

Introduction

Christopher Bigsby and Don B. Wilmeth

On 15 September 1752, in Williamsburg, the capital of Virginia, the first play performed in America by a fully professional company was presented. It was Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*; its *Virginia Gazette* advertisement ended with the formulaic phrase "Vivat Rex." It is hard not to see a certain symbolic significance in this production. First, company, play, and actors were British, as, of course, was the audience. After all, this was a British colony, and the Revolution was still more than two decades ahead. The influence of the British theatre, indeed, would remain central, if a matter of growing contention, throughout the period covered by this volume. Second, it was notable that the performance took place in a southern colony, for the fact is that theatre did not find a ready home on a continent that to some was to be a new Eden, a world in which God alone would have the prerogative of invention.

The only Word, the only authorized text, was to be the Bible, and man's role was to be obedient to He who alone was the author of the human drama. The frivolous, the sensual, the illicit were to be shunned. Display was seen as unseemly, the aesthetic as suspect. Boundaries were to be respected, not transgressed, and the theatre, as the Puritans well knew, had always been about transgression. Those on board the Mayflower had not suffered the privations of sea crossing and winter storms to worship Dionysus. They had another God, who would not be mocked by those who seduced by their skills of mimicry or claimed a license to portray the proscribed. The actor implied a Protean world in which transformation was a central and vivifying principle. Those who landed on Plymouth Rock looked to something more permanent.

Theatre in America was born into an immediately hostile environment – physically demanding, philosophically suspicious, culturally uncertain. A communal art, it found itself in a society whose priorities had to do with subordinating the natural world and enforcing covenants that foregrounded spiritual or commercial imperatives. This was a society busy constituting itself, simultaneously attracted to and repelled by a mother country whose possibilities – personal and civic – seemed depleted. The first formal playhouse, in Williamsburg, was not built until over a century after the original settlement,

whereas the first theatre in Boston, epicenter of Puritanism, was constructed some fifteen years after the Revolution. Apart from anything else, a playhouse required a sizable population to support it, and before the Revolution there were barely half a dozen centers with more than ten thousand citizens. Boston itself could boast only twenty thousand in 1774. But theatre consists of more than buildings. The impetus to perform, the need for public entertainment, for a collaborative and social art, is plainly irresistible, and there is evidence for such from the earliest days of exploration and settlement. Theatre accompanied the colonizers. Even the Spanish took time out from their search for golden cities to distract themselves from their failed utopianism with dramatic performances.

Despite its origins in religious and civic ceremony, theatre has always been a tainted art. In Imperial Rome any soldier turning to acting was instantly executed, whereas actors were required to raise their children in the same profession to limit the spread of corruption. The Puritans attacked the theatre for its presumption in challenging God's power to create character, for its licentiousness, and for its inconsequence. They recognized a certain lubriciousness in a form that displayed intemperate emotions and placed the body at the center of attention. Beyond that, theatre validated assembly and provided the occasion for a promiscuous mixing of people. Nor were the Puritans wrong. For whether or not sexual adventures were conducted on the stage, they had certainly historically been conducted in the auditorium, which in America continued to be a place of assignation, both amateur and professional, until well into the nineteenth century. It is notable that we know of one of the earliest performances in America, that of *Ye Bear and Ye Cubb* in 1665, because of attempts to ban it.

The fact is that despite the hostility that it encountered, theatre resisted proscription and has always proved adaptable to shifting circumstances, fashions, and values – adaptable to and expressive of such changes. Any history of theatre must therefore perforce be a history of the society that produced it. But such a history is not easily reconstituted, or not as easily as other cultural forms.

