



THE MAKING OF AMERICAN
Audiences

From Stage to Television, 1750–1990

RICHARD BUTSCH



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Colonial Theater, Privileged Audiences

During the first third of this history, from about 1750 to the 1820s, America underwent major political, social, and cultural transformations that were reflected in theater audiences. In 1750, Colonial America, more than England itself, still was a monarchical society ruled by royal governors and gentry chartered and licensed by the king. The Revolution of course changed this and substituted a bourgeois democratic structure premised on the idea of government serving the people. Commoners challenged the authority of gentry and asserted their right to a voice in their own governance. By the 1820s early industrialization transformed class relations and the nascent working class gathered in urban neighborhoods. Throughout this time audiences were active and exercised sovereignty over performances. But who wielded this power and with what significance changed. Theater audiences continued to be important public gatherings, but the behavior and significance of the gatherings changed. Audience gender changed too, but its significance was as much about class as about gender. In the next three chapters we will detail these changes.

Professional theater arrived in the colonies in the 1750s,¹ just as the power of gentry had reached a high point and was about to enter a long process of dismantling. The colonies were a hierarchical society with a specific place for each person in a vertical structure. Relations were governed by a culture of deference, an expectation that each individual would defer to his “betters” and expect the same from his inferiors. Deference was based upon the real power of superiors to materially control the fortunes of those beneath them. A small number of elites controlled everything from government to land and commerce to religion.²

The most important distinction was between gentry and commoners, “lace” versus “leather aprons”. Gentlemen were those of such wealth that they need not work. They proclaimed their gentility through their behavior, their demeanor, their education, their leisure. Their lifestyle provided employment for commoners.³ Commoners were those who must work for a living, regardless of their income or skill. Gentry expected from them dutiful bows and doffed caps.

Actors were commoners and were expected to display proper deference. They were also itinerants. Even the largest cities of the colonies were only a few thousand residents, of whom only a few hundred could afford to regularly support theater.⁴ Actors had to move from town to town to seek audiences. That made them vagabonds who without references could be jailed or ejected from a town, according to English laws of vagrancy.⁵ Actors therefore sought powerful patrons to sponsor them when applying for license to play at a destination. The players had to submit letters of reference to the royal governor as testimony that they would cause no trouble.⁶

The culture of deference required actors to pay their respects to all the leading citizens. One manifestation of this was the custom in the 1750s for actors to call upon each of the principal inhabitants of the town to solicit their attendance at the theater for benefit performances. Announcements of benefits customarily said that, the actor “humbly begs the Gentlemen and Ladies will be so kind as to favor him with their company.”⁷ Public statements by managers of the 1750s express a remarkable obsequiousness, the verbal equivalent of doffing the hat and bowing. In announcing their arrival in the *New York Mercury*, Lewis Hallam, founder of one of the first acting companies in America, wrote that his company “humbly submitted to the Consideration of the Publick; whose Servants they are, and whose Protection they intreat [sic].” In part this tone was the norm even

among gentry, a florid style borrowed from the Restoration court. However, it takes on significance when contrasted to the more egalitarian tone and behavior soon to replace it. A 1762 playbill for New York indicated a change in the practice of calling on patrons: "The ceremony of waiting on ladies and gentlemen at their houses with bills has been for some time left off in this company; the frequent solicitations on these occasions having been found rather an inconvenience to the person so waited on, than a compliment."⁸

An acting company's success depended to a considerable degree on these deferential relations between patrons and clients. Theater did not operate in a full market economy. While tickets were sold to the general public, a large portion of their income depended upon the willingness of wealthy gentry to purchase the lion's share and through their patronage encourage others of their class to do so too.⁹ The colonial "audience," in several senses then, was the gentry.

Audiences of Gentry

Consequently, troupes frequented those southern towns that were centers of the privileged gentry life. Troupes arranged to play in Williamsburg, Virginia and other seats of royal governors to coincide with sessions of court and colonial assemblies, when markets and horseracing were also scheduled. These were sure to draw the gentry from the countryside and fill the theater. Gentry typically attended every performance when a troupe was in town.¹⁰ Box seats where ladies and gentry families sat provided the bulk of income. The pit seated gentlemen without ladies, merchants, and others moderately well-to-do. Servants and slaves who arrived early to hold seats for their masters – there was no reserved seating – removed themselves to the gallery for the performance. Bills typically advised attendees to send servants to pick up tickets and hold seats or on where to descend from their carriages.

