

Introduction: Survey from the beginning to the present

1. To the Civil War

The early history of the American theatre is largely one of the transference of European traditions, primarily those of provincial England, and a gradual development toward self-identity, which did not reach its full potential until after WWI. Early settlers in the colonies, many representing the same antitheatre element that existed in England, through the exigencies of the times diverted their energies into other and more complex channels than entertainment. As actors in the real-life drama of survival in hostile surroundings, colonists, with some notable exceptions, reflected Benjamin Franklin's attitude: "After the first cares for the necessities of life are over, we shall come to think of the embellishments."

The earliest records of theatre in the New World were not English in origin at all; indeed, the initial dramatic performances were the NATIVE AMERICAN RITUALS performed by Indians of the North and South. Early in the 16th century the Spanish discovered Aztec performances in Mexico that blended song, dance, comic byplay, and animal imitations; warlike tribes in the U.S. Northeast, though less inclined to organized theatricals, had variegated revels; and tribes in the Pacific Northwest created elaborate stage effects for dramatizations of tribal mythology. More complex theatre, however, is tenuously documented as having occurred in Spanish as early as 1538 in the Southwest and Mexico and by 1606 in French, in what is now Canada.

With the establishment of the first settlement (Jamestown, VA, 1607) in what would become the U.S., two traditions were quickly established among the English-speaking residents. The southern colonies, especially the Royalist colony of Virginia, were more congenial to the theatre; Puritan New England and Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania were vehemently against this frivolous pastime, although William Penn's efforts were inevitably overturned by regal veto, the king and his court being strong supporters of the theatre in England. Nonetheless, in various colonies between 1700 and 1716 laws were passed against the theatre with some effect. In Massachusetts, Increase Mather expressed the typical Puritan attitude when he wrote in 1687 that "there is much discourse of

Introduction

beginning Stage-Plays in New England. The last year Promiscuous Dancing was openly practised.” Despite such outcries, there were local amateur theatricals from an early date. A nonextant piece called *Ye Bare and Ye Cubb*, the first recorded play in English presented in the colonies, was written by one William Darby of Accomac Country, VA, and performed in 1665 by Darby, Cornelius Wilkinson, and Philip Howard in Cowles Tavern, though this is the last recorded performance in Virginia until 1702. In 1687 a BOSTON innkeeper named John Wing attempted to outfit a room in his establishment for theatrical use, but to no avail: Attitudes like Mather’s and the protests of Judge Samuel Sewall ended the brief experiment. There is evidence, however, that three years later a Harvard College student, Benjamin Colman, wrote the first play (*Gustavus Vasa*) by an American to be acted in the colonies. In Virginia students at William and Mary College offered in 1702 the recitation of a “pastoral colloquy” before the governor. Other colloquies of this sort were offered at other institutions of higher learning. Between 1699 and 1702 a Richard Hunter petitioned for permission to produce plays in New York, then a town of 4,436 people; it was granted, but no more is known. On 6 May 1709, however, the Governor’s Council in New York forbade “play acting and prize fighting,” with no rationale provided.

Early evidence of professional efforts is scattered and imprecise. The British vagabond player Anthony (Tony) Aston is generally credited as the first professional actor in America; in 1703, in his early 20s, he acted in “Charles Town,” SC, writing that he “turn’d *Player* and *Poet*, and wrote one Play on the Subject of the Country.” He then claims to have gone to New York. His play is unknown, and in 1704 he returned to London. In 1715, the first known play written and published in America appeared. Written by Governor Robert Hunter of New York, *Androboros* is a satire on the citizens of that city and the New York Senate. There is no record of performance.

For the next 35 years theatrical activity was sporadic. In 1716, in Williamsburg, VA, the most advanced town in the colonies to promote theatre, William Levingston, who ran a dancing school, built a theatre that was operated by his indentured servants William and Mary Stagg until Levingston’s death in 1729. In 1724 a makeshift playhouse (The New Booth) was built in the Society Hill section of PHILADELPHIA for “roap dancing” and the traditional clown pieces called Pickleherring. The 1730s marks the advancement of Charleston as a theatrical center and the erection of a theatre in Dock St. in 1736. During the same period there was limited activity in New York: In 1730 an amateur production of *Romeo and Juliet* was presented, the first SHAKESPEARE ON THE AMERICAN STAGE; in 1732 a space above a commercial establish-

ment was turned into a playing space; and in 1735 at “The New Theatre” (a converted warehouse in Pearl St.) a season of recent English plays, including *The Beaux’ Stratagem*, was presented.