The history of the novel is easily reconstructed. We can be reasonably certain as to the logistics of publication and the nature of its readership. Easily carried, the book could survive sea crossings and frontier adventures, be picked up and put down at will, integrated with ease into the shifting rhythms of daily life. The price of purchase, provided that it or the form itself was not seen as subversive (as the novel itself was in South America for several centuries), was the only cost associated with an experience that could be public but that was usually private. Being itself a new form, it could take the impress of new experiences and prove adaptable to change. Beyond that, and crucially, books themselves are permanent. They survive. The history of the the-

atre is harder to establish. We have accounts of productions but not the thing itself. Texts may have survived, but performances have not, and performances are by their nature difficult to recuperate. We read accounts that speak, for example, of “realistic acting” in the knowledge that definitions of stage realism change with each generation. We acknowledge the dominance of English playwrights, actors, and stage designers but know less of the cultural, social, and even political uses to which such influences were put, since each society transforms the products it acquires from abroad, making them serve new purposes whatever the nature of their origin, whether it be British working-class fish and chips repackaged as franchised fast food for the middle class of America or British soap opera transformed into “Masterpiece Theatre” solely by virtue of crossing the Atlantic.

The form and nature of the novel remained open and unvalidated. It was, as its name implied, a new form whose development was coterminous with the settlement of America and in which America might be thought to have a hand. Henry James’s “baggy monster” was by its nature undefined, sufficiently loose and expansive to incorporate a shifting reality. The ambition to create the “Great American Novel” may have been an act of hubris, but implicit in that ambition was a recognition of the fact that the novel could bend itself to new experiences, being fluid and without definable parameters. The theatre, with the authority of a longer tradition, shaped by other necessities than those of an emerging society, and subject to the limitations implicit in the form, was not so easily shoehorned into a novel environment, or, at least, not at first. The conventions of theatre, while permitting an imaginative expansion in time and space, constantly grounded that expansiveness in its own conventions. America did in fact play a major role in defining the modern novel. The situation with respect to theatre was different. Its tradition was external to the country. The early dominant playwrights were European, as were the principal actors. Theatre buildings followed European models as did styles of production. However, theatre changed as it necessarily adapted to new priorities, new conditions, and new assumptions. Nation building is not only a matter of political exhortation and physical exploration; it is a search for and justification of distinctiveness. Pride in geography and the new realities of the American continent eventually resulted in a call for equally distinctive cultural products that spoke not of an abandoned world but of a world in the making. An immigrant culture looks for justifications for the abandonment of old personal and social ties. Nostalgia for familiar if relinquished places and habits is balanced by a need to insist on the self-evident virtues of the new.

Certainly, revolution provoked a revolt against more than political values. The surprise, perhaps, is that England contrived to exercise cultural hegemony for as long as it did. Audiences who had just staged a successful revolt

against the crown then took pleasure in plays that focused on the very principle of royalty they had supposedly rejected, just as in the twentieth century Americans remained fascinated by a British royal family itself reduced to largely theatrical significance.

In one sense the history of theatre in America recapitulates the history of America itself, in the attempt to stage a drama of social change while retaining a stabilizing sense of order. Just as the new topography was linguistically assimilated to the old (New London being sited on the River Thames), so cultural transformations were accommodated to familiar forms, styles, and characters. Plays, actors, and companies were imported along with other necessities, being required to do no more at first than announce their port of origin to establish their value. But they were also in time suspected to be incompatible with a new sense of national identity and as such began to take on a local coloration.

America was from the beginning a theatricalized environment, a space to be filled with significant action. Americans stood self-consciously upon a stage and prepared to perform exemplary actions. The Puritans knew the risk implicit in theatre, with its personations and pluralism of voices, but, as Nathaniel Hawthorne appreciated, they were hardly innocent of deploying its power, and not merely in the dramatic monologues in which its ministers revealed or the constructed dialogues they deployed in their published texts. When the sinner Hester Prynne was to be publicly chastised for breaching their codes, in *The Scarlet Letter*, she was made to costume herself and offered a text to speak before an audience sensitive to the symbolic meanings enacted before them. She was required to play out a drama of humiliation and repentance on a stage devised and constructed for the purpose of national consolidation. Encouraged to read the world symbolically, the Puritans saw no event as arbitrary: Each was expressive of an imminent meaning, each was staged by God for the enlightenment of man. The Quakers, likewise, suspicious though they were of masquerade, nonetheless were equally aware of participating in a drama greater than that staged in their own churches when persons rose to their feet and declared themselves in possession of their individual conscience and hence of their destiny.

