Prologue

Strollers without Borders

William Hallam heard the gossip about John Moody’s success in Jamaica with irritation. His own theater in Goodman’s Fields had been continuously harassed by the authorities for the unlicensed competition it gave to the royal theaters of Drury Lane and Covent Garden and sniffed at by critics for its propensity to spice up plays with tumblers and dancers entr’acte. Now, in July 1750, he faced a court summons that seemed likely to result in financial ruin. That the Cork adventurer and probable Jacobite Moody should have the freedom in the colonies to perform the drama unmolested and, still more, that his brogue-inflected performances of Shakespeare and Rowe should win “universal acclaim,” as one American friend had put it, seemed a species of luck so undeserved that it should have eluded even an Irishman.

Some eighteen months later, after several appearances at Middlesex quarter sessions, the payments of fines and the failed solicitation of the local magistrates, Hallam was forced to close down the Goodman’s Fields Theatre. His business had failed, but his conduct and standing were such that his creditors let him keep his props, scenery and costumes and discharged him from his debts. Now Moody’s example excited, if also still exasperated, the forty-year-old theater producer, for it heralded new opportunities. If that pretender Moody could dazzle the colonists with his limited gifts, what remarkable good fortune could a genuinely talented troupe expect? Hallam rounded up his former company members, including his brother Lewis and Lewis’s brilliant actor wife, Susan, as well as a few other newly unemployed thespians of his acquaintance to propose the new venture: touring the British colonies of America. He would be the backer, supplying scripts, scenery and costumes, as well as some start-up capital; Lewis was to be manager; Susan, their children and the ten other adults would constitute the rest of the company and share its profits. The repertoire would include the current stock of Shakespeare, Otway, Rowe, Addison and other examples of English genius; the actors’ status as London performers would add to the appeal, for rustic American
provincials would rush to purchase tickets for the play to prove that they were not the uncivilized bumpkins the English liked to imagine. As the *Virginia Gazette* of June 12, 1752, put it, in a paragraph that flatteringly rendered equivalent the taste, discernment and status of metropolitan and colonial sensibility,

**THIS IS TO INFORM THE PUBLIC**

That . . . [the manager] from the New Theatre in Goodmans Fields, is daily expected here with a select Company of Comedians, the Scenes, Cloaths, and Decorations are all entirely new, extremely rich, and finished in the highest Taste, the Scenes being painted by the best Hands in London are excell’d by none in Beauty and Elegance, so that the Ladies and Gentlemen may depend on being entertain’d in as polite a Manner as at the theatres in London, the Company being perfected in all the best Plays, Opera’s, Farces, and Pantomimes, that have been exhibited in any of the Theatres for these ten years past.

William Hallam secured the company’s passage on the *Charming Sally* of Captain William Lee, slave trader, conveyer and lover of the play. On this particular sailing, the ship had no slaves until it reached Barbados but did take some aboard there to deliver to Virginia and New York, docking in Virginia on June 2, 1752. The *Charming Sally* then proceeded up north to New York with “a parcel of likely slaves, Men, Women and Children” according to the same newspaper report. Perhaps as Mrs. Lewis Hallam practiced Portia’s famous plea on the quarterdeck — “The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” — the human cargo chained together in the hold, lacking the faintest possibility of reprieve for themselves or their progeny, may have glimpsed in this assemblage a ghostly preface to their own bloodier New World experiences. In the meantime, those allowed on deck, working as sailors and servants, endured, memorized or perhaps were even amused by the performance of *The Merchant of Venice* or *The Fair Penitent.*

“This should give that upstart Moody a run for his money,” Hallam probably thought as watched the *Charming Sally* depart from the Thames docks. What he couldn’t have known was that, despite assurances to the contrary, the Hallam company would fall almost immediately upon hard times in the colonies, that it would ultimately merge with a remnant of Moody’s Jamaican company in the tropical lowlands, and that Moody himself would escape to London, eventually to be “discovered” by David Garrick, where he became famous for his Irishmen in plays such as *The Committee* and *Love à la Mode* at Drury Lane. Of more lasting importance for the story told here, Hallam’s company had embarked on a journey that added eccentric and unexpected currents to the already hectic flows of transoceanic exchange, hydraulic propulsions that extended English theater across the Indian Ocean and the Pacific basins, as well as the Atlantic.
littorals, creating an imperial culture in circulation, where culture, identity and futurity traveled and were transformed by their polycultural audiences. Strolling players fetched up not only in Kingston but also in Calcutta, Bengkulu, St. Helena and Port Jackson, among other places in the overseas British world, critical cargo in the relentless “trade” that propelled waves of goods, peoples, skills, knowledge and strategies of both rule and survival into propinquity, marking territory, collapsing distance and assuaging homesickness across hemispheres and oceans. In theaters composed of paper, bamboo and mud, as well as more permanent materials, audiences were assembled, disassembled and repurposed as Britons on the move carried their theatrical practices with them, flouting conventions and embracing privations that only underscored playing’s instrumental role in empire’s formation.

Oceans were the highways of the eighteenth century, connecting relations, marking and distributing domains of belonging and attachment, slavery and freedom, life and death. Indigenous travelers had long taken such crossings in stride with world-making effects. The strolling players of empire retraced their routes and limned in new ones in order to stage both quotidian and monumental performances across the globe, arriving as embodied archives of knowledge and practice that transformed peripheries into historical stages where alternative collectivities were enacted, imagined and lived. Here Europeans, Amerindians, Africans, Asians and Australians jostled for freedom, love and power, and the enslaved and the free, rich and poor alike, performed tales of tribulation, memory and redemption, but for audiences and in conditions that were not usually of their own choosing.