2011

Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem': Identity and Politics in Eighteenth-Century English and Colonial American Theatre, 1752-1776

Abigail Calvert Fine

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the Theatre History Commons

Recommended Citation

https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-xy86-xn31

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
'Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem': Identity and Politics in Eighteenth-Century English and Colonial American Theatre, 1752-1776

Abigail Calvert Fine

Williamsburg, Virginia

Bachelor of Arts, The College of William and Mary, 2009

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of History

The College of William and Mary
May 2011
APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Abigail Calvert Fine

Approved by the Committee, February 2011

Committee Chair
Professor James Whittenburg, History
The College of William and Mary

Adjunct Associate Professor Carl Lounsbury, History
The College of William and Mary

Assistant Professor Nicholas Popper, History
The College of William and Mary
Eighteenth-century British and colonial American theatre is often overlooked by both historians and theatre enthusiasts. From the Renaissance comes Shakespeare, the nineteenth century gave us Oscar Wilde, and the from twentieth century came the plays of Noel Coward, Tom Stoppard, and Tennessee Williams. But who were the great dramatists of eighteenth-century Anglo theatre? Only perhaps John Gay and Richard Brinsley Sheridan have any name recognition today, but their plays, like many written in the eighteenth century, are less lasting works of art attesting to the human condition than they are commentary on the society in which they lived. Because of censorship laws in the theatre, specifically the Licensing Act of 1737, many of the brightest minds of the eighteenth century turned their talents to novel writing rather than playwriting.

But the theatre of the eighteenth century brimmed with innovation, excitement, and most importantly social relevance. Despite the Licensing Act, many actors, theatre managers, and playwrights found creative ways to make political or social critiques, sometimes through the alteration of Renaissance and Restoration pieces, or through newly written farcical afterpieces. The theatre became a place of patriotism during the Seven Years War, and an outlet for tensions during the Stamp Act Crisis. In London, David Garrick both set the style and responded to what the public desired, while in the English countryside and in colonial America theatre troupes tried to emulate the London playhouse experience.

Most importantly, in colonial America the American Company, a traveling British troupe with David Douglass at the helm, performed in almost all of the colonies from Massachusetts to South Carolina. The common experiences he provided for the colonists helped to create a common identity which, though rooted in British culture, united them as Americans on the eve of Revolution.
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To my father, my first history teacher and my ‘protector’
and to my mother, my best friend
Acknowledgements

Though I like to think of myself as self-sufficient, I would never have managed to write this thesis without the help of many incredible individuals. First of all, I would like to thank Dr. James Whittenburg, my adviser, who has been my mainstay during my time at William and Mary. From my freshman seminar to my masters thesis, he guided me through it all. Without him and his wife, Dr. Carolyn Whittenburg, these past six years would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my other committee members: Dr. Nicholas Popper, both for his wonderful suggestions upon reading my thesis and for a fantastic independent study on Renaissance theatre, and Dr. Carl Lounsbury for spending several hours teaching me about theatrical architecture and for providing me with critical resources for conducting my research.

This thesis has been influenced by many other hands, as well. Thanks especially to Dr. Leslie Mitchell, who opened my eyes to the joys of England in the long eighteenth-century, to Dr. Lu Ann Homza for helping me to learn what I am capable of writing when I put my mind to it, to Dr. Philip Daileader for teaching me how fun and funny history can be (I will never forget Enrico Dandolo and the Fourth Crusade), and to Dr. Carter Hailey, who helped me gain access to the Folger Shakespeare Library and who has been a wonderful friend. Thanks also go to my best friends, Katharine Schellman, who has read so many snippets of this thesis along the way and has never failed to be encouraging, and Zan Gillies, who has been incredibly supportive throughout this endeavor, even on days when I felt like giving up.

And with all of my love, thanks to my mom and dad who have always believed that I am capable of achieving anything I want and who do everything in their power to ensure that I have the means of giving it my all. They have loved me unfailingly, have offered me support, and have always let me know that they think my dreams are worthwhile. Without them, this thesis really would never have been possible.
‘Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem’:
Identity and Politics in Eighteenth-Century English and Colonial American Theatre, 1752-1776
Introduction

Setting the Stage

In the spring of 1752 a ship called The Charming Sally crossed the Atlantic with a troupe of London players aboard. They landed in Virginia in the early summer, and by mid-September they had secured permission to perform in Williamsburg.¹ The company, originally called The London Company of Comedians or Hallam’s Company, became famous as the American Company when in 1758 David Douglass took the helm as manager. Douglass’s actors were professionals who had played at theatres in London and who knew first-hand the conventions of English theatre. Though the personnel of the troupe fluctuated from season to season, with long-time actors making an exit while new recruits entered from London, the American Company flourished until the American Revolution by presenting London-style entertainment to colonists who were desperate for British goods and culture.

Within this thesis, I will first compare the operations and management of the American Company under David Douglass to the operations and management of the two licensed theatres in London and to the operations and management of the English provincial companies.² Although other companies were operating in America, I plan to focus my study

² While theatre in Ireland was certainly a major component of British theatre in the eighteenth century, and a comparison between the Irish, English, Scottish, and colonial American stages could be both interesting and useful to theatrical studies, I have decided that to include the Irish theatre to this already massive topic—and to do it any justice—would take far more time and space than I have available for this thesis. Furthermore, Douglass often returned to England to recruit actors and the colonial American public read theatrical news out of London, but the Irish stage, though temptingly comparative, did not play a direct role in the story of the interactions between colonial American and English theatre—except insofar as Dublin often hosted some of the more famous London actors from time to time, or gave aspiring actors a place to start their careers. Though I may rely on small bits of information from the Irish stage, it will not feature prominently within this thesis.
solely on the American Company because of its proven roots in London theatre, because it was arguably the most famous company operating in colonial America, and because there simply is not enough evidence left of any other company to make an adequate comparison between its operations and those of English theatres. Moreover, we have evidence that the American Company played in nearly every major colonial city as well as in Nova Scotia and Jamaica, making it truly ubiquitous within colonial America. From these comparisons, I will next examine the extent of the differences between colonial American and English theatre, the way these differences were influenced by geographic location, and the extent to which these differences were perceived or not perceived by the colonists. I will also look at the extent to which these differences helped shape colonists reactions to the theatre, and I will analyze the way in which the perception of theatre shaped colonists responses to theatrical entertainment at a political level on the eve of the American Revolution.

To adeptly make all of these comparisons, three historiographies must be taken into account. First, within the realm of colonial theatre, Odai Johnson, especially, has proved indispensable. In his book, Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli’s Plaster, Johnson attempts to reconstruct both the colonial performances and the cultural context in which they played, while his calendar co-edited with William J. Burling makes easy a comparison of the English and colonial American repertory. Moreover, Johnson’s scholarship paints the best modern picture of David Douglass as an actor-manager, and the way in which Douglass’s personal influence helped sway audience perception. His is the only new scholarship to focus exclusively on American theatre in the colonial period, although Colonial Williamsburg has several research reports that pertain to the theatre in colonial Virginia and to the reconstruction of the 1760 Douglass theatre, such as Patricia
Kearney’s 1989 report, *Plays and the Playgoers: 18th Century as a Reflection of its Audience*. Another older, but incredibly important book is Hugh Rankin’s *The Theater in Colonial America*, the first of recent histories to look at the vastness of the colonial theatrical world. Additionally, *Performing Patriotism* by Jason Shaffer has been extremely influential to my ideas of the politics of colonial American performance, and the database *Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers 1690-1783*, compiled by Mary Jane Corry, Kate Van Winkle Keller, and Robert Keller has greatly illuminated my understanding of the place of theatre in colonial America. Older, but seminal works, such as William Dunlap’s *A History of the American Theater from Its Origins to 1832* falls somewhere between primary and secondary source, since he begins his history with the arrival of the Hallams before his birth, yet continues his history into the early days of the Republic, supplementing the text with his own memories of the theatre.

Secondly, the realm of eighteenth-century London theatre must be examined. This is a wide and varied historiography, encompassing everything from actor’s memoirs written in the 1700s, such as *Memoirs of His Own Time* by Tate Wilkinson or *A Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke* by Charlotte Charke, to new studies about David Garrick, to an exhausting encyclopedia and calendar of plays. I have found that George Winchester Stone’s critical introduction to *The London Stage 1747-1776* succinctly states the facts of theatrical operations in eighteenth-century London, while a section of John Brewer’s *The Pleasures of the Imagination* examines the Georgian stage in cultural context. The authors represented in the volume *The London Theatre World 1660-1800*, edited by Robert Hume, deftly handle a variety of theatrical topics, and Vanessa Cunningham has analyzed how the most famous
London actor-manager shaped public perception by examining David Garrick as a playwright and gentleman of letters in *Shakespeare and Garrick*.

Finally, the role of provincial companies and strolling players in England must be studied. This field is relatively unexamined, but I have relied heavily on the work of Sybil Rosenfeld and Kathleen Barker for my secondary knowledge of the operations and management of the provincial companies, and I have used the primary accounts of eighteenth-century strollers and provincial managers to learn first-hand what these players experienced. Though no such memoirs exist for the players of colonial America, with a fine comb their experiences can be teased from the both the pages of newspapers and from the memoirs of their British contemporaries, though the vast differences between the two geographic areas and between the operations of the theatre companies must be taken into account.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the work of T.H Breen, specifically his work *The Marketplace of the Revolution*. Breen argues that the consumption of British goods united the otherwise disparate colonies into a single-minded force. The consumption of goods allowed women to participate in nation-building, as they often decided what to buy and what to boycott, and it gave commonalities to otherwise completely unalike colonists. Without creamware, a plantation owner in Virginia had little in common with a lawyer in Massachusetts; the consumption of British-imported goods led to the development of an American identity. I have extended this notion of "goods" and placed theatre into the milieu. Though throughout the colonial period Boston officially did not allow the American Company to perform, we shall see that the idea of theatre (and even David Douglass himself) did in fact pervade into even the most Puritan of colonies, and in October of 1774 the first
Continental Congress felt the need to ban theatre—last of all—in their list of British goods to boycott. But I would like to take it a step farther and argue that theatre was not only a British good, but a personal manifestation of London which each colony had experienced first-hand. The theatre, then, signified London. In banning theatre the colonists not only boycotted a good, but banished London and all that London implied.

Before concluding this introduction, I would like to make it clear that I am arguing that the institution of the theatre and the experience of attending the playhouse acquired political meaning prior to the Revolution whether the managers and actors wanted it to or not. I am not arguing that theatrical performances or the presentation of certain plays in colonial America singlehandedly led the colonists to the idea of Revolution, nor do I think that David Douglass intentionally set out to perform pieces which would subvert the Crown, but he was not impervious to which way the political winds were blowing. Moreover, despite Douglass’s wishes, what the audience took from his theatre might have nothing to do with the ideas the American Company wished to promote. People take what they need from plays, and the interpretations are endless. While I would not wish to argue that seeing *Cato* six or seven times made up George Washington’s mind about the issue of independence and the concepts of tyranny, monarchy, and republic, neither would I suggest that seeing plays had no influence upon the men and women who attended them. In his letters, Washington quoted several lines from *Cato*: he wrote “‘T is not in mortals to command success” during the Revolutionary War, and “the post of honor is a private station” as he prepared to retire. Since Washington did not own a copy of the play it stands to reason that he learned these lines in a playhouse.³

The theatre does have power. The experience of theatre-going, from buying a ticket to hearing an epilogue, embodies a whole range of cultural notions. For this reason, the theatre has been, and always will be, a major influence upon any culture in which it features prominently. As such a potent and subtle tool for change, its history should never be forgotten, nor its importance underestimated.
Chapter One
Taking the Town

The eighteenth-century British stage was a far-flung operation with London at its heart and profit on its mind. Strolling players operated in the English countryside, with provincial theatres and circuits in places such as Portsmouth, Norwich, Ipswich, Bath, Bristol, and York all attracting aspiring actors during the London season, and out-of-work London actors during the off-season. There was a flourishing theatrical scene in the Scottish capital of Edinburgh, in Dublin at the famous Smock Alley Theatre, and there were even companies which played in the Irish countryside. And, although the American Company was perhaps the longest lasting and arguably the most famous of the companies performing in colonial America, it was certainly not the only one on the circuit.

Yet, all of these theatrical ventures, in both their material and immaterial aspects, attempted to physically and symbolically recreate the experience of London playgoing. Part of this self-identification with London was economically driven: British playgoers believed they had the best theatre in Europe, and that the theatre in London was the best of Britain. Thus, whether in England or the colonies, having an actor with London credentials as part of the troupe was a great boon. If a provincial manager had contracted even a second-rate London actor, he would often carefully advertise it in the playbills, for he knew that the audience revered London experience. If an audience perceived that a local company provided London-styled entertainment, the company

---

could be sure of good returns on ticket sales. No matter where they played all companies looked to London as their example.