When the theatre was banned, it cloaked itself in the very moral arguments that had been invoked to secure the ban, just as moralists had borrowed the techniques of a form they affected to despise. Theatrical performances were forbidden? Very well, early audiences were invited to plays in Boston and elsewhere under the guise of “moral lectures” or, later, informed of a “Histrionic Academy,” where they would hear dissertations on subjects “Moral, Instructive and Entertaining,” presumably in that order. Failing that, they could enjoy “Moral Dialogues” of the kind Puritans themselves had ostensibly engaged in. When David Douglass, who married Lewis Hallam’s

widow and reorganized the Hallam Company, played in New England in 1761, he presumably presented *Othello* as just such “a series of moral dialogues.” Such a transparent subterfuge, however, can have fooled few, but moral sanctions were often embraced at the level of legal injunctions and ignored at the level of actual performance. Nor were bans ever really effective. In 1709 the Province of New York banned acting, along with cockfighting. Six years later Robert Hunter, governor of New York, published *Androboros*, a satire on the Provincial Court and the lieutenant governor. Prohibitions, though, continued. In 1750 the General Court of Massachusetts banned the theatre. Nine years later, in 1759, the House of Representatives of the Colony of Pennsylvania passed a law forbidding the showing and acting of plays, with a penalty of 500 pounds. In 1762 the New Hampshire House of Representatives refused a group of actors admission to perform in Portsmouth on the grounds that plays had a “peculiar influence on the minds of young people and greatly endanger their morals by giving them a taste for intriguing, amusement and pleasure” (quoted in Hornblow, I, 24).

The first Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia in 1774, passed a resolution in which its members committed themselves to discountenancing and discouraging “every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting, exhibition of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments.” Revolution was not, they thought, compatible with drama. More than that, the Congress resolved that “any person holding office under the United States who shall act, promote, encourage or attend such play shall be deemed unworthy to hold office and shall be accordingly dismissed” (quoted in Moses, *American Dramatist*, 41). This did not, however, prevent George Washington from patronizing the theatre, or various colonies – most notably Maryland – from continuing to enjoy plays. The British, meanwhile, determined that if the Congress could close theatres, they could open them. General Burgoyne, himself an amateur actor and playwright, sanctioned theatrical performances in Boston’s Faneuil Hall during the Revolution. Others followed in New York, where the manager of the company was Dr. Beaumont, surgeon general of the British Forces, and Major Williams of the artillery played the tragic heroes and his mistress the heroines. Theatre thus became the arena for a battle otherwise fought in the streets and fields.

Two weeks before the soldiers opened their season at the John Street Theatre, a notice appeared in the press announcing that the theatre would open “for the charitable purpose of relieving the Widows and Orphans of Sailors and Soldiers who have fallen in support of the Constitutional Rights of Great Britain in America” (quoted in Jared Brown, 33). The connection between theatre and politics could hardly be clearer, even if the plays – including *Tom Thumb*, *The Beaux’ Strategem*, and *The Suspicious Husband* – showed little evi-

dence of that link. In Philadelphia, likewise, war and theatre came together as the Southwark Theatre was used first as a hospital for the wounded before staging, in January 1778, fourteen plays, including *Henry IV*. Reportedly, Major John André, who was later sent to negotiate with Benedict Arnold – traitor or loyalist depending on your nationality – painted the scenery at the Southwark. This was the same André who was to become the subject of a play by William Dunlap.

