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978-0-521-82508-5 - Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas

Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People

Heather S. Nathans

Excerpt

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Introduction

IN 1832 THE “FATHER OF AMERICAN DRAMA,” WILLIAM DUNLAP,¹ defined the theater as a “powerful engine” that should be given “into the hands of the people,” for the transformation of the American nation. Understanding the properties of this theatrical “engine” requires an analysis of the forces that brought it into being and those groups who disputed its ownership. *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* explores the process of nation-building as it was played out via the construction of theaters in what were arguably the most prominent urban centers of the early Republic: Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson* illuminates the social, political, and financial forces that shaped the early national theater, studying the connection between the development of city landscapes, elite neighborhoods, and elaborate playhouses built by men who believed that the theater would cement their cultural authority in the new nation.

Though the struggle to establish a post-Revolutionary theater may seem tangential to the process of nation-building, beneath the “democracy of glee” which supposedly reigned in the theater and the young Republic lurked a deep sense of unease about the political and cultural development of the new nation. In this work, I suggest that the early American theater emerged as a cultural product of conflicting ideas of nationalism – shaped by “the hands of the people” into a uniquely American mold.

My approach to the topic is somewhat unusual. I have focused my study on Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, excluding the southern states where theater encountered comparatively little opposition either prior to or after the Revolution. I have also excluded cities such as Baltimore and Newport, whose theaters were primarily off-shoots of the ones established in other major urban centers. My choice of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia

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was, in large part, guided by evidence I found which suggested that these three cities envisioned themselves as part of a powerful – if competitive – triumvirate. Certainly they were the most economically powerful, and, one might contend, the most intellectually and culturally advanced cities in the new nation. Over and over again, in the popular press and the private correspondence of the period, citizens compared the accomplishments of one city to the other – whether it was Boston to Philadelphia, or Philadelphia to New York. They maintained a keen sense of competitiveness with each other, and saw their progress of civic and cultural development as a means of “one-upping” their neighbors. This competition grew especially fierce at times – for example, when the nation’s capital moved from New York to Philadelphia, or when Boston opened its new playhouse within the same two-week period as Philadelphia. Yet these three cities were linked by more than a superficial wish to outvie each other in their new theaters. They deliberately modeled their civic and cultural ventures upon those of their neighbors, invoking their rhetoric, employing their political strategies, mimicking their patterns of association. For example, it is not coincidence that the Boston and New York Tontines evolved during approximately the same period, or that the New York tontiners were able to learn from the mistakes and failures of their Boston neighbors. Nor is it a coincidence that Boston’s pro-theater faction applied to Philadelphian Samuel Breck for an account of how the Dramatic Association in that city overturned its anti-theater law.

Ties of blood and business also formed strong bonds among these three communities, as families intermarried and as business partners formed an extended network of associates that sustained (or occasionally menaced) the post-war economy. Their names recur in intriguing patterns on boards of land development companies, stock companies, and banks. These three groups of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York cohorts quickly became interdependent, and when the national economy took a downturn in the late 1790s and land speculation and stock bubbles burst, it impacted all three groups – and the theaters they had created.

Perhaps most importantly, the communities that form the focus of this study seem to have identified a similar “use” for the theater: to cement their cultural authority in the new nation. Shorn of patriotic rhetoric, the motives of each group focus on obtaining and sustaining power in the new nation. Thus the outrage of the Boston Tontine Association at the ungrateful audience who failed to appreciate their theater. Thus the furor in New York over who should have the right to stage plays in the new nation,

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and whose political agenda should dominate. And thus, the ongoing dispute in Philadelphia about the “anti-democratic” structure of its luxurious playhouse.

