

# Third Place: **Stephen C. Walter**

## *Changing Images as Expressed on the American Stage 1829 and 1969*

Theater 367.01: Joseph Brandesky

Prize: \$25 Gift Certificate

A society depends on mythical representations of its past to create a self-perception, and perceptions of others, that are compatible with dominant social values.<sup>1</sup> These myths are necessary to reinforce the *hegemonic view* and ultimately support a society's collective policies and actions.<sup>2</sup> Changes in the accepted myth can change self-image and can result in a shift in the hegemonic view. Theatre is one expression of representations of society, sometimes supportive of, and sometimes dissenting from, the traditional myths that perpetuate the hegemony. Images in Metamora (1829) and Indians (1969), viewed in the temporal context of the respective history and rhetoric of their times, provide examples of theatrical representations that support and challenge hegemony, respectively.

America used the images portrayed in Metamora, a self-image of a morally superior divinely ordained people, and the image of the *Indian* as an unredeemable heathen *race*, to justify the forced removal of Native Americans during the colonialist U.S. expansion in the mid

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is my conclusion from a synthesis of various writings on hegemony. I believe all are ultimately predicated on Antonio Gramsci with varying interpretations. See Bruce McConachie, "Using the Concept of Hegemony to Write Theatre History," in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, ed. Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1989). And Jeffrey Daniel Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996). See also Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1989) and Rheinhold Niebuhr and Langdon Gilkey, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Hegemonic view is used in the sense of hegemonic culture, referring to the values of the dominant class that become the "common sense" values of a society at large, a concept expressed by Antonio Gramsci. Wikipedia contributors, "Antonio Gramsci," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, February 16, 2006, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio\\_Gramsci/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Gramsci/) (accessed February 27, 2006).

nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Indians challenges the mythical images of noble savage and superior American that supported Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal policy, and expresses the author's critical commentary on America's use of similar rationale to justify its colonialism in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> The comparison of Metamora and Indians reveals that the America's view of the historic "Indian Question" had changed but the fundamental rationalizations were still in use.

The historical context for Metamora begins in the early 1800s, when the non-Indian population of the US was rapidly expanding. In 1700, the Colonial population was 250,900; by 1800, there were sixteen U.S. States with a total population of over four million people.<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop of expansion, and the nationalism that arose from the U.S. victory in the War of 1812, the actor Edwin Forrest solicited the writing of a play in which the hero would be "an aboriginal of this country."<sup>6</sup> Forrest chose John Augustus Stone's Metamora as the winner of his solicitation. Metamora became the most "famous and influential of the 'Indian' plays of the antebellum stage."<sup>7</sup>

The image of the Indian in Metamora deviated from the historical Native American; this deviation created a mythical figure that satisfied society in a way that history could not. Stone based his title character, Metamora, on Metacomet. Also known as, King Phillip, Metacomet was

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<sup>3</sup> Understanding that using "Indian" in reference to Native Americans is a pejorative term, I use it to refer to the characters as written by the playwrights, and the term Native American to refer to actual indigenous peoples. I also use the term American in a national context: to refer to the United States. This use is not intended to disrespect those in the Americas who are outside of the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur L. Kopit, *Indians: a play / by Arthur Kopit* (New York: Bantam, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson and Susan M. Hartman, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, ed. Mary Dougherty, to 1877* (Boston: Bedford /St. Martin's, 2005), A-38,A-48.

<sup>6</sup> Mason, 38.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 23.

a chief of the Wampanoags, an Algonquin tribe in the northeast. During King Phillip's War (1675-76), the Wampanoags and their tribal allies destroyed thirteen English settlements and killed over 1,000 colonists, thousands of Native Americans died in the counterattacks.<sup>8</sup> As a percentage of population killed, some historians believe that King Phillip's War was the deadliest war ever on American soil. More than one hundred and fifty years after the fact, Stone creates *Metamora* in a more romantic light: the tragic hero, the noble savage, the leader of a doomed people who were destined to submit or perish.

Metamora depicts an American culture war with the English aristocracy and an American battle for dominance over the Indians. The exemplary Americans are Sir Arthur Vaughn, Vaughn's ward Walter and Errington, chief of the local council. Sir Arthur expresses his disregard for class by raising Walter, an orphan, as if he were his own son. Walter displays contempt for the elite status of Lord Fitzarnold by lacking the deference due to a nobleman, yet he sees natural and nobility in *Metamora*. Errington, in his role as chief of council, is determined to remove the Indian threat to his people. Lord Fitzarnold represents the English. Titled, cunning, and willing to use any means to attain his goals, Fitzarnold represents the worst of the old world: aristocracy without merit. Mordaunt is an expatriate Englishman who longs to return to his station in English society, and is caught between the two countries. *Metamora* is the exemplar of the Indian ideal: "the noble sachem of a valiant race — the white man's dread, the Wampanoag's hope."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Roark, 128-129.