A sustained record of professional theatre in Philadelphia, which quickly became America’s theatrical center until about 1825, dates from 1749 and is associated with the activities of the first professional company known in the colonies under WALTER MURRAY AND THOMAS KEAN, about whom we know virtually nothing. In August they performed in Plumstead’s Warehouse, converted for use as a playhouse; by February they were performing in New York in a converted building in Nassau St. In October 1751 they opened a new, crudely built wooden playhouse in Williamsburg, played in Maryland the following year as The Virginia Company of Comedians, and then drifted into obscurity. They had, however, as historian Hugh F. Rankin indicates, acted “as an advance agent for those to follow, whetting the appetite of the colonials for the drama and upon occasion wearing down religious and moralistic opposition.”

The next chapter in the history of theatre in America is the story of one company, The London Company of Comedians (renamed in 1763 The AMERICAN COMPANY of Comedians), and their total dominance of the theatrical scene for 50 years, beginning in 1752 under the leadership of LEWIS HALLAM SR. and continuing from 1758 under DAVID DOUGLASS, who married Hallam’s widow. The Hallam Company, sent to America on speculation by Lewis’s eldest brother, William, who remained in London, arrived in Williamsburg with a completely professional company of 12 adults and 3 children, a complete repertoire of plays, and basic scenery and costumes. Operating on a sharing system, the company began their first season at Kean’s old playhouse on 16 September with *The Merchant of Venice*; in July 1754 they moved to New York, carrying with them a letter of endorsement from Governor Dinwiddie to the governor of New York. Until October 1754 they played in New York, Philadelphia, Annapolis, and Charleston, spending the next three years in Jamaica, where Lewis Hallam died in 1755. Douglass, an erstwhile actor and printer, brought the company back to New York in 1758, and within six years had added “American” to their name. Despite continued opposition from all quarters (Puritan, Quaker, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist), Douglass, with LEWIS HALLAM JR. as leading man, took his company up and down the East Coast, building new theatres or revamping old buildings, and introducing significant new British plays to the public. In the early 1760s Douglass even attempted an invasion of New England, first in Newport, RI, in 1761, and the next year in Providence – both stops a challenge to his ingenuity. In order to avoid

Introduction

criticism, he apparently advertised his plays as “moral dialogues,” and in Providence he called his makeshift playhouse a “schoolhouse.” Literally drummed out of town, Douglass returned to New York, where he opened the temporary Chapel of Beekman Street Theatre in 1761, followed in 1766 and 1767 by the construction of two more important and permanent theatres.

The first permanent theatre on the American continent, the SOUTHWARK THEATRE (1766), which stood until 1912, also was the scene for the first professionally produced play by a native author: Thomas Godfrey’s *The Prince of Parthia*, a heroic tragedy in blank verse set in Parthia near the beginning of the Christian era – and thus in no way American in subject matter – premiered on 24 April 1767. It was sheer chance that this play earned its historic position, for a play called *The Disappointment* by Thomas Forrest was to receive that honor but was abruptly withdrawn because it contained “personal reflections unfit for the stage.” Douglass’s second major venture, the JOHN STREET THEATRE, opened 7 December 1767, predominating among NEW YORK CITY THEATRES for 30 years.