Additionally, by focusing on Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, I undertake a detailed examination of the trends that shaped the early American theater. Such a study allows me to situate theater in its social and political context. For example, the hotly contested Boston theater arose amidst bitter debates over not only the propriety of theatrical entertainments, but the establishment of the Boston Tontine Association and a wealthy urban neighborhood known as the Tontine Crescent. The Philadelphia theater was menaced by efforts of Pennsylvania conservatives to impose ruinous taxes – a strategy aimed not only at the theater, but at the much hated Bank of North America which had financed it. The New York theater had its origins in the animosity between Tammany Society Democratic-Republicans and old-style Federalists who resented the appropriation of their elite entertainments.²

A reader may well wonder at the exclusion of the southern theaters from this circuit. I would suggest that both pre- and post-war patterns of political, cultural, and economic development in the southern states differed markedly from those of the Mid-Atlantic regions. While the southern states of the early Republic imagined themselves as part of the same national community as their fellow citizens to the north, they faced widely different challenges in the *formation* of their post-war communities. The different economic base (including the growing reliance on slavery), the close pre-war ties to the culture and church of Great Britain, as well as the more diffuse political structure of the South make an intriguingly different model for the development of an imagined American community in the playhouse, and one that will bear investigation in further research. Susanne K. Sherman’s *Comedies Useful: Southern Theatre History, 1775–1812* offers an excellent overview and wonderfully detailed accounts of theatrical entertainments in South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Georgia during the early national period. Sherman’s study is an excellent source for scholars pursuing a study of the southern theater. Her work provides new insights into the trials of sustaining theatrical activities in regions still struggling to establish themselves in the early post-war period.³ By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the South presents a better basis for cultural, political, and social comparison to the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions, as William and Jane Pease suggest in *The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828–1843*.⁴

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I have confined the bulk of my study to the period between the Revolution and Jefferson's election in 1800. Jefferson's election wrought a substantial change in the American theater, marking the transition to a more "democratic" drama, and undermining the cultural hegemony established by the theaters' founders after the Revolution. My interest lies in the transitional period between the war and Jefferson's election, when the nation was still in the process of defining its political, financial, and cultural goals.

In this search, I am enormously indebted to theater historians Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, Jeffrey H. Richards, Joseph Roach, Jared Brown, Barry Witham, and Bruce McConachie, who, over the past decade, have begun the exciting task of re-examining the American theater in the broader context of the formation of American national identity. Together with the aid of such other American theater luminaries as Tice L. Miller, Gary A. Richardson, Mary C. Henderson (among others), Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby have compiled the impressive and award-winning *Cambridge History of American Theatre*, which offers a broad overview of American theater history, encompassing topics as diverse as playhouses, performance styles, and popular entertainment. Jeffrey H. Richards, author of *Theatre Enough: American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage*, and *Mercy Otis Warren*, and editor of the anthology *Early American Drama*, has explored the connections between politics and the playhouse in the development of early American theater. Jared Brown's *Theatre in America During the Revolution* links the phenomenon of British military theatricals to the perception of the post-Revolutionary theater. Barry Witham has edited a documentary history, *Theatre in the Colonies and United States, 1750–1915*, which offers a wide-ranging collection of documents, reviews, and engravings, and covers every topic from theater management to anti-theatrical protests. Editors J. Ellen Gainor and Jeffrey H. Mason draw connections between the nascent American theater and national identity in *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*. In addition to these recent works, over the past five years articles in journals ranging from *Theatre Survey* to *The New England Theatre Journal* to *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* have re-examined the drama of the early national period, generally focusing on the difficulty in establishing a successful post-Revolutionary theater.

My work necessarily owes much to those who have come before, yet I argue that the struggle to establish an early national theater must be seen as part of the complicated process of what historian Richard Buel has termed "securing the Revolution," of stabilizing a country still deeply divided over

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financial and political issues. Such an examination requires an exploration across disciplinary lines, into the field of early American history.

