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Symbiosis

a Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations

Volume 10.2

Sarah Meer

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the 'Political Shaughraun':
Transatlantic Irishness and
an International Theatre

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First published in SYMBIOSIS 10.2 (October 2006)

2nd electronic edition published in 2009 by Humanities-Ebooks LLP

<http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk>

Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

Essays published in Symbiosis are subsequently digitized
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ISSN: 1362-7902

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SARAH MEER

Dion Boucicault, the 'Political Shaughraun': Transatlantic Irishness and an International Theatre

The melodramatist Dion Boucicault epitomised both the transnational ambitions of the mid-nineteenth-century theatre, and some of its contradictions. Remarkably international in its production, at least in the Anglophone world, the drama was nevertheless fascinated by national difference. As Walter J. Meserve has observed, British actors, managers and playwrights crowded into American theatres, at least until the Civil War, and a large group of cosmopolitan actor-playwrights have since defied confinement to a single national history (John Brougham, J.B. Howe, James Pilgrim, Henry W. Plunkett, John Howard Payne, and so on).¹ Yet national types were staple features of comic and melodramatic writing for several decades, and Yankee roles delighted British and American audiences alongside 'Frontiersmen', 'Indian' and 'Negro', 'Cockney', 'Scottish' and 'Irish' parts.²

National identity was especially important to audiences, and in similarly contradictory ways. Americans flocked to see Jenny Lind, partly because she was famous in Europe.³ But foreign actors could trigger hostility, such as the Astor Place riot in 1849, over Briton William Macready's perceived slight on American actor Edwin Forrest. New Yorkers also caused disturbances in response to supposed insults from English actors in 1817, 1825, 1831, 1832 and 1834.⁴ Similarly, in London in 1848 a mob protesting about the perceived dominance in London of French plays disrupted the *Théâtre Historique*, then visiting from Paris.⁵

Dion Boucicault was responsible for many of the pirate translations of French melodramas responsible for the antagonism, and was surely the most flamboyant of the ocean-crossing thespians. His career, as playwright and actor-manager, spanned Dublin, London and New York. His play *The Octoroon* has been an obvious site for the consideration of transatlantic theatre; it has a Louisiana setting and a hero newly returned from France, and Boucicault rewrote the ending in London when