

Theatre in the United States: A Documentary History

Volume I: 1750–1915
Theatre in the Colonies
and United States

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1996

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Theatre in the United States: a documentary history / edited by Barry
Witham.

p. cm.

“Section one, 1750–1810: Martha Mahard; Section two, 1810–1865:
David Rinear; Section three, 1865–1915: Don B. Wilmeth.”

Contents: v. 1. 1750–1915, theatre in the colonies and United States.

1. Theater – United States – History – Sources. I. Witham, Barry,
1939–

PN2221.T54 1995

792'.0973 – dc20 94-39375

ISBN 0521 30858 5 / hardback

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0521 30858 5

Transferred to digital printing 2002

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General Introduction

BARRY B. WITHAM

The history of the American theatre is a complex story which has been problematized in recent times by controversies involving periodization, gender, ethnicity, and historiography. When we first began this study, the issues seemed relatively clear: What were the major documents which, brought together in these volumes, could provide a historical narrative of the ways in which the American theatre had been created in the colonies, survived the opposition of churches and the Continental Congress, and then flourished in the rest of the country? In a relatively brief time, however, we discovered that even the most widely accepted views of history were subject to re-examination and critique. What does "American" mean, for example, in a world which has questioned the contribution of artists and theorists outside the geographical confines of the constantly expanding United States? How do we deal with a traditional "history" which has frequently denied or repressed the contributions of women and minorities? And how do we address the fact that so many of our national histories focus on the accomplishments of the Broadway theatre in New York City?

These questions did not lead us to answers but rather to an extensive review of the literature and eventually the formulation of an approach which shapes both the narrative and the selection of documents in these volumes. The literature is impressive. We were struck by the richness of detail in Mary Henderson's *Theater in America* where she grapples with many of the problems that we encountered and finally settles on an approach which divides the material according to function (producer, director, actor, etc).¹ And we admired the breadth and intellectual grasp of Travis Bogard who describes the "central reflector" of American drama as the playwright's ongoing fascination with the land. "The American has always thought of himself as Antaeus, deriving his strength from his contact with the earth."²

¹ Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America* (New York: Abrams, 1986).

² Travis Bogard, *The Revel's History of Drama in English* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 45.

We reviewed many of the pioneering works in the field by Barnard Hewitt, Garff Wilson, and Walter Meserve and rediscovered some interesting resources like the two-part assessment of the American theatre by Richard Moody and Oscar Brockett for the National Educational Theatre Conference in 1986.³ Professor Brockett's piece is especially noteworthy as he attempts to evaluate the impact of the Ford Foundation and the National Endowments on the organization of American theatre as well as speculate on notions of postmodernism in performance.

We concluded after numerous discussions that it might be productive not to try to reinvent categories and periods but rather to examine theatrical activity as a kind of mediation among three specific "tensions" which operated across all geographical and period lines. And these tensions became the controlling principles which guided us in our selection and discussion.

The first is that the American theatre was created and sustained by a tension between what was perceived as "commerce" and what was "art." This is illustrated in a variety of ways from the "closet" dramas of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (compared with the melodramas of the same period) to the current prejudice against the popular theatre of writers such as Neil Simon and Bernard Slade, often considered inferior to their peers, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, or Irene Fornes. Although dramatists like Eugene O'Neill momentarily united these impulses – with four Pulitzer Prizes and over a million dollars at the box office – the tension continues to the present day. Despite the subsidy of the WPA Federal Theatre Project in the 1930s or the National Endowment for the Arts thirty years later, most theatres are forced into a stance where they must negotiate this tension in order to survive. Since even relatively successful regional theatres are only able to earn approximately 70% of their expenses at the box office, new and imaginative funding strategies are constantly being tested in order to insure that "art" has a commercial market.

Of course, this tension is not limited to writers; there are countless examples in the American theatre where commerce and art collide. Edwin Booth's attempts, for example, in the nineteenth century to create a temple of art for Shakespeare had to be constantly revised and subsidized by his colleague Joseph Jefferson's immensely popular presentations of *Rip Van Winkle* (Doc. 160). And the experience of the New Theatre (1909–11) still stands as testimony to the pressures and contradictions of trying to negotiate the uneasy landscape between art and commerce which has characterized much of the American theatre. (Doc. 206–7)

There is, of course, a perception that "art" had nothing to do with the Ameri-

³ "The American Theatre, 1936–1961" and "The American Theatre, 1961–1986"; reprinted in *Theatre History Studies*, 7 (1987), 84–98, 99–116, respectively.

can theatre until well into the nineteenth century but that prejudice has more to do with the literary acceptability of the written word than the performance context.⁴ The “art” of the actor is very much a concern in eighteenth-century America as well as the “politics” of the performance and how that will help or hinder the box office.

Second, there is a tension between what is urban theatre and what was happening in the rest of the country. Historically, theatre in the United States is often a history of the Broadway stage and we have tried in these volumes to mediate between that perception and the vast amount of activity elsewhere. The extravagant touring “Tom Shows” of the nineteenth century, the popular melodramas circulating on the Stair–Havlin “wheel” at the turn of the century and the “Little Theatre” movement in the 1920s all attest to a tradition of popular theatre in the “provinces.” Eighteenth-century theatre companies toured outside of metropolitan areas during the yellow fever season; the university theatres of the mid-twentieth century became repositories of culture in numerous small communities, and the current Regional Theatre movement which exploded in the 1960s saw the creation of professional theatres in Minneapolis, Hartford, New Haven, Seattle, and elsewhere.