Managers made clear in their playbills their desire to accommodate ladies, more than they would after the Revolution. On some occasions the pit and boxes were "laid together," meaning the pit was railed off into boxes. An announcement of such intentions in 1754 stated explicitly that this was done "For the better accommodation of the Ladies" at a performance of *Romeo* by an actor popular with women. In April 1762 in New York City an actor postponed his benefit "as the Weather was then too bad for any Ladies to walk," indicating how

important a segment of the audience were privileged women. A frequent announcement in playbills was that “Ladies will please to send their servants to keep their places.”¹¹

Sources suggest that *young* gentlemen and ladies were an important segment of the audience. An opponent of theater in 1768 attempted to dissuade young ladies and gentlemen from attending theater, saying “I suspect that the Play-house could not long support itself from the middle-aged and grey-headed.” Opponents and supporters often referred to theater’s attractions for youth. It is perhaps these young ladies and gentlemen who, like their counterparts in England, featured themselves, rather than the play, as the center of attention.¹²

Colonial gentry arrived late, were inattentive, and talked noisily. A playbill of 1754 for New York warned that the curtain would rise on time, despite latecomers, in order to not inconvenience those already arrived. Foppish young gentlemen took advantage of their privileged status to go backstage during the performance, pester the actresses, and even wander on stage to display their fine clothes – another English custom. In the winter of 1761–62 David Douglass, who had succeeded Hallam as the head of the acting company, had to repeatedly petition in playbills to clear the stage in New York. He complained in a public notice that “gentlemen crowd the stage and very much interrupt the performance” and announced that no one would be admitted backstage who did not have a ticket for the stage or upper boxes. Such complaints and warnings indicate managers’ partially effective effort to contain unruly young gentry, probably with the support of some of the older gentry.¹³

These behaviors replicated those of English tradition in which the players were merely props in the performances of the privileged, for whom the theater was no different (in terms of these considerations) than a drawing room where they might carry on their relations with each other. Watching the play was simply one activity embedded in the more general social event of attending theater. Inattention and free trespass of the boundary between performer and audience were practices that served to affirm gentry status and the general hierarchy of colonial life.

While the upper class predominated, a few commoners appear to have attended as well. Middling artisans might afford a gallery ticket as a special occasion. The lowest ticket price was two shillings for a gallery ticket. Pit tickets were typically twice the price of the gallery. A Philadelphia laborer’s wages in the mid-1750s were about ten shillings

per week; a journeyman tailor, four shillings a day in 1762. For skilled workers theater was something of an expense, affordable on occasion, but most likely only in the gallery. Laborers and apprentices probably rarely attended.¹⁴

A recurring theme raised by opponents of theater in the 1760s and 1770s was the temptation it represented to those who could not really afford it. In one example in January 1768, "Thrifty" claimed that some tradesmen who were in debt or unemployed, for whom some benefactors found work, were wasting money to "frequent the Play-house with their families." These complaints were not the typical religious condemnations of theater and did not object to gentry attending, but expressed concern for the welfare of the town when tradesmen who could not afford such a luxury were tempted by the habits of their "betters" and by their wives and daughters to indulge themselves beyond their means. Even "middling sorts" had to be careful of their expenditures, since their fortunes could change quickly with the economy.¹⁵

Beginning in the 1760s there is some evidence of the rowdiness that became the trademark of the gallery in the nineteenth century. In 1762 in New York, David Douglass offered a reward to "whoever can discover the Person who was so very rude to throw Eggs from the Gallery, upon the Stage last Monday, by which the Cloaths [sic] of some Ladies and Gentlemen in the Boxes were spoiled, and the Performance in some Measure interrupted."¹⁶ A Charleston music concert in 1765 was moved from a garden to the theater, due to some persons "so indiscreet as to attempt climbing over the fence to the annoyance of the subscribers" at the garden.¹⁷

Whatever the numbers of commoners in the audience, managers incorporated the English traditions of class divisions of the audience into box, pit, and gallery, reflecting the hierarchical society and its culture of deference. Each group had their proper place in the theater just as they had in society. Servants could not remain in the pit, where they held seats for their masters, but must remove themselves to the gallery. Slaves, free blacks, and other menials also would not be tolerated among gentry. Similarly the pit was no place for a lady whose status required a box where those with whom she sat were there by invitation and proper introduction. This segregation preserved proper relations of deference.

