompter’s box, Steele Mackaye successfully controlled the stage devices and light effects in a perfect combination with the action and mood of the play. Changes between Scenes and Acts were made rapidly—Percy Mackaye gives a maximum of forty seconds (Mackaye 347). The long and tedious waits thus disappeared. The heavy set pieces were moved by electricity, and thus, the traditional stage shifters were no longer necessary, and with them disappeared “the annoyance occasioned by the carpenter’s hammer and the sounds emerging from the curtain when a scene is being ‘struck,’ and the succeeding one ‘set’ ” (Hewitt 235). An electric motor was devised to raise or lower the luminary. By this process, Mackaye represented the traveling of the sun and the moon as they featured in *The Path Finder*. Manipulating the complex lighting and mechanical systems required a specialist. Though at the opening of the Scenitorium Mackaye was very ill, he was transported to the theater; he alone could operate the machinery, and financially, he could not risk a further postponement.

From the artistic point of view, Mackaye’s ultimate project was to perfect the interplay of light and darkness with a view to producing a realistic effect on the stage. Like many other newspapers, the *Chicago Sunday Adviser* of March 26, 1893, praised him for the revolution he had brought in stage lighting: “your art and science have solved the problem of absolute realism” (Mackaye 387). Other reporters provided specific examples to illustrate their claim of his success. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune* of February 6, 1894, the reporter could remember the use of light to create “moods of despair and hope” (Mackaye 382). Another writer in the *Chicago Times* of February 6, 1894, was struck by “the extraordinary accuracy” in the presentation of “the growth of daylight and all the effects of the sun and shadow” (Mackaye 444). All these confirmed Mackaye’s aims and convictions about the artistic possibilities of electricity as a luminary source: “the purpose of this mechanism,” he claimed, “was to bring into the realm of art as perfect a reproduction of nature as possible” (Mackaye 346).

Like his realist colleagues, Mackaye strove to dispense with everything that could impair or distort the illusion of realism. Hence, for instance, he endeavored

An interesting criticism often made against some of the reformers was that beneath their “good works” there was sometimes a money-making motive (Trachtenberg 215). This might have been particularly true of the big industrial capitalists, but it is also well known that inventors like Thomas Edison, for instance, never hid their commercial motives. Mackaye benefited from the collaboration of this category of money-minded people. But among his benefactors, there were also some liberal clergymen who came to perceive the theater—the temple of entertainment—as a possible “temple” of transformation of the citizen.¹

Mackaye believed in the “educational influences,” to use Winter’s expression (Mackaye 10), and in the theater as a place of entertainment. He claimed the theater as didactic leisure activity and devoted his life to achieving this in practice:

When the amusement of the multitude can be made the means whereby lives benumbed by overwork, callused by coarse occupations, stricken by great sorrows, or deadened by the poisonous sweets of luxury, may be brought to that clear consciousness of the real worth of life which is created by the contemplation of the heroism history reveals, then indeed the temple of entertainment performs its worthy function and attains its highest rank. (Mackaye 312)

Mackaye, undoubtedly, had a cultural project. He meant his theater to cater to the “mental [and moral] health of the mass” (Mackaye 132) in an overwhelmingly industrialized society. No wonder he drew the sympathy of both Christian-capitalists who always financed his projects and social reformers who supported him in their own way.

But one must wonder how many among the masses could or did go to the regular theater which according to John F. Kasson “belonged to the genteel class” (Mackaye 11). At the turn of the century, the number of popular entertainments increased tremendously and were more appealing and affordable to the working class and immigrants. There is perhaps some truth in the words of this writer in the Editor’s Study of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* who, after opposing the novel to the theater in terms of audience, stated on July 18, 1886, that: “it is therefore of little consequence to the great mass of those who truly love literature, whether the theater is good or bad; they will never see it; they will never suffer from it, or profit by it” (317). One feels a note of overstatement in these words, but, at bottom, they convey some truth. For a look at the newspapers that

reviewed the private and public productions of Mackaye we are concerned with here reveals that the audience were always “the best citizens” of New York, to borrow the expression of the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* of February 6, 1894 (Mackaye 445). A few examples will make the point.