In their effort to turn a profit, however, theatre and company managers had to contend with a power higher than the example of the London stage. British theatre in the mid-eighteenth century, including theatre in the American colonies, depended on authority—governmental and in some cases religious—to secure the right to play. The major difference was that in England, though not in the colonies, the theatrical landscape was dominated by the Licensing Act of 1737. This act effectively legalized censorship of plays, a practice which had been unofficially occurring since the Restoration, and limited to two the number of theatres allowed to perform pieces using the spoken word: the Theatre Royal Covent Gardens and the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. Later, Samuel Foote’s Haymarket theatre received a patent to play during the summer when the two official patent houses were between seasons, and beginning in the 1760s several long-established provincial theatres ventured to secure a patent. But overall, on the British mainland, every theatre excepting the major patent houses were rendered instantaneously illegal in 1737, unless with “Authority by Letters Patent from His Majesty… or with License from the Lord Chamberlain.”

The reality of the act was that it little affected established theatres in the countryside and only briefly prohibited the growth of new provincial companies, but it

---

3 An important distinction should be made between theatres which show operas and theatres which show plays. Throughout the period, opera remained a separate art form from the theatre of the spoken word. Theatres which played operas were not affected by the Licensing Act, and continued as they had before.

sometimes made life difficult for strollers,\(^5\) who had to contend with the authorities and possible informers. In general, however, as long as the strolling company could ‘take the town’—that is, secure permission from local authorities, often by advertising a benefit for the poor of the parish—they could usually play under the radar.\(^6\) In London, however, the Licensing Act put a halt to most theatrical ventures. In fact, the same Hallams’ who began the London Company of Comedians in the American colonies (the company which later became the American Company) were first put out of business in London by the Licensing Act: their theatre, the New Well’s Theatre in the Goodman’s Fields area, operated clandestinely until 1747 as a “drinking theatre” that only produced legal entertainments such as “rope dancing, tumbling, singing and Pantomime entertainments,”\(^7\) but early in that year the authorities caught wind of the subterfuge, and the theatre was permanently closed in December of 1751.

In the colonies and Jamaica, however, the Licensing Act had no effect; the only thing necessary to play in the colonies was to secure both permission from local authorities and a playing space, similar to provincial strollers ‘taking the town.’ The players also had to hope that the local religious sects or, later, the Sons of Liberty would not try to disrupt the performance. But, since religious opposition was common to the English theatrical world, especially in the provinces, and English theatres often faced riots, playing in America seemed like a golden opportunity to those looking from across the ocean.

---

\(^5\) Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* (Gainsville, FL: Scolars’ Facsimilies and Reprints, 1969), 239. Charlotte writes of a benfit performance planned in Wells in 1752: “All was to be done under the Rose on account of the Magistrates, who have not suffered any Plays to be acted in the City for many Years…”

\(^6\) Rosenfeld, 21.

\(^7\) Hugh Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 1959), 47.
Of course, playing the colonies had its own unique challenges—the religious sects in parts of America held much more authority than they did in most of England. Moreover, local governments were often run by those religious sects, as in New England, or else kept them always in mind for political purposes, as in Philadelphia. Additionally, the populations of even the largest colonial cities could barely sustain a single season, and the cost of providing quality theatre with accoutrements from England soared with the Atlantic crossing. Nevertheless, when word got back to England about the success of John Moody’s company in Jamaica, the Hallams’ quickly got to working on their own colonial company, set to start their tour in Virginia with William Hallam as the business head who would remain in London, and Lewis Hallam as the actor-manager on site with the troupe.

Once across the Atlantic, however, the Hallam troupe quickly realized that the colonies were not such an easy market as they had hoped. The realities of the differences inherent between the colonies and the mother country meant that the troupe needed to adapt. They would have to travel on a circuit, and that circuit would have to be much larger than any English circuit, encompassing most of the Eastern seaboard and even Jamaica if the company wanted to turn a profit. Lewis Hallam seems to have modeled the troupe on the strolling players of England; he never owned any property in the colonies, except for briefly in Williamsburg, although he lost the title to the ‘playhouse’ (a converted building, rather than purpose-built) when he left the city without paying his debt on the building. Instead he found places to play. The troupe used halls, assembly

---

8 Rankin, 45
rooms, barns, or, as in New York, raised theatres quickly and cheaply, abandoning them at the end of their stay.⁹

The company was moderately successful, but after three years of strolling in the North American colonies, Hallam took his troupe to Jamaica in 1755. He died there in 1756, and his widow married the actor David Douglass, who probably acquired Lewis Hallam’s shares in company via the former Mrs. Hallam, and then purchased William Hallam’s shares becoming the single shareholder and manager of the troupe.¹⁰ In 1758, Douglass took his new troupe back to the North American colonies, where little had changed in the theatrical landscape. What Douglass found was that, unlike the managers of London theatres or larger provincial theatres, he did not have the option of profitably settling in a single city, or even a single colony. He simply did not have the population to sustain full seasons year after year in a single location, nor in many cases were the individual colonies affluent enough, or religiously tolerant enough, to provide an audience for even a full season; the situation mirrored several of the smaller English provincial theatres, such as that at Jacob’s Wells, where one night the prompter excitedly scrawled across the account book the word “wonderful” when they had taken in only £76. 2s. 0d,¹¹ a paltry sum compared with Douglass’s presumed average of £133. 6d.

Furthermore, Douglass could not have reasonably expected people from South Carolina to travel to Philadelphia for the theatre, or vice versa. Although David Garrick, the patentee of Drury Lane, could expect to attract to his London patent house people from all over the British Empire, the British mainland, and parts of Ireland, too, colonists

⁹ Johnson, 28.
¹⁰ Johnson and Burling, 180-185.
¹¹ Rosenfeld, 214
saw themselves as part of separate little entities. Though a Pennsylvanian and a
South Carolinian might have visited their common capital of London, if given the chance,
a South Carolinian may have seen no reason to visit the capital of Pennsylvania simply
for entertainment; he had his own capital in his own colony. Douglass, then, had to adapt
to the views of the colonists, as well as to the limited population. This meant he could
not afford to be sedentary. Though he operated the American Company in large part like
a London theatre, by virtue of his geographic location Douglass knew that his theatre had
to tour, and thus it clearly had ties to the strolling traditions of the countryside. Besides
traveling to the major colonial cities, Douglass’s troupe, like the strolling players in
England who followed fairs, races, courts, and markets, often found themselves following
court days and attending the Fredericksburg races.\textsuperscript{12} Even if Douglass had built a single
large theatre—comparable to the size of Covent Gardens or Drury Lane—in
Williamsburg or Charleston or Philadelphia, it is likely that after a single season his
company would have produced little revenue compared to their annual intake as a
traveling company.

Renting spaces for performance, however, was not always the most profitable
option. Besides the cost of needing to rent in each new location, the practice of using
found spaces for performance instead of using a permanent playhouse tended to look
somewhat suspicious to the colonial authorities, since the companies which preceded the
American Company (including the Hallam company from whence it came) and some
companies which played concurrently with the American Company often left trails of
debt and criminality in their wake. This pattern was not confined solely to colonial

\textsuperscript{12} Rosenfeld, 6, 117 and Johnson and Burling, 387, 425
America, however, as strolling players in England were known for their poverty. Strollers frequently had not enough to eat, too much to drink, and, like their colonial counterparts, left behind debts in every city they visited. An English provincial company manager by the name of Mossop, for instance, tended to leave suddenly in the dark of night without settling his accounts. In another instance in England, a low comedian named James Spiller, who was often in debt thanks to his heavy drinking, was nearly arrested just as he was going on the stage, though in this case he managed to distract the authorities and escape.¹³

But perhaps the most notorious case of such behavior occurred in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1768 when a rival company to the American Company, called Verling’s Virginia Company, left behind nine cases of debt among the actors and against the actors, while one actor was arrested and detained for debt. The manager William Verling was sued for the recovery of debt in five additional cases; these cases were dismissed until the next court session, however, by which time Verling had absconded from Williamsburg altogether, effectively cancelling the suits against him and leaving the plaintiffs empty-handed. A similar situation occurred with the troupe later that year in Annapolis.¹⁴ But strolling players took with them more than unpaid debts: property loss and personal loss also followed in the wake of the troupe. After Verling’s company left Williamsburg, tavern-keeper Jane Vobe advertised in the Virginia Gazette for her runaway slave Nanny:

“Runaway from the subscriber, on Monday the 27th of June, a negro woman named Nanny... it is supposed that she has gone off with some of the comedians who have just left this town, with some of whom, as I have been informed since

¹³ Rosenfeld, 15-16; a print by Hogarth depicts Spiller selling benefit tickets at his execution.
¹⁴ Johnson, 30.
she went off, she had connections and was seen very busy talking privately with some of them.”15

And, tragically, Reverand Issac Gilberne from Williamsburg discovered that his wife had eloped with the strolling players at that same time.16 Since strollers had no property in the cities, they had no stake in ever returning to the communities in which they had left behind such debts and devastation. This meant that when a new company of property-less players arrived without a stake in the community, the authorities, merchants, barbers, printers, and anyone else necessary to the theatrical trade naturally shied away from becoming too involved with this new troupe.

Thus, in what amounted to a bid for respectability, Douglass built a permanent playhouse in Williamsburg in 1760. From that date on, Douglass built permanent theatre buildings in Williamsburg, Annapolis, Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, Newport in Rhode Island, Kingston and Spanish Town in Jamaica, and possibly also in Norfolk and Petersburg in Virginia,17 and he retained the deed on many of these theatres for years after their initial construction. Not only did the building of permanent theatres save Douglass the cost of renting a space to play, it also gave the citizens and the authorities of those colonial cities which featured a Douglass-owned theatre reason to trust him: it provided a surety against his return, and gave him a stake in ensuring that his reputation in those cities remained sterling. Additionally, these theatres gave Douglass English-styled theatres in which to play, a critical feature for good audience reception: an English-styled theatre meant that Douglass could more easily present his troupe as a respectable London-based company ready to entertain the colonists with the best of

---

15 *Virginia Gazette*, June 30, 1768.
16 Johnson, 29.
17 Johnson and Burling, 44-59, and Johnson, 33.
British entertainment. Moreover, if the American Company was in town, the theatre was theirs by right and ownership to use, but if another company, lecturer, or even sermonizer visited while the American Company was elsewhere, Douglass could rent out the property for profit. But most importantly, the buildings gave Douglass a residence in these cities and in many cases prevented him from having to secure the permission of local authorities to play every time he returned to a location.\textsuperscript{18}

Based on archaeological evidence from the 1996-1999 excavation of the 1760 Williamsburg theatre and the surviving lease of the 1763 Queen Street Theatre in Charleston, it appears that Douglass modeled his playhouse buildings on English provincial theatres. The outline of the postholes of the Williamsburg theatre determined that the exterior dimensions were 72’ in length and 44’ in width, and the Queen Street Theatre in Charleston is known to have been 75’ in length and 35’ in width.\textsuperscript{19} In comparison, the 1729 Jacob’s Wells Theatre in Bristol, which was used until the building of the Bristol Theatre Royal in 1766, measured 62’ x 37’, the 1758 theatre in Penzance measured roughly 67’ x 29’, the surviving 1788 theatre in Richmond, Yorkshire measures 67’ x 28’, and the exterior of the 1766 Bath Theatre Royal measured 88’ x 48’.\textsuperscript{20} It should be noted, however, that the Bath Theatre Royal was somewhat smaller than other provincial Theatre Royals of the 1760s.

Overall, Douglass’s theatres were somewhat larger than the average provincial theatre, but decidedly smaller than the average Theatre Royal. Given the population of

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{18} Johnson, 31
\textsuperscript{19} Johnson, 19
\textsuperscript{20} Mark Howell, “The ‘Regular Theatre’ at Jacob’s Well, Bristol 1729-1765,” in \textit{Scenes from Provincial Theatres}, ed. Richard Foulkes (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1994), 39; sadly, the dimensions for the Theatre Royal York remain unknown, though they most likely compare favorable to the dimensions of the Bath Theatre Royal.
\end{footnotes}
the areas in which he played, and from how far away he could reasonably expect to attract an audience, the size of his theatres seems like a shrewd business decision for maximizing profit. It has been estimated that Douglass’s Williamsburg theatre could seat roughly 300 spectators, though based on estimated capacity of 1000 at the Bath Theatre Royal and the 400-500 people capacity at the even smaller Jacob’s Wells theatre I would suggest that it could hold somewhat more; Douglass’s Chapel Street Theatre in New York could hold around 470 audience members. These figures are comparable to the average number of spectators the provincial regular theatres and Long Rooms could hold, though less than the average capacity of provincial Theatre Royals. The two London patent houses, of course, could hold far more than Douglass’s theatres: it is estimated that by 1762 Drury Lane could hold about 1,800 patrons, and Covent Garden could hold perhaps 2,180 spectators.

