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052184746X - Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic

Jeffrey H. Richards

Excerpt

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ALTHOUGH THE OUTLINE HISTORY OF DRAMA AND THEATRE IN early America has been told before, with the exception of Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, relatively little has been said *in detail* about the particular plays or performances that graced – or disgraced – the stages and pages of American theatres and notebooks in the early republic. It might be a stretch to call the citizenry of the incipient United States a theatre-going nation in 1775; it would be considerably less difficult to say so in 1825. Yet in either case, plays and stage performances seemed to occupy some part of the consciousness of many men and women, certainly the seaboard elite, but additionally a number of people not restricted to the wealthy and educated. The Continental Congress during the Revolution thought it best to proscribe theatrical amusements, but the British military on American soil asserted the opposite, launching seasons in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia when they occupied those cities. After the war, debates ensued in many areas about the appropriateness of resuming stage entertainments in a republic – were they not the delight of the late oppressors of the land? But except in Boston, the forces for restoring theatre prevailed in relatively short order. By 1790, nearly every coastal city of size, as well as many smaller towns and such inland locales as Richmond, had some professional or semi-professional theatrical troupe performing in public venues. By 1800, a number of these cities had built or were building new theatres to replace the smaller pre-Revolutionary or converted structures put to use in the immediate aftermath of the war. And by 1825, larger theatres than these were being constructed or contemplated to meet the increased demand by a more accepting and diverse populace.¹

Although most histories of American drama and theatre stress native authorship, the fact remains that actual spectators at American early republican theatres saw very few plays written by persons resident in the

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new United States or acted by persons born in North America. Given the rapid rise of theatre as a widely subscribed entertainment, one might inquire as to what exactly Americans were seeing and how this fare influenced both American writers and spectators as they tried to establish themselves as selves in the former colonies. Whether before the war or after, English-language Americans almost exclusively encountered playbills promising British fare. In cities or towns with German- or French-speaking populations, one might find occasional performances in those languages; but the vast majority of plays and performances in the early United States were English-language of British provenance. The few American dramas in English that did make it to theatres all show the marked use of British templates in their construction, even if the matter and setting appear to be “native” to American locations and situations. As will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, Philadelphians between May 1792 and July 1794 would have been exposed to over 160 evenings of professional theatre in their city, but only on two of those, only slightly more than one percent of the total, would they have witnessed a main play written by someone living in the United States. Some of the others might have been inspired by French or German dramatists, but the overwhelming majority were written by British playwrights for British stages. To speak of “American” drama or theatre is necessarily to confront “British” texts and practices, even to the point where one might plausibly insist that the theatre of the newly independent nation was in reality simply a provincial stage of the British empire.²

Nevertheless, as I will argue in some specific cases, these plays from London or Dublin were not always enacted or printed or read or seen without some local American factors altering the context in which they would be perceived. It has been long understood, for instance, that Tyler’s *The Contrast*, the best-known play by an American from before 1800, bears the signs of two plays being performed in New York while Tyler was there: Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s comedy of manners *The School for Scandal* and John O’Keeffe’s operetta *The Poor Soldier*. But what does it mean that *The Poor Soldier* – a rather feeble play with a great many engaging songs – was the most popular afterpiece on American stages before 1815? To what extent did American audiences nationalize O’Keeffe’s comic rendering of Irish soldiers home from fighting for the British army in America? Did they see this as a “British” play, or was it to some extent their own, converted either by acting or staging or by projection on the part of the audience into something approximating an

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“American” amusement? Such are the kinds of questions the chapters in this volume seek to address.