On 20 October 1774 the Continental Congress forbade all extravagance and dissipation, including stage entertainments; Douglass and his company returned to the West Indies the following year. Other than military theatricals, theatre ceased during the hostilities, though plays – many little more than political satire in dialogue form and the majority unperformed – were written during the period, including those by MERCY OTIS WARREN, HUGH HENRY BRACKENRIDGE, and ROBERT MUNFORD. Also written were anonymous pieces such as *The Blockheads*, inspired by the performance in Boston of General John Burgoyne’s farce *The Blockade of Boston*, as well as John Leacock’s *The Fall of British Tyranny* (both 1776). The real activity, however, took place among the military on both sides. In 1775 the John Street was renamed the Theatre Royal and presented a long series of dramatic productions performed by the British military, until their evacuations in 1783. The same was true in other major cities, such as Boston, where a theatre was organized in Faneuil Hall during 1775–7, and Philadelphia, where a Captain Delancey and Captain John André, later involved with Benedict Arnold, were leaders of a theatrical group under General William Howe. Despite edicts to the contrary, the Continental Army also performed: At Valley Forge, for example, Washington’s troops presented Addison’s *Cato* in 1778.

After the Revolution, in 1782, professionals began to return. Lewis Hallam Jr. brought back the Old American Company from Jamaica in 1784, picking up where they had left off in 1774. Along with JOHN HENRY, they were the major

actors of the day, joined soon by THOMAS WIGNELL. On 16 April 1787 the reinstated company offered the first professional production of a native American comedy on an American subject: ROYALL TYLER's *The CONTRAST*, which, among other firsts, introduced Jonathan the stage YANKEE, the prototype of many subsequent Yankees and the first native type to be developed. With the elimination of all repression, Philadelphia was stimulated as a theatre center due to the efforts of Wignell and Alexander Reinagle, a musician, who in 1794 opened the superior CHESTNUT STREET THEATRE with a new group of actors. After this period of reestablishment, the 1790s became a decade of rapid expansion. Wignell erected theatres in Baltimore (1794) and Washington (1800); in 1792 JOHN HODGKINSON joined the Old American Company; with the repealing of restrictive laws in New England, Boston and Providence became important centers, especially with the opening of Boston's FEDERAL STREET THEATRE in 1794, followed two years later by the Haymarket; and other scattered activity spread theatre throughout the young country, including French-speaking theatres in Charleston (1794) and in New Orleans (1791, though not part of the U.S. until 1803). In 1798 New York kept pace with Philadelphia with the opening of the PARK (New) THEATRE, where WILLIAM DUNLAP, whose drama *The Father* had been performed at the John Street in 1789, initially became a partner of Lewis Hallam Jr. and John Hodgkinson but ultimately assumed the management, recording a career of ups and downs, ending in bankruptcy in 1805. After a brief period of management by actor THOMAS BATHORPE COOPER, STEPHEN PRICE, America's first professional manager, took control in 1809 and, by encouraging star appearances, beginning with GEORGE FREDERICK COOKE in 1810, helped undermine the stock system. Actors such as Cooper and JOHN HOWARD PAYNE (remembered primarily as a playwright) exploited the starring possibilities, and – after the uncertainties of the War of 1812 – a steady flow of actors from England appeared, including in the 1820s Edmund Kean, JUNIUS BRUTUS BOOTH, WILLIAM B. WOOD, WILLIAM WARREN SR., TYRONE POWER, LAURA KEENE, Charles Kean, and JOHN BROUGHAM, to mention only a few.

More significant than foreign imports of stars and plays was the slow Americanization of the theatre, which accelerated during the first half of the 19th century. Native-born stars began to emerge in the 1820s, beginning with EDWIN FORREST, America's first great actor and the first native-born performer to create excitement abroad. In his footsteps came Augustus A. Addams, MCKEAN BUCHANAN, John R. Scott, J. Hudson Kirby, and, most significant, JOHN MCCULLOUGH, E. L. DAVENPORT, and JAMES MURDOCH (and, toward the end of this period, great actors like EDWIN BOOTH and JOSEPH

Introduction

JEFFERSON III). Among the actresses of the period, none received more acclaim than Forrest's contemporary CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN, who by midcentury was the dominating tragic actress on the American stage and an international star. Other actresses of note during the first half of the century include MARY ANN DUFF, JOSEPHINE CLIFTON, CLARA FISHER, MAGGIE MITCHELL, LOTTA CRABTREE, ADAH ISAACS MENKEN, and ANNA CORA MOWATT, remembered today for her play *FASHION* (1845), the most significant native comedy of manners of its time. Its central character is Trueman, another Yankee in the tradition of *The Contrast*'s Jonathan; such roles were the speciality of numerous significant American comic actors, including JAMES H. HACKETT, GEORGE HANDEL HILL, DANFORTH MARBLE, and Joshua Silsbee (as well as the later JOHN E. OWENS and DENMAN THOMPSON).