<sup>9</sup> John Augustus Stone, *Metamora; or The Last of the Wampanoags. Dramas from the American Theater 1762-1909*, ed. Richard Moody (Cleveland: World, 1966), 207.

Stone uses the English Lord Fitzarnold to define the Americans by contrast. Fitzarnold knows Mordaunt's secret: that Mordaunt (a pseudonym) was complicit in "a monarch's death".<sup>10</sup> Fitzarnold blackmails Mordaunt, offering to improve his station in exchange for the hand of Mordaunt's daughter Oceana, or to expose Mordaunt's identity. Sir Arthur Vaughn finds Fitzarnold devoid of virtue:

Fitzarnold! What a plague! There is naught talked of or thought of but Lord Fitzarnold! And yet this noble viscount, but for his coat and title were a man to look with scorn upon – a profligate and spendthrift as fame already has too truly shown him.<sup>11</sup>

Walter expresses his egalitarian values to Fitzarnold's servant Wolfe, saying of himself: "Then thou knowest one who will not take a lordling by the hand, because his fingers shine with hoops of gold – nor shun the beggar's grasp if it be honest."<sup>12</sup> It is from this American perspective that Walter is able to see the merits of Metamora despite his red skin and Native culture.

Walter and Oceana romanticize Metamora, creating the mythical Indian. In Act I, Oceana paints the following romantic description of Metamora before the audience sees him:

High on a craggy rock an Indian stood, with sinewy arm and eye that pierced the glen. His bowstring drawn to wing a second death, a robe of fur was o'er his shoulder thrown, and o'er his long, dark hair an eagle's plume waved in the breeze, a feathery diadem. Firmly he stood upon the jutting height, as if a sculptor's hand had carved him there. With awe I gazed as on the cliff he turned — the grandest model of a mighty man.<sup>13</sup>

Walter describes Metamora's nobility and virtues:

That lofty bearing – that majestic mien – the regal impress sits upon his brow, and earth seems conscious of her proudest son. [...] [Conversion] would cost him half his native

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<sup>10</sup> While Stone is not specific about the regicide mentioned, the execution of King Charles I of England in 1649, at the hands of the Puritans, would fit the historical timeline of the play. Stone, 211.

<sup>11</sup> Stone, 208.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 209.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 207.

virtue. Is justice goodly? Metamora's just. Is bravery virtue? Metamora's brave. If love of country, child and wife and home, be to deserve them all – he merits them.<sup>14</sup>

Walter complements Metamora's unique qualities among the Indians, and alludes that character defects of other Indians are the cause of rising conflict between Indians and Americans: "Were all thy nation mild and good like thee, how soon the fire of discord might be quenched."<sup>15</sup> Walter sees goodness and virtue in Metamora, but not in all Indians. Stone introduces Metamora's flaws through Metamora's self-perceptions.

Metamora's own dreams foreshadow war with the Americans, "When I sleep I think the knife is red in my hand, and the scalp of the white man is streaming."<sup>16</sup> Metamora is virtuous, noble and pious in his own way, yet dreams of bloody war reveal his savage nature. A noble savage perhaps, yet savage nonetheless. Musing over the choice between slavery and death, Metamora chooses death, the valiant death of a warrior. Metamora suffers the rise and fall of his character, and is vanquished dies at the hands of the Americans.

Errington's speech to his council foretells the rationale that would answer the "Indian Question" — the removal of Native Americans.

Heaven has in sounds most audible and strange, in sights, too, that amazed the lookers-on, forewarned our people of their peril. 'Tis time to lift the arm so long supine, and with one blow cut off this heathen race, who spite of reason and the word revealed, continue hardened in their devious ways and make the chosen tremble.<sup>17</sup>

The speech reflects American colonialism, the exercise of American power over a sovereign people, and it contains the rationale of Manifest Destiny: divine rights to dominate—even

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 207-208.