While it is true that much of the nation’s touring theatre originated in New York City and that production there served as a kind of imprimatur for works originating elsewhere, there is a rich tradition of theatre activity throughout the country which we have drawn on for this history. E. P. Hingston’s colorful 1864 account of visiting the playhouse in Salt Lake City, with Brigham Young in attendance (Doc. 122), or the rowdy crowd in Cincinnati which Frances Trollope deftly sketches (Doc. 116) provide wonderful insights into a theatre tradition that did not rely upon Manhattan for its legitimacy.

Third, there has been an ongoing tension in the theatre between what is “American” and what is “foreign.” This is perhaps the most important of the three tensions because it is fundamental to the theatre experience and yet resonates differently in different eras. Prior to the institution of an International Copyright Act in the 1880s, for example, American playwrights were often just gifted translators who could go to Paris and transcribe current hits. As times changed, however, the notion of an American voice became central to the theatre. Walt Whitman and others complained about the lack of native dramatists (Doc. 133) and in the early nineteenth century the actor, Edwin Forrest, created prize competitions for plays on American subjects by American writers (Doc. 124). Eventually the idea of “American” became embroiled with the world politics of two wars and the “requirement” of being American was extended to such

⁴ Bogard, *The Revel’s History*, p. 15. The “complete professionalism” to which actors aspired is surely an index of their artistry.

vivid examples as the vetting of playwrights and performers before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the emergence of companies like Teatro Campesino and the Negro Ensemble Company where notions of being “American” were extended beyond a traditional white, male perspective.

This tension – like the other two – has literally ebbed and flowed over the years and has precipitated numerous controversial episodes. The British star “invasions” of the early nineteenth century played a vital part in shaping the nature of American acting and also led to civil disasters such as the Astor Place Riot. More recently, Actors’ Equity “quotas” on the numbers of foreign actors who can appear in Broadway casts has insured more roles for natives but has also led to increasingly restrictive immigrations laws such as those proposed by the Bush administration for visiting artists and companies.

With the controlling notions of these three tensions guiding our philosophical speculation, we then turned to the more pragmatic considerations of how to group specific documents. Since these volumes are related to a larger enterprise at Cambridge University Press (*Theatre in Europe: a documentary history*) we wanted to follow the categories in those volumes where possible. However, because many of the European selections (documents of control or official censorship acts) did not always have direct corollaries in the United States we had to modify the system. Moreover, each of the “periods” in the American theatre had slightly different emphases so we did not impose a completely uniform grid on them.

Consequently, each period has common chapters on such topics as business, acting, theatre buildings, and drama but not all contain information on audience. Based upon the documents which we uncovered, audience benefits from very vivid documents in some eras and a relative paucity in others. Of course, space guidelines also had a great deal to do with sorting out topics common to all eras and those unique to a certain period. Each of the contributors submitted many more documents than we were finally able to use.

The thrust of the material is chronological within each chapter. We chose to do this partly in order to conform with the other books in the Cambridge series and because we decided that this was the clearest way to present the material given the number of editors on the project. Similarly, after numerous discussions and tentative models we came back to a traditional treatment of times and “periods.” And while it is possible to argue for different lines of demarcation as Walter Meserve does so persuasively in *An Emerging Entertainment*, for example, we believed that the project would be best served by traditional periodization rather than creating a new set of signposts.⁵ Thus beginnings and ends are signified by

⁵ Walter J. Meserve, *An Emerging Entertainment: The Drama of the American People to 1828* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). Meserve argues for 1828 as a significant breaking period in American Drama because of, among other things, the election of Andrew Jackson and the launching of Edwin Forrest’s playwriting competitions.

events such as George Frederick Cooke's influential tours in the nineteenth century, the American Civil War, and the constellation of forces that mark the years around 1915 as a significant place from which to view the modern.

In reprinting such a wide variety of documents we have had to deal with a host of stylistic and editing problems and I would like to acknowledge especially the help of Sarah Stanton at Cambridge University Press who has been enormously supportive of the project over the years. In the midst of struggling to obtain copyright permissions, replacing editors who had not realized the enormity of the project, or awaiting the arrival of long-sought photographs, she has been patient and helpful.

Initially, Cambridge undertook this project with the intent of allowing the documents to speak for themselves and intended a minimum of footnotes. As it evolved, however, some editors felt that more notes were needed to provide a better context or to reference recent scholarship. As a result some sections have more notes than others, although I have tried to insure that archaic, confusing, or long forgotten references have some explanation. The language of the documents has been consistently modernized in matters of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical usage for clarity – except in cases where an individual editor wants to catch the flavor of a particular letter or contract – and generous cuts have been made in a lot of the documents where material was deemed to be redundant or not illustrative of the subject under discussion. Each period contains an introductory essay and connecting commentary by the individual compilers which further amplifies what is unique about that period and its documents. The connecting statements provide a narrative and a link between individual documents.

The “history” of the American theatre is a daunting topic and selecting the documents that most clearly illuminate that story is both rewarding and controversial. We had hoped to include many more documents illustrating popular entertainments, non-traditional theatre pieces, and native American performance but page constraints forced us to eliminate many items in this volume. Each printed document excludes several others and eventually the “construction” of this history involves numerous compromises among contributors and editors. By establishing a series of mediating tensions, however, we have tried to provide a focus whereby contributors have the freedom to tell their individual stories within the boundaries of a larger narrative. Volume One traces the theatre from its earliest manifestations in Colonial America to approximately 1915. Volume Two picks up the threads of that narrative and concludes in the present with particular emphasis on the marginalized and minority voices which were discovered and recovered in the twentieth century.