A virtual reconstruction of the 1760 Williamsburg theatre, pieced together from contemporary reports and comparisons with the provincial theatre upon which it was based, depicts the exterior of the theatre as a large two-story building with one main entrance for patrons, a side entrance, and a stage entrance. The building was probably painted Spanish red, presumably to imitate the color of bricks since that seems to have been the building material of choice for provincial English theatres. Based on a preserved purchase agreement from 1786 when a contractor bought a large quantity of

21 Johnson, 72.
23 Johnson and Burling, 82.
24 In 1746 the regular theatre at Jacob’s Well in Bristol, for instance, could hold probably around £85 or £90 worth of patrons at capacity with ticket prices at 3s. for a box and 2s. 6d. for the pit (gallery prices are not recorded), while Douglass’s New York Chapel Street Theatre could hold 470 patrons, or £180, with tickets going for 8s. for a box, 5s. for the pit, and 3s. for the gallery.
bricks from the disappearing 1760 Williamsburg theatre, it is believed that a brick foundation was inserted in-between posts on the first story of the building—according to Odai Johnson, this “design seems to concur with the construction used later for the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia that Douglass built in 1766, the second Annapolis theatre, 1771, and the Church Street Theatre in Charleston, 1773. All had a bricked-in foundation or ground floor and a framed-in wooden second story.”

A comparison of the virtual reconstruction of the Williamsburg theatre with the prints of eighteenth-century theatre buildings in the Winston Project reveals that Douglass’s theatre had much in common with some of the less refined provincial theatres. The Sadler’s Wells theatre in Cheltenham, though all brick and with a brick façade, appears to have a very similar blueprint to the Williamsburg theatre, with one main entrance leading to pit, boxes, and gallery, and what appears to be a shed structure probably containing storage space, dressing rooms, and a green room attached to the back of the main building. Another theatre, this one located at Wells, also resembles the structure of the Williamsburg theatre, with a brick foundation, one main entrance, and a stage door. The Tewkesbury theatre also appears to closely resemble the Williamsburg theatre with a brick foundation, brickwork halfway up the building, and wooden framing filling out the second half and the top.

Though the exterior design of the theatre may have differed somewhat from the theatres upon which it was based, on the inside Douglass’s theatres were purely English,

26 Johnson, 20.
down to even minor details. For example, we know for certain that in the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia, if not in all of Douglass’s theatres, the words Totus Mundus agit Histrionem—“All the World Acts the Player”— were carved above the proscenium in imitation of the decoration of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. The playhouse followed the basic three tiered seating of boxes, pit, and gallery, with a stage roughly half the size of the building. The 1760 theatre also followed the majority of mid-eighteenth century theatres in that it had only one entrance from the outside through which everyone entered. Only once they entered inside the main passage did patrons split off towards the boxes and the pit or gallery. Later in the century playhouses began to have two or three separate entrances to the outside, further socially stratifying the already hierarchical experience of attending the theatre, for although technically anyone with five shillings could buy a box seat, the theatre remained as hierarchical as any eighteenth century civic institution; box, pit, and gallery seating within the theatre space promoted recognition of differences in wealth and honor among audience members in both England and America.

Any audience members wishing to flout the social divisions apparent in the playhouse faced iron spikes. Most eighteenth-century theatres had the edges of the stage and boxes lined with spikes to protect the actors from the audience, and to keep those who had paid for cheaper seats safely out of the more expensive ones. Theatre riots in England were common, making the spikes useful for English managers. In her Apology, George Ann Bellamy mentions them while describing the Kelly Riots at Smock Alley in Dublin, an account book of the builder of the Theatre Royal Edinburgh for the years 1767

30 Johnson, 120.
and 1768 lists the building materials used, including 9" spikes, and an etching and engraving of Covent Garden theatre, done by Charles Mosley in 1747, depicts iron spikes lining the edge of the patent house stage. Additionally, the painting *The Pit Door* (1784) by Robert Dighton shows iron spikes lining the entrance to the pit, the second most expensive seating area. This apparently minor detail made its way to the colonies: according to a report in the Virginia Gazette from December 8, 1752 in which "the playhouse was broke open by one White Man and two Negroes, who violently assaulted and wounded Patrick Maloney... by throwing him upon the Iron-Spikes, one of which run into his Leg..." it seems that Lewis Hallam added them to the edge of his temporary, 're-fitted' Williamsburg theatre in 1752, and a notice that Douglass printed in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* concerning the vandalism of the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia reads, "December 10th, 1772: ...a number of evil disposed persons... burglariously and feloniously, broke open the gallery door of the theatre, tore off and carried away the iron spikes, which divide the galleries from the upper boxes." Douglass likely added spikes to all of his colonial theatres; archaeological evidence proves that he lined the edge of the 1760 Williamsburg stage with them, as well.

31 Johnson, 2—also, see endnote 1 on that page.
34 *Virginia Gazette*, December 8, 1752.
36 Johnson, 2.
“There’s No Business Like Show Business”

The details of Douglass’s theatres suggest a well-thought out vision, but Douglass, like most eighteenth-century theatre managers, probably considered the physical structure and material decorations of his theatres only insofar as they would bring him the best returns on his investment. Douglass had profit, not art, foremost in his mind. Theatre—whether in colonial America, London, or the in the English countryside—was a business, and its practitioners did not consider themselves artists, but professionals. To turn a profit, of course, tickets had to be sold. Throughout both England and colonial America during the mid-eighteenth century ticket prices remained very steady; at Drury Lane, at least, this was partially due to a riot breaking out when a price increase was announced. But overall, in North America the few instances of extreme variations in ticket prices occurred only when the local currency of a colony was drastically different from the other colonies, as each colony at the time used its own currency. Johnson and Burling note that Hallam and Douglass must have been very aware of currency values because in New York in 1753, where the exchange rate with London ran about 160-170 percent, ticket prices were nearly identically adjusted in value to the contemporary London prices of 5s., 3s., 1s. 6d. Thus, in the colonies you would not

---

37 In their Calendar, Johnson and Burling state that ticket in the colonies cost the following prices: in 1751 in Williamsburg, Virginia, a seat in the boxes cost 7s. 6d., 5s. 9d. in the pit, and 3s. 9d. for the gallery; these prices remained fixed through 1770. In Maryland, prices declined over the time period due to Maryland’s use of dual currency: in 1752 boxes cost 10s., the pit cost 7s. 6d., and the gallery cost 5s., but by 1772 the box and pit cost 7s. 5d., and the gallery cost 5s. In Pennsylvania, prices in 1754 were 6s. for boxes, 4s. for the pit, and 2s. 6d. for the gallery, but increased slightly over the period. The prices in Charleston seem exceedingly high compared to the other colonies (30s. for boxes, 20s. for the pit, 15s. for the gallery), but in fact that just reflects that South Carolina operated on a local currency with a 200-500 percent difference from the other colonies. Johnson and Burling, 83.
be overcharged by London standards. Nor would you be undercharged: tickets cost 6s even in the minor venue of Frederickburg, Virginia.\textsuperscript{38}

The potential cash intake of a full house varied from theatre to theatre, of course, and based on current local currency, but in a letter written from Charleston in 1764 Alexander Gardner noted that “they have performed thrice a week & Every night to a full nay a Crowded house” supposes that “[the American Company] can’t possibly have made less than £110 sterling [per] night at a medium for some nights they have made between 120 and 140 sterling in one night & I believe never under 90 £ sterling & that only one or two rainy evenings.”\textsuperscript{39} Three years earlier, the New York Mercury reported that the theatre there could take in a maximum of £180, though on average sold £120. After expenses, the revenue from the American Company’s 1761 New York season amounted to about £620, which then could be used for salaries and properties.\textsuperscript{40} This sum may be lower than a normal season, though, since the company’s expenses of constructing the theatre were factored into the figure. We have very little information, however, about audiences in other locations, so perhaps the sum could represent an average.

On February 1, 1762, Douglass reported in the New York Mercury that after a benefit which sold 352 tickets the gross receipts were £133 6.d, and the expense of operating the house that night came to £18.10s.6—a figure which most likely represents the average nightly cost of opening many of Douglass’s theatres. In the newspaper, he

\textsuperscript{38} Johnson and Burling, 84.
\textsuperscript{39} Alexander Garden, personal correspondence written February 1, 1764 to David Colden, found in Johnson and Burling, 234
\textsuperscript{40} New York Mercury, December 28, 1761, in Mary Jane Corry, The Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers, 1690-1783: Text Data Base and Index, (New York, 1997).
lists as expenses salaries for two musicians, front doorkeepers, stage doorkeepers, assistants, a bill-sticker, a men’s dresser, a stage-keeper, a drummer, wine for the second act, and a large layout for advertising and lighting (because this is a benefit, players salaries are not included).\textsuperscript{41} Notably, beyond transparently revealing the costs of performing and the profits made by the company, the newspaper account confirms that Douglass employed auxiliary personnel: his company was no mere rag-tag troupe of strollers, but was rather fully professional, in the English sense.

The patent houses, of course, had many auxiliary personnel and operated on a much larger scale than Douglass, but even at the provincial, non-licensed Jacob’s Wells Theatre in Bristol auxiliary personnel made-up a large portion of the nightly expenses. Jacob’s Wells Theatre was one of the major provincial theatres of the mid-eighteenth century, drawing an audience from not only Bristol but also from the increasingly popular city of Bath. The theatre itself, however, was a much smaller structure than Douglass’s theatres, and the existing account book from the 1740s reveals that operating the theatre was relatively inexpensive—a good thing, since ticket sales never amounted to much. For example, at a benefit held for Mr. Barrington on August 15, 1746, the theatre took in £38.18.0, and the total operating costs amount to just £4.18.0.\textsuperscript{42} But the account book lists expenses quite similar to those noted by Douglass in the \textit{New York Mercury}: music, candles, bills (playbills and advertising), a stage-keeper, a man’s dresser, a woman’s dresser, a gallery keeper, porters, a door-keeper, and money sent to the tailor, presumably for costuming. At other performances the account book lists ‘wine’ and ‘drums for

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{New York Mercury}, February 1, 1762, in Corry, \textit{The Performing Arts}.

\textsuperscript{42} For comparative purposes, in my figures I have excluded £4.10.0 paid as shares to actors, since Douglass does not list a similar cost. Including that cost, Mr. Barrington would have had to pay £9.8.0 total on his benefit night.
Hamlet' as expenses. During the regular season, as opposed to during benefits, operating costs also included a nice sum laid out for clothing and rent. Though the operating costs at Jacob's Wells Theatre were lower than those of Douglass's theatre, proportionally they are comparable: both The American Company and Jacob's Wells Theatre spent most of their money on music, candles, and advertising.

Yet despite the regular wages paid to auxiliary personnel, the life of a player was always a somewhat of a hand-to-mouth existence. The late Renaissance and early Restoration method of paying actors based on share ownership had largely been replaced by a salary system by 1730, though a few small strolling companies clung to the old ways through the 1770s; these sharing strolling companies were soon viewed as inferior. Under the share system, the players with the largest shares in the company received the most pay, while those with only a small holding received only little payment, or even none, during an unprofitable season. The salary system, on the other hand, meant that players were paid per performance, on a weekly basis, or were contracted for a set sum for the season. Though little evidence exists for the wages paid to the players with The American Company, we can reasonably assume it was a salaried affair. No one owned any shares in the company save Douglass, in much the same way that Garrick and Lacy 'shared' Drury Lane or that the actor turned actor-manager Tate Wilkinson held the patent for the circuit in York. While the managers owned and operated the company, the players were paid a salary based on their roles and the seasonal income of the theatre. But, while the salary system had obvious benefits for actors, payment remained somewhat precarious and subject to the whims of management.

43 Rosenfeld, 3.
Furthermore, the salary system—unlike the sharing system—left actors free to travel from company to company (unless under a long-term contract) and many took this advantage. In England, Wilkinson played at Covent Gardens, Drury Lane, and the Haymarket, spent a season at Dublin’s Smock Alley, and played several summers in Portsmouth before finding himself manager of the York theatre. He was not the only one; in the colonies we find the players in The American Company leaving the troupe to return to England, to join another colonial company, to travel the circuit playing one-man shows, to get married, or simply to stay in one place and offer music or dance lessons. Strolling was a hard life; wages were low and uncertain, traveling was difficult, many towns were hostile to players, and in England playing without a patent could get a player arrested. The famous English actress Charlotte Charke (the daughter of the great early eighteenth-century Drury Lane manager Colley Cibber and whose daughter at one time played with The American Company) termed strolling “A little dirty kind of war.” Still, all over the colonies and England actors moved from company to company, theatre to theatre, even continent to continent, in search of well-paid work.

