

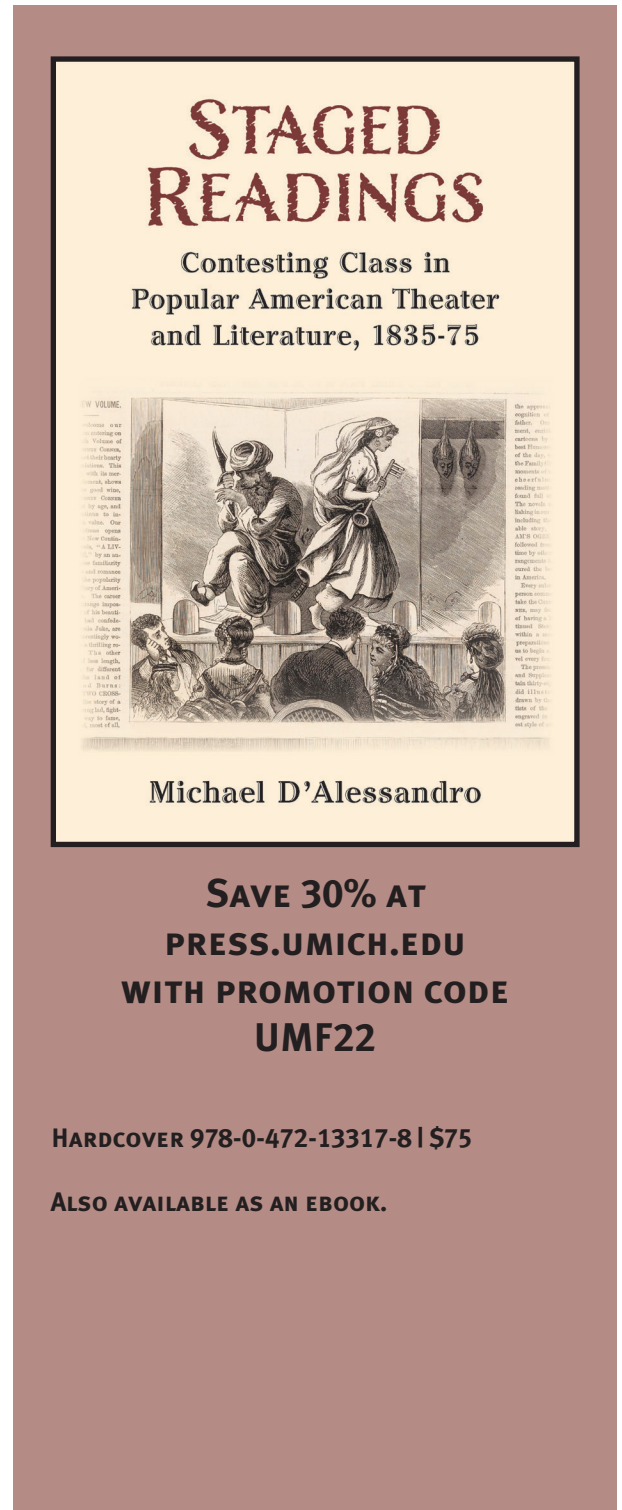
Staged Readings

Contesting Class in Popular American Theater and Literature, 1835-75

Staged Readings studies the social consequences of 19th-century America's two most prevalent leisure forms: theater and popular literature. In the midst of watershed historical developments—including numerous waves of immigration, two financial Panics, increasing wealth disparities, and the Civil War—American theater and literature were developing at unprecedented rates. Playhouses became crowded with new spectators, best-selling novels flew off the shelves, and, all the while, distinct social classes began to emerge. While the middle and upper classes were espousing conservative literary tastes and attending family matinees and operas, laborers were reading dime novels and watching downtown spectacle melodramas like *Nymphs of the Red Sea* and *The Pirate's Signal* or, *The Bridge of Death!!!* As audiences traveled from the reading parlor to the playhouse (and back again), they accumulated a vital sense of social place in the new nation. In other words, culture *made* class in 19th-century America.

Based in the historical archive, *Staged Readings* presents a panoramic display of mid-century leisure and entertainment. It examines best-selling novels, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and George Lippard's *The Quaker City*. But it also analyzes a series of sensational melodramas, parlor theatricals, doomsday speeches, tableaux vivant displays, curiosity museum exhibits, and fake volcano explosions. These oft-overlooked spectacles capitalized on consumers' previous cultural encounters and directed their social identifications. The book will be particularly appealing to those interested in histories of popular theater, literature and reading, social class, and mass culture.

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