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Jared Brown

Excerpt

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## *Prologue*

**C**HRONICLERS OF THE RELATIONSHIP between colonial Americans and the theatre have long tended to see a conflict of rather simple dimensions: “Morality” and devotion to religion on one side versus those who wished to enjoy the pleasures the theatre could offer on the other. The truth is more complex. Many colonial Americans of the eighteenth century opposed the fledgling professional theatre (dominated by the British) on the ground that it competed with and detracted from the development of American mercantile enterprises. Whatever money was spent by the theatre’s patrons could not be spent to purchase American goods and services, after all. As Peter A. Davis has pointed out, “In this way, theatre became much more than just an undesirable amusement; it was a political and social symbol of English oppression.”<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the moral and religious opposition to the theatre cannot be overlooked, for some Americans firmly believed that the theatre was a place of evil whose function was to teach blasphemy, lechery, and sedition. Chief among these were Puritans, who, although a minority among the immigrants, were highly influential in several northern colonies.

Although it is misleading to make sweeping generalizations about

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“Puritan attitudes,”<sup>2</sup> scholarly observers agree that the Puritans did share a decided aversion to the theatre. One of the reasons the Puritans had left England in the latter half of the seventeenth century was the desire to escape the influence of what they regarded as a bawdy and corrupt Restoration culture, of which the theatre (many of whose plays mocked religion and called for a life devoted to the pleasures of the flesh) was a part. This may have been a lesser grievance than many others, but it was an irritant nonetheless.

Earlier, in 1649, when the Parliamentary Party, in which the Puritans figured prominently, took control of England and beheaded King Charles I, one of their first decrees was to close all the theatres in the country and prohibit theatrical performances. When Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, the theatres reopened, often featuring comedies calculated to appeal to the new king’s taste: witty, salacious (all of them revolving around sexual intrigues), and – as far as the Puritans were concerned – particularly offensive. Moreover, women appeared on the stage during the Restoration, whereas female roles before 1649 in England had been played by boys. To the Puritans, who regarded actresses as “whores,” this was perhaps the greatest offense of all.

Thus, many Puritans and their descendants looked with great disfavor upon the establishment of the theatre in their new home. Most would have agreed wholeheartedly with William Crashaw’s sermon given in England in 1607: “The ungodly Plays and Interludes so rife in this nation,” said Crashaw, without a hint of irony, “what are they but a bastard of Babylon, a daughter of error and confusion, a hellish device (the devil’s own recreation to mock at holy things) by him delivered to the Heathen, from them to the Papists [Puritanism’s most despised enemy on earth], and from them to us?”<sup>3</sup> Whenever performances of plays seemed imminent, antitheatre diatribes were distributed. Titles such as “The Theatre, the High Road to Hell,” were typical.<sup>4</sup>

Antitheatre sentiments were regularly reinforced by colonial churchmen (Presbyterians and Quakers as well as Puritans), and they had the desired effect: By the early 1750s few colonial Americans

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had ever seen a play, and those who had had seen only amateur performances or those of semiprofessional troupes, such as the one headed by Walter Murray and Thomas Kean. That company's brief history extended only from 1749 to 1752.

In 1752, however, the first fully professional theatrical troupe sailed for the American colonies. Officially known as the London Company of Comedians, the troupe was run by Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Hallam, performers who had known little success in England. Along with their three children and ten additional British performers, the Hallams attempted to establish the professional theatre in America. The obstacles were many: The colonies, vast in territory, were home to a small, poor, largely uneducated population who had been told time and again by ministers and other preachers such as George Whitefield, the much-traveled English evangelist whose fiery sermons helped give rise to the religious phenomenon known as the "Great Awakening," that the theatre was frivolous at best (and thus a waste of valuable time) and evil at worst (thus endangering the onlooker's immortal soul).<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately for the London Company of Comedians, their ship first arrived in Virginia, the colony that was least affected by religious opposition to entertainments because of its largely Anglican composition. Even there, however, the company was initially denied a license to perform. Unable to ply their trade and lacking the wherewithal to return to England, the actors settled down in Williamsburg and took jobs in the community, establishing themselves as reliable individuals. Then, with the backing of Williamsburg's leading citizens, their reapplication to the Royal Governor for a license to perform was granted. The company shrewdly followed the same procedure in most of the localities in which they played: becoming accepted by the community as individuals before applying to perform. That strategy – combined with the company's decision to produce only the most inoffensive (and, they claimed, morally edifying) plays – allowed them to gain a measure of acceptance in most of the colonies in which they were permitted to play.