At the same time, when Americans do pen their own plays, they must choose the particular British texts on which to model their own. One overwhelming factor in American playwright choice of template is certainly popularity. Tyler knew that to refer to *The Poor Soldier* in the dialogue of *The Contrast*, which he does explicitly, would be to evoke an immediate and knowing response; by April 1787, the month *The Contrast* premiered in New York, O’Keeffe’s musical had already entered into the playgoing vocabulary of theatrically minded Americans, and the Irish character Darby, to whom Tyler’s Yankee Jonathan directly alludes, had become nearly a household name, at least in New York. But for a playwright like Judith Sargent Murray, mere reference to a well-known British comedy would not be enough; as she cast about, perhaps, for something familiar on which to ground her attempt to construct a native play, she decided to borrow heavily from a text that itself portrayed a transatlantic situation, Richard Cumberland’s *The West Indian*. As a sentimental comedy, *The West Indian* had few rivals on American stages; most of the comedic writing then in vogue was sharply satiric and distinctly anti-sentimental. Cumberland, however, found a ready audience in the American colonies, then later, in the new United States. For her play of the American Revolution, *The Traveller Returned*, Murray could borrow character types and plot situations from *The West Indian* without making any direct allusions in the way Tyler does to O’Keeffe. Not only could she provide her audience with that air of familiarity that theatre managers thought the spectators required, but she also could demonstrate the differences between a play that valorizes London versus one that affirms Boston – to the favor of the latter.

The matter of influence may or may not have produced anxiety among playwrights, but it became an inescapable fact of the literary and cultural life of the new republic. Tyler and Murray are but two of the American writers who look at what their contemporaries are paying money to see in order to construct their texts. For a playwright like William Dunlap, the early republic’s most prolific professional dramatic author, both British and German plays provide models or sources for direct translation; he makes, in essence, no particular claim to originality or American genius. Despite his attempt to find the right formula that would produce a paying script – Dunlap was a manager during much of the 1790s and had to worry about receipts – he rarely created a vehicle that lasted more than a handful

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of performances. His most popular play was probably his translation of Kotzebue's *The Stranger*, a perennial favorite in American theatres, but never billed as Dunlap's. One of those that were performed, only that usual handful, his relatively original tragedy *André*, is known today as a play about the Revolution; but as I seek to demonstrate below, that play is so implicated in Dunlap's understanding of his *ur*-text, Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, as to cause us to inquire whether nationality is even an appropriate rubric for a drama that makes a virtual hero of an enemy spy. The same might be said for a less audacious and ambitious play than Dunlap's, the comedy *Independence* by the young South Carolina writer William Ilor. Despite its title, nothing in Ilor's play speaks directly to the American strand. It is based on an English novel, is set in England, and contains only English characters. No one gives a Huzzah! for George Washington or speaks in reverent tones of Yorktown or Bunker Hill, as other more overtly patriotic plays do in the 1790s and early 1800s. Rather, the test of its Americanness seems to be simply its authorship; the audiences in Charleston that witnessed the premiere would have known who wrote it, and the printed version proudly announced his even more local origins as a son of the then-deserted town of Dorchester, South Carolina. But again, one wants to ask what people saw: a reminder of their vaunted British heritage, now that the bloodshed of the Revolution was being forgotten? Or did they patriotically convert the English pastoral scene to an equally pastoral South Carolina one – devoid of slaves – and take pride in the title word more than the literal setting? Ilor was fully aware of the power of patriotic appeal; his other play overtly depicts a famous battle of the Revolution, Eutaw Springs. Even in that play, however, he equivocates to some degree on national identity, mixing his sympathies among American and British combatants, as if such a thing as nationality were so “fluid,” in Heather Nathans's phrasing, as to be always negotiable in the world of capital T Theatre. In other words, when Americans thought of or participated in the theatre, they entered into a cultural space that was transatlantic and without fixed national borders, even though the content may have appeared nationalistic and local.³

Most studies of early American drama take the emerging or incipient nationalism of the colonies or early United States as the chief point of such plays, their ostensible lack of literary merit often excused in order to get to the “rise” of American drama – a rise that cannot be too quickly brought to the twentieth century. To be sure, much can be learned from this perspective. What I argue here, however, is that *identity* is a complex

