

UNIT 1

ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN THEATER IN THE 18TH CENTURY. REVOLUTIONARY PLAYWRIGHTS. THE QUEST FOR A NATIONAL DRAMA: ROYALL TYLER'S *THE CONTRAST*.

I. THE BEGINNINGS OF AMERICAN DRAMA: THE COLONIES

In this period the drama suffered under enough handicaps and discouragements to founder any ordinary enterprise. Legal statute, clerical frown, the exigencies of war, yellow fever, the copyright bogey (lack of) - these and other factors operated to prevent the conception and hinder the growth of the American theater. Moralists might indict the theater as the "House of the Devil", and lawmakers might legislate against it as contrary to the public good; but no amount of opposition could effectively stamp out a form of entertainment based on the virtually instinctive will to "make-believe".

At the end of the eighteenth century the American theater was pretty well established, but original American drama was far from arrival. Repertories were mainly foreign; it would have been folly to expect a native drama to compare with royalty-free plays such as *Richard III* or Dryden's *Amphitryon*.

In the beginning, however, there was no thought of an American drama. To be sure, many Americans experimented with the dramatic form; but they had little hope of seeing their plays professionally produced. The first complete and unquestionably American play to be performed publicly and professionally was presented in 1767. Gradually more American writers entered the field, and between 1790 and 1820 the variety and vigor of native production was so great that the failure to bring forth a single dramatist or a single great play is the more remarkable.

The first efforts at dramatic literature in this country were wild, wrote William Dunlap in *A History of the American Theater* (1832). Literature, particularly dramatic literature developed two divergent characteristics which lasted more than half a century:

the imitation of English and European literature, and the presentation of distinctive American qualities. Performance of plays was opposed by local and colonial governments and by certain religious groups.

Bankruptcy was a common hazard for theater managers, actors, and the public. It was not strange that good native drama before 1800 was rare. Due to the middle-class tastes which dominated the theater and the lack of protection of a copyright law, plays did not appeal to an artistic temperament and were written mainly by opportunist, political or theatrical. The results -propaganda plays, poetic tragedies, and comedies imitative of the English were produced occasionally with the major theater fare of pirated English and European plays, adaptations, and translations. In healthy contrast, American originality appeared in the stage Yankee and in plays with native themes. By 1800, although conditions in the theater remained chaotic, a drama which could be called American was slowly forming.

Early drama in the Colonies may be called "American" only because the term is a convenience. The land belonged to the French, the Spanish, the English, and the Indians. In fact, the first play produced in America was a Spanish comedia by a Spanish captain, Marcos Farfán de los Godos, performed early in 1598 near what is now the city of El Paso, Texas by the first white men to settle north of the Río Grande, and depicted the progress of that group and good-naturedly recounted their adventures. There were also one French play, *Le Theatre de Neptune en La Nouvelle-France*, by Lescarbot in 1606 and an English play, *The Lost Lady* written in 1641 by Sir William Berkeley, Governor of Virginia. Perhaps there were other "American" plays performed during this period, but the historian of drama has little information at his disposal. Few of the plays produced were written in America.

Perhaps the first one performed in English was *Ye Bare and Ye Cub*, by William Darby, produced in 1665, in Accomac County, Virginia. It was promptly sued for his

troubles by the King's attorney -the implication being that such activity was either immoral or illegal and perhaps both. The play unfortunately has been lost. There were probably other plays performed before the turn of the century, by Richard Hunter and Anthony Aston.

The first play printed in America was *Androborus*, by Robert Hunter in 1714. Under a classical theme, the play reveals an occasional witty but rowdy attack on the Provincial Council, the church government, and Lieutenant Governor Nicholson as Androborus (man-eater). Called a "Biographical Farce", the play has no literary value and it is connected both logically and theatrically by only the slightest dramatic threads.

The drama of the English Restoration (1660-1700) had been witty and brilliant but a bit too vulgar for the tastes of the rising middle class. Playwrights like Congreve left the stage. Moralists, humanitarians, and sentimentalists took their places, with the result that theater attendance dropped sharply. Likewise, the actors in America suffered from some important problems because of the attitudes of some Colonial fathers and the people.

First, the antagonism of religious groups: especially New England (Boston in particular long retained a reputation for severity toward the theater, and Pennsylvania was little better. In the Penn Colony (1681), Quakers, the Germans, and the Scott-Irish opposed theaters and helped pass laws prohibiting their activity.