Separation was emphasized in the Williamsburg theater and the Southwark (Philadelphia) Theater, built in 1759, by installing rows of

spikes separating the boxes and the stage from the pit and gallery. These spikes were not insignificant. On a night in 1752 burglars broke into the Williamsburg building and threw an actor upon a spike that penetrated his leg so deeply that he hung suspended until some passerby heard his cry for help. In the 1750s the spikes probably reflected more of the influence of English tradition of theater architecture than of an American necessity, as theater was too new in the colonies to have established the need here. But they may have gained a purpose during the 1760s as anti-aristocratic sentiment grew.¹⁸

Dramatic Protests

In sum, theater was an institution of the colonial aristocracy who, with their families, friends, servants, slaves, and clients, composed the audience. The actors were wholly dependent upon the aristocratic audience as their patrons. It was an active audience, but the rowdiness was of the sort based in aristocratic prerogative – young gentlemen strutting, carousing, and misbehaving themselves. Senses of an active audience engaged in collective action were absent because other classes besides servants and slaves were insubstantial in the audience. They were *outside* the theater and often opposed to theater, specifically because it was an aristocratic institution, representing from a religious point of view, decadence, and from a political view, domination.

The southern colonies were more hospitable. Williamsburg, Virginia, Annapolis, Maryland, and Charleston, South Carolina had some of the earliest active amateur theater groups and were visited by early touring professional companies, who played without opposition in the 1750s.¹⁹ Northern colonists opposed theater on religious grounds and often succeeded in imposing bans on performances. Massachusetts banned theater in 1750 and did not repeal it until 1792; Philadelphia Quakers opposed it repeatedly in the 1750s and 1760s, whenever troupes petitioned the governor for permission to play, and Pennsylvania forbade plays in 1759. Rhode Island and New Hampshire banned theater in 1762.²⁰

Opposition against Hallam's company was strong in New York and Philadelphia in the 1753–54 season. Nevertheless, supporters of theater prevailed and Hallam was granted permission in both cities. Douglass's company escaped the 1759 ban in Pennsylvania because the governor delayed its effective date long enough for them to present

a five-month season of drama. Outside New England, theater had strong supporters among the most powerful and influential, including governors, and, although the opposition was not without influence, they often lost the battle.²¹

Early objections to theater were mostly to the place and people, rather than to the plays. Some even approved of reading plays while opposed to attending performances. Religious objections centered upon the theater as a depraved *place* frequented by immoral people, audience and performers alike. Opponents called the playhouse the “house of the devil,” “synagogue of Satan,” “school of debauchery.” The actors’ character more than the characters they played were at issue. In 1761 in New York City and again five years later in Philadelphia Douglass defended his actors’ character from the “vilest epithets.” As to the audience, one New York critic in 1761 accused all women who attended theater of lacking modesty. One critic even claimed that the problem was the people who congregated *outside* the theater, where “riots, drunkenness and obscenity are among the least of the evils nightly practised.”²²

Religious opposition, rooted in the Puritan cause of the English civil war, tended to be anti-aristocratic as well. Actors had joined the king’s army against the Puritan army of Cromwell, who closed all English theaters in 1642. Upon restoration, the king reopened court theaters where plays often ridiculed Puritans. Restoration aristocracy and theater were notorious for their licentious and decadent lifestyle. Religious opponents then tended to equate theater with being both an aristocratic and decadent institution.²³

