HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The stage and screen has long played a major role in American society and culture. Just try to imagine a world without movies and theater. Plays, shows, and motion pictures have served as an entertainment outlet, a social event with the chance to meet and mingle with others, and a means of escaping the stress of everyday life.

Although motion pictures and theater are meant to serve primarily as entertainment, examining the trends in the performing arts of the stage and screen over the years reveals reflections of American culture within different eras. Considered to be racist today, Blackface minstrel shows were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in America for over 100 years starting in the 1830s. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show dramatized frontier life and played into the stereotypes of American Indian culture at the peak of its success. Studying popular films and advertisements for shows tell a great deal about what Americans have been interested in over the years. Take a look at the movies and theatrical performances offered in your community. Do they reflect current trends in American culture?

ADDITIONAL LINKS:
- Performing Arts Encyclopedia
- America at Work, America at Leisure: Motion Pictures from 1894-1915
- American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920
- Edison Motion Pictures
- Posters: Performing Arts Posters
- Origins of American Animation
- The New Deal Stage: Selections from the Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939
- The Wizard of Oz: An American Fairy Tale
- Music, Theatre, Dance
- Shakespeare in America
- Invention & Motion Pictures

Teaching with Primary Sources — MTSU

PRIMARY SOURCE SET
PERFORMING ARTS: THE STAGE & SCREEN

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS:
The Library of Congress Web site is a great place to find primary sources related to the performing arts, from movie posters to films to photographs to scripts. This particular primary source set explores several categories related to the performing arts:

- p. 2 Theater
- p. 3 Motion Pictures
- p. 4 Circuses, Sideshows & Magicians
- p. 5 Famous Performers

(pp. 6-7 are bibliographic citations)

A great place to start is the Performing Arts Encyclopedia, which allows explorers to both search and browse the primary source collections and exhibitions relating to various performing arts. Search the Posters: Performing Arts Posters Collection for examples of advertisements and posters for movies and shows. How have advertisements and posters changed over the years? Design a poster for your favorite movie or play. Have students look at the play scripts in the New Deal Stage Collection, and choose a scene to act out or have students participate in a school variety show. View some of the films on the Library of Congress Web site. How are they different than films today? How is American culture reflected within the stage and screen and vice versa? For additional ideas see the June 2009 TPS-MTSU Newsletter that explores popular culture and the performing arts and the May 2010 TPS- MTSU Newsletter that explores music.
Theater

Macbeth (William Shakespeare), Boston, January 31-March 1, 1939, directed by Eliot Duvey - contains reviews, costume designs, photographs, lighting plot, playbills, etc.

Broadway north from 38th St., New York City, showing Winter Garden, Maxine Elliott’s, Casino, and Knickerbocker Theatres, [c. 1920]

Wm. H. West’s Big Minstrel Jubilee (formerly of Primrose & West), [ca. 1898]

The Sandow Trocadero Vaudevlles [ca. 1894; detail]

Star Theatre / [1902]

Tivoli Theater, 709-713 Broad Street, Chattanooga, Hamilton, TN [n.d.]
MOTION PICTURES

Advertisement for *The Wizard of Oz* in *Cosmopolitan* magazine [1939]

"Adventures of Tarzan" / Ritchey Litho. Corp. [1921]

Roy Roger's hand and footprints, Grauman's Chinese Theatre, Los Angeles, California [2006]

[Ritz Theatre, Greenville, Alabama] [2010]

Levi & Cohen, the Irish comedians/ American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. [1903] Video

The first circus / [1921]

Movie theatre, Chicago, Illinois [1940]
The Barnum & Bailey greatest show on earth, the world's grandest, largest, best, amusement institution. The Flying Dillons in a series of most marvelous mid-air feats and startling performances [c. 1895]

Barker at sideshow with performers, state fair, Donaldsonville, Louisiana [1938]

Thurston, master magician all out of a hat, [c. 1910]

Buffalo Bill's Wild West and congress of rough riders of the world A congress of American Indians [...] [c. 1899]

Bicycle trick riding, no. 2 / Thomas A. Edison, Inc. [1899]
FAMOUS PERFORMERS

Fred and Adele Astaire [n.d]

[Lotta Crabtree half-length portrait, facing right] [c. 1868]

P. T. Barnum [between 1855 and 1865]

[William S. Hart, three-quarter length portrait, seated, facing front, in cowboy outfit] [1918]

Stone walls and chains do not make a prison --- for Houdini [c. 1898; detail]

Judy Garland as Dorothy wearing the ruby slippers. [1939]

Famous actress urges admittance into U.S. of 20,000 German refugee children… [1939]
CITATIONS

Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is April 6, 2011.