Parallel with the emergence of American-born actors is the growth of native plays and native characters. As a result of a playwriting contest sponsored first in 1828 by Forrest for "the best tragedy, in five acts, of which the hero, or principal character shall be an original of the country," 200 plays were submitted overall and nine prizes awarded; four plays were retained in his repertoire. The first winner, JOHN AUGUSTUS STONE'S *METAMORA*, which harkens back to Major Robert Roger's 1766 play *Ponteach* and other early dramatic efforts to write plays about the noble red man, became the most durable of the dozens of Indian plays written and performed for the next half-century (see NATIVE AMERICANS RITUAL/THEATRE). Stone was one of a number of notable playwrights of the period from Philadelphia; others included JAMES NELSON BARKER, ROBERT MONTGOMERY BIRD, RICHARD PENN SMITH, MORDECAI MANUEL NOAH, ROBERT T. CONRAD, and SAMUEL WOODWORTH.

In addition to the Indian and the Yankee, a minor native character was the stage Negro, first appearing in John Murdock's *The Triumphs of Love* (1795) and culminating in the many versions of *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* beginning in 1852. Related to the dramatic development of African American characters is the phenomenal popularity of the blackface MINSTREL SHOW stimulated by THOMAS D. RICE in the late 1820s. Two additional types emerged before the Civil War: the tough city lad, Mose the fire b'hoy, as depicted in BENJAMIN BAKER'S *A GLANCE AT NEW YORK* (1848); and the stout-hearted frontiersman, beginning with Colonel Nimrod Wildfire in JAMES K. PAULDING'S *The LION OF THE WEST* (1831). In addition to the development of native types, American drama up to midcentury was dominated by the burlesques and dramas of immigrant playwright-actors like John Brougham and DION BOUCICAULT. Advancements in writing techniques were made by GEORGE HENRY BOKER, arguably the period's

best writer of romantic drama in the English-speaking world, in particular his *FRANCESCA DA RIMINI* (1855), though Bird's romantic plays as performed by Forrest were more popular.

As the U.S. expanded its territory, enterprising theatre entrepreneurs took small companies into the Ohio and Mississippi Valley, beginning in 1815 when SAMUEL DRAKE went from Albany, NY, into FRONTIER settlements in Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee. JAMES H. CALDWELL established a first-rate English-speaking theatre in New Orleans by 1819. The names NOAH LUDLOW and SOL SMITH were familiar ones along the rivers and in the wild; combining forces they established the first real theatre in St. Louis in 1835. CHICAGO's first theatre dates from 1847. During the same period William Chapman was operating his Mississippi Floating Theatre (see SHOWBOATS). By midcentury, thanks to the gold rush, theatre came to California. The first theatrical performance by professional actors was given in SAN FRANCISCO in 1850, and by 1862 the SALT LAKE THEATRE (UT) was established. The star system was unequivocally aided by this westward expansion, for Western managers paid higher salaries than in the East to attract the best talent available.

By 1800 a definite shift of influence from Philadelphia to New York had begun. Philadelphia's population in 1820 was 63,802, New York's 123,706; by 1840 it was 93,655 to 312,710, and by midcentury New York boasted almost half a million people. The Chestnut Street Theatre, managed by William Warren and William B. Wood, began to lose dominance in Philadelphia in 1811, followed in 1828 by the ARCH STREET THEATRE and the WALNUT STREET THEATRE (renovated from a CIRCUS to a theatre in 1811). Philadelphia could not support three major theatres, and in 1828–9 all three went bankrupt. The country was rapidly changing, with a growing urban lower-class audience on the rise, significant emigrations on the horizon, an active revolt against English domination of the stage in motion, and a major civil war around the corner. Gradually playwrights were able to gain a living writing plays, encouraged by the copyright law of 1856. The number and quality of playhouses increased, gas STAGE LIGHTING was introduced in 1816, native SCENIC DESIGNERS were gaining recognition, and greater realism – given impetus by the 1846 presentation of Charles Kean's *King John* – was sought. The Lafayette Theatre, built in New York in 1826, boasted of border lights and equipment for aquatic and equestrian drama (see ANIMALS AS PERFORMERS). The second Park opened in 1821 with a capacity of 2,500, topped by the 3,500 of the first BOWERY THEATRE in 1826. The CHATHAM GARDEN THEATRE opened in 1825; what became BARNUM'S AMERICAN MUSEUM began operation in 1841, as did the famous BOSTON MUSEUM, which operated a most successful