In the 1760s circumstances began to change. A regular “assault on aristocracy,” as historian Gordon Wood phrases it, arose. After the French and Indian War (1756–1763) rejection of deference intensified with a postwar depression. With the Stamp Act of 1765 resentment toward wealth and luxurious living increased further.²⁴ A series of incidents within and surrounding theaters indicated the beginnings of class confrontations in theater spaces that developed and continued through the Jacksonian era. Opposition to theater became openly political, and resentment of the British intertwined with class resentment. With the rising tide of anti-British feelings, theater was an obvious target. The actors were English; the plays were too. The willing patronage of the royal governors also reinforced the image of theater as a symbol of English rule. Actors, dependent upon royal governors, were reluctant to express anti-aristocratic sentiments or otherwise

distance themselves from aristocracy. The American Company, renamed by Douglass in 1763 to avoid becoming a target of anti-British sentiments, still included on its advertisement in Philadelphia of April 1767 the phrase, *vivant rex et regina*. Such a public pronouncement of affiliation with the English crown on playbills, even if simple compliance with the law, must have inflamed antitheater feelings of colonists. Antitheatrical legislation expressed the anti-British feeling of northern merchants. Theater became subject to the sentiments of the boycott movement against British goods.²⁵

Perceiving English rule as enforcing economic hardship, opposition to England became alloyed with opposition to aristocracy and wealth. The expense and frugality forced upon colonists by parliamentary acts produced hostility to the “extravagance” of theater. The *New York Journal* in January 1768 complained, “The money thrown away in one night at a play would purchase wood, provisions and other necessities, sufficient for a number of poor.” Imported theater competed with domestic products for the scarce incomes of colonists.²⁶ The repeated characterization of theater as an extravagance represented a changed attitude toward wealth and toward the obligation of deference. Leisure signifiers of a gentlemen’s status, such as patronizing theater, were now attacked as idleness. The gentry’s association with the English justified refusing deference to them as an act of national independence. Many colonists considered English actors lackeys to aristocracy.²⁷

Antitheatrical sentiments burst forth in the first major American theater riot. In New York City in 1766 the Sons of Liberty, who opposed the Stamp Act, passed a resolution to not “admit the strollers, arrived here to act, though the [British] General has given them Permission.” Followers of the Sons prevented some actors, whom Douglass had sent in advance of the whole company, from performing at the Chapel Street Theater for two nights. On the third night, as a performance got underway, a “grand Rout instantly took place both Out and In the House... Lights were soon extinguished, and both Inside and Outside soon torn to Pieces and burnt by Persons unknown.” Several people were injured and, according to one account, a boy killed in the attack and flight from the theater. Having cleared the audience out, rioters pulled down the theater, dragged the wood to a nearby square and built a bonfire, a typical part of street protests, all the while shouting “Liberty!” The riot revealed strong class sentiments. One newspaper said that many “thought it highly

improper that such Entertainments should be exhibited at this time of public Distress, when great Numbers of poor People can scarce find the Means of subsistence.”²⁸

In this riot the attack was from outside, upon the theater as a British institution and symbol of the oppression of the Stamp Act. But this incident also reveals the pattern of equating the English with aristocracy and wealth, and opposing these as antidemocratic and anti-American. The pattern of equating class and nationality remained through the Jacksonian period. Artisans consistently equated the two, in the process also equating Revolutionary ideals or Americanism with the common man.

In the early 1770s a series of incidents involving artisans and laborers suggest the incipient development of class tensions *within* the theater, and the rise of an active, collectively oriented lower-class audience. After an October 28, 1772 performance by Douglass’s American Company at the Southwark Theater in Philadelphia, a theater critic denounced “some Ruffians in the Gallery”:

...if they call for a Song, or a Prologue, of which no Notice is given in the Bills, the Actors have an equal Demand upon them for an extraordinary Price for a Compliance with their Request – which of those vociferous gentlemen, of a Carpenter, Mason, or Taylor, will do more work than he bargains for without adequate Compensation? – Are not the Players in the same predicament? But to dismiss the Subject, the Directors of the Theatre are publicly desired to engage a Number of Constables, and dispose them in different Parts of the Gallery, who upon the smallest Disturbance, for the Future, may be authorized, by any Magistrate, and there are always enough in the House, to apprehend and carry to the Work-House, such Rioters, by which Means, Peace will be restored, and a few examples deter others from the like Outrages.²⁹

This published challenge to the rights of audiences coincided with an increased presence of artisans in theaters. It was published at a time of larger strains between classes, when artisans of Philadelphia were explicitly rejecting the leadership of the merchant-lawyer elite. The calls for limitations on audience rights were directed at “carpenter, mason, or taylor” as the “ruffians” in the gallery, revealing the presence of lower classes in the audience in sufficient numbers and sufficiently active to foster the class tensions implicit in the complaint. The demands for police to enforce order indicate a desire to suppress working-class protests, a desire usually associated with the Jacksonian period.

