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## Theater of War: Combining entertainment and art

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# Theater of War: Combining entertainment and art

## **Abstract**

Did the theater work to benefit the causes for north or south, dependent upon region? Sautter stated that this phenomenon was less common than many might expect. Many actors stated their neutrality, or as one Civil War era actor said, "I am neither northerner nor southerner." Still others simply responded to the war by leaving the country. One must consider the "clannish nature" of theater of the time in order to understand how actors could have taken the neutral role during a war of ideals: many actors were born into theater life, therefore did not grow up in any one city or region, and furthermore lived a life separate from the outside world where harsh realities allowed for the existence of slavery and social oppression. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Theater

## **Disciplines**

History | Theatre and Performance Studies | Theatre History | United States History

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Theater of War: Combining entertainment and art

February 3, 2014

By: Val Merlina, '14

Did the theater work to benefit the causes for north or south, dependent upon region? Sautter stated that this phenomenon was less common than many might expect. Many actors stated their neutrality, or as one Civil War era actor said, "I am neither northerner nor southerner." Still others simply responded to the war by leaving the country. One must consider the "clannish nature" of theater of the time in order to understand how actors could have taken the neutral role during a war of ideals: many actors were born into theater life, therefore did not grow up in any one city or region, and furthermore lived a life separate from the outside world where harsh realities allowed for the existence of slavery and social oppression.



Nonetheless, some theaters did hold benefit nights for their respective regional war effort. Additionally, some performers themselves raised funds for a chosen organization or cause. For example, Sautter introduced the bold Charlotte Cushman, a celebrated stage performer, who raised a sum of \$8,300 for the United States Sanitary Commission. Likewise, others took it upon themselves to, in a sense, entertain the troops. One should note these were not USO entertainment shows in the style of Bob Hope, but were meaningful for morale nonetheless. James E. Murdoch, a performer of the Civil War era, vowed in 1861 not to keep a penny of his earnings until the hostilities ended. Instead, the earnings of his patriotic poetry readings went to the causes of soldiers and sailors. However isolated the theater world may have appeared to be from the hostilities of the battlefield, Murdoch's story

demonstrates a crossing over between these two worlds. James Murdoch's son, Sautter stated, was killed in the Battle of Chickamauga, and in order to retrieve the body, crossed state lines, and travelled to hostile territory. As he was waiting for his son's body, Murdoch was said to have begun a recitation of poetry. There, in the field, Murdoch recited for the soldiers' entertainment on stages and at benefits in the North.

Just as the theater was a source of patriotism during the war (such as at the end of some plays, the characters led the audiences to the nearest flagpole, around which together all would stand and sing patriotic songs), it also provided scathing commentary. Early in the war, in limited showings, plays might follow the story of a comic character who became an incompetent officer, who led men to accidental victory. The imagined end of the war would have this character then elected to Congress, where, as Sautter narrated, "he could do no harm." Still, as the war progressed and casualty lists grew, of course the talk of war itself became taboo. It was not a social topic that dominated conversation, and theater itself was a form of escapism, not necessarily an outlet for a reminder of the reality of civil war. Further still, public sentiment guided the theatrical responses.

Sources:

\*All information quoted within was from "The American Theater During the Civil War," a lecture by Richard Sautter, Adjunct Instructor of Theatre Arts at Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

Image:

"Charlotte Cushman, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing left." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Online. Digital ID: cph 3c01793. Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-101793.