Secondly, the opposition by Governments: on May 6, 1709, the Governor's Council of New York passed a law forbidding "play acting and prize fighting", because they were felt "to increase immorality, impiety, and a contempt for religion". Similarly, a Pennsylvania act of 1778 (repealed in 1789) declared all theatrical performances illegal.

Thirdly, such discouraging opposition taxed the inventive resources and finesse of the Colonial actors and acting companies. Occasionally, however, actors defended their art in prologues to plays: "Much has been said at this censorious time, / To prove the treading of the stage a crime // Yet wise men own a play well chose may teach / Such useful moral truths as churchmen preach". At other times an actor might hide behind a subterfuge of

evasive words, by proposing a "Histrionic Academy", or naming a theater "The Boston Museum". Mainly, the actors in the Colonies met their problems with fortitude, ingenuity, and some success.

Information about early theaters in the Colonies is very sketchy, but it is clear that the first theater was contracted for (established) on July 11, 1716, in Williamsburg, Virginia. In New York, the New Theater opened on December 6, 1732, with a performance of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706). Plays were produced occasionally in Williamsburg during the next several years, and theaters continued to be built throughout the century.

Not until August, 1749, when a company of actors headed by Walter Murray and Thomas Kean acted plays in a warehouse on Water Street, Philadelphia, did America at last have the beginnings of professional theater. Records show that Murray and Kean's "Virginia Company" continued playing for nearly twenty years.

That company stimulated an interest in the theater, thus creating an advantage for Lewis Hallam's Company of Comedians which opened at Williamsburg on September 15, 1752, with *The Merchant of Venice*. Faced with the opposition from the authorities, David Douglass (who married Lewis Hallam's widow in 1798), with typical resourcefulness, disassociated himself with plays, declaring his interest, solely in "Dissertations on Subjects, Moral, Instructive, and Entertaining", and was allowed to open with Nicholas Rowe's *Jane Shore* (1713) on December 28, 1758. Douglass became sufficiently encouraged during the early 1760's to build temporary theaters in Annapolis (Maryland), Newport (Rhode Island), and New York City. During these years, anti-British feeling persuaded him to call his players the "American Company". Douglass was the main figure in American theater before the Revolution, his company enjoyed notable seasons, and his success in overcoming objections to plays was remarkable. He should also be remembered for his Southwark Theater in Philadelphia -the first permanent theater in America- where in 1767,

he produced the first play written in America and presented on an American stage by professional actors- *The Prince of Phartia*.

Plays written by Americans were disappointing and few. Beginning a tradition which lasted over a hundred years in America, players and managers took their repertory from the popular successes of England and the Continent. Effectively used, the theme of love and honor was meaningful in middle-class philosophy, and politics as a theme was significant in a country already concerned with democracy, freedom, and tyrannical attitudes.

II. DRAMA DURING THE REVOLUTION AND POST-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD UNTIL 1800

Anticipating the serious situation, the Continental Congress in 1774 recommended that all public entertainments be suppressed. Thus began an eight-year period in the history of American theater during which the stage was mainly controlled by the British military who performed some of the best plays of England and the Continent and entertained not just soldiers but great numbers of Colonists.

American drama, on the other hand, was perhaps given additional impetus by the war years. With the spirit of nationalism, Americans found a new *raison d'être* for the drama. By the time the theaters were opened after the war, American drama had launched a modest but definite beginning. A variety of aspects of American life appeared moral lessons and dramatized political issues, social farces which often featured the native Yankee character or the Negro and commented on society in America, national plays by the score (twenty), plays imitative of English drama- in general, a reflection of the times. And by the turn of the century, America had a serious dramatist and student of the theater in William Dunlap, and its first effective writer of comedy in Royall Tyler.

II.1. Plays Reflecting Patriot Views during the Revolution.

Long before the Battles of Lexington and Bunkers Hill, the contest between Whig and Tory, Patriot and Loyalist, was being waged (held) in literary circles. In the drama, the mode was satiric farce (hyperbolic (comical) historical-episodic parables with characters like caricatures), and what the playwright lacked in dramatic talent they made up for with the partisan fervor. Frank and even libelous, only a few of these frequently anonymous satires have been preserved.

II.1.1. MRS. MERCY OTIS WARREN: PARTISAN SATIRIST. (1728-1814)

The sister of James Otis, the patriot statesman, and the wife of James Warren, who was president of the provisional Congress of Massachusetts, she did her share for the Revolution by writing two political satires: *The Adulateur* (1773), a send up of Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson, and *The Group* (1775), which deals with the king's abrogation of the Massachusetts' charter (asamblea). Both were printed and widely read, but neither appears to have been performed. In 1790 she published a pair of blank-verse tragedies, *The Sack of Rome* and *The Ladies of Castile*. Other plays, notably *The Blockheads* (1776), have been attributed to her, though most modern scholarship finds the attribution suspect.