I situate my research in the framework erected by political and cultural historians such as Gordon Wood, Gary Nash, Ann Fairfax Withington, Richard L. Bushman, Michael Warner, and David Waldstreicher, all of whom have sought to ground the birth of the new nation in the social, political, and economic conditions of its formation. In particular, Withington's *Toward A More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics*, Bushman's *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*, and Waldstreicher's *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820*, explore the process through which British cultural traditions were appropriated and transformed into something uniquely American. Since Americans inherited the theatrical traditions of the “Old World,” their work has been vital in framing my discussion of the post-Revolutionary response to the theater, and the efforts of its founders to “Americanize” it, while simultaneously aping British models. Rosemarie Bank, David Grimsted, and Bruce McConachie have all produced impressive interpretations of the development of nineteenth-century American theater. Their works offer a synthesis of cultural, social, and economic history. Yet, up to this point, no one has applied these methods to a study of theater in the early national period. I hope that *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson* will offer the reader the detailed historical background and analytical framework necessary to understand the development of the early national theater.

Many traditional studies of the post-Revolutionary theater emphasize literary criticism or performance analysis, neglecting the crucial social, political, and financial context for theatrical activity. Others dismiss the early national period as a time of little significant theatrical entertainment, suggesting that a real “American” theater did not emerge until the early nineteenth century. Contemporary cultural historians have not yet incorporated theater into their studies of the early national period, focusing instead on the “theatricality” of public demonstrations and displays, without questioning the possible connections to events taking shape in the playhouse.

My work focuses on the broader agendas of those men who believed the theater's existence was vital to the construction of a civilized society, and who thought that the development of theatrical entertainments in the new nation would both demonstrate America's cultural status to the watching nations of Europe, and establish what they labeled a “school of Republican virtue” to disseminate political ideology to the theater-going public.

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I explore the challenges that these men faced in creating a sense of community among an otherwise disparate population – one fractured along lines of class and political divisions. The struggle to establish an early national theater can be seen as part of the complicated process of “securing the Revolution,” of stabilizing a country still deeply divided over financial and political issues.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the pre-Revolutionary perception of theater in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. The battle waged between pro- and anti-theater factions began almost with the founding of the colonies, and lasted up until the time of the Revolution, when the Continental Congress imposed a ban on all “extravagance and dissipation,” including theatrical entertainments. Examining the history of colonial attitudes towards the theater may shed light on its tenuous post-war status, and may suggest the ways in which theatrical entertainments were inextricably intertwined with certain groups’ political and social agendas. Prior to the Revolution, resistance to theatrical activities had been largely a subject for debate between factions which opposed the theater on religious grounds and elite groups which supported theater as a tangible link with British culture. As the eighteenth century progressed, and the populations of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York grew increasingly diverse, pro- and anti-theater debates reflected growing schisms among colonial communities. As it would later in the post-war period, the theater often became linked to an elitist agenda of financial and political reform, and thus theater-going became identified with partisan politics and factionalism. As the break with Britain approached, resistance to theater was increasingly identified with concepts of “republican virtue.” Examining the pre-war history of the theater in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York may illuminate the process through which anti-theatrical sentiment, originally grounded in religious bias, gradually became embedded in the struggle to sever all political, financial, and cultural ties with Great Britain.

In chapter 2, I explore the battle to bring an “American” theater to post-Revolutionary Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. I suggest that the struggle exemplified the transition of social and political authority in the early Republic. Power shifted from the “Old Revolutionaries,” resistant to the rise of factions and corporations, to a new post-war elite, intent on launching a system of banks, corporations, and cultural institutions that would place them on the world stage. The first years of the Republic witnessed a struggle to determine whose national and cultural vision of America would prevail, and by what means.

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In this chapter, I also investigate the rise of America's early banks and stock corporations, suggesting that the same men who pursued sweeping financial reforms (amassing considerable personal wealth in the process) mounted a challenge to the established leaders of American society. Through a complex network of financial and personal connections, these men waged a successful campaign to re-establish theatrical entertainments in the new nation. By dint of persuasion, cajoling, subtle blackmail, and sometimes outright lawbreaking, they overturned or sidestepped wartime anti-theatrical legislation.