Introduction

stock company for almost 50 years beginning in 1843; the ASTOR PLACE OPERA HOUSE opened in 1847; Brougham's Lyceum in 1850. Some of the more successful managements up to midcentury fought the growing trends of stars and long runs: for example, WILLIAM MITCHELL at the Olympic Theatre in New York during 1839–50. WILLIAM E. BURTON, who leased Palmo's Opera House in 1848 and opened it as BURTON'S CHAMBERS STREET THEATRE, followed suit, dominating as the fashionable New York theatre until the emergence of the WALLACK'S stock company beginning in 1853.

By the Civil War the American theatre had undeniably established a strong, individualistic mainstream tradition, relatively free of foreign influence, despite strong impulses from new European migrations to America. After a brief curtailment of growth, the American theatre would experience a great period of prosperity following the War Between the States, lasting until about 1915. DBW

2. The Civil War to the First World War

The Civil War only disrupted theatrical activities in the East, and by early 1862 the theatres in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia were open and thriving. Such patriotic pieces as CHARLES GAYLER'S *Bull Run; or, the Sacking of Fairfax Courthouse* (1861) appeared in New York at the New Bowery Theatre three weeks after the actual battle. Into the 1880s Wallack's continued as the leading New York playhouse, offering a steady diet of old and new British comedies with a superb acting company that included MME. ELIZABETH PONISI, ROSE COGLAN, HENRY J. MONTAGUE, and CHARLES COGLAN. William Warren remained a fixture at the Boston Museum until his retirement in 1883, offering a wide range of comic roles, classic as well as contemporary. MRS. JOHN DREW managed a talented company at the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia during 1861–92, establishing the careers of her son, John Drew, and her daughter, Georgina Drew Barrymore (see DREW-BARRYMORE).

At the beginning of the decade, Edwin Forrest and Charlotte Cushman reigned as the leading tragedians in America, although Forrest's position was being challenged by EDWIN BOOTH, the son of English-born tragedian J. B. Booth. Young Booth had served his apprenticeship in California (1852–6) and returned east in 1856 to establish himself as a star. Success the following year in Boston and New York made him an actor to watch. In the fall of 1862 he played in New York at the same time as Forrest, inviting comparison with the older actor. Cultivated theatre patrons had long abandoned Forrest and found Booth's quiet, unassuming, intellectual, and

refined style more suitable for their ideal of a “temple of the arts.” Booth’s slight but handsome physique (dark hair and eyes) made him the ideal late Victorian tragedian, much as Forrest’s muscular physique had attracted patrons 30 years earlier. Critic Nym Crinkle (ANDREW C. WHEELER) thought Booth’s Hamlet resembled a 19th-century gentleman more than a 16th-century courtier. Although his most famous role was Hamlet – which he played for 100 performances at the Winter Garden Theatre during the 1864–5 season – he excelled in other roles requiring intellectual rather than emotional or physical force: Iago, Richard II, Shylock, Cardinal Richelieu (in Bulwer-Lytton’s play), and Bertuccio in Tom Taylor’s *The Fool’s Revenge*. Booth departed from tradition in building his own theatre (BOOTH’S, 1869) with neither a raked and grooved stage, an apron, nor proscenium doors. A better actor than manager, he succumbed to the financial panic of 1873 and lost the theatre through bankruptcy. Considered by historians as America’s finest actor, Booth spent the last two decades of his life successfully touring as a star.