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and often paradoxical matter, especially when rendered through drama and theatre. It is not restricted to nationality, even if from American stages one could have heard appeals to a developing ideology of nationalism. Although the early republican American stage was occasionally a testing-ground for questions of nationality, more often the issues it evoked or represented were ones that might have seemed more immediate than the often vague and not entirely coherent notions of citizenship and allegiance then circulating. Susanna Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers* has been read in recent times as an appeal to American liberties in the context of the Barbary captivity crisis, in which American sailors had been captured on the high seas by North African corsairs, but the play invokes a myriad of ethnic and other identities, many with complex genetic histories. Certainly the figure of Ben Hassan brings forward a British tradition of unpleasant Jewish stereotypes, while Muley Moloc is the oddly familiar and flat stage Muslim. But when looked at theatrically, Rowson's Algerian dey, in particular, rides a peculiar stage history into the Anglo-American playwright's text, most of which has nothing to do with contemporary politics or Barbary corsairs. Theatregoers in 1794–1796, the years of greatest popularity for *Slaves in Algiers*, would have recognized the stage Muslim tyrant as a type from a variety of earlier plays, some of which are clearly reflected in Rowson's Moloc. Negotiating religion and ethnicity in the context of contemporary events and stages past and present creates interpretive difficulties for a play that appeals to desires for strong female characters or a triumphing American ideology of human rights.⁴

Reading the writing and performance of *Slaves in Algiers* illustrates much of what I intend to pursue. Essentially, this book puts forward three interrelated problems: the significant un-Americanness of the American theatre and what that means for the identity of the institution of the stage; the recognition that most American plays, like most British dramatic texts, are influenced primarily by other plays more than by current events; and the ways in which American spectators might have seen themselves in the drama and performances of that theatre, particularly as the plays reflected and shaped a host of identities, many of them having little directly to do with the political re-creation of the colonies as a distinct "nation." To be sure, Americans were busy with a variety of rituals that expressed some understanding of an "imagined" national "community," in the terms of Benedict Anderson. As David Waldstreicher describes, publicized toasts, street rituals, parades, and other gatherings helped groups make claims for national identity that were often at odds with

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those of other groups. But the very rivalry in the streets between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, or whites and blacks, to name but two types of difference, indicates the volatility of identity during the formative years of the early republic. In addition, because nationality was in a fluid stage, people in the United States would have found themselves allied to or rejected from a variety of communities, some based on “objective” registers of difference – dialect, perceived skin color, or sex – some on proximity – “from” Savannah or Newburyport. Curiously, the theatre, staffed often by itinerant actors or troupes, created a community as well, the community of theatregoers, who shared in the perception of a common set of stage practices, actors, and repertoire. Therefore, in a world of reconsidered communal identities, the stage functioned as a supra-community, whose traditions in some ways superseded those of the culture immediately outside its doors, even as they acknowledged them, in the syntax and diction of the theatre.⁵

Even the term *identity* is problematic for this period. Identity is only meaningful when placed in opposition to something else. An early seventeenth-century Nansemond man living along the river in Virginia that still carries that name might have considered himself distinct in part from members of the other tribes in the Powhatan confederation, but he would have shared with tribes to the east and north a common language, Algonkian. However, he probably never imagined himself an “Indian” and thus forcibly connected to people he considered as his hereditary enemies to the west and south until the Englishman Captain Smith and cohorts called such a distinction to his attention. An eighteenth-century British American woman faced with the fact of “independence” would have had to learn a new distinction, too, perhaps not so different from the Nansemond to other Algonkians; yet at the same time, she would also have to negotiate new uncertainties in her position as woman, as white, as not French in 1793 or not Irish in 1798 (years of sudden and large migration from St. Domingue and Ireland), as New Englander or Carolinian, as once Anglican now Episcopal, in addition to not British but then again not entirely not-British either. Not surprisingly, persons resident in the newly declared United States would have been somewhat uncertain about what exactly made up “identity.” The confusions could come from a variety of markers: class, religion, race and ethnicity, gender, region or locale, as well as nationality. As Waldstreicher remarks, “In the late eighteenth century, identity itself had become increasingly unstable. Highly mobile young people, particularly young men in cities, found that they could