She was well equipped to satirize the social as well as the political issues of her day. In her best plays, however, she was essentially a gadfly (fighter) of the war, harassing the enemy with bitter satire and poignant (vehementes) observations on liberty and patriotism. A lady of culture, a wit, and a member of the literati, she inserted in her plays the conventional sentiment and moral strictures of her day along with interesting biographical, social, and political comment. Quite in spite of occasional dramatic effectiveness, she was clearly amateurish and lacked any real dramatic talent. It is ironic that she remains best known for the political farces, which she doubtless wrote more for amusement than literary acclaim.

II.1.2. HUGH HENRY BRACKENRIDGE: WAR OF THE *BELLE-LETTRES*

Although his reputation in the history of American literature rests quite appropriately on his authorship of the early picaresque and satirical novel *Modern Chivalry*, Brackenridge (1748-1816) also contributed two plays in the Whig-Tory "War of the Belles-Lettres".

II.1.2.a *The Battle of Bunkers-Hill*, by H.H. Brackenridge, 1776

In five short acts and a series of epilogues, this play in blank verse praises the courage of the American leaders and their men. An epilogue, "Who fights for freedom fights for the cause of Heaven" is followed by an ode on the "Battle of Bunkers-Hill", a speech by George Washington, and a song in praise of American efforts that day.

II.1.2.b. *The Death of General Montgomery*, by H.H. Brackenridge, 1777

Mainly a patriotic play built around a recognized hero, *The Death of General Montgomery* dramatizes the attack on the fortress of Quebec.

II.1.3. POLITICAL FARCE-MELODRAMA: *THE FALL OF BRITISH TYRANNY*, 1776 (AUTHOR UNKNOWN)

Although the language of the Whig-Tory argument is occasionally quite realistic and the plot idea of a scope to suggest something more than the usual nationalistic propaganda, the characters are caricatures, though identifiable, and the action is episodic and farcical.

II.2. Plays Reflecting Loyalist Views during the Revolution

Extant (existente) Loyalist plays indicate that few opportunities were overlooked to belittle the motives and abilities of the Colonists. Slanderous remarks concerning the Patriot leaders were not uncommon. Truth was not important; propaganda for the cause was. Obvious Tory tracts in which the arguments from the British point of view are presented with wit and intelligence in contrast to the confusion and ignorance of those who espoused the Whig philosophy.

**II.2.1. *THE AMERICANS ROUSED IN A CURE FOR THE SPLEEN*(bazo, cólera),
OR AMUSEMENT FOR A WINTER'S EVENING, BEING THE SUBSTANCE OF A
CONVERSATION ON THE TIMES OVER A FRIENDLY TANKARD(jarra de cerveza)
AND PIPE BETWEEN SHARP(agudo), A COUNTRY JUSTICE(juez), FILLPOT
(tarro) AN INNKEEPER, GRAVEAIRS(serio), A DEACON(diácono), TRIM(cortar), A
BARBER, BRIM(ala de sombrero), A QUAKER, PUFF(don Nadie), A LATE
REPRESENTATIVE. TAKEN IN SHORTHAND BY SIR ROGER DE COVERLY,
ATTRIBUTED TO JONATHAN SEWALL, 1775**

**II.2.2. *THE BATTLE OF BROOKLYN*, A FARCE IN TWO ACTS. AS IT WAS
PERFORMED ON LONG ISLAND, ON TUESDAY, THE 27th DAY OF AUGUST,
1776. BY THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE TYRANTS OF AMERICA,
ASSEMBLED AT PHILADELPHIA, AUTHOR UNKNOWN, 1776**

II.3. Nonpartisan Drama: "Both Your Houses"

Colonel Robert Munford (c. 1713-1784), who fought in the Revolution, presents quite accurately the feelings of the majority of the people who did not know what to do during the days of uncertainty early in the Revolution, both in *The Candidates* and *The Patriots*, published together in 1798. If in *The Candidates*, Munford ineffectively satirizes

the methods used to elect members to the Assembly, in *The Patriots*, he attacks the half-hearted and the professed Patriots.