Theatre also had high-level support. As president, George Washington had a regular seat, first at the John Street Theatre and then the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, as the nation's capital moved relentlessly south. Abraham Lincoln was also a keen theatregoer until his enthusiasm was blunted by a bullet. John Wilkes Booth, an accomplished theatrical regicide, killed the president of the United States and then justified himself in Latin, thus dignifying the assassination with a touch of linguistic hubris and establishing a link to Shakespeare with the Latin tag from *Julius Caesar*. The killing itself was thus offered as an act of theatre while proclaiming a natural relationship between the public arena and the stage. Where else should a nation's tensions be staged but in a theatre? Where more appropriate to ring down the curtain on the Civil War?

Assassination was, thankfully, a rarity, but general disorder was for a long time epidemic. Washington Irving's account of his visit to the theatre, in 1801, reveals it to have been a kind of bear pit (fittingly, since, back in England, the bear pit and the theatre were usually situated next to one another and occasionally in the same building), in which audiences displayed little interest in the play and a great deal in themselves, a behavior common enough, to be sure, in England. If Frances Trollope is to be believed, however, America took this propensity to disruption to even greater heights, or depths. Reporting on a visit to the theatre in Cincinnati, she objected to the audience's habit of spitting and bursting into choruses of "Yankee Doodle." Because Cincinnati only boasted a population of one thousand, and was the only western town of any size until steam navigation opened up the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, this might be thought to be evidence of a certain frontier rawness. But things scarcely improved in Pittsburg, population twenty thousand, where she heard the sound of tobacco juice hitting the floor as a counterpoint to the declamation of actors, or in Washington, where the redoubtable Mrs. Trollope observed a man in the pit who "was seized with a violent fit of vomiting, which appeared not in the least to annoy or surprise his neighbors" (quoted in Hewitt, 120–21). And why should it? Theatre was not a site of decorum or a place to seek moral enlightenment or uplifting experiences. It was a source of entertainment, a place of public display, a stage where local pride could celebrate its accomplishments, and a nation's pretensions could find a form commensurate with its new energies. Nor was the audience then, as now,

expected to sit in reverential silence. People went to participate, albeit at times overenthusiastically. Musicians in Boston once felt compelled to complain to the newspapers at being singled out as the target for peanuts and pieces of fruit, criticism being yet to establish a more formal language.

Perhaps such Dionysian behavior explains why, in 1824, the president of Yale College remarked that “to indulge a taste for playgoing means nothing more or less than the loss of that most valuable treasure the immortal soul” (quoted in Hornblow, I, 24). The theatre, however, predictably, survived. What Dionysus proposes the president of Yale is unlikely to frustrate. He did, however, have the virtue of precedent. In 1756 a memorandum from the Yale faculty charged that a play had been acted and that students and townsfolk had lingered “until after nine of the clock.” Such playmaking, it was declared, “is of a very pernicious nature, tending to corrupt the morals of the seminary of religion and learning, and of mankind in general, and to the mispence of precious time and money” (quoted in Moody, *Dramas*, 2). Puritan affront and Yankee prudence, it seems, were beginning to come into alignment. The students were fined eight pence and the actors three shillings, as ever the actors being required to bear the greater moral responsibility.

The question arises as to what is American about the American theatre at a time when theatre was contested as a form and the uniqueness of the American experience was far from being fully articulated? America was, for more than 170 years, a colony and displayed the characteristics of a colony, conceding cultural primacy to an imperial center. Yet, even with independence, in the world of theatre England was still liable to define content, style, and subject matter. The British also had the advantage of boasting the preeminent playwright-poet in the English language, in the form of William Shakespeare, and of offering superior roles for actors, nostalgia for an abandoned country, cultural primacy for an educated elite, and moral sanction for a suspect art.