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make and remake themselves by manipulating appearances.” Beyond the kind of social masking that a Benjamin Franklin or his con-man alter ego Stephen Burroughs entertains, the theatre, of course, is that cultural space where the making and remaking of appearances occurs nightly, where identities are roles and roles change as plays change. What I entertain in these pages is the interpretive problem of how to read plays and performances in terms of a world where identity is volatile and where the oppositions that create identity themselves often shift or mushroom or wither in a relatively short time. The meeting of audience and stage on the level of identity is a constant negotiation, inflected by social and political conditions on the one hand, but given shape by long-standing dramatic and theatrical practice on the other. What makes the theatre even more complex to discern as a register of American identities is the explicit foreignness of it.⁶

One measure of foreignness centers on the very nature of theatre itself in a land that prides itself on natural virtue. Colonial Americans used theatrical tropes for a variety of contexts, including politics, but they did so from a position of some skepticism about literal theatre. There was a big difference between the providential “theatre of God’s judgments,” whereby individuals played out parts true to themselves and assigned by the divine (settling New England or fighting the Revolution, for instance), and the small stage theatre of deliberate falsification, much abhorred by Puritans, Quakers, and others, including radical American whigs.⁷ As John Howe remarks of the tension between figural and literal theatre:

Though the metaphor of politics as theatre could provide insight into the revolution’s gleaming place on the stage of history, the theater, with its calculated distinction between appearance and reality, offered a deeply troubling referent for civic affairs, especially in a republican culture suffused with worry over hidden conspiracies and thus sensitive to the public dangers that arose when appearance and reality diverged. The theatrical transaction between actors and audience was both complicated and ambiguous. While actors concealed their true identities behind the characters they created on stage, speech, action, and scenery combined to transport audiences into far realms of imagination. Such a complex, calculated, and constantly shifting process of discursive negotiation seemed altogether unsuited to the honest conduct of republican politics.⁸

To bring theatre to British America meant some kind of negotiation, whether between communities and theatre managers to have it at all, or

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between spectators and players, in terms of what people would see and how they would see it. As a British institution on republican soil and as a presentation of shifting, unstable identities, theatre could irritate or please, depending on the degree of willingness of republican audiences to accept the playacting of identities as a dimension of American culture, British plays as the primary repertoire, and their own power to transform productions when occasion suited.

Another aspect of the theatre that brought foreignness to North America was a specialty of the eighteenth-century British stage, ethnic typing, a specialty reiterated and transmuted in the American theatre. Rowson's "American" play parades a variety of such types – Jew, Muslim, Spanish, as well as English and Anglo-American – in a style familiar to aficionados of British drama. To see an Irish character on stage, in another instance of ethnic typing, was in the 1790s or early 1800s to be linked to a long, and largely derogatory, history of representation in English drama of the people of Eire. In the 1790s, however, an Irishman on stage was not always simply a laughable Paddy but might have reminded Americans of the Irish rebellion, an event that brought a vocal, liberty-seeking set of individuals to the United States in search of a sympathetic, anti-British population that would harbor them. What tensions in American theatres were created by 1798, the year the uprising in Ireland was put down by British troops, between the desire to laugh at a dialect-speaking fool and the feelings of sympathy or antipathy real Irish political exiles produced in English-majority American cities? Quite possibly none at all, given the political battles of that year occasioned by the XYZ Affair and the Alien and Sedition Acts, yet the surviving texts of American plays with Irish characters show a particular interest in staging and restaging Irish characters as divergent variants of a type. Indeed, Irishness becomes peculiarly implicated in Americanness in the post-Revolutionary period, a trope for sympathy or mockery or both. Because Irish people were in the early republic a small minority, their presence on stage signals another history, a complex one of representation and evocation within the theatre itself.

Other ethnic groups with loaded histories also show up on American boards, including Native and African Americans. In many ways, the ethnic distinction between these two groups is elided in the theatre. In George Colman, Jr.'s *Inkle and Yarico*, a popular British production that had surprising vitality on American stages, the identity of Yarico as Indian overlaps her cultural position as African, one that Colman confuses by speaking of the color of Indians as both tawny and black. But the issue

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raised by the play – amidst songs and comedy – is miscegenation and the loyalty of an Englishman, Inkle, to a woman of color, Yarico. To sell her into slavery, Inkle's choice, seems entirely consonant with American practice; to be forced to relent and declare for her as an equal, the play's conclusion, would appear to raise disquieting questions about race relations and market forces. Nevertheless, if the play ever did tweak any conscience in America, that tweaking did not stop it from being produced in many cities over two decades, including theatre centers in the South.

