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.
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.

The primary intent of this series is to set up a forum of important and original scholarship in and criticism of American theatre and drama in a cultural and social context. Inclusive by design, the series accommodates leading work in areas ranging from the study of drama as literature to theatre histories, theoretical explorations, production histories and readings of more popular or para-theatrical forms. While maintaining a specific emphasis on theatre in the United States, the series welcomes work grounded broadly in cultural studies and narratives with interdisciplinary reach. Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama thus provides a crossroads where historical, theoretical, literary, and biographical approaches meet and combine, promoting imaginative research in theatre and drama from a variety of new perspectives.

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HEATHER S. NATHANS
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