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978-0-521-03382-4 - The Theatre in America during the Revolution

Jared Brown

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The Theatre in America during the Revolution

The Theatre in America during the Revolution is a first comprehensive attempt to assemble all that is known of theatre at the time of America's political birth. Because many plays performed during the Revolution served mainly as vehicles for partisan politics, they were not always aesthetically enticing; yet this was one of the only historical eras in which the theatre was used by both sides to help achieve military and political objectives. Whether moralistic or satirical, the plays of the Revolution offer unique insights into the sympathies and fears of both loyal and dissident parties, and so serve as a telling document of a socially turbulent age. Jared Brown's extensive research coheres into an invaluable theatrical chronicle that should prove a useful resource for students, scholars, and the general reader.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after extended neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research, yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development. The primary aim of this series is to provide a forum for important and original scholarship in and criticism of American theatre and drama in a cultural and social context. Inclusive by design, the series is intended to accommodate and attract leading work in areas ranging from the study of drama as literature (but without losing sight of its theatrical context) to theatre histories, theoretical explorations, production histories, and readings of more popular or paratheatrical forms. The series welcomes work grounded in cultural studies and narratives with interdisciplinary reach, encompassing books and monographs aimed at a more strictly scholarly audience as well as titles that will also appeal to the general reader. With a specific emphasis on theatre in the United States (although worthy studies in the whole of the Americas will be considered), *Studies in American Theatre and Drama* provides a crossroads where historical, theoretical, literary, and biographical approaches meet and combine, promoting imaginative research in theatre and drama from a variety of new perspectives. Books commissioned for the series include:

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Preface

INFORMATION CONCERNING the theatre in America during the Revolution is available in many sources, but – with the exception of George O. Seilhamer’s nineteenth-century study of the American theatre – it has not been collected in a single volume, as in the present book. Seilhamer’s work, however, contains many factual errors; this book attempts to set the record straight. George C. D. Odell’s multivolume history of the theatre in New York, completed more than sixty years ago, also contains a great deal of information; yet it, too, is limited, because Odell’s chronicle is restricted primarily to New York City, whereas the history of the theatre during the period was far more widespread. More recent studies, such as Kenneth Silverman’s *A Cultural History of the American Revolution*, are more accurate than Seilhamer’s and more wide-ranging than Odell’s; however, because they do not focus specifically on the theatre, they omit many details concerning the theatrical productions of the time. Articles in scholarly journals (nine of which have been written by the present author) offer specific details, but are often difficult to locate and, by their nature, offer only fragments of the total picture. I hope that this volume will satisfy the requirements of thoroughness and scope as well as accuracy.

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Preface

I attempt in this book to describe the story of the theatre in America during the Revolution. All the known theatrical performances that took place in America during the conflict (and until British soldiers evacuated the country) are chronicled – in detail, where details are available. In addition, two chapters describe many of the significant plays written in America between 1773 and 1784 that took the War of Independence as their subject. Furthermore, some of the most lavish social entertainments of the time (although not, perhaps, accurately described as “theatre”) were highly theatrical in nature; those, too, are described in the text.

Obviously, the American Revolution was a cataclysmic event with far-reaching social, political, military, and cultural consequences and implications. I do refer to some occurrences that are militarily or politically significant, but only when they affected (or were affected by) the theatre in America during the Revolution. Similarly, the link between the theatre in Great Britain and the performances given in America is acknowledged to be strong, but this book is not fundamentally about that connection. It is quite intentionally focused upon and limited to the theatre in America during the Revolution.

I gratefully acknowledge the journals in which some of the material in this book originally appeared, albeit in somewhat different form, and thank the editors for their permission to reprint it. The original articles, and the journals in which they appeared, are as follows:

“The Theatre in Boston in 1775 and 1776,” *Players*, 51 (3) (Feb./March 1976): 82–5.

“Howe’s Strolling Company’: British Military Theatre in New York and Philadelphia, 1777 and 1778,” *Theatre Survey*, 18 (1) (May 1977): 30–43.

“British Military Theatre in New York in 1778,” *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research*, 16 (1) (May 1977): 44–55.

“Plays and Amusements Offered for and by the American Military during the Revolutionary War,” *Theatre Research International*, 4 (1) (Oct. 1978): 12–24.

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“British Military Theatre in New York City in 1779–80,” *Southern Theatre*, 22 (1) (Winter 1978): 19–26.

“British Military Theatre in New York in 1779,” *Theatre Annual*, 35 (1980): 11–29.

“The Theatre in the South During the American Revolution,” *Southern Quarterly*, 18 (2) (Winter 1980): 44–59.

“A Note on British Military Theatre in New York at the End of the American Revolution,” *New York History*, 62 (2) (April 1981): 177–87.

“British Military Theatre in New York in 1780–81,” *Theatre Survey*, 23 (2) (Nov. 1982): 151–62.

Much of the research for this book was conducted at the British Library in London, the New-York Historical Society, the Maryland Historical Society, and the Library of Congress. I am grateful to the librarians at those institutions who assisted me in my researches.

Finally, my sincere gratitude to Don B. Wilmeth, Peter A. Davis, Brian A. Hatcher, Paul Bushnell, and Heather L. Bazsali for their comments about various drafts of *The Theatre in America during the Revolution*: All of them offered helpful and constructive suggestions, many of which have been incorporated into the text. I am also grateful to Anne Barker for compiling the index for this book. Special recognition is due Judy Brown, who, as always, has been a persistent, constructive, and welcome critic.