Less affirmative about ethnic integrity are such American plays of the early nineteenth century as James Nelson Barker's *The Indian Princess* and Samuel Woodworth's *The Forest Rose*. Both musicals, like *Inkle and Yarico*, they can hardly be held to too strict an accounting of reality; still, they build on popular assumptions about what constitutes race, or race as a represented state. Barker is the first American playwright to deal fully with the Pocahontas myth, but his understanding of the Rolfe–Princess relationship takes some of its shape from lines explored by Colman's English comedy. Ethnicity comes to be a markedly theatrical concept; the labels Islamic or Irish or Indian or African have little to do with the living beings who claim those identities and more with previous and necessarily distorted representations on stage. Despite the literal presence of Native peoples in playhouses, such as the Cherokee chiefs who both sat in the boxes and performed on the stage of the new John Street Theatre in New York in 1767, the “Natives” in dramas more often resembled “natives” from other plays – plays originally written by London playwrights – rather than the hungry, besieged, persecuted, and embattled nations who lived on the American frontier.⁹

Anglo-American stages offer a distinctive set of African types. Even a closet dramatist like St. Jean de Crèvecoeur makes use of a crude dialect to portray his servants of loyalists and patriots in the Revolutionary War play, “Landscapes.” Blacks often become registers of other issues, as they do for Crèvecoeur, reflecting the virtues or vices of their respective masters. But again, certain British plays often shape Americans' rendering of their characters. One of the most influential plays on the depiction of blacks in American theatre is Isaac Bickerstaff's 1768 *The Padlock*. His comically abused character Mungo, as played in the colonies and United States by Lewis Hallam, Jr., was much applauded and served as a direct influence on a character created by Royall Tyler in his now-mostly-lost comedy, *May Day in Town* (Jarvis, “Royall Tyler's Lyrics”). Both

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Crèvecoeur and Tyler generate sympathy for their Africanized characters through speeches on abuse, but both authors equally avoid looking at the causes with too keen an eye. Several decades after those two writers, the dramatist Samuel Woodworth cares nothing for sympathy; his figure of Rose is simply a comic butt, abused, yes, but never allowed to assert any form of subjectivity. She suffers particularly at the hands of the stage Yankee, that figure made popular in Tyler's *The Contrast* as a lovable naïf, but by Woodworth's time, a type that in at least one of its manifestations lacks any sympathy for others – especially blacks. Benevolence and paternalism have been succeeded by naked cruelty, all in the name of humor, all sung to fetching music for the delight of the heterogeneous American audience.

If the Indian question or the African question gets peculiar theatrical answers, so does the history question. How does one make American history something entertaining? Dunlap tried it with *André*, failed, he thought, then bowdlerized his own text to produce a chronically popular July Fourth vehicle, *The Glory of Columbia, Her Yeomanry!* Sack the tragedy, praise the farmer captors of the English spy, sing and dance. Some early writers on the Revolution – Mercy Otis Warren and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, for instance – took a tragic tone, even when the action was not classically tragic in scope, for the purpose of elevation and education of a population in need of lessons on civic virtue. Later writers, however, found that sermons on stoicism did not match the mood of the rising generation. Indeed, the Revolution itself did not always translate well to the stage. With just one relatively minor motif – the portrayal of committees of safety – one can see the fireworks and flag-waving that became the signs of the Independence spectacle were often less on playwrights' minds than the doubts about democracy that adhere to the committee trope. It is not as if any American playwright fully understood the dramatic significance of the committees, those patriot inquisitorial bodies that became the arbiters of political correctness during the early Revolutionary period, but writers such as Crèvecoeur, Robert Munford, and Murray comprehended readily enough that when the loyalty of citizens is put on trial by other citizens, matters of innocence and guilt can become woefully muddled in short order. Thus the kind of stereotyping that the stage indulges in ethnic characterization can yield to more subtle, politically tinged discourse and plot devices and allow the plays to speak as registers of different kinds of anxieties from those represented by race alone.