II.4. Royall Tyler: The Beginnings of American Comedy

The first comedy and the first play on a native subject written by an American and produced by a professional company was *The Contrast*, by Royall Tyler (1757-1826). A Harvard College graduate, 1776, and a major in the Continental Army, he was admitted to the bar (abogacía) in 1780. Returning to military duty during Shay's Rebellion (1787), he visited New York City, and met Thomas Wignell, the leading comedian of the Old American Company. That same year, on April 16, Wignell acted with some personal success in *The Contrast* at the John Street Theatre in New York. Tyler also wrote a novel, *The Algerine Captive* (1797), many essays and verses, and at least seven more plays, only four of which have survived. His main career, however, was not literature but law, and he eventually became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Vermont (1807-13) and Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Vermont (1811-14).

II.4.1. THE CONTRAST, BY ROYALL TYLER, 1787

By the time Royall Tyler wrote *The Contrast*, the nation had emerged as an independent political unit; but its social pattern was still equivocal. It was and is an excellent acting-play. Its universally interesting theme of urban sophistication vs. rural naïvité had a peculiar appropriate application in post-Revolutionary America, when the British, having lost political control, were still able to patronize America culturally.

(Plot) With an intricate plot involving love, filial obligation, intrigue, and the follies of fashion, this play abounds in contrasts between ideas, lovers, servants, fashions, and so on. The main action of the play evolves around Dimple's (hoyuelo) personal problem; he loves the person of Charlotte and the fortune of Leticia, while he is engaged to Maria. To

complicate the problem, Manly (viril) has met, impressed, and been impressed by Maria; Dimple has been unintentionally forced into making identical secret appointments with both Charlotte and Letitia; and Van Rough has discovered that Dimple is seriously in debt - he has not "minded the main chance". In the final act, Dimple is exposed in all of his duplicity; Manly will marry Maria; and Letitia and Charlotte have learned a moral lesson.

(Discussion) *The Contrast* has been revived occasionally, generally in university theaters; but in 1787, it played only five performances. A contemporary critic thought that the dialogue of the play wanted pruning (recortes), that the soliloquies were not probable, and that ridicule of Lord Chesterfield's letters was imprudent. Another reviewer who signed himself "Candour" (franqueza) in the *Daily Advertiser*, April 18, 1787, was impressed: "It was certainly the production of a man of genius, and nothing can be more praiseworthy than the sentiments of the play throughout. They are the effusions of an honest patriot heart expressed with energy and eloquence". Although the modern reader probably cannot approach this play in the spirit of "Candour" ("the contrast drawn between a gentleman, who has read Chesterfield and received the polish of Europe, and an unpolished, untravelled American"), he will find it sprightly (vivo, enérgico), witty (ingenioso), and still very funny.

In descriptive terms *The Contrast* is more a caricature of society than a social comedy. There is much farcical action. Jessamy is the traditional intriguer; Jonathan is the shrewd (sagaz, astuto) but naïve country-bumpkin(pardillo) Yankee who became a major figure in American farce-comedy by the middle of the nineteenth century; Colonel Manly is the serious defender of honor and country -a startling contrast to Charlotte, the witty and indelicate flirt whose "head runs so upon beaux". Although a caricature, Charlotte establishes the pace of the drama with her wit, while her lines contain most of the play's satire upon fashion.

The characterization of the "fashionable" elements in the dramatist personae is done with the authentic tone of a writer who knew his Sheridan (*The School of Scandal*), but the prologue sounded a national note that was well sustained:

Why should our thoughts to distant countries roam
When each refinement may be found at home?

Patriotism was further emphasized when "Yankee Doodle" was sung during the performance. Beyond this, the action was made interesting to Americans by local references and the celebration of the American character. Colonel Manly's success in breaking up a sinister stratagem (and in his suit of the young lady he has saved from a Chesterfieldian trick) constitutes an endorsement of the American way of life in 1787. American social institutions must set the standards of individual behavior.

The success of *The Contrast* on the stage was probably due also to the adroitness(mastery) with which Tyler manages his dialogue and to the introduction, for the first time on the American stage, of a fine example of a Yankee rustic, Jonathan, whose combination of sturdy(macizo, tozudo), though not inflexible, New England morality and childlike innocence makes for comedy, especially in the scene in which he unwittingly (inconscientemente) attends a theater and tries to carry out the foreign servant's instructions as to how to succeed in an amour. Jonathan's attempted amour ends in a rebuff (desaire) which helps to clarify his thinking: "If this is the way with which our city ladies behave, give me the twenty acres of rock, the Bible, the cow, and Tabitha, and a little peaceable bundling(lío, atillo)".