Receiving a set salary was largely dependent on the success of the theatre company during the regular season. Some provincial companies, such as Jacob’s Wells Theatre during the 1740s, blended the two forms of payment for a time. The account book records that several of the actors played on a salaried basis: in 1748 the book lists a Mrs. Vallois and a Mrs. Bland as receiving 4s. per performance, and a Miss Mullart received 2.6. to appear, as did someone listed simply as “Boy.” The book also records, however, that regular actors received shares while only a few well-known actors received

44 Charke, 187.
a salary. In the case of Jacob’s Wells Theatre, those receiving a salary actually made a better profit than those who shared, since an actress who contracted for £50 for the season needed to make that amount at her benefit, otherwise the company would have to pay the difference to the detriment of regular performers. Though no information exists regarding the salaries of the players in The American Company, the fact that many players supplemented their income by offering music and dance lessons, performing in special concerts, or giving solo acts suggests that the wages left much to be desired.

Even at Drury Lane, ‘regular performers’ salaries were paid when there was money available; otherwise, claims were postponed. For example, as late as the 1775-1776 season, salaries were ‘short-paid’ the week ending 30 September, and only in November did full payments become fairly predictable.”

And though Garrick was not known for his stinginess, Wilkinson found that the God-like manager of Drury Lane blew hot and cold. After granting Wilkinson a furlough to Smock Alley in 1758, where Wilkinson met with great success, Garrick refused to pay him his 30s. per week salary at Drury Lane based on the fine print in Wilkinson’s contract, and, one suspects, a measure of malice towards an upstart who had met with such unexpected success: Wilkinson produced his contract

“which was worded thus on the back, “Articles of agreement between David Garrick and James Lacey, Esquires, and Tate Wilkinson, Gentleman, for two years, from October 24, 1757’... When after a look of disdain and a sneer of ineffable contempt, Mr. Garrick said, “Thou foolish pert boy, go home to thy Mamma, she can read though you cannot; look carefully over the contents of your article and you will there find, that on the inside it does not commence till September 1758.”

From this episode, Wilkinson learned “never to trust the seeming generosity and good nature of others.” But then, Garrick had moments of true kindness; in a pinch, he gave Wilkinson his Portsmouth coat, helped him to salvage a benefit performance, and loaned him £20 without second thought. Of course, when Wilkinson returned from a second furlough once again a success, Garrick similarly withheld Wilkinson’s due salary.

Given the salary situation, most players relied on their benefits for the bulk of their income; not only were benefit nights guaranteed money—almost everyone profited by their benefit—they usually brought in the equivalent of a month or two’s wages in a single night, and sometimes brought in more cash than an actor would receive for an entire season’s worth of regular salary. Benefit nights for actors ran from about mid-March through the end of the season in late May, and benefits for charities (such as for hospitals or for relief of the poor) came the week before Christmas. There were four forms of benefits, but the three most common types were a clear or free benefit where the beneficiary received all of the evening’s profit, a house charge benefit where the beneficiary paid the operating costs of opening the theatre for a performance, but took home the remaining profits, and a partial benefit where two or more beneficiaries shared both the operating costs and the profits.\(^47\)

Most charity benefits were clear benefits, such as the benefit given in New York by the American Company for which the costs and profits are reported in February, 1762, or the benefit Garrick organized at Drury Lane in 1763 to raise funds for the colonial colleges in Philadelphia and New York.\(^48\) Many actors’ benefits were house charge

---

\(^{48}\) Rankin, 111.
benefits. Well-known actors, or actors with many influential friends and patrons often took in large sums on their benefit nights: as a relative newcomer to the Smock Alley stage in Ireland, Wilkinson pocketed £130 from his benefit, far more than twice his seasonal salary, since “from the exertions of Mr. Chaigneau, Lord Forbes, and [his] long list of more than common friends” his boxes “were rapidly taken, and, for want of places in that circle, no less than seven rows of the pit were added and railed at box prices.”

Wilkinson knew he had Irish support: most lesser-known actors tended to share a benefit with another lesser-known actor. If they were brave, though, and had managed to convince the management to allow them their own benefit night, actors usually tried to enlist the support of a big name. Back in London, Wilkinson asked Samuel Foote, the famous London actor and later patentee of the summer Haymarket theatre, to play his benefit with him to ensure its success. Due to their long friendship, and many favors Wilkinson had done for the somewhat abrasive Foote, Foote agreed to play the benefit, which Wilkinson thought was his “duty, as well as a debt of honour.” Garrick consented to Wilkinson’s request for a benefit night that year only because of the promised appearance of Samuel Foote, without which Garrick feared the entire benefit would be a flop. When the benefit night was upon them, though, Foote backed out leaving Wilkinson’s benefit in disarray. After the slight, the two men did not speak for over five years time, and Wilkinson maliciously and humorously imitated, or ‘took off’ Foote on many occasions. That practice, at least, brought him great acclaim and a small measure of wealth (and infamy). As his fame spread, Wilkinson could soon support a benefit night on his own.

49 Wilkinson, 64.
50 Wilkinson, 104.
But drawing an audience required more than a good actor. As the eighteenth-century wore on, audiences increasingly patronized the theatre to see a spectacle. The archeological remains of the 1760 Williamsburg theatre suggest that it had space under the stage for grave-traps and machinery.\footnote{Johnson, 20. For how set pieces work, see Colin Visser, “Scenery and Technical Design,” in \textit{The London Stage 1660-1800}, ed. Robert Hume (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 75.} We can also assume that Douglass’s theatre had some type of grooves or tracks used to mount and move scenery, since we know that Douglass commissioned scenes from the Covent Garden scene painter, Nicholas Doll.\footnote{\textit{Maryland Gazette}, June 13, 1771, in Johnson and Burling, \textit{Calendar}.} Since he ordered from London, he knew to expect London-styled set pieces which would need to be mounted with some type of English device. Spectacle was becoming increasingly important to attract an audience, so these brilliantly colored sets and imported machinery were of the utmost importance, and touted in many of the newspaper notices Douglass published as being purchased at great cost. In addition to scenery, lighting also added to the spectacle (and to the operating costs—candles did not come cheap): it both aided in the conspicuous consumption aspect of theatre by illuminating the house, and it helped to create fantastical illusions onstage. A contemporary explained that at Drury Lane audiences were astonished

“not merely by beautiful colouring and designs...but by a sudden transition in a forest scene, where the foliage varies from green to blood colour. This contrivance was entirely new, and the effect was produced by placing different colored silks in the flies, or side-scenes, which turned on a pivot, and with lights behind, which so illuminated the stage, as to give the effect of enchantment.”\footnote{Henry Angelo, \textit{Reminiscences} (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1904), II, 248.}

In addition to introducing enchanted light effects, Garrick also added brighter lighting to the stage to combat inattentive audiences, though the house of the theatre remained well-
lit; the practice of darkening the house for a performance did not occur until after the eighteenth-century. Clearly, if even the great Garrick sometimes found it difficult to keep the attention of the audience on himself and not on the other audience members, the “see and be seen” aspect of the theatre must have drawn many of the drama’s patrons. The practice of lighting the stage more brightly than the house became an element used in many eighteenth-century theatres, and the practice has persisted and developed through the ensuing centuries.

**A Desirable Commodity**

Despite the inattentiveness of eighteenth-century audiences by our standards (which will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter), neither the material aspects nor the ephemeral performances of the theatres in London, the English countryside, and the American colonies could have existed without explicit public support. To raise funds to construct his colonial American theatres, Douglass used a subscription scheme that English provincial managers often employed to construct new playhouses on large, established circuits. Subscription schemes were also used by the London patent houses to increase income in the short-term or to expand their existing theatre structures. It should be noted, however, that the building of these theatres and the use of a subscription scheme set Douglass’s troupe apart from the majority of English strolling companies, who, unaffiliated with the larger provincial companies such as York, generally used found spaces to play by temporarily converting existing buildings into make-shift theatres. The theatres also set his company apart from the other troupes performing on the colonial American circuit, who operated much like the majority of
English strollers. By using a subscription scheme to raise purpose-built theatres which he subsequently owned, Douglass raised the status of the American Company from minor strollers to a major company.

In colonial America, the subscription scheme involved patrons advancing money to the theatre manager in exchange for tickets to all performances in the new theatre for the first season or two. Once built, theatre ownership defaulted to the manager or company owner, not the investors. For the 1760 Williamsburg theatre George Washington fronted £7.10.3, and in return he received 20 box tickets at a slightly discounted price. \(^{54}\) Even as late as June of 1773, Douglass journeyed to Charleston ahead of his troupe, which was then playing in Annapolis, to begin work on a new theatre. *The Maryland Journal* reprinted a letter from Charleston which reads, “A large subscription has been solicited and is raising, for building an elegant Theatre in this town, in which Mr. Douglass’s American Company will perform during the winter.” \(^{55}\) And in late 1770, when Douglass raised a subscription for a new theatre in Annapolis, he published a notice in the *Maryland Gazette* of October 4 flattering both the institution of the theatre and citizens of Maryland who patronize the theatre, before explaining that

> “the expenses of building a Theatre would be more than the company could possibly pay out of receipts of one season...It is proposed, then, to deliver to any lady or gentleman, subscribing five pounds or upwards, the value of their respective sums in tickets; one half of which will be admitted the first season, and the remainder the season following.” \(^{56}\)

On the subject of the Annapolis theatre for which Douglass printed his notice, one subscriber, William Eddis, wrote that

\(^{54}\) Johnson, 61, 36.


\(^{56}\) *Maryland Gazette*, October 4, 1770, in Johnson and Burling, *Calendar*, 375.
“Our governor... patronizes the American Company; and as their present place of exhibition is in a small scale, and inconveniently situated, a subscription, by his example, has been rapidly completed to erect a new theatre, on a commodious, if not an elegant plan. The manager is to deliver tickets for two seasons, to the amount of the respective subscriptions, and it is imagined, that the money received at the doors, from no-subscribers, will enable him to conduct business without difficulty; and when the limited number of performances is completed, the entire [sic] property is to be vested in him.”

Interestingly, Douglass’s ownership of the property after its construction appears to be somewhat of an anomaly in English subscription schemes, as most English theatres were not owned outright by the manager, but rather ‘shared’ by investors.

In England, a subscription scheme appears to have given subscribers much more return on their money. At Covent Gardens and Drury Lane where subscribers were more like shareholders, each received 2s. per performance as interest, as well as a free seat for himself, which he could transfer to a friend. These benefits were not limited to just one or two seasons, but continued for as long as the shareholder held shares. On the provincial circuit, in Bristol, England, a subscription was taken up for a new Theatre Royal in 1764, which would replace the older (and also subscription built) theatre at Jacob’s Wells. The Bath Chronicle reported that “We hear a new Theatre is intended to be erected in Baldwin-street, and that the Leases are now preparing,” and four days later reported that forty citizens “Mutually Agreed to Erect and Build a Theatre or Playhouse in the City of Bristol...” These subscribers were to receive an “annual rent equivalent to 5 per cent of expenditure over and above the cost of rates and taxes.”

57 William Eddis, personal correspondence, found in Rankin, 158.
59 The Bath Chronicle, September 14, 1764 and September 17, 1764, found in Barker, The Theatre Royal Bristol, 6.
received a free ticket for every performance indefinitely, and, as at the patent houses, these tickets were transferrable. The shares could also be inherited in whole or in part.

Moreover, Drury Lane, Covent Gardens, and the larger provincial theatres were not self-contained companies in the same way as The American Company. Though the personnel of Douglass’s troupe frequently changed, just as the actors on the patent house stages changed, the members of Douglass’s troupe—at any given moment—were not free agents while employed by The American Company. They traveled together as a united company. Though people could and did break off from the troupe, playing with The American Company had great advantages. Douglass had a mind for business which kept the company respectably afloat longer than any other colonial American venture, and the troupe relied on his management and his outright ownership of both the company and the theatres—two separate spheres of ownership—for its operations to run smoothly. He could sell his shares in the company, perhaps, but he would still own their theatres.

Alternately, English managers of London-based or large provincial theatres and Theatre Royals, instead of owning the company or the theatre building as personal property, owned a patent or were the largest shareholders. Garrick, for instance, owned one-half of the Drury Lane patent, and he could sell that half-share of the patent, but that would not mean that the actors would find themselves suddenly paying Garrick rent on their performance space if they wanted to play; he did not own the theatre separately from his share in the patent. The actors at the patent houses were not a company in the sense of Douglass’s troupe; some signed contracts, some played for limited engagements, and most freely traveled between Drury Lane, Covent Gardens, Smock Alley, and the provincial theatres. So for Garrick or any other major actor-manager to leave, all that
really changed was the management, which might or might not change the nature of theatrical operations. Importantly, other investors would continue to receive their 2s. of ‘rent’ per performance night and free tickets for every show. Douglass’s investors, on the other hand, appear to have received their two seasons of free tickets and then their involvement with the theatre was finished, unless they chose to buy tickets at the door.