English theatre did, indeed, carry its own cachet, as did English actors, a fact satirized by Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Not only did Shakespeare predominate, but even new London plays made their way quickly to America. Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* opened at the American Company’s New York theatre less than five months after its London premiere. The English theatre was also experiencing a revival at the very time the American theatre was emerging, with Joseph Addison, William Congreve, John Dryden, George Farquhar, and William Wycherley producing work of distinction. The British also had a vested interest in exporting their culture, not to mention themselves. In a habit that has never entirely been abandoned, they eyed America as a place where fortunes were to be made and culture could be transmuted into gold. Beyond that, certain actors were driven out by financial distress just as much as were people in other crafts and professions. The elder Booth wrote from England to his father in America in 1826: “The dis-

treasure is so excessive . . . that men look upon each other doubtful if they shall defend their own, or steal their neighbor's property. Famine stares all England in the face. As for the theatres, they are not thought of, much less patronized. The emigration to America will be very numerous, as it is hardly possible for the middling classes to keep body and soul together" (quoted in Graham, 10).

The Americans, for their part, demonstrated something of that "cultural cringe" that Australians were later to accuse themselves of displaying toward the "mother country," ceding authority to those presumed to be guardians of the flame.

From time to time American playwrights even presented themselves in the guise of Englishmen, the badge of theatrical respectability. Even when Royall Tyler wrote a comedy, *The Contrast*, for the Old American Company in which he mocked the Anglophilia of one of his characters, he did so in a play whose model was plainly English.

Writing in 1828, James Fenimore Cooper addressed the question of why America had failed to produce playwrights of the stature of its novelists and poets and why the theatre seemingly had less purchase on the culture than other genres. His answer was that not only was competition more fierce but the prevalence of foreigners meant that the theatre exerted "little influence on morals, politics or anything else" (quoted in Henry Williams, 5). Such foreigners spoke out of alien experiences. Their art was generated out of other necessities, reflected other priorities, engaged a social world distant in time and space. For Edgar Allan Poe, the son of an actor and actress, the answer was revolution: "We must discard all models. The Elizabethan theatre should be abandoned. We need thoughts of our own – principles of dramatic action drawn not from the 'old dramatists' but from the Fountain of Nature that can never grow old" (quoted in Moses, *American Dramatist*, 86). When Poe attacked Mrs. Mowatt's *Fashion* as an echo of eighteenth-century English comedy, she replied that American audiences seemed to find it an acceptable "counterfeit of life." Perhaps they did, but the feeling was growing that the American theatre needed to discover its own form, its own subjects, its own writers. In 1827 James K. Paulding called for a national drama that would celebrate the nation and the national character.

For Walt Whitman, the classic works of literature "had their rise in the great historic perturbations," which in part they reflected and embodied. The problem was that they thus reflected times past and declared, if not their irrelevance, then at least their unfitness to address what he called "the spiritual and democratic, the sceptres of the future" (quoted in Moses and Brown, 67). The understandable power of Shakespeare failed only insofar as it fell short of "satisfying modern and scientific and democratic American purposes." It was a drama that could not match "Yellowstone geysers, or Colorado ravines," and when ordinary people made their appearance it was only

“as capital foils to the aristocracy,” or as “the divertissement only of the elite of the castle. The comedies,” thus, were “altogether non-acceptable to America and Democracy” (quoted in *ibid.*, 68). There was, however, more wrong with the American theatre than the failure of American drama to match the stature of American geography or to address the concerns of a democratic people.

In 1847, in *The Brooklyn Eagle*, Whitman wrote a piece under the title “Miserable State of the Stage – Why Can’t We Have Something Worth the Name of American Drama!” Largely denouncing the coarseness of the New York theatres, he attacked even the best – the Park – for being “a third-rate imitation of the best London theatres” offering “the cast off dramas and unengaged players of Great Britain,” dramas in which “like garments which come second hand from gentleman to valet, everything fits awkwardly.” Beyond that, however, he attacked a system that was to survive, in another form, into the twenty-first century – the star system, by which some “actor or actress flits about the country, playing a week here and a week there, bringing as his or her greatest recommendation, that of *novelty*” . . . (quoted in *ibid.*, 71). These stars would travel the country where audiences, thin on the ground before their arrival, “would crush each other to get a sight of some flippant well-puffed star, of no real merit” (Hewitt, 145).