The Hallams proceeded slowly and painstakingly from Virginia to

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New York, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, attempting to cultivate an appetite for the theatre in the colonies. They performed plays from the standard eighteenth-century English repertory, including both recently written plays (such as *The Twin Rivals*) and classics (such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*).

The London Company survived the death of Lewis Hallam in 1755, when David Douglass took over the management of the troupe. Hallam's son, Lewis Jr., became the company's leading actor, often playing opposite his mother. Playing in Virginia, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Maryland, and South Carolina, the company built playhouses – most of them small, poorly ventilated, and makeshift – at nearly every stop. Despite the hostility of many colonials, the company gradually established a more secure foothold (of which the playhouses they built were tangible evidence), brought about in part because of a shrewd decision made in 1763: They officially changed the name of the group from “The London Company” to “The American Company,” thus publicly identifying themselves with the American cause in the growing conflict with Britain. In every significant respect the company remained British, performing British plays and employing British actors, but the name change itself served to win over many converts. Moreover, in 1767 the company became the first professional organization to present a play written by an American-born playwright: Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia*. (Godfrey's play achieved the distinction only because Thomas Forrest's *The Disappointment; or, the Force of Credulity* [written under the pseudonym “Andrew Barton”], scheduled to be given on April 13, 1767, was canceled just prior to production owing to the opposition of two prominent Philadelphians who objected to being parodied in the play. *The Prince of Parthia* was rushed into production and performed on April 24.)<sup>6</sup>

Still, prejudice against the theatre remained strong: Anti-British sentiment – based largely upon opposition to a British-dominated theatre that competed economically with local businesses – was growing, and religious antagonism, often combined with the mercantile argument, continued. Davis quotes the 1750 Massachusetts Act in

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order to demonstrate how the economic argument merged with – and, depending upon one’s interpretation, perhaps took precedence over – the “moral” question. The act called upon colonials to prevent and avoid “the many and great Mischiefs which arise from publick stage plays, interludes, and other theatrical entertainments, which *not only occasion great and unnecessary expenses, and discourage industry and frugality, but likewise tend generally to increase Immorality, impiety, and contempt of religion.*”<sup>7</sup>

In order to counter this hostility, the American Company advertised some of their plays as moral tracts<sup>8</sup> for the benefit of various American charities. The assumption behind the plan – which often proved to be correct – was that some colonials who might otherwise have refused to attend the frivolous, potentially soul-damaging and economically competitive theatre would be willing to view dramas and comedies as long as they incorporated “moral” points of view and were given for worthy causes.

After twenty years and despite constant struggle against either apathy or outright hostility, the American Company was slowly becoming an entrenched institution in the colonies. It might have consolidated its position further against the opposition of businessmen and organized religion had it not been for difficulties of another kind: Relations between England and her colonies had stretched to the breaking point in the early 1770s. Outbreaks of patriotic fervor, sometimes favoring the British, sometimes espousing the colonials’ cause, periodically found their way into the playhouses, interrupting the plays. Some members of the audience shouted their convictions loudly to one another; others were more physical. On more than one occasion a note had to be inserted in the evening’s program asking the “Ruffians in the Gallery” to cease their “Outrages”; and on December 9, 1772, when the American Company was playing in Philadelphia, a riot occurred outside the theatre door. As the political atmosphere worsened, the theatre, like every other aspect of colonial life, was drawn inevitably into the controversies aroused by the conflict between England and its colonies.

Furthermore, those colonials who had come to regard England as

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the enemy found other reasons to distrust the American Company. Didn't the organization employ English actors, thereby bringing to the colonies potential subverters of American values? Wasn't its repertoire almost entirely British, thereby introducing into the colonies those ideas and convictions American patriots most fervently detested?

Determined not to allow political matters to destroy their slow progress in winning converts to the professional theatre, the managers of the American Company, in an attempt to improve their personnel, sailed for London prior to the beginning of the 1774–5 theatrical season to enlist new actors for the following season. One of them, Thomas Wignell, a cousin of Lewis Hallam, Jr., was destined to become one of the most important figures in the early American theatre. However, before Wignell and his fellow actors could reach America, a Congress met in Carpenters' Hall, Philadelphia, in September 1774, where they agreed upon the necessity of setting forth, in a series of resolutions, the rights to life, liberty, and property. On October 20, the Continental Congress met once again to pass another resolution, one that emphasized the seriousness of their earlier action and called upon patriots to support American commercial enterprises and to forego all pleasures that might interfere with the conflict against the British:

We will, in our several stations, encourage frugality, economy, and industry, and promote agriculture, arts, and the manufactures of this country, especially that of wool; and will discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting, exhibitions of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments.<sup>9</sup>

The American Company, preparing to begin its new season, recognized that attempting to defy the Congress's direct order would be futile, and immediately closed its theatres, setting sail for the British West Indies, where most of the actors – including poor Thomas Wignell, who had never dreamed that his passage from England

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would result in a lengthy detour – remained for more than ten years, until the war was over.<sup>10</sup>

If the lawmakers' intention was to eliminate all theatrical productions for the duration of the hostilities, however, it could not have failed more completely. Indeed, the American Revolution saw a remarkable amount of theatrical activity on American soil. Although the Continental Congress was effective in stamping out the *professional* theatre until 1781, it failed to have any impact whatever on the British military forces that occupied and controlled colonial cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. The British – unlike the Americans – brought with them an appreciation of drama and a tradition of theatregoing, and their officers made certain that that tradition would remain unbroken during the Revolution by presenting an ambitious series of plays in the cities they occupied. In turn, the remarkable number of British theatrical productions stimulated some American officers to permit performances for and by American troops. This action may have been illegal according to the congressional injunction, but it boosted morale and was intended to demonstrate that Americans could compete with the British on any level, including the theatrical. Ultimately, a troupe of professional American performers flew directly in the face of the Continental Congress's 1774 resolution (and a subsequent resolution passed in 1778, reaffirming the sentiments expressed earlier) and began presenting plays during the waning years of the war. Thus, rather than declining, the extent of theatrical activity during the Revolution increased steadily, thereby helping to establish a tolerance for and understanding of the theatre in America.

The British impact on American culture during the Revolution could not have occurred had the American citizenry been solidly behind the effort to establish a new country: Historians agree that a sizable number of colonists were either loyal to the crown or uncommitted.<sup>11</sup> Thus, perhaps one-half or more of the American population of approximately 2.5 million was willing to tolerate the activities of the British soldiers in their midst. Some loyalists and many neu-

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trals looked upon the theatrical productions sponsored by the British disapprovingly, to be sure, but they were generally unwilling to speak or act against them in an active way. Moreover, some Americans who favored the British cause attended the theatre for the first time in their lives during the Revolution because the British, whom they admired, demonstrated by their example that playacting and playgoing were legitimate activities – not directly inspired by God, perhaps, but not conceived and perpetuated by the devil, either.



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# Setting the Stage: Before the Revolution

**A**MERICA WAS READY to explode. The hated Stamp Act of 1765, the Royal Proclamation closing the lands west of the Alleghenies to immigration, the Sugar Act, and taxes on tea, paper, glass, and paint had all led to boycotts and riots in the colonies. Royal governors representing George III had become detested symbols of oppression. The Virginia Resolves stated defiantly that only Virginians could tax Virginians – and other colonies, quick to indicate their agreement with that revolutionary sentiment, denied the British their historic prerogative to impose taxes.

George III could not countenance, however, any defiance of his – or his ministers' – will. The Americans must be made to obey, he believed, by force if necessary. Anything short of total obedience represented a direct threat to the monarchy. More was at stake than the continued subjugation of the American colonies. If America resisted British authority, might not Ireland do so as well?

Divided British public opinion was becoming increasingly anti-American. The colonial boycott of British goods could wreak havoc with British commerce. The Boston Tea Party was

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only a foretaste of what might occur if the Americans were not put swiftly in their place.

The causes of the imminent war were manifold, of course, but overriding all was the British failure to understand that “a new spirit had arisen in the colonies.” Oscar Theodore Barck explains:

The colonies had been allowed to go practically their own way for a century and a half; they had been populated primarily with discontented subjects; there had been a large influx of non-English groups; and the colonies were American-minded, with a new view of the British Constitution. This theory advocated real rather than virtual representation, and since the colonists were not actually represented in Parliament, they believed they could not be taxed by it. Furthermore, although the colonies recognized the King as their rightful sovereign, they believed that their own assemblies were their representative bodies, not Parliament. The ministers, on the other hand, thought the colonists were objecting to taxation solely on financial grounds. It was the failure to comprehend American thought that probably did more than anything else to bring on the Revolution. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In America, Whigs yearned for revolution. American Tories – backed by a growing number of British soldiers, politicians and customs officers – knew in their hearts that rebelliousness had to be destroyed. The tension increased perceptibly as the hour of explosion drew ever nearer.