Due to its limited return for investors, the subscription plan as it worked in colonial America clearly indicates that not only the players, but the colonists themselves were interested in raising permanent theatre buildings and contributing to the promulgation of English-styled theatrics in their colony. In the introduction to his book Marketplace of the Revolution, T.H Breen writes: “Imported goods reflected cosmopolitan tastes and manners, so that an American who managed to purchase a porcelain teacup or a modest pewter bowl could fancy that he or she partook of a polite society centered in faraway places such as London or Bath.” The theatre, like a teacup, symbolized far more than itself. For many colonists, a theatre represented a distinctly English civilizing force. The building imposed on an otherwise rural town the same sense of order and unity that an English garden imposed on nature. In North Carolina, under Governor Tryon in the late 1760s, a small circuit of playhouses came into being which were meticulously recorded on the maps of the period. On the map of Halifax only five public buildings are labeled—the playhouse is one of them; the church, oddly enough, is not.

---

61 Johnson, 53.
Throughout the colonies the desire for theatre manifests again and again. Though the colonists generally seemed short of cash on every front, they managed to fund the building of their theatres and to patronize them. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, laid out money he did not have for theatre tickets and punch in the pit, less afraid of debt than of missing a night at the playhouse. In Nova Scotia, a woman who signed her name Doll Tearsheet (a character from Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV*) offered to pawn her winter coat in exchange for theatre tickets. Even in Boston, where playing was outlawed, men and women bought plays to read at home, and those who found themselves discontented with sitting at home reading plays made a four-hour trek to Newport, Rhode Island in the late summer of 1761 to see performances by the American Company. A Bostonian by the name of Nathaniel Ames noted in his diary, “Boston people flock up to Newport to see the Plays by the English Actors.” From this success, Douglass even managed briefly to perform a one-man show, Steven’s *Lecture on Heads*, in Boston itself under the guise of presenting an educational and moral lecture.

For many colonists, the American Company performances were the closest they would come to seeing English theatricals. Though they could easily keep up with the theatrical news coming out of London by picking up a newspaper, colonists could not experience for themselves the act of going to an English playhouse until David Douglass began to build them in the colonies. Though the differences between Drury Lane and Philadelphia’s Southwark Theatre might seem immense, without the benefit of hindsight the colonists perceived only that through their theatres they were experiencing a piece of their English cultural heritage. In Douglass’s theatres they saw what they had read about

---

62 Johnson, 79.
63 Johnson, 134.
from the iron spikes and the inscription above the proscenium to real London actors recently brought over by Douglass to entertain them. They saw the newest plays, debuted in London just months previously and they saw London favorites such as *Romeo and Juliet*. And, as Garrick did at Drury Lane, in the colonies Douglass promoted British patriotism with a rendition of *Britannia* sung before many performances, an emphasis on Shakespeare as the great Bard of the nation, and plays such as *Cato* and *The Recruiting Officer* seriously and humorously reflecting back at the audience that no Englishman would stand for tyranny. Just as colonists fervently spent money on imported British goods such as cloth, spices, mirrors, gloves, and porcelain teacups in their efforts keep up with their English counterparts, men and women attended the theatre to partake of their cultural birthright. They believed, after all, that the English had the best theatre in the world, and that in the colonies they had every right to that experience.

Moreover, from Massachusetts and Rhode Island to Maryland and South Carolina, in many cases the colonists experienced the theatre of David Douglass, specifically. Prior to the revolution, perhaps no other man on American soil was so ubiquitously—and personally—known. As a Freemason, Douglass had a built-in network in every city he visited. Many of the printers he contracted for advertising were brother Masons, he could safely leave his theatres in the hands of brother Masons when he traveled, he could always rely on large benefit nights from the Masons, and most importantly, many of the authorities who granted him permission to play were brother Masons. In this capacity, Douglass personally knew many of the men who would later become key revolutionaries, from Peyton Randolph to John Hancock. Furthermore, colonists viewed Douglass and the theatricals he presented as authentic; the man himself
was born in the mother country, and his well-publicized recruiting trips to London
and his imported scenery, costumes, and properties assured his close association in the
public mind with all things British.

Breen suggests that prior to the revolution the marketplace strengthened British
culture in the colonies. The experience of navigating the expanding marketplace and the
purchasing of common goods gave the colonists along the Eastern seaboard
commonalities which hitherto had not existed. Though not strictly a 'good' in the sense
of a carpet or creamware, I propose that the theatre must certainly fall into that uniting
category. As both a shared experience and the perceived personal presence of London
culture, the theatre allowed colonists not only to make the choices of the marketplace, but
to showcase them. By choosing which seat to purchase in the theatre, whether or not to
treat friends to punch, how to dress in the theatre, and who to associate with publicly, the
playhouse allowed colonists an opportunity to fashion themselves however they chose.
Whether in Pennsylvania or Virginia, colonists coveted Douglass's theatre as much as the
piece of British-imported silk they donned for their nights at the playhouse.
Chapter Two

“The Drama’s Laws the Drama’s Patrons Give”

The idea of theatre as a place of conspicuous consumption and self-fashioning permeated not only the colonies, but also Britain. Audience members on both sides of the Atlantic visited the theatre for more than an evening of entertainment: attending the theatre made a statement. In a world where society drew firm, but fine lines between moral and immoral, educational and scandalous, and industrious and frivolous, the theatre became a battleground of societal mores. To successfully navigate public appetites and private convictions, eighteenth-century theatre managers became shrewd businessmen who both created taste and responded to the desires of their audience. While moralists railed from the pulpits that devils haunted the playhouses, and the fiscally conservative moaned about the amount of money idly lost in the theatre, managers such as Garrick and Douglass began to seriously combat such negative press by creating a veneer of respectability around themselves and their business.

Cleaning up the theatre’s reputation had fourfold benefit for English actor-managers: it appeased the authorities, it appeased society, it advanced the reputation of individual actor-managers, and, most importantly, it was critical to turning a profit. To begin, both Garrick and Douglass lived their private lives in a respectable, domestic fashion. Garrick had a long, successful marriage to Eva Marie Veigel which was famed for being incredibly happy and faithful. Douglass’s personal life, too, appears beyond reproach; his marriage to the former Mrs. Hallam was an apparent success. Neither left outstanding debts unpaid, nor made themselves public nuisances. The two men attempted to conduct their professional lives with the same grace and esteem as their
personal lives. Perhaps they chose to live so firmly within the bounds of polite society in part because the two men relied on authority for their right to perform.

In England, Garrick held one of only two legal patents in London—and for most of his tenure, one of only two legal patents in all of England—which were issued by His Majesty's government. In a sense, the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the Theatre Royal Covent Garden were part of the establishment. As such Garrick's Drury Lane operated relatively conservatively, presenting plays which reinforced the government's ideals and conformed to society's most well-mannered desires. While other London theatres and provincial playhouses operated under the radar, constantly in fear of informers whether they conformed to ideals or not, Garrick, more than any other actor-manager of the mid-eighteenth century, became the face of English theatre. His innovations in acting, lighting, and staging, and his promotion of a respectable, patriotic theatre not only influenced the course of theatre in England, but also in the colonies where news of London theatrical activity reached the newspapers and the plays of the London patent houses reached the bookshops and the stages.

In the colonies, Douglass, like Garrick, relied on governmental authority for his right to perform, except instead of needing a patent, he needed the permission of the royal governor, the colonial assembly, or the city magistrates. The best way to achieve said permission was to present the proper authority with a letter of recommendation from the last colony in which the American Company had played. The Newport Mercury reprinted one of these letters on August 11, 1761:

---

"The following recommendation, copied from the original was signed by the Governor, Council, and near one hundred of the principal gentlemen of Virginia:

Williamsburg, June 11, 1761

The company of comedians under the direction of David Douglass have performed in this colony for near twelvemonth; during which time they have made it their constant practice to behave with prudence and discretion in their private character, and to use their utmost endeavours to give general satisfaction in their public capacity. We have therefore thought proper to recommend them as a company whose behavior merits the favour of the public, and who are capable of entertaining a sensible and polite audience."\(^2\)

Such a letter suggests that Douglass's conduct in his personal life was, in a way, for public benefit, which in turn became profit. As evidenced by both the contents and signers of the letter, even with the signature of the governor and assembly, public opinion mattered—the letter was even reprinted in a newspaper, that most public of spaces.

But in the colonies, where religion, politics, and economics were so closely bound, the lines between public opinion and governmental authority blurred. Moral objections and economic objections could easily be disguised as legislative objections. So even with letters as gratifying as this, permission did not always come easily. In 1758, for instance, Douglass ventured to New York for a season where the magistrates met his petition to play "with positive and absolute denial."\(^3\) The denial was most likely based on moral grounds, since in a newspaper release written by Douglass shortly thereafter he proposed to "deliver dissertations on subjects, moral, instructive and entertaining... to speak in publick with propriety."\(^4\) After seven more weeks of petitioning, the magistrates finally granted the American Company permission for a

\(^2\) *Newport Mercury*, August 11, 1761, in Johnson and Burling, *Calendar*, 212.

\(^3\) *New York Mercury*, November 6, 1758, in Johnson and Burling, *Calendar*, 187.

\(^4\) *New York Mercury*, December 11, 1758, in Johnson and Burling, *Calendar*, 188.
‘season’ of thirteen nights. Regardless, it seems likely that public opinion held strongly against Douglass for most of his stay in New York that year.

But public opinion could also sway authorities towards granting permission to players, making a respectable reputation a necessity. If a large enough public wanted theatrical entertainment, such as in Philadelphia, moral objections from the establishment could be overcome more easily. Moreover, permission from authorities did not mean a successful season unless the public wanted to see a performance; a reputation for pleasing and polite entertainment sold tickets. One way to ensure public support was to give charity benefit nights; the *Newport Mercury* reported on November 3, 1761 that

> “On Friday evening last, the company of comedians finished their performances in this town by enacting the tragedy of ‘Douglas’ for the benefit of the poor. This second charity is undoubtedly intended as an expression of gratitude for the countenances and favour the town has shown them, and it can not without an uncommon degree of malevolence be ascribed to an interested or selfish view, because it is given at a time when the company are just leaving the place, and consequently [sic] can have neither hopes nor fears from the publick.”

Douglass, of course, did have hopes from the public: the hope of good press and a letter of recommendation to the next city on the circuit. Apparently he got it, as the report finishes by saying that “The character they brought from the governor and gentlemen of Virginia has been fully verified, and therefore we shall run no risk in pronouncing that ‘they are capable of entertaining a sensible and polite audience.’” Companies also secured good public opinion by presenting plays which suited audience taste.

Eighteenth-century audiences, while not as tight-laced as the later Victorians, did not have nearly as much tolerance for dirty jokes as did their Renaissance counterparts.

---

6 Ibid.
Thus, the plays which Garrick and Douglass presented responded to the current societal desire for (somewhat) polite entertainment, and helped to create respectable theatre.

A quick glance over the repertory shows that when constructing a season actor-managers on either side of the Atlantic favored Renaissance and Restoration plays for their main pieces, especially the plays of Shakespeare. In England, old plays were chosen largely because of the guaranteed profit associated with performing plays known to please an audience versus the great expense and risk associated with mounting a new show. Even when responding to political events, Garrick’s theatre chose to revive older plays rather than try a new one. Of course, this may have been because new politically-charged plays were scarce after the passing of the Licensing Act in 1737, and anyway such play might have ruffled too many authoritative feathers. In many cases, however, the plays were actually altered to meet audience expectations of respectability: for example, Garrick removed the bawdy and somewhat morally ambiguous gravedigger scene from *Hamlet*, dismissing it as too racy for polite society, and he added a death speech for the character of MacBeth, in which the man acknowledges his horrible deeds saying

'Tis done! The scene of life will quickly close,
Ambition’s vain delusive dreams are fled,
And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror.
I cannot bear it! Let me shake it off—
'Twa' not be; my soul is clogged with blood.
I cannot rise! I dare not ask for mercy.
It is too late, hell drags me down. I sink,
I sink—Oh!—my soul is lost forever!
Oh!?

David Garrick, from his 1744 alteration of *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, in Cunningham, 58.
While certainly not good poetry, it made for an outstanding performance by Garrick and satisfied eighteenth-century tastes, which made repentance—or at least an admission of guilt—almost an imperative.

In the colonies, Douglass chose plays based both on the popular shows playing in London, and also on what he felt would appeal to patrons in various colonies at various political moments. For instance, *George Barnwell; or, The London Merchant*, written in 1736, was all the rage in London during the 1730s and 40s, but had diminished in popularity as early as 1747. During the 1760s in the northern colonies, however, Douglass successfully revived the play with regularity, possibly because its overarching themes of Christian temperance and rigorous work ethic appealed to the colonists.8 Plays which provided a clear moral message could always be puffed in the newspapers as educational and instructive; for theatre managers everywhere, this was an asset in areas where the theatre stood on shaky ground in terms of audience attendance and authoritative permission.