At the same theater two months later in a small riot outside the gallery door, two people were arrested, and later that evening others broke into the theater and removed the iron spikes, the literal and symbolic class barrier that separated the gallery from the upper boxes. Douglass faced a similarly boisterous gallery when he moved to New York in the spring. There he called for the “better dispos’d People” in the audience to point out the repeated “offenders” to constables stationed in the theater or he would shut the gallery. The gallery, precinct of the lower classes, increasingly was becoming troublesome for elites.³⁰

The violence, the action in the street outside the theater, and the class makeup of the crowds all indicate that theaters and theater audiences were involved in a form of lower-class political participation distinct from that after the Revolution. These incidents exemplify the operation of the moral economy of the crowd, as British historian E. P. Thompson termed it. In the early industrial settings of England and France, working-class political participation took the form of riots. Through riots, they defended what they considered their traditional rights. The term “moral economy” refers to the expectation that prices be set at what was traditionally accepted as fair, rather than by the market. This principle was applied more widely to defend political as well as economic rights.³¹ Historian George Rude typified lower-class crowds as marked by direct action and violence to property more than to persons; discrimination in selecting targets; spontaneous with minimal organization and beginning with small incidents; composed of lower classes and artisans; and ideologically turned toward the past. Urban actions in particular he described as egalitarian, concerned with justice and rights of freeborn Englishmen, and class hostility to the rich.³²

The Chapel Street riot as well as the series of incidents at Philadelphia’s Southwark Theater fit these interpretations. In action and words rioters indicated that the attack was by lower classes upon wealth. Through crowd action they rectified what they considered a violation of the moral economy, that the privileged attended theater while others suffered hardship from the Stamp Act and other Acts. The crowd that removed the spikes in the Philadelphia theater was similarly taking matters into its own hands. The actions, however, differed from the moral economy in that they justified their actions not through tradition, but through new rights that would be enunciated in the Revolution and a repudiation of their traditional deference. This

difference from the traditional crowd constituted the opening through which artisan political participation after the Revolution would incorporate political debate as well as riot.

The use of crowd action to rectify a situation was the hallmark of the moral economy. They acted since the government, which served the king, was not expected to act in their interest. This stands in contrast to the conception of the bourgeois public sphere upon which the new polity arising from the Revolution would be premised. The public sphere was a social situation in which private persons debated public issues and let rational argument rather than power and status determine decisions. The public sphere was supposed to be a space beyond money and power. This bourgeois democracy was premised on the idea expressed in the Declaration of Independence that government served the people, and the idea expressed in the First Amendment that people would "petition the government for redress of grievance." The presumption was that people gathered together would debate and decide issues; the government as their servant would act. Public spaces would be used legitimately for debate instead of crowd actions. Thus the theater would suffice for debate, whereas the street was more suited to the action of the moral economy.

The incidents in the early 1770s, however, suggest some shifts in circumstances. Actions still indicate the exercise of a moral economy, in removing offenses by force, for example, the spikes. On the other hand, more artisans were now *inside* the theater, part of the audience, and objections to their behavior suggest both an elite unaccustomed to tolerating them inside the theater, and an increased concern about containing and controlling their behavior. Yet, the objection to the gallery's behavior also acknowledged their rights to be there and to demand the bill. The inclusion of artisans in the audience with elites seems a step toward a theater as public sphere where, in a decade or so, they would be debating each other.

This bourgeois concept of debate in public space and trust of the government to listen – and of the powerful to let argument decide – however, was never fully accepted by the artisan classes. While to some degree artisans in the theater audience accepted and participated, yet they periodically took matters into their own hands, as they did outside the theater. Street riots continued to be an important form of lower-class expression.³³ Therefore violent crowd action continued to be a part of theater disturbances through the Jacksonian era, even when at the same time participating in debate in the public space of

the theater. There was a tenuous balance between debate and order on the one hand and crowd action and disorder on the other. Even the debates themselves often involved violence. Ultimately, inclusion of the lower classes created such heterogeneity that debate produced dissension rather than decision. From the elite point of view the “quality of the discourse” had degenerated. The elites eventually would withdraw from the debate and reestablish homogeneous assemblies in their own exclusive opera houses.