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## "The Tenter-Hooks of Temptation": The Debate Over Theatre in Post-Revolutionary America

### **Abstract**

In Royall Tyler's 1787 play *The Contrast*, the innocent and simple Yankee Jonathan unknowingly attends a playhouse, mistaking it for a hocus pocus show. The historian and eighteenth-century theatre manager, William Dunlap, later criticized Tyler's play because his hero was a clown who misrepresented the new nation that the Revolutionary War created. Tyler's satirical portrait of his hero, however, is not an attack on the Yankee, but rather a symbol of the ideological conflicts within America. Jonathan repeats the religious charges against theatre, but he also joins in the fun at the playhouse. He is simple and honest, but he does not have a mind of his own. Thus, Tyler both supported and critiqued the arguments against theatre from the 1780s and 90s. *The Contrast* is not only a play about theatre, but it is about the new American. Jonathan represents the common man, but his ignorance reveals that the common man could be dangerous. The debate over theatre at the end of the eighteenth century exemplified this paradox. Republicanism meant freemen should have the right to choose their own entertainment, yet it also meant freemen had the right to be protected from dangerous elements of society.

### **Keywords**

theatre, post-revolutionary America, Royall Tyler

# **“The Tenter-Hooks of Temptation”: The Debate Over Theatre in Post-Revolutionary America**

*Meredith Bartron*

In Royall Tyler’s 1787 play *The Contrast*, the innocent and simple Yankee Jonathan unknowingly attends a playhouse, mistaking it for a hocus pocus show. He says a green curtain was lifted and he looked right into the neighbor’s house. Although he was unaware that the play was not real, he joined in the festivity saying, “Gor I—I liked the fun, and so I thumt away, and hiss’d as lustily as the best of ‘em.”<sup>1</sup> When asked what he thinks about theatre he naively responds, “...why ain’t cards and dice the devil’s device, and the play-house the shop where the devil hangs out the vanities of the world upon the tenter-hooks of temptation?”<sup>2</sup> The historian and eighteenth-century theatre manager, William Dunlap, later criticized Tyler’s play because his hero was a clown who misrepresented the new nation that the Revolutionary War created.

Tyler’s satirical portrait of his hero, however, is not an attack on the Yankee, but rather a symbol of the ideological conflicts within America. Jonathan repeats the religious charges against theatre, but he also joins in the fun at the playhouse. He is simple and honest, but he does not have a mind of his own. Thus, Tyler both supported and critiqued the arguments against theatre from the 1780s and 90s. *The Contrast* is not only a play about theatre, but it is about the new American. Jonathan represents the common man, but his ignorance reveals that the common man could be dangerous. The debate over theatre at the end of the eighteenth century exemplified this paradox.

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<sup>1</sup> Royall Tyler, *The Contrast*, in *Early American Drama*, ed. Jeffrey H. Richards (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1997), 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Republicanism meant freemen should have the right to choose their own entertainment, yet it also meant freemen had the right to be protected from dangerous elements of society.

Theatre is a social art. Therefore, theatre's right to exist was contested since the establishment of the American colonies because it influenced not only the actors, but the audience as well. Theatre was finally legalized for the first time in the northern states in the late 1780s and early 1790s. The debate over theatre was the most intense in large cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, especially where religious groups retained power. Although the debate addressed issues of national importance, it was handled locally, and therefore different cities accepted theatre at varying times. New York never officially banned theatre because of British influence during the Revolutionary War, while Pennsylvania and Massachusetts each repealed anti-theatre legislation in 1789 and 1793, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The debate over theatre focused on the imagined power of theatre as an institution, rather than on the ability of certain plays to corrupt or uplift.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the debate did not divide between any social classes or political groups, showing that although economic and political events influenced the nature of the discussions, it was an ideological contest that transcended class, race, gender, and political boundaries. It was about the role government should take in shaping society's amusements, and about what should be considered advantageous and detrimental to society. The opponents and supporters of theatre, however, did not question the right of government to intervene. The large number of petitions that were

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<sup>3</sup> Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 46.

<sup>4</sup> John H. Houchin, "The Struggle for Virtue: Professional Theatre in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia" *Theatre History Studies* 19 (1999), 168.

circulated by both sides reveal that they thought public entertainment was the domain of the state legislatures.