Altering plays and securing public opinion helped managers in their quest for respectability, but before they could hope to clean up the long-ingrained negative reputation of the theatre and those with theatrical careers, managers first needed to combat—perhaps somewhat ironically—audience behavior. The idea of attending the theatre to see-and-be-seen distracted audience members away from the performance on the stage and oftentimes the behavior of the most powdered of gallants contributed to the seedy reputation of the theatre. Some audience members wanted so much to be seen that they actually opted to sit on the stage itself. The practice of stage-sitting was

---

8 Johnson and Burling, 66.
not new. In *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London* Andrew Gurr writes at length about the pitfalls of young dandies sitting on the stage, particularly when they garnished their hats with large feathers. Since in 17th-century and 18th-century theatres some of the boxes were set just off the stage, stage-sitters tended to distract those in box seats. Nor were stage-sitters always seated: reports abound of gentlemen crossing the stage to talk to their friends seated in the boxes opposite them and in 1749 Garrick inserted a satirical passage in his *Lethe* in an effort to discourage stage sitting. He describes ‘a fine gentleman’ who visits the playhouse “not... to be diverted with the play, but to intrigue, and shew myself—I stand up on the Stage, talk loud, and stare about—which confounds the Actors, and disturbs the Audience.”

These ‘fine gentlemen’ not only sat upon the stage, but also visited behind the scenes to flirt with their favorite actresses and in this way many men and women became embroiled in scandalous affairs. The behavior of such gallants annoyed the actors, other audience members, and especially the management, but most unfortunately their escapades added to the disreputable reputation of the theatre. The publicized exploits with actresses who were, according to moralists, no better than prostitutes cast a shadow across the theatrical profession in general, which was already under attack from the more Puritanical factions in both England and America for being an idle diversion sent from the Devil. Theatre was also under attack from large elements of eighteenth-century society, who felt that theatre taught audience members nothing but intrigue and scandal, rather than imitable virtues—something Garrick

---


attempted to remedy with great success through his textual alterations. In a further effort to combat such an unfavorable public image, as well as to eliminate a great annoyance, in 1762 Garrick began to forbid stage-sitting and visiting behind scenes at Drury Lane, and Douglass discouraged the practice by printing on the evening’s bill that no one would be admitted behind the scenes.¹¹

Unfortunately for theatre managers, stage-sitting was not the only means of drawing attention to oneself in an eighteenth-century theatre. A prologue composed by Garrick entitled Bucks Have At Ye All; or, The Picture of a Playhouse illustrates some common behaviors observed in every part of the house. In part the poem reads

“For instance now- to charm th’ admiring Crowd,
Your Bucks o’ the boxes sneer, and talk aloud.
To the green box next with joyous speed you run

Tho’ Shakespeare speaks—regardless of the play
Ye laugh and loll the sprightly hours away

Your Bucks o’ the pit are miracles of learning!
Who point out Faults- to shew their own discerning.

The sidelong row, whose keener views of Bliss
Are chiefly centered in a fav’rite Miss;
A Set of Jovial Bucks who there resort,
Flushed from the Tavern- reeling ripe for Sport-
Wak’d from their Dream, oft join the general roar,
Bravo! bravo!—bravissimo, eh damme, encore!

Ye bucks above, who range like gods at large—
You who design to change this scene of raillery
And out-talk players in the upper gallery.¹²

¹¹ Johnson, 22.
¹² David Garrick, “Bucks Have At Ye All; or The Picture of a Playhouse,” in A Collection of the Most Esteemed Farces and Entertainments Performed on the British Stage (Edinburgh: Printed for Silvester Doig and William Anderson, Stirling, 1792).
Since people attended the theatre not to appreciate the art but instead to socialize, games of cards in the boxes and conversations held during the middle of performances were considered quite normal. Men and women paid attention to the actors and scenes which interested them, and conversed during the rest of the performance. In *The Sylph*, a semi-autobiographical novel published in 1777 by Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, the heroine Julia attends the opera with her companion Lady Anne.

During the performance Lady Anne maliciously gossips to Julia about the other people in attendance that night, but "A very favorite air being then singing, I [Julia] dropped the conversation." Similarly, the English actor James Fennell, who later became a favorite on the New York stage, wrote in his *An Apology for the Life of James Fennell*

"I was in the green boxes at the theatre, Covent Garden, when a large star attracted my attention to the company in one of the lower boxes on the opposite side: I immediately recognised my revered Lord Bective and his family, and in the adjoining one, their amiable associates... I tapped at the door of the box; it was immediately opened for they had perceived and watched me. Lord Bective shook me cordially by the hand... said he was very happy to see me, and invited me to dine with him the next day... I then entered into conversation with ladies; one of whom, in the next box, requested I would call early and pass the morning at Mrs. M—'s house, opposite the earl's."

All this during the middle of a performance!

In part, such audience behavior stemmed from the collective feeling of the audience members that they were patrons of the actors, and could thus choose whether or not to pay attention. They also felt it their right to choose what and who they would see on the stage. Since audience members did, in fact, determine the fate of new plays by telling the manager whether they liked a performance or not, their feelings were not entirely unfounded. The 'gallery gods,' as those in the upper galleries were known,

---

could become quite vocal about their preferences. For instance, Fennell, while acting in Edinburgh, found himself up against a clique who wished to see Mr. Woods in the role of Jaffier in *Venice Preserved*. By his own inclination, Mr. Woods had taken the smaller but more heroic part of Pierre, while Fennell acted Jaffier. During the performance, the group hissed, cat-called, and interrupted Fennell, and they demanded that Mr. Woods and the manager explain. The two appeared on the stage and apologized, but for several weeks after the party continued to harass Fennell, until the manager reluctantly dismissed him to keep order in the theatre.15

In a humorous essay, Oliver Goldsmith relates the story of a provincial player who, like Fennell, dearly felt all of the power of an audience. In the essay, Goldsmith explains that while walking in St. James’s Park he happened upon a poor man with a familiar face. The man cleverly invites himself to dinner on Goldsmith’s penny, and over the meal he explains that once his star was on the rise in the provinces. His fame grew with every part he took, and audiences loved him excessively in the role of Sir Harry Wildair—that is, until one night “There was here a lady who had received an education of nine months in London; and this gave her pretensions to taste, which rendered her the indisputable mistress of the ceremonies wherever she came.” When the man appeared as Sir Harry Wildair, “instead of looking at me, I perceived the whole audience had their eyes turned upon the lady who had been nine months in London; from her they expected the decision which was to secure the general’s truncheon in my hand, or sink me down into a theatrical letter-carrier.” Sadly for the man, the lady from London did not appear pleased with his performance and, “in short... my fame expired;

I am here, (and the tankard is no more!).”16 Clearly, whether in the provinces or the colonies, the power of London dominated. For this reason, Douglass heavily advertised the Englishness of his theatre and frequently made recruiting trips to the capital to engage actors with London experience. Once in the colonies, he made known which actors had worked with the famous composer and singing-master Thomas Arne and which had ties to famous London names, such as Colley Cibber.

London actors did not receive better treatment, however; in Ireland, Tate Wilkinson found himself subject to the whims of a zealous audience. Wilkinson had proposed to speak the ‘Prodigal’ prologue by Mr. Woodward in the manner of Mr. Woodward at his benefit in Dublin, and Woodward made complaint. Wilkinson immediately altered the bills so as not offend Woodward, and resolved not to speak the prologue. But on the night of the benefit, to his dismay the audience called for Wilkinson in Woodward’s prologue. So riled up were they that the manager, Barry, believed Wilkinson had planted friends in the audience to start a riot. Since Wilkinson had not practiced the prologue, another actor, Mr. Glover, went forward and apologized to the audience, saying that Wilkinson would not perform the prologue, and asking for the audience’s pardon and approval: the “answer was not only universal, but as if one determined voice—'No! no! no!—No play! No play! No benefit unless he speaks the prologue.'”17 After another apology and more hissing and groaning, Wilkinson appeared in the imitation of Woodward. Thinking he had satisfied them, the play began but upon his entrance as the Cardinal Wolsey “there was an universal cry for Woodward’s prologue, nor would they let me or the play proceed till I advanced and

---

17 Wilkinson, 186.
said, "Gentlemen, as soon as I am dead I will certainly speak it." Calls for the prologue continued to plague Wilkinson throughout his furlough in Dublin; days later a new farce by Foote was interrupted by calls for the prologue.

Demanding and rude audiences were not just a facet of English theatre, though. In colonial America, Douglass found it necessary to advertise during the 1773 season in New York that the afterpiece would be "performed but once," as the gallery gods took it upon themselves to demand encores. He wrote, "The repeated insults, which some mischievous persons in the gallery have given, not only to the stage and orchestra, but to the other parts of the audience, call loudly for reprehension..." and concluded that unless the offenders stopped the gallery would close. Additionally, he offered a reward in the newspaper for the "Person who was so very rude to throw Eggs from the Gallery, upon the Stage last Monday, by which the Cloaths of some Ladies and Gentlemen in the boxes were spoiled, and the Performance in some Measure interrupted." Demands for certain performances and thrown food occurred commonly in both colonial America and England: Richard Cross, the prompter at Drury Lane, wrote in his diary that at the seventh performance of The Foundling, "there was an attempt made by one cat-call & an apple thrown at Macklin & some other efforts made by a few, but without effect."

Then, though "Mr Garrick order'd the Foundling to be given out for Sat & As You Like

---

18 Wilkinson, 189.
19 David Douglass, appendix to the playbill for the evening of May 3, 1773, in Johnson and Burling, Calendar, 439.
20 New York Mercury, May 3, 1773, in Johnson and Burling, 89.
It for Mon… the Pit rose & insisted the *Foundling* shou’d be given out again for Monday, which was done, though the Lords who oppos’d it were in the house.”  

Though the rabble in the gallery may have been noisy, disrespectful fruit-throwers, the esteemed members of the *beau monde* sometimes constituted a far more dangerous threat to the peacefulness of an evening’s performance. The Lords mentioned by Richard Cross, those who opposed *The Foundling*, were part of a faction made by Lord Hubbard, the reason being that they believed the play lasted too long and they wanted to see other entertainments, such as afterpieces and music. Luckily, Garrick managed to successfully tread a fine line with Lord Hubbard’s party, and they did not cause much damage or interruption. Some factions, though, caused theatre riots which spread out from their boxes, into the pit, and to the top of the upper gallery. Though only a few serious riots broke out, disruptions by factions occurred with some regularity: in *The Sylph*, Georgiana’s heroine attends the playhouse where

“Unhappily, the after-piece represented was one obtruded on the public by an author obnoxious to some of them; and there were two parties formed, one to condemn, the other to support. Wholly unacquainted with a thing of this kind, I soon began to be alarmed at the clamour which rang from every part of the house. The glass chandeliers first fell a victim to a hot headed wretch in the pit; and part of the battered fragments was thrown into my lap… the ladies were ordered out of the house…”

The iron spikes lining the stage make sense in such a volatile environment. Audience members formed factions over nearly everything theatrical: plays, prologues, epilogues, and afterpieces which they liked or disliked, actors who they liked or disliked, and playwrights who they liked or disliked. Sometimes the factions were rooted in political

---

22 Stone, clxxiv.
ideologies; for example, a faction might not agree with a certain playwright’s political sentiments, and thus they attended only to hiss the play while another faction attended to applaud it. Sometimes factions simply formed over the length the play and the desire to see performed a short satirical farce.

Major theatre riots could arise out of these factional disputes, and sometimes the ostensible reason for a faction overshadowed a deeper concern: Cross privately wrote of Lord Hubbard’s faction that “the main cause of their anger, in spite of their Excuses, was their Being refus’d admittance behind the scenes.” In their efforts to regulate the theatre and to legitimize their profession, Garrick, Douglass, and other theatre managers could provoke strong resentment in their audiences. Though the case of visiting behind the scenes affected primarily the aristocracy, other measures taken at the patent houses touched audience members from the pit to the galleries, turning the theatre into a tinderbox.

In 1763, Drury Lane experienced two days of rioting known as the Half-Price Riot. Though presumably motivated by economic reasons, the riot also brought audience rights and class differences into question. An evening’s entertainment usually lasted four hours or more during the eighteenth-century; the main piece, a five act play, began at 6:00 p.m.—too early for most artisans to arrive, but late enough for the leisured classes. An afterpiece—usually a comical farce or some type of musical entertainment—followed the main piece, and appealed strongly to the middling and working classes. To encourage the attendance of tradespeople and shopkeepers, traditionally at the patent houses admission fees dropped to half price after the third act

---

of the main piece. In 1763, Drury Lane and Covent Garden attempted to change that practice, and to charge full-price no matter when a patron arrived. Drury Lane especially felt the wrath of the public; Garrick himself experienced personal humiliation, financial loss, and devastation to the interior of the theatre. Yet given the financially mixed nature of the audience, the riot should not have gotten so out of hand. Unfortunately for Garrick, the riot offered an outlet for the frustrations of the aristocracy who just months previously had permanently banned what they perceived as their traditional rights to stage-sitting and visiting behind the scenes.