According to actor-manager William B. Wood, the chief characteristics of such stars was vanity: “One star is very tall, and will play with no person of diminutive stature. . . . The next is very short, and will play with no one of ordinary height” (quoted in *ibid.*, 152). The star would simply arrive in a given community, and rehearsal would amount to little more than moving people around the stage, ensuring that the star remained as close to center stage as possible. Whitman took this as further evidence of British theatrical corruption and called for “some American . . . not moulded in the opinions and long established ways of the English stage” to take the high ground, “revolutionize the drama . . . encourage American talent,” and “give us American plays . . . fitted to American opinions and institutions” (quoted in Moses and Brown, 72). But the fact is that the theatre did not attract the country’s leading writers. Sometimes their books were adapted – as was the case with Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Robert Montgomery Bird even flirted with the theatre, only to abandon it, while William Gilmore Simms wrote *Norma Morice* (1851) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow *John Endecott* (1861) and *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* (1868). But there were no plays from Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, or Melville. Bird had a simple answer. In 1831 he berated himself for turning to drama: “what a fool I was to think of writing plays! To be sure, they are much wanted. But these novels are much easier sort of things, and immortalize one’s pocket much sooner” (quoted in Moody, *Dramas*, 236). One reason for

this was that the actor Edwin Forrest purchased Bird's plays, whose ownership thereby passed directly to the actor, who subsequently made a fortune with them. But beyond such concerns, no play did what *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Scarlet Letter*, or *Moby Dick* could be said to have done: define the nature of the culture, its ambiguities, tensions, and codes.

This was not, however, for want of trying. Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), produced by the American Company at the John Street Theatre, was very self-consciously designed to Americanize British forms. "The sentiments of the play," observed the reviewer of *The Daily Advertiser*, "are the effusions of an honest patriot heart" (quoted in Moses and Brown, 24). It was a play that, for all its English origins, introduced a figure, in the form of Jonathan, who was to appear in many more plays over the years as the embodiment of American common sense and the democratic spirit. Tyler graduated from Harvard in the year of American independence, saw military service, and rose to be chief justice of the Supreme Court of the State of Vermont. Perhaps unsurprisingly, patriotism was his strong suit. The program for *The Contrast* at the Charleston Theatre in 1793 carried the subtitle *The American Son of Liberty*, and the author was given as "Major Tyler, a citizen of the United States." When the play had first been performed, he had omitted his own name. He rectified this swiftly when success became apparent. When it was published, the list of subscribers was headed by President Washington, followed by the secretary of war and the attorney general.

America, thus, entered the theatre at least at the level of character and subject matter. The Revolution was restaged, with its confused motives adjusted and its heroes brushed down and placed at center stage in such plays as Mercy Warren's *The Group* (1775) and *The Defeat* (1773) or John Leacock's *The Fall of British Tyranny; or, American Liberty Triumphant* (1776). The Native American became a protagonist of the theatre even as Native Americans were relegated from history in the emerging national drama: Major Robert Rogers's *Ponteach; or, The Savages of America* (1766), John Augustus Stone's *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829), Robert Montgomery Bird's *Oralloosa, Son of the Incas* (1832), and George H. Miles's *De Soto, the Hero of the Mississippi* (1852). According to Richard Moody, seventy-five Indian dramas were written in the nineteenth century.¹ But more often than not, the plays were self-consciously offered as works whose chief virtue lay, at least in part, in their national origin. Thus, when *Metamora* was first staged, the actor Edwin Forrest, who had effectively commissioned it, hired Prosper M. Wetmore to add a prologue, which read:

Tonight we test the strength of native powers,
 Subject, and bard, and actor, all are yours –
 'Tis yours to judge, if worthy of a name,
 And bid them live within the halls of fame! (Moody, *Dramas*, 201)