<sup>15</sup> Stone, 207.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 210.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 212.

exterminate—non-whites, considered lesser, heathen and unreasonable, the very justification that fueled American expansion at the expense of Native Americans. Despite the virtue, nobility and other admirable qualities of the Native Americans, as represented by *Metamora*, the American hand of “the chosen” sealed their fate. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced Native Americans west of the Mississippi and resulted in the forced march known as the Trail of Tears. By 1837, most of the five tribes of the southwest, over 45,000 Native Americans had been forcibly moved, and their 25 million acres claimed by the U.S. government.

Arthur Kopit created Indians in a time of changing American self-image and shifting hegemony. After World War II, America sought to define itself by what it was not. Congress established the House Committee on Un-American Activities (1945–1975) creating an exclusive and narrow view of what was American. In contrast, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 changed the concept of who was a fully qualified and enfranchised American, expanding the American self-definition. As America discarded some old myths and images, traditional images came under popular scrutiny, creating a time of social turbulence. By 1966, the year Kopit first had his idea for Indians, the United States had over 200,000 troops deployed in Viet Nam.<sup>18</sup> Although veterans of World War I, World War II and Korea were protesting the U.S. involvement in Viet Nam, that involvement was escalating.<sup>19</sup> Kopit wrote Indians as a commentary, questioning the legitimacy the rationale supporting U.S. colonialism.

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<sup>18</sup> U.S. Troop Levels Top 200,000 see 1965 on American Experience Online, "American Experience - Vietnam Online," *PBS*, 2005, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/timeline/tl2.htm#b/> (accessed February 28, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> See 1966 on American Experience Online, "American Experience - Vietnam Online," *PBS*, 2005, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/timeline/tl3.html#a/> (accessed February 28, 2006).

While Stone represented mythical versions of historical characters in Metamora, Kopit presented the mythical characters of the Wild West in Indians and sought to expose the myths. In Kopit's own words:

I wished to present a hallucinatory panorama of this period of time when heroes were being created, in which romantic literature was being written to justify and ennoble a very unsavory, violent and horrible process. The taking of land from a people and the destruction of those people in the belief that they were inferior.<sup>20</sup>

Kopit depicts American colonialism through images of the American West, the mythical West as show and spectacle, and through the scenario of a senators dealing with Indian grievances.

The characters in Indians reflect the "great political confusions, both on the governmental and public level" that Kopit saw in the "madness of our involvement in Vietnam."<sup>21</sup> An unnamed Ol' Time President and First Lady, a committee of three U.S. senators, Ned Buntline, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill Hickok represent various images of America. Sitting Bull, John Grass, Spotted Tail, Geronimo, Teskanjavila and Uncas as Indians, portray "the other." The Grand Duke Alexis is the image of a foreign power.

The President and First Lady are the willing audience for the Show, enthralled with the performance. Buntline, journalist and author, is the mythmaker who romanticizes the American West. He is the creator and director of the Wild West Show. Buffalo Bill is the mythical American hero, and headliner of the show. Wild Bill Hickok is a real cowboy, reluctant to play one on stage. The three senators, negotiating with the Indians, represent the harsh reality of U.S. Government treatment of the Indians.

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<sup>20</sup> Arthur Kopit, "indians," interview by John Lahr. (1971): n.p.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, n.p.

Buffalo Bill exemplifies the devastating affect of the American on the frontier and on the Indians when he shoots and kills 100 buffalo—played by Indians dressed as buffalo— in 100 shots, as an exhibition to impress the Grand Duke Alexis. Spotted Tail comments on the loss of so many buffalo, an Indian staple, Buffalo Bill suggests he takes some, “‘Tween us, my friends don’t ‘specially care for the *taste* ‘o buffalo meat.” The Grand Duke, enthused by Buffalo Bill’s display of cowboy skills, wants to shoot a Comanche. The Grand Duke fires into the darkness killing Spotted Tail, a mixture of Sioux, Cherokee and Crow. Through an interpreter, Buffalo Bills confirms for the Grand Duke that Spotted Tail was a Comanche.<sup>22</sup> The sport of Americans, and their friends, takes precedent over the livelihood and the life of Indians.

Kopit portrays American hunger for lust and violence when The Ol’ Time President and First lady view Buntline’s Scouts of the Plains in a performance at the White House. The First Lady is excited to see her “*first real cowboys*.”<sup>23</sup> Hickok, reluctant to *play* a mythical cowboy when he *is* a real cowboy, apologizes for what he considers the embarrassment of acting, “Mister and Missus President, if you’re still out there, believe me, I’m as plumb embarrassed by this dude-written sissyshit as you.”<sup>24</sup> Buffalo Bill justifies his acting the hero with the declaration, “I am doin’ what my country *wants!* WHAT MY BELOVED COUNTRY *WANTS!*”<sup>25</sup> Kopit introduces more images of “others”, the vanquished Europeans of World War II—in the characters of Uncas, an Indian with a German accent and Teskanjavila, an Indian maiden with an Italian accent. Uncas, rising from the grave, makes a speech in support of “white” superiority.