"Crying Out 'Liberty! Liberty!'"

The rhetoric of liberty, individual rights, and patriotism played a major part in the experience of any playgoer. The Half-Price Riot demonstrates how audience members believed that they had not only the best theatre in Europe, but also a right to demand of that theatre low prices and traditional liberties. With their claims to the having the freest country in Europe, with the best constitution which afforded every man liberty, audience members from the British mainland to the North American colonies already felt a measure of British patriotism. Overtly introducing into the theatre the element of patriotism, already present in society, constituted a brilliant move on the part of the patent house, provincial, and colonial theatre managers towards the legitimization of theatre and the acquisition of profit. Patriotism not only strengthened the establishment by steering clear of harsh political critiques, but it also appealed to the mores of the general public, upon whom theatre professionals relied for their

25 Cunningham, 23.
livelihood. Cast in terms of patriotism, a night at the theatre could pass for something more than an idle pleasure or an immoral vice: it morphed into love of country and patriotic duty.

Prior to the revolution, colonial Americans partook in demonstrations of British patriotism with as much fervor as any English audience. The first prologue spoken by Hallam’s London Company of Comedians on September 15, 1752 notes that “In this politer age, on British ground, The spritely Scenes, with Wit and Sense Abound.”26 As late as 1772, the Pennsylvania Chronicle reports that colonial America has “the best Mungo upon the British stage”27 in the form of Mr. Hallam. The colonists did not view their theatre as something separate from the English theatre reported upon in their newspapers; they did not conceive of an ‘American’ theatre. In their minds they constituted a valid extension of the British stage, as good as or better than any English provincial theatre. At the playhouse on St. George’s Day they heartily sang out “God Save the King,” “Rule Britannia,” and “Britons Strike Home.”28

Garrick, however, struck patriotic gold when he endeavored to link his name and his theatre to Shakespeare. The plays of Shakespeare had never really gone out of style, so though Garrick did not ‘revive’ Shakespeare, he imbued the Bard with a greater cultural significance than ever before. In theatres on both sides of the Atlantic during the period of Garrick’s management (from 1747 to 1776) the plays of Shakespeare constitute a majority of the performances in a season; *Romeo and Juliet*

---

28 Johnson and Burling, 363
played more than any other play. Shakespeare himself became linked in popular culture with the idea of the singularity of the English language. His works became masterpieces; his words stood as a tribute to the genius of the British mind. In 1756 Garrick staged an operatic performance of The Tempest at Drury Lane, and wrote as a prologue a dialogue between a critic and an actor. In the prologue, Garrick reveres the patriotic power of music and the patriotic force of Shakespeare. Unsurprisingly, Garrick managed to make both music and Shakespeare appear as twin epitomes of patriotic expression just before an opera of The Tempest: he implies that attending the performance is nothing less than participation in a patriotic act.

Garrick’s rebranding of Shakespeare as a cultural icon did not stop with a prologue: in 1759, at the height of the Seven Years War, Garrick wrote and presented an afterpiece entitled Harlequin’s Invasion; or, A Christmas Gambol. The piece involves Monsieur Harlequin arriving in Britain with his troops, tricking some simpletons in his usual humorous escapades, but being roundly defeated at the end by the rising of ‘King Shakespear’ [sic] who appeared as Harlequin sunk defeated into the trap door. Ten years later at his famous Jubilee in Stratford-Upon-Avon, Garrick again reiterated the greatness of Shakespeare as a national poet and a patriotic figure.29

Patriotism in the theatre, though a lucrative venture, could also backfire. Though theatre managers could control to what degree they promoted patriotic ideas, the concept of patriotism could not be contained on the stage; the audience regarded the entire experience of theatre-going as one in which they could exercise their God- and Constitution-given liberties. Garrick himself discovered this fact the hard way just

29 For more on patriotism and the formation an British identity, see Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).
before the outbreak of the Seven Years War. In November of 1755, patriotism,
xenophobia, and class warfare combined to produce an explosive six-day riot which
destroyed the interior of Drury Lane, resulted in tremendous financial loss for the
theatre, and even, for Garrick, ended in the destruction of personal property after the
riot erupted into the streets and a group of rioters broke the windows of his house in
Southampton Street.

The riot began in response to Garrick’s staging of a grand ballet called *The
Chinese Festival*. The dance, designed by George Jean Noverre, cost Garrick around
£2000 to produce, and though war with France appeared imminent, preparations had
gone too far for Garrick to stop production. He worried, however, about the reception
the French dancers would receive, so he listed the names of all sixty dancers in the
playbills to show the audience that over half of the dancers were English, and the others
he advertised as Swiss.30 These measures did not appease the public. On the first night
that the dance was staged, Cross records “A good deal of hissing & clapping and some
cries of No French Dancers.” After its second showing four nights later, he writes, “A
great deal of Hissing—but the Boxes being on our side some Swords were drawn, &
several turn’d out of the Pit & Gallerîes.” Shortly after, a pamphlet appeared damning
the production and contending that the dancers had arrived to undermine the British
Constitution, and by the third performance of the dance Cross notes that “When Garrick
appear’d, from the Slips one cry’d out Monsieur,” and that some benches were torn up
and the dance ended early to placate the patrons. But, though the pit and galleries
mutinied at the sight of *The Chinese Festival*, the Lords in the boxes still wanted to see

30 Stone, clxxvii
the dance. Garrick attempted a compromise between the two components of his audience, but on November 18, 1755—ten days after its debut—Cross writes that the ballet and theatre were torn apart:

"The Riot was very great. The Gentlemen came with sticks... The Boxes drove many out of the Pit & broken heads were plenty on both sides; the Dance began—was stopp’d & so again and again—and while this was doing, numbers were assembl’d in the passages of the Pit... heavy blows on both sides... Garrick was oblig’d to give up the dancers & the Audience dispersed."\footnote{The diary of Richard Cross, in Stone, “A Critical Introduction,” clxxxvi-clxxxvii.}

Such a demonstration perhaps goes some length towards explaining the overt British patriotism evident in 1759's *Harlequin's Invasion*.

In the case of *The Chinese Festival*, the nationality of the performers coupled with rising anti-French sentiments occasioned the outburst of patriotic feelings, while class tensions within the theatre caused the outburst to erupt into riot. Similarly in colonial America, the symbolism of The American Company and the Englishness associated with theatre resulted in the destruction of New York’s Chapel Street Theatre. The British patriotism taught to the North American public by the British play-going experience, with its twin pillars of liberty and choice, and by British plays such as *Cato*, laid the foundations for attacks upon the theatre in the name of a new type of patriotism. The American Company had left for Barbados in the spring of 1765, and thus did not play in the colonies during the summer and autumn leading up to the enforcement of the Stamp Act, but they left behind two members in New York, Mr. and Mrs. Tomlinson. Over the ensuing year, the two cobbled together a small troupe and engaged the theatre for a short season in May, 1766. Notwithstanding the March 1766 repeal of the Stamp Act, citizens did not look favorably upon theatricals. Seemingly
aware of popular sentiment, they chose for the main piece an inoffensive comedy called *The Twin Rivals*, included on the bill “A Song in Praise of Liberty,” and hoped that “as the Packet is arrived, and has been the Messenger of good news relative to the Repeal... the Public has no objections to the above performance.”

But an April meeting of the Sons of Liberty had already decided the theatre’s fate: in his journal, British captain John Montressor records that on April 4, 1766, “A Grand meeting of the Sons of Liberty to settle...whether they shall admit the strollers...to act. Some stamps...were publicly burned... together with some play bills.” On May 5, the Sons of Liberty made good on their threats: the New York Gazette reported that

“Our Grand Theatre in Chapel-Street on Monday night last had a grand Rout [sic]. When the Audience were fixed... about the Middle of the first Scene a more grand Rout instantly took Place both Out and In the House, for by the usual English Signal of one Candle, and an Huzza on both Sides, the Rivals began in earnest, and those were best off who got out first... as the Lights were extinguished, and both Inside and Outside soon torn to Pieces and burnt by Persons unknown... to the Satisfaction of Many at this distressed time, and to the great Grievance of those less inclined for the Publick Good.”

Interestingly, the colonists used an ‘English signal.’ The fact that the newspaper notes the signal as such suggests that the northern colonists were beginning to think of themselves as less ‘English’ even as early as 1765; that they learned from the English how to inflame hearts and begin a riot proves that lessons in British patriotism carried over into their new ideologies. Jason Shaffer suggests that, in addition to the inherent anti-British sentiment, political alliances in New York gave the riot an air of class

---

32 Shaffer, 88.
33 John Montressor, private journal entry from April 4, 1766, in Johnson and Burling, *Calendar*, 246.
34 New York Gazette, May 12, 1766, in Johnson and Burling, *Calendar*, 249.
warfare, similar to that found in The Chinese Festival riot. The New York Sons of Liberty were composed of the DeLancey family and middle- and lower-class tradesmen and artisans; the British governor had given permission for the Tomlinsons' to open their season, and in the lean economic times only those with disposable income and leisure time could afford a night at the theatre.

Meanwhile, in South Carolina, Douglass found a public hungry for theatrical entertainment. In October of 1765, while the rest of the company lingered in Barbados (except for Mr. and Mrs. Tomlinson, of course), Douglass arrived in Charleston after a London recruitment trip on the same boat as the British appointed stamp distributor, George Saxby. Though the South Carolinian Sons of Liberty dragged that unfortunate man off to the Fort, Douglass disembarked safely. He was shortly notified that due to a continued engagement in the Caribbean, the majority of his company could not join him until the following spring. Somewhat dejectedly, he gave up his hopes for entertaining that winter. But by early November he began plans for an abbreviated season in Charleston. In a public circular, he stated that even with his condensed troupe, he had been prevailed upon to present theatricals in Charleston by some 'ladies and gentleman.' He met with no trouble.

The different receptions to theatre in the colonies of New York and South Carolina suggests not that they conceived of theatre differently by 1766, but that their feelings towards the British changed at different rates during the pre-Revolutionary era. In New York, the theatre had been at odds with the growing middling class long before the Stamp Act Crisis due to its amoral reputation. In the politically charged climate of

---

35 Shaffer, 87.
36 Johnson, 58.
the Stamp Act Crisis, northern colonists viewed the theatre with more suspicion than before: as an anti-theatrical tract from 1750 entitled *The Sure Guide to Hell, by Belzebub* noted, ministers of state who encouraged luxuries fostered by the playhouse “may easily surprise [the People] out of their Privileges, Rights, and Properties, and every Thing else that is dear to them.” As anti-British sentiment rose, the pre-existing reputation grew worse. Though economically speaking nearly anyone could buy a ticket, the theatre was increasingly seen as a British institution patronized by the British colonial governor and his wealthy (and morally corrupt) associates. The money spent at the theatre was thus wasted on unnecessary luxury. If the only saving grace for the theatre was its identification with British patriotism, that one virtue quickly turned into a vice.

South Carolina, on the other hand, had welcomed theatre with open arms since its inception; without Puritanical attitudes or even much of a moral middling class, the idea of the playhouse as a civilizing force dominated. In the south, where identification with a genteel British lifestyle had always been stronger than in the north, the ‘ladies and gentlemen’ craved some symbol of the goodness of their Mother Country during the darkest and most unruly days of the Stamp Act crisis. They disliked current British policy, but not British rule itself. To South Carolinians, the theatrical performances seen inside the orderly English playhouse represented the perfect opposite of the street theatre occasioned in Charleston by anti-Stamp Act mobs. Though in 1766 their reactions were extremely different, the theatre united citizens of both New York and

[^37]: Shaffer, 67.
South Carolina. Each recognized the power of professional theatre, and each regarded it as a supremely British institution.

In less politically unsettled times, however, the theatre signified a bastion of liberty without eliciting a riot: both the English and the colonists regarded the playhouse as a place of liberty. In addition to the British patriotic messages reinforced in many plays, extolling the goodness of the British constitution and the liberty of all British citizens, in the playhouse, the audience had power. They could jest with the actors onstage as equals, they could call loudly for the plays and prologues they wished to see, they determined which plays would be shown again. Just as Breen contends that the act of choice in the marketplace brought with it a liberating feeling, the act of choice within the theatre allowed colonists from Rhode Island to South Carolina to fashion themselves as they chose. Not only did their actions regarding the performance bring a sense of power and choice, the theatre also went hand-in-hand with the booming trade in consumer goods: a dress cut in the newest fashion and made of the finest imported fabric did not do much good worn at home. In the playhouse, however, the dress could be shown off to the greatest degree in the illuminated house, glittering in the candlelight, surrounded by the town.