Booth was not the only actor challenging theatrical traditions: MATILDA HERON became an overnight success in 1857 with her portrayal of Marguerite Gautier in Dumas’s *The Lady of the Camellias* (called *Camille* in New York), exhibiting a style of acting marked by excessive emotional display and a seeming lack of technique and control. For the next half-century, the style attracted such actresses as LUCILLE WESTERN, CLARA MORRIS, and MRS. LESLIE CARTER. JOSEPH JEFFERSON III also broke with the traditional school in the 1860s with his portrayal of RIP VAN WINKLE in Boucicault’s dramatization. After presenting it in London (1865) for 170 performances, Jefferson brought it to New York in 1866 and, in the title role, established himself as the leading comedian of his age, as Booth was the leading tragedian. Jefferson endowed Rip with charm, humor, and pathos: His quiet, even casual, style seemed free of all staginess, with nothing forced or unnatural. In 1874 FRANK MAYO idealized the frontiersman in FRANK H. MURDOCH’s drama *DAVY CROCKETT*; like Jefferson, Mayo underplayed the emotional points and offered a style of acting that seemed natural to his audiences.

Dramatic tastes changed significantly in the 1860s: The historical costume dramas of Stone, Bird, Knowles, and Bulwer-Lytton began to go out of fashion; more popular were melodramas that offered adventure, romance, and obligatory sensational events. In AUGUSTIN DALY’s most successful melodramas, suspense and novel disasters abound: a man tied to railroad tracks facing an approaching train (*UNDER THE GASLIGHT*, 1867); the heroine stranded on a steamship about to explode (*A Flash of Lightning*, 1868); or the rescue of a man

Introduction

bound to a log entering a sawmill (*The Red Scarf*, 1868). These dramas had broad emotional appeal and played to a large popular audience.

The excitement over *Camille* and the new French drama resulted in numerous adaptations. There was good reason for these French plays achieving instant popularity: They dealt with contemporary events and discussed subjects formerly considered taboo (adultery, for example). DION BOUCICAULT made a profession out of Anglicizing French plays; Augustin Daly was responsible in part or whole for 44 adaptations of French drama, in addition to borrowing others from the German and English theatres. Although the Dramatic Copyright Law of 1856 improved the playwright's legal rights, it was not until the International Copyright Agreement was accepted by the U.S. in 1891 that managers found it as profitable to produce native plays as foreign ones.

American social comedies and dramas in the 1870s reflected the important topics of the day: stock speculation, social climbing, the winning of the West, divorce, and the family – and, in a romantic way, the Civil War. Daly's big hit of 1875, *The Big Bonanza*, poked fun at those who naively attempted to make a "killing" on Wall St. BRONSON HOWARD offered a more serious treatment of the subject in *The BANKER'S DAUGHTER* (1878), and in *Young Mrs. Winthrop* (1883) he touched upon the subjects of money, social status, and divorce. In *The HENRIETTA* (1887) Howard suggested that the country's obsession with making money was leading to moral decline. (This theme was explored by DAVID BELASCO and HENRY C. DEMILLE in *Men and Women* [1890], and exploited by CLYDE FITCH in *The Climbers* [1901]; a better play of the genre, LANGDON MITCHELL's *The NEW YORK IDEA* [1906], satirizes divorce and social customs among the wealthy.) Historians have regarded Bronson Howard as the first professional playwright in America because he successfully made a living from his plays. His biggest hit, *SHENANDOAH* (1889), used the Civil War as a background for an essentially romantic plot, as did WILLIAM GILLETTE's spy stories *Held by the Enemy* (1886) and *SECRET SERVICE* (1896), Belasco's *The Heart of Maryland* (1895), and Fitch's *Barbara Frietchie* (1899).

The frontier and the winning of the West provided countless plots and characters, including Davy Crockett and the American cowboy. Daly used the West as the setting for his *HORIZON* (1871), as did BRET HARTE for *Two Men of Sandy Bar* (1876), JOAQUIN MILLER for *The DANITES in the Sierras* (1887), BARTLEY CAMPBELL for *MY PARTNER* (1879), AUGUSTUS THOMAS for *Arizona* (1899), and Belasco for *The GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST* (1905). WILLIAM VAUGHN MOODY's *The GREAT DIVIDE* (1906) contrasts the East and the West in what some historians regard as the first modern American play.