Though the development of stock companies and banks may seem to have little connection with the creation of theaters, I argue that *without* the aid of their privately sponsored companies and banks, the rising post-war elite would not have had the requisite authority to impose their cultural agenda on an often resistant population. For example, the stockholders of the Bank of North America and several of the land development companies in Pennsylvania were among the primary supporters of the post-Revolutionary theater. They used their economic and political influence to manipulate groups who opposed the theater, issuing oblique (and sometimes direct) threats to the parties that resisted them. In one instance, they threatened the Quakers' political faction, promising to block the passage of laws that would improve the treatment of Quakers, if the Quakers continued in their campaign against the theater. Their threats appear to have worked, as the Quaker outcry subsequently diminished. In Boston, the shareholders of the Boston Tontine Association were lampooned by one angry newspaper editor as the "Tontine Gentry," and their attempts to use the profits from their life insurance company to build a new theater and new elite neighborhood came under fire from both the public and the state government. New York's financial speculators, most notably William Duer, brought the state to the brink of ruin through their unbridled and often unprincipled transactions. Indeed, between 1792 and 1793, they created a financial crisis that imperiled New York's ability to build a new post-war playhouse.

Chapter 3 chronicles the early successes of the Boston and Philadelphia theaters, as well as the early failures. While New York struggled to regain financial stability in the wake of the 1793 crash, and "made do" with Lewis Hallam's shopworn entertainments in the John Street Theatre, Boston and Philadelphia entered a new age of American entertainments. By 1794, the combination of money, influence, and determination had prevailed, and both Boston and Philadelphia opened new and luxurious playhouses. The founders anticipated a "democracy of glee" in their first season. Every aspect

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of the theaters had been carefully planned to ensure that they would become monuments to their founders' cultural sophistication. In this chapter, I discuss the first season of the Boston and Philadelphia theaters, as well as the high hopes that their founders entertained for them. I also discuss the John Street Theatre's efforts to keep pace with its more lavish competitors, suggesting that without the financial and intellectual investment of New York's reigning elite, its theatrical entertainments remained adrift – an ineffectual cultural or political tool for its post-war audiences.

The rhetoric that surrounded the creation of the Boston and Philadelphia theaters points to an intriguing problem that faced the theaters' founders. On the one hand, they wanted to build theaters that would be uniquely "American," that would serve as "schools of Republican virtue." The prologue to Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, the best-known play of the early national period, asks, "Why should our thoughts to distant countries roam/ When each refinement may be found at home?" The theaters' founders claimed that their theaters would inculcate truly democratic principles in their audiences, and that their theaters would remain untainted by European vice. Yet, even while they expressed their disdain for the "corrupt" British theater, they hastened to ape British styles of architecture and design in their playhouses, importing scenery, curtains, even chandeliers from England. Moreover, they felt a keen sense of competition not only with each other, but with European theaters as well. Even as they struggled to define their playhouses as "American," they wanted to ensure that they would match or surpass the best that London had to offer.

This tension between the desire to create homespun arts and the yearning for European splendor and parade permeated the playhouse and its audience. Some clamored for patriotic productions, while others demanded the latest plays from England. Wealthy patrons grew annoyed when denied private, locked boxes like the fashionable ladies of Europe, while middle-class patrons objected to being segregated from the "well born" in their expensive seats. The Philadelphia newspaper *Aurora* praised the Boston theater for its production of *Gustavus Vasa*, a well-known, pro-democratic play, while the Boston theater founders chastised their manager for failing to produce commercially viable material. In chapter 3, I explore both the expectations and disappointments that the theaters' founders faced in their first season, suggesting that the confusion they encountered was a reflection of the nation's own ambivalence about its emerging identity and its ongoing relationship with the "mother country." I also explore the founders' new dilemma: the invasion of party politics and class rivalry into the playhouse.

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I examine the impact of theater riots on the founders' vision – and the way in which their “democracy of glee” fell under the onslaught of partisan demonstrations. Indeed, for many, the theater became the ideal site to display party loyalty, and the popular press took up the cry. Reports of uprisings in the theater spread up and down the country; often citizens of one city would respond to reports of violence in another – either with a show of support in their own playhouse, or with a public demonstration of approval for the beleaguered theater managers caught in the middle of the struggle.