After the exhibition of the Scenitorium, the reporter of the *Chicago News* wrote on February 6, 1894 that “cultured people will enjoy the Scenitorium; the vulgar will not understand it” (Mackaye 449). By “vulgar” he may have meant the detractors of realism, but he may also have been thinking of the working class. His “cultured people” are clearly the same as the “brilliant audience” of the *New York Dramatic Mirror* of February 14, 1880 (qtd. in Hewitt 234) or the “best citizens” mentioned above. The description provided by the *Morning Journal* of April 7, 1885, is quite instructive:

A distinguished audience poured in into the new theater on Fourth Avenue. Many of them came in carriages with liveried coachmen, for the audience were drawn from the best New York society, which came crush. (qtd. in Hewitt 9)

Obviously, the audience were mainly the elite class. The reporter of the *New York Dramatic Mirror* mentioned above significantly observed that the “ensemble of the elegant and fashionable” audience was “in keeping with the theater itself” (qtd. in Hewitt 234). The theater matched its audience (or is it the other way round?) because it was conceived with them in mind.

Mackaye knew well that if those he hoped to uplift were the great mass, those he sought to amuse were mostly the middle class whose patronage he needed to secure the “financial maintenance” of the theater (Mackaye 311). Mackaye was, as has been noted, an idealist who sought, by the practical blend of science and art, to achieve some clear objectives. He was perhaps a bit too idealistic as the gigantic nature of his projects intimate.² But in both ways—as an idealist and a pragmatist—he was behaving as a man of his time, obsessed by the idea of progress and ways to achieve it. He had many merits. With electricity he aided the development of the art of the theater, technically and stylistically. Thereby, he contributed to preparing for what some have qualified as the renaissance of the American theater that took place in the early 20th century. On the other hand, he participated in the process of familiarizing society at large with the new technology,³ in the consolidation of the myth of American ingenuity, and in the larger

movement of social reform of the turn of the century. Thus, in many regards, one may agree with him that he had worthily devoted his life to trying, among other things, “to make the lofty and refined popular” (Mackaye 312).

Eventually, we may remember that through electricity, both regisseurs like Steele Mackaye and David Belasco, and the theater played the role that one could expect from them in the late 19th century. By integrating electricity for both artistic and utilitarian purposes in the theater, the regisseurs did not simply improve the theater, but, to use the recurrent terminology of the reviewers of the time, they revolutionized the stage. The high risks of fire in the gas-lighted theater almost disappeared. The theater—the regular theater, at least—practically ceased to be looked upon as a place of indecency because the middle class now identified with it. Instead, it came to be seen as capable of assuming the middle class’ noble aims of morally and culturally uplifting the masses. Wilson rightly argued that “the theater made its greatest contribution to the reform movement by reforming itself” (300). In this, the theater indeed had much in common with such historical events as the construction of Central Park and the organization of the Chicago Fair. The theater probably failed to fulfill the particular function of refining or uplifting the working class, but the fact remains that, through an elite audience, it spoke to American society. The enthusiasm and admiration that animated the audience in or at the theater,⁴ the continued increase of their number, etc., indicate that America was progressively sensitive to the message of the innovators: the theater thus played a significant cultural role at the turn of the century, and regisseurs like Steele Mackaye were its key agents.

Notes

- 1 Percy Mackaye (p. 337) noted that these liberal clergymen were often lampooned in some newspapers. Mostly, the writers pointed out the incongruity of the association between the Church and the theater.
- 2 Among Steele Mackaye’s theaters, only the Lyceum Theater seated less than a thousand spectators. For the advocates of the realistic stage, realism is best achieved in small size theaters; hence perhaps the success of David Belasco and the relative failure of Mackaye.
- 3 For an account on how artificial lighting altered the private and public lives of people in the late 19th century, see Thomas J. Schlereth.
- 4 However, I feel that I could have said more about the significance of electricity in the late 19th century if I had had direct access to more newspapers. Most of those I used were quoted by Barnard

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Hewitt and Percy Mackaye, and I suspect that they were carefully selected, especially in the case of Mackaye whose work I most referred to is a biography of his father. I could also have had more to say about the audiences: how they really felt and thought about the electric innovations. It would also have been interesting to look at the composition of the audience in ordinary representations. Opening productions were perhaps too special.

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