The petitioners used similar logic to argue for and against theatre, but they used these arguments to come to different conclusions. The proponents of theatre looked to the future works of genius that Americans must produce, while the opponents cited the present degeneracy of theatrical entertainment, yet neither side praised the current state of theatre. Many theatre supporters believed theatre represented the future of American culture that was not dependent upon England. Their opponents also desired to disengage Americans from English culture by banning theatre, yet most of the plays performed in this period were imports, and advertisements included descriptions of a play's success in London to attract larger crowds. The language of the petitions for and against theatre was preoccupied with the issue of morality. America was a moral nation and like previous moral nations it deserved the right to reflect its greatness through art. Conversely, opponents of the theatre worried about the nation's decline if immoral performances were accessible to a public demanding democracy.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons for the repeal of anti-theatre legislation at the end of the eighteenth century by examining the arguments for and against theatre, and the influence of democratic and republican values on the debate. The arguments were expressed in petitions, newspaper editorials, legislation, and even plays. The most important and famous American play of the late eighteenth century, *The Contrast*, self-consciously examined the role of theatre and its paradoxical relationship to American patriotism and British aristocratic principles. Ultimately, Tyler supported theatre because the play was created to be performed, yet Jonathan's inability to

distinguish a play from real life reinforced the argument that the lower classes were too easily influenced and corrupted by both the material of the plays and the environment in which they were performed.

The historiography of theatre is often contradictory because many early sources are inaccurate since the legislation of the period was confusing. The inconsistency of the debate about theatre is related to the complexity of the laws. Many were not repealed, but rather reworded, and the British often made pre-Revolutionary legislation inactive. In 1797 William Dunlap wrote the first complete history of the theatre. His *History of the American Theatre* is often quoted by later secondary sources, even though it has been criticized for its historical inaccuracy and biases. Dunlap managed the Old American Company from 1796 and therefore his history is based on personal memory and experience. Although his facts are not all accurate, the use of his history by all subsequent historians shows that even if his facts are incorrect he is still useful when analyzing arguments for theatre. Even as late as 1797 he defended the right of theatre to exist and made suggestions for how it should be regulated.<sup>5</sup>

American theatre history did not gain legitimacy until the latter half of the twentieth century. In the 1800s actors, managers, or critics wrote the histories. These works are more interested in the specific people involved in the production of a play, than with the plays or the debate about theatre.<sup>6</sup> Theatre history expanded in universities in the post World War II era. It was originally associated with literature departments and consequently early academic works focused on the plays, rather than the legislation of the

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<sup>5</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre* (New York: J. Oram, 1797; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), 127-30.

time period.<sup>7</sup> Most sources on theatre are separated into either the history of theatre or the history of drama, and little synthesis between these two fields exists. Comprehensive histories of the theatre do not focus on the era before 1800 because this is considered a barren time in American theatre. Also, contemporary historians have not been debating between one another about why theatre was legalized after the Revolution because most sources simply fill in the gaps of earlier histories and solve problems of historical accuracy. Therefore, the history of theatre is not a controversial historical field.

The few sources that address the reasons for the repeal of the laws, however, do not adequately focus on the ideological arguments of the petitioners. In the 1930s the historian William Dye explained the repeal of the anti-theatre laws by focusing on economics. He said the depreciation of the currency in the 1780s made the laws unenforceable.<sup>8</sup> His analysis is limited because he does not examine the complex debates carried out in newspapers and pamphlets. There are articles on the political and social implications of specific plays; yet again the history of the plays has been separated from the history of the theatre. Few contemporary sources on the history of theatre examine the ideological components of the eighteenth-century theatrical debate in detail, nor do they establish connections between the opponents and proponents of theatre, and the values of the new American nation.

There are many reasons for the repeal of the anti-theatre legislation in the post-Revolutionary period. Theatre was legalized in Philadelphia and Boston, and accepted in

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<sup>6</sup> Oscar G. Brockett, "Introduction: American Theatre History Scholarship," in *the American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, eds. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> William S. Dye, "Pennsylvania Versus the Theatre," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 55 (1931), 360.

New York, because the threat of revolution was defeated and the citizens of the new country claimed the right to decide how to spend their leisure time. Most importantly, however, the repeal of anti-theatre legislation reflected a change in the definition of American freedom. Britain's refusal to accept local laws forbidding theatre was an affront to the freedom of Americans as represented through their legislative bodies, but once independence was achieved the legislature's ban on American rights after the Revolution because of the opinions of a minority was unacceptable. The ability of all levels of society to petition their local representatives and their confidence in the legislative process proved that the former colonists viewed themselves as politically conscious citizens of states. But the new nation was trapped within a paradox. It espoused egalitarian rhetoric, and therefore the legislature did not have the right to limit rational entertainment, but theatre would also then be subject to the whims and fancies of the public, most of whom were not enlightened and wise members of the upper classes. Both opponents and proponents of theatre addressed this paradox. Neither side embraced the unequivocal freedom of the people to do whatever they like, but the opponents did not believe theatre regulation was realistic and thought theatre must cease to exist altogether. The proponents, however, did not agree that theatre was inherently harmful to a nation's social fabric, rather they trusted in the ability of the wise to restrict immoral shows. Ironically, the proponents won the debate, but the opponents were correct in predicting the ineffectiveness of regulations. In the nineteenth century, theatre was still criticized for its content even though debates about its existence waned. The opponents presented the most realistic argument, but their defeat suggests that although the rhetoric for both sides stressed morality, it was less about ethics, than rights.

## LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

Theatre was not a controversial issue in the southern colonies in the pre-Revolutionary period, but the northern colonies disapproved of it on religious grounds. William Penn said plays caused people to neglect their vocations and engage in pernicious living.<sup>9</sup> Laws prohibiting theatre were passed in Pennsylvania in 1700, 1706, and 1713, but they were repealed by Britain. Interestingly, these laws were passed when groups were not attempting to build theatres or perform plays. Rather, theatre was associated with other vices, such as card playing and drinking.<sup>10</sup> In the first half of the eighteenth century, however, there was little threat the laws might be broken so theatre was not a controversial issue.

In 1754 the Lewis Hallam Company came from England and requested permission to show plays in Philadelphia. Governor Hamilton granted Hallam a license as long as he promised to show nothing indecent, but Philadelphia residents sent letters to the Governor and the local newspaper, complaining of the possible lewdness of the plays and the scandalous lives of the actors.<sup>11</sup> Early Americans believed it was their right to protest against the infiltration of their communities with foreigners who did not conform to their social code. In 1759 David Douglass's London Company received permission to build a theatre on the outskirts of Philadelphia. The possibility of a permanent theatre aroused the strong opposition of religious groups who presented petitions to the assembly. Other groups also cited the French and Indian War as a more pressing concern than frivolous entertainment. The House of Representatives in Philadelphia enacted a law

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<sup>9</sup> William S. Dye, "Pennsylvania Versus the Theatre," 336.

<sup>10</sup> Harold C. Shiffler, "Religious Opposition to the Eighteenth Century Philadelphia Stage," *Educational Theatre Journal* 14 (October 1962), 215.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

against theatre, but the Governor did not make it effective until January 1, 1760 because he had already promised the Company the chance to show plays.<sup>12</sup> The law pointed to the actors as “idle Persons” from “foreign Parts” who would cause Philadelphians to neglect their duties.<sup>13</sup> Although religious groups were vital in passing this law, it was not imbued with religious language. The Crown again declared this law void, feeding into the disjunction between Britain and its colonies. Therefore, theatre was not only prohibited because it promoted vice, but ultimately because it represented the aristocratic and trifling values of Britain.

Boston passed its first official law banning theatre in 1767, but New York did not propose similar legislation.<sup>14</sup> New York was traditionally the home of more British sympathizers, while Philadelphia and Boston resented British influence. Additionally, Philadelphia and Boston were the homes of the Quakers and Puritans. Thus, religion did play a part in anti-theatre legislation, but the timing of the laws reveals repeal was more closely connected to British influence. The right to prohibit theatre was linked to the independence of the American people. Britain consistently refused to acknowledge the colonies’ right to create their own legislation. Therefore, pre-Revolutionary anti-theatre legislation had less to do with the right of theatre to exist than with the right of Americans to rule themselves.

Despite local legislation against his theatre, Douglass toured American towns and built utilitarian playhouses. In 1766, Douglass opened the Southwark Theatre in

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<sup>12</sup> George B. Bryan, *American Theatrical Regulation 1607-1900, Conspectus and Texts* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993), 24.

<sup>13</sup> William S. Dye, “Pennsylvania Versus the Theatre,” 356.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 70.

Philadelphia, and in 1767 he premiered the John Street Theatre in New York City.<sup>15</sup> In 1766 Douglass also changed the name of the London Company to the American Company. Most likely, he tried to distance the image of his Company from the British because Americans would favor entertainment brought from their own communities. Patriots did not want foreign control of their politics, economics, or culture.<sup>16</sup>

In 1774 the Continental Congress threatened anyone holding office under the United States with a loss of his job if found acting in, promoting, or attending a play. Meanwhile, British soldiers put on plays in Boston and then New York. Dunlap defended the British by saying they could have done worse things with their time, but Dunlap's family were Loyalists and spent the duration of the Revolution attending these British performances.<sup>17</sup> Revolutionary Patriots, however, would not have agreed with Dunlap. The British put on shows that ridiculed the Yankees and renamed the John Street Theatre the Theatre Royal, while the Patriots tried to mobilize Americans for a higher cause.<sup>18</sup> The British preoccupation with theatre reinforced the connection in American minds between