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<sup>22</sup> Kopit, 13-30.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 49.

I am Uncas, Chief of the Pawnee Indians, recently killed for my lustful ways. Yet, before the white men came and did me in, I had this vision: the white man is great, the red man is nothing. So, if a white man kills a red man, we must forgive him, for God intended man to be as great as possible, and by eliminating the inferior, the great man carries on God's work. Thus the Indian is in no way wronged by being murdered. Indeed, quite the opposite: being murdered is his purpose in life. This was my recent vision. Which has brought light to the darkness of my otherwise useless soul....And now I die again.<sup>26</sup>

Hickok decides to add realism to his performance. He kills Buntline and lustfully forces himself on Teskanjavila. The curtain falls and Buffalo Bill stands dumbfounded as the Ol' Time President remarks, "Good show, Cody! *Good show!*"<sup>27</sup> The popularity of Buffalo Bill's frontier hero has given way to the American demand for realism.

Kopit weaves the story of the senate committee and Indian grievances between many scenes. The Ol' Time President, now playing cowboy in the White House gym, refuses to meet with the Indians himself.<sup>28</sup> Senator Logan opens the meeting with a statement reflecting American paternalism for the Indians.

Indians! Please be assured that this committee has not come to punish you or to take away any [more] of your land but only to hear your grievances, determine if they are just. And if so, remedy them. For we, like the Great Father, wish only the best for our Indian children.<sup>29</sup>

As the discussion unfolds, the senators are nearly schizophrenic in their policies of Indian dependence and expectations of self-reliance.

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Kopit, 52-58.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 72-77.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, 7.

The senators frame their discussion in the context of treaties and the letter of the law. The Indians base their understanding of the treaties on what whites told them were in the treaties. The senators are unsympathetic. The Indians want land and “everything [they] ever needed” as they understood they would get when they gave away the Black Hills.<sup>30</sup> When the senators accuse the Indians of being drunk when they get money, John Grass replies that they are only imitating white men like the Great Father wants.<sup>31</sup> Paternalism, confinement to the reservation and the loss of the buffalo, made the Indians a dependent people.

Buffalo Bill, who urged the Indians to cooperate with the whites, was caught in the middle. Buffalo Bill recklessly killed buffalo that the Indians depended on, and all the while encouraged the Indians to accept the white man as superior. He was culpable in the demise of the Indians and started to feel the guilt of his actions.

Buffalo Bill turns to the realistic Hickok to regain his sense of self, only to find that he had co-opted Hickok. Hickok was forming a show of his own, complete with an army of actors playing Buffalo Bill. Copies of his mythical self and the spirits of the Indians he had helped to defeat surround Buffalo Bill, caught in a surreal world.

In the final scene, soldiers kill all the Indians, their corpses are piled everywhere. Buffalo Bill visits the grave of Sitting Bull where the ghost of Sitting Bull laments, “We had land ... You wanted it; you took it. That ... I understand perfectly. What I cannot understand ... is why you did all this, *and at the same time* ... professed your love.”<sup>32</sup> Buffalo Bill tries to justify his

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Kopit, 64.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 103.

actions: “Oh God. Imagine. For a while, I actually thought my Wild West Show would *help*. I could give you money. Food. Clothing. And also make people *understand* things ... better.”<sup>33</sup>

Buffalo Bill begins a long rationalization of his actions, proclaiming the American rights of domination over the savages and over the land. In a final lament, Buffalo Bill quotes Chief Joseph, “Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired. My heart is sick and sad! From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more, forever.”<sup>34</sup> The Wild West Show returns with Buffalo Bill on his white stallion. Indians appear from the shadows and surround him. Lights fade to black.<sup>35</sup> The mythical Buffalo Bill is the victim of his cowardly deeds.

In Indians, Arthur Kopit challenged American colonialism by attacking the mythical images that supported the ideology. America used the mythical images of August Stone’s Metamora to create an ideology that would support its policies of expansion. Metamora provided the needed support for American colonialism against the Native Americans, Indians sought to unravel those myths, and with them support for American colonialism in Viet Nam. Theatre, viewed in historical context, serves as a social artifact, revealing insights into the hegemony of its time.

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, 103.

<sup>34</sup> Kopit, 113.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 113.

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