The Contrast was a lusty embodiment of American ideals in a play which, without pointedly ignoring English tradition, made its own way. It's wit and humor of *The Contrast* were unmatched in American drama until Mrs. Anna C. Mowatt Ritchie's *Fashion* in 1845. What is scandal, says Charlotte, "but amusing ourselves with the faults, foibles (manias,

debilidades), follies (locuras), and reputations of our friends". Among the most humorous scenes are Jonathan's attendance at a play, *The School for Scandalization*; Jessamy's lessons to Jonathan on how to court a girl with an object of "cherubim (angelical) consequences"; and his later instructions on how "to laugh by rule".

The Contrast also has a liberal amount of sentiment, moralizing, and nationalism - necessary ingredients of the successful American play. The patriotism that the Prologue proclaims,

EXULT each patriot heart! -this night is shewn
A piece, which we may fairly call our own

Colonel Manly exemplifies in every action. And the outcome of the play is a national triumph. The necessary moral sentiment of the play is clear in Maria's "filial obligation". There are particular morals to be drawn too, in the actions of both Charlotte and Colonel Manly. That moralizing was required for Tyler's audience is evidenced by a Boston performance of the play in 1792 advertised as "A Moral Lecture in Five Parts".

II.4.2. OTHER PLAYS BY ROYALL TYLER

A comic opera, *May-Day*(1^o de mayo) *in Town; or, New York in an Uproar* (escándalo), (was performed a month later at the John Street Theatre. The play failed, perhaps, because the main female character was a scold(gruñona) whom the New York women may have resented.

Of the four plays by Tyler that are reprinted in *America's Lost Plays*, Vol. 15, three are sacred dramas in blank verse: *The Origin of the Feast of Purim*, *Joseph and His Brethren*, and *The Judgment of Solomon*. The fourth, *The Island of Barrataria*, is an amusing, satirical play based on parts of Don Quixote.

II.5. William Dunlap: Father of American Drama

William Dunlap (1766-1839) was the first professional dramatist in America. Although he must now be considered only a second- or third-rate playwright, his contribution of fifty-three plays (twenty-nine either wholly or partly original with him), his tireless and honorable work as a theater manager (gerente, administrador) and producer (director), and his reputation as the author of the first history of the American theater, make him a significant figure in the history of American drama.

Dunlap also brought respectability to the theater, badly in need of this quality. A pioneer in an unproven field, with remarkable industry and abilities superior to his contemporaries, his uneven but occasionally superior dramatic creations, and his abiding (duradero) interest in drama and theater, make his place as "Father of American Drama" secure.

Born in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, of staunch (firmes, rígidos) loyalist parents, William Dunlap enjoyed a fair education. His family moved to New York where he started to be interested in theater given by the British soldiers at the John Street Theatre.

In the spring of 1796, Lewis Hallam and John Hodgkinson, partners and actors of the Old American Company performing in the John Street Theatre in New York, persuaded him to buy into the management (administración, gerencia). According to the agreement, Dunlap became the manager and had the freedom to produce his own plays. He took over the company in 1798 and started his career as manager with the success of his English adaptation of August von Kotzebue's *The Stranger*. After long years of successes and economic difficulties Dunlap gave up theater management for good in 1812.

As a playwright, Dunlap wrote sentimental comedy, patriotic drama, the ballad-opera, Gothic melodrama, romantic tragedy, historic tragedy, farce, melodrama, adaptations, and translations. His best plays, certainly, were those mainly original with him; and on these plays -*André*, *The Father*, *Leicester*, *The Italian Fathers*- rests his reputation as a playwright.

As a theater historian, he wrote *A History of the American Theatre* (1832). Dunlap's single most significant contribution to both American theater and drama, consists mainly of an interesting narrative of personal observations of a growing theater. Although with some errors, his work is still regarded as an invaluable history written in a frequently delightful fashion.

II.6. Post-Revolutionary Drama: Varied Directions

When the Revolution was over and the war satires had disappeared, the theater continued its role as a means of propaganda, entertainment, and moral instruction. Numerous playwrights discussed social and political issues. Other playwrights inspired by the work of Tyler and Dunlap, wrote farce comedies and kept alive the native character types. At the same time, the theaters continued to depend on European dramatists. Translations and adaptations were constantly on the American stage, along with the pirated versions of current English successes and, of course, Shakespeare and the best of England's older plays. Along with these popular trends, the practicing moralists were at work, and the colleges were showing an increasing interest in drama.

There were Nationalistic and Political Plays (with a nationalistic spirit, political issues, patriot leadership, and national affairs), Social Farces and early Character Types (social and political themes, varied satire, character types such as the Yankee, the Negro and the Indian), Romantic Tragedy, Strictly Moral Lessons, and College Drama.