Furthermore, women could and did participate in the theatre both on the stage and in the audience. Not only did women view the plays and laugh behind their fans at the bawdy bits, but in the eighteenth century they acted upon the stage. A popular phenomenon for actresses was to play in a 'breeches part.'\textsuperscript{38} For these parts, the actress cross-dressed, though oftentimes she still played a female character. An example

\textsuperscript{38} Rankin, 27.
would be Rosalind from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, though one of the most popular characters seen in breeches in both the colonies and England was Silvia from George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*. Whereas Rosalind is a woman dressed up a boy, Silvia remains Silvia even in breeches. Silvia, an outspoken but virtuous tomboy, stands in stark contrast to the seemingly more traditional female character, Melinda. Though on the face of it Melinda seems the epitome of honorable femininity, she is conniving and mean-spirited while Silvia rises to the fore as a proper heroine, even in breeches. What impression this made on young women in the audience we can only guess, though records abound of men who quite enjoyed seeing a shapely leg on the stage.

But female participation in the experience of the theatre, especially as audience members, has important implications for the viewing the theatre as a consumer commodity which drew the colonists together: unless all of the colonists, including the women, felt themselves connected they could not so effectively have joined together in boycotts and non-importation agreements which helped aid the Revolutionary cause. Women participated in the marketplace and in the theatre, and without their cooperation the Revolution may not have gotten off the ground. Indeed, the theatre affected women just as much as men. Though many historians refer to George Washington and his love of Addison's non-partisan, liberty-loving, tyrant-hating play *Cato*, fewer mention that in Massachusetts—where playing was outlawed—Mercy Warren Otis, using her knowledge of that very text, penned some of the few lasting Revolutionary American plays. Though they could not be performed in Boston,
except clandestinely perhaps, they could and were read dramatically by fireplaces and occasionally in lecture halls.³⁹

Additionally, unlike in a church or other public venue, the theatre was not ruled by long-established protocols. Though generally the most affluent of the community sat in boxes while the poorest sat in the gallery, no rule designated that a man or woman had to sit in a certain space. If a man had landed a windfall at cards at the coffee table the night before, the said gallery-god might appear in a box at the next performance with little comment. For the eighteenth century, such freedom was almost subversive. The fact that within the theatre a simple artisan could sit next to a man as wealthy and powerful as Peyton Randolph, so long as he had paid his shillings, suggests that the playhouse experience more than offered liberty, but could also transgress class and social boundaries.

Leading up to the Revolution, social mobility and limitations became an ideological battleground, with the traditional societal leaders trying to stay on top in the face of an increasingly mobile middling class. The outfits worn to the theatre provide an excellent example: without sumptuary laws, as people became able to buy better fabrics and newer styles, it became difficult to distinguish who was who in society. In a pamphlet entitled *News from the Moon*, a writer in Massachusetts notes that in ‘Lunar City’ he “could not tell the maids from the mistress by their apparel; the mistress was patched and painted, and so was the maid.”⁴⁰ Breen writes that “in the new order almost anyone of moderate means seemed capable of presenting himself, at least in

³⁹ Johnson, 142: interesting to note her husband is a Mason, like Douglass.
⁴⁰ Breen, 149.
terms of material possessions, as a gentleman or lady,\(^4\) a statement which brings to mind actor-manager Douglass's own pretensions at gentlemanliness through his purchase of a four-horsed phaeton. The phaeton, purchased not for functionality but rather as a private carriage, marked Douglass as a man on the rise. If a player could become a gentleman, and a maid could become a mistress, then the world surely had turned upside down and the adage above the proscenium—*Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem*—rang true.

"So Free—they’d demolish the whole Constitution"

As the colonies drew nearer to Revolution, the theatre grew increasingly politicized. The play *Cato*, a perennial favorite in the colonies and an especial favorite of George Washington’s, became strongly associated with the Sons of Liberty—a poem printed in the December 1768 edition of the *Boston Weekly News-Letter* read:

```
Quoth the Rabble make Way for great Cato’s Descendants
Lo! These are the Men aptly call’d Independents!
Quaint Patriots indeed! Of Old Noll’s Institution,
So Free—they’d demolish the whole Constitution.\(^4\)
```

*Cato* dropped from The American Company’s repertory between 1768 and 1774. Similarly, Douglass stopped giving out *The Recruiting Officer* until 1771 after the 1768 riots partially directed against the British impressment policies. Instead, Douglass gave out *King John*, with its anti-French overtones, and *Cymbeline*, in which rebellious, colonial Britain and imperial Rome peacefully resolve their conflicts. But despite such loaded choices, it seems that Douglass was not trying to be political, but politic. During

\(^4\) Breen, 157.  
\(^4\) Shaffer, 91.
the 1772-1773 season in Philadelphia he staged *Tamerlane* and *The Recruiting Officer*, plays which appealed to patriots and military garrisons alike, as well as the British patriotic piece *The Conquest of Canada*. These choices seem less pointed towards a certain course of action, and more designed to draw in the largest audience for the most profit. Douglass did not want riots and political tensions disrupting his theatre; he wanted to make a livelihood.

But it was not up to Douglass to control theatrical interpretation. In 1774 the American Company performed *Cato* for the first time since 1768 as part of a benefit show for the Charleston Masons. Though ostensibly the program reeks of British patriotism—first *Cato*, followed by a farce called *The Reprisal, or the Tars of Old Britain*, followed by a singing of “Rule Britannia”—the entertainment actually seems to have been designed with colonial grievances in mind. *Cato* represented to the colonists their own fight against the tyranny of Britain, and the afterpiece seems to have been a commentary on the British customs policy and the blockade of the port of Boston.\(^{43}\)

Thus, even something as seemingly clear-cut as *The Reprisal* became twisted by the new American patriotic interpretation. Even had Douglass wanted to make a political statement, his medium was not the easiest place to make known his leanings. The theatre would become politicized however the audience wanted it, not however the theatre-manager wished. After all, the audience still had the most power in the theatre.

Then in the ultimate act of politicization, on October 20, 1774, the dramas patrons gave a new law. The Continental Congress passed a resolution to “encourage frugality, economy, and industry, and promote agriculture, arts, and the manufactures of

\(^{43}\) Shaffer, 101.
this country...” while it “discourage[d] every species of extravagance and
dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting,
exhibitions of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments.”

Instead of proclaiming the vice of the theatre or banning it on amoral grounds, the
Association proscribed ‘shews’ and plays based on economics. No matter how it they
couched it, though, the resolution effectively curtailed professional theatre in America.
The resolution also attempted to put a stop to commerce with Great Britain by
encouraging colonists to use homespun and to reject frivolous consumer goods which
could either be substituted by American made objects or done without. That the
thirteen colonies with such varied religious and political backgrounds could bond
together to see the resolution put into practice says something for the pervasiveness of
British culture up to the Revolution: a culture which the theatre actively promoted.
Rejecting imported consumer goods and the theatre constituted a major break with vital
cultural component.

After the resolution passed, Douglass received the bad news first-hand from
Peyton Randolph. Perhaps this was because both men were Freemasons, or perhaps it
was because Douglass had made a name for himself as a respectable would-be
gentleman. But perhaps Randolph broke the news to Douglass in person because
Douglass, to him and many of the other delegates, represented the personification of
London. Douglass and his theatre company had brought to life a piece of British
society in the colonies. His troupe had entertained many of these men on many
occasions, and even those who had not seen him in a theatre might have known him

44 Johnson, 91.
45 Johnson, 93.
from the Masonic Lodge. Before John Adams and Thomas Jefferson met,
Douglass knew them both. Though by 1774 things were moving quickly in the
direction of independence, these men had lived their whole lives as British citizens and
maintained a respect for their mother country. They would not let Douglass, a man
who shook their hands as a brother Mason and who brought with him all of the
excitement and civility of London, find out about such a crippling resolution from the
newspaper. Douglass and the American Company, like Britain itself, deserved more
respect than that. And so, respectfully, Douglass and his troupe, along with a few other
strolling companies playing on the circuit, sailed to Jamaica to wait out the war.
Epilogue

"Et Finis Coronat Opus—The Bell Rings—Exit Nonsense"¹

The end of The American Company, or “The Old American Company” as it was known after the Revolution, was not the end of theatre in America. Although the Continental Congress reissued its ban on theatricals in 1778, even during the Revolutionary War itself amateur troupes took up the mantle of theatre, student groups gave out *Cato*, and British soldiers entertained themselves in their garrisons with theatrical productions. After the war, William Verling, Thomas Wall and several other members of The American Company and her rival troupes returned to the newly formed United States of America. When the old hands returned to their old circuits, their audiences remembered them. In July of 1781 the *Charleston Royal Gazette* reported that “The lovers of theatrical entertainments will doubtless be happy to learn, that there is some probability of the American Company… being here next winter.”²

But it would not be the same as before. Douglass had given up the management of the company to John Henry, an actor, and Lewis Hallam, the star of the company and the son of the original actor-manager.

Theatrically speaking, times were changing in England, too. In 1776, just weeks before the Continental Congress in America signed the Declaration of Independence, Garrick retired from the stage with one last hurrah as *Richard III* on June 3 and 4, and a final appearance on June 10 as Don Felix in a comedy called *The

---

² *Charleston Royal Gazette*, July, 1781, in Johnson and Burling, *Calendar*, 477.
Wonder. He sold his shares of the Drury Lane patent to the famous playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Sheridan, though one of the few playwrights of the eighteenth century with any real merit, had very little idea how to profitably take on the role of manager. Despite an expansion of the Drury Lane theatre to increase capacity to nearly 4,000 spectators, the profits of ‘Sheridan’s’ Drury Lane fluctuated year-to-year; the steady revenue of Garrick’s years as manager could not be counted upon.

Garrick himself, however, enjoyed retirement. In 1773, he had been elected a member of The Club, an exclusive social organization in London whose members included Dr. Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, and George Colman. For many years Garrick had been kept out of this group by virtue of his occupation as an actor, despite much literary collaboration with George Colman and his close friendship with Samuel Johnson. By 1773, however, his extensive work as a playwright, editor, and collector of rare manuscripts—along with his good reputation—earned him a place in the group. When he died in 1779, Johnson, as a tribute to his friend, declared that The Club should have a year of mourning for Garrick; no new members were accepted until November 30, 1780. Thirty-three coaches attended his funeral at Westminster Abbey, where he is interred in Poet’s Corner under a marble statue of himself with a portrait medallion inscribed with the word “Shakespeare” above his head.

Like Garrick, Douglass, too, retired around 1776: a review of The American Company’s Tamerlane performed on May 17, 1777 in Montego Bay, Jamaica, lists Mr. Henry as the manager. So, while other ‘theatrical merchants’ trickled back to the

---

3 McIntyre, 564-565.
4 Cunningham, 17-18.
5 Johnson and Burling, 477.
former colonies after the Revolution, Douglass remained in Jamaica. During the war he had established himself in Kingston as a printer—his original trade, before becoming a theatre manager—and he stayed with that business until his death, even becoming the "Royal Printer" of the *Royal Gazette*. At the time of his death, Douglass owned a house on the Parade, a silver-handled cane, and two carriages. He was listed as a "Gentleman." The theatrical reign of two King Davids had ended.

But America was new and everything seemed possible. Old ideas of the immorality of theatricals were soon forgotten in New England, where theatre became legalized. New York, where the only serious colonial playhouse riot took place, quickly became the seat of the theatrical business. Hostility towards English actors faded immediately after the war ended, and just as before the war, English actors flocked across the Atlantic to try their luck on an untried stage. New players emerged, new companies grew, and a new American theatre began to form. Though the English roots from which it derived remained at its foundation, the American theatre soon found its own voice in the early Republic.

---

6 Johnson, 88-89
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Garrick, David. *An essay on acting: in which will be consider'd the mimical

Garrick, David. Harlequin’s Invasion. A Christmas gambol, after the manner of Italian Comedy. First performed in 1759. Photocopied MS in the Folger Shakespeare Library. S.n. ca. 1786.

Garrick, David. List of prologues, epilogues, miscellaneous verses, epitaphs and songs, the majority, if not all, by David Garrick. MS in the Folger Shakespeare Library. W.b.464, fols. 89-94.


Georgian Theatre Royal, Richmond, North Yorkshire.


*Virginia Gazette.* Williamsburg, Virginia. December, 1752 and June, 1768.

Virtual Williamsburg: Computer-made model of the 1760 Douglass Theater in Williamsburg. A few pictures of this model can be found online at http://research.history.org/DHC/VW.cfm; accessed August 23rd, 2010.


*Secondary Sources*


Vita

Abigail Calvert Fine

Abigail was born on August 5th, 1987. At six years old she had her first theatrical role as ‘The Littlest Angel’ in a community theatre production of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. At eight years old she decided she loved colonial American history after a family vacation to Colonial Williamsburg. It was also then that Abigail decided that William and Mary was the college for her—and ten years later she was accepted! She earned her B.A. in History in May 2009, and began work on her M.A. that fall. In addition to her study of academic history, Abigail loves photography and traveling (mostly to locations rich with history). Abigail hopes to put her knowledge of theatre history to good use in the coming years as a dramaturg.