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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

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*Early American Theatre from the Revolution
to Thomas Jefferson*

Into the Hands of the People

Theater has often served as a touchstone for moments of political change or national definition and as a way of exploring cultural and ethnic identity. Heather Nathans examines the growth and influence of the theater in the development of the young American Republic, from the Revolution through to the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800. Theater was a dangerous profession in the post-Revolutionary period – for actors, for audience members, and for playwrights. In this book, Nathans discusses the challenges faced by the artists who produced the theater and the people who participated in it. From William Dunlap, author of *André* and the “Father of American Drama,” to Susanna Rowson, creator of *Slaves in Algiers*, and one of the first successful female authors on the American stage, she traces the controversy that surrounded the birth of a uniquely American drama.

Unlike many works on the early American theater, this book explores the lives and motives of the people working behind the scenes to establish a new national drama. Some of the most famous figures in American history, from George Washington to Sam Adams, from John Hancock to Alexander Hamilton, battled over the creation of the American theater. The book traces their motives and strategies – suggesting that for many of these men, the question of whether or not Americans should go to the playhouse meant the difference between the success and failure of the Revolutionary mission.

HEATHER S. NATHANS is a member of the faculty and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Theater at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is also currently a Non-Resident Fellow at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University. Her articles on the early national theater have appeared in the *Pennsylvania History Journal*, *The New England Theatre Journal*, and *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad of shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

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