For example, in one particularly violent incident, members of the Boston audience assaulted the orchestra for refusing to play a particular patriotic song, hurling pieces of broken glass into the pit. The riot made the papers in both New York and Philadelphia, and drew a wide range of responses. In other cases, riots were deliberately planned to embarrass political figures who would be attending the theater. I argue that such incidents demonstrated to both founders and audiences how far they were from “securing the Revolution,” and how unstable America's post-war identity remained. As scenes of political disharmony were enacted among the playhouse audience, it became increasingly difficult for the theaters' founders to maintain the fiction of a “school of Republican virtue.”

Chapter 4 juxtaposes the political instability of the playhouse with the growing class awareness in the new nation. In this chapter, I suggest that as artisans and small merchants sought access to opportunity, they fundamentally transformed the shape of American theater. In particular, the struggle to create a viable American cultural product became an issue that penetrated every social class. The mechanics and artisans vaunted the gifts of their playwrights, John Murdock and John Daly Burk, while the merchant elite touted the talents of their “American Garrick,” William Charles White. Not only did the class schisms produce new (and competing) styles of drama, they produced competing spaces as well. The Boston mechanics, snubbed by the Tontine Gentry, invested in their own playhouse, the Haymarket, and the Philadelphia mechanics, excluded from the city's elite entertainments, transferred their loyalty to more “democratic” entertainments, including the circus.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus primarily on the founding of the Boston and Philadelphia theaters, suggesting that they grew simultaneously with a new, post-Revolutionary elite, and that they emerged as an effort to mold the cultural identity of the new nation. My approach for chapter 5, the chapter on the New York theater, will be somewhat different. Much has been written of the city's early national theater, including the first-hand accounts of

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both the theater's premiere actor, John Hodgkinson, and one of the nation's foremost managers and playwrights, William Dunlap.⁵ Additionally, George Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage* and Joseph Ireland's *Records of the New York Stage* offer a comprehensive discussion of season offerings and company history.⁶ Thus I will not attempt to duplicate their accounts of the city's theater, or to provide a year-by-year chronology of its development. Instead, I will focus on one of the most puzzling aspects of New York's post-Revolutionary theater: its origin. In the summer of 1794, a group of men (whose identities and affiliations have remained largely unknown and un-investigated), announced that they were taking subscriptions for a new theater. *Four years later*, they opened the Park Street playhouse. Little to nothing has heretofore been known of the identities of these men, why they decided, after more than a decade of enjoying plays at the John Street house, that they needed their own theater, or the reason for the long delay between the announcement of their plans and the opening of their new playhouse. Chapter 5 will focus on the tensions that produced a rupture in the John Street Theatre, the network of social and economic alliances that backed the prospect of a new theater, and the struggle that its founders encountered in their efforts to transform a cultural project into a viable financial venture.

Having built their lavish playhouses, the founders turned to the question of what should go *in* them. Initially, the theaters were populated with British managers, actors, and scripts. But increasingly, American audiences demanded plays and performers that would reflect their own "native genius."⁷ Though mine is not a study of eighteenth-century dramatic literature, in each chapter I try to trace the development of professional theater and drama in the early national period, as those developments relate specifically to the theaters or historical moment in question. The best-known dramatists of the period, Mercy Otis Warren, Susanna Rowson, William Dunlap, Judith Sargent Murray, and Royall Tyler, have all received much scholarly attention. In my study, I focus on the less well-known "native geniuses" such as John Murdock and William Charles White whose successes and failures, I argue, reveal much about the development of our early national drama. Each of their respective careers illuminates the challenges native authors and performers faced in establishing themselves among their European rivals. Through their work I explore the development of a nascent American cultural aesthetic. I also trace the efforts of the Federal Street, Chestnut Street, and Park Theatre managers to accommodate American audiences by cutting or altering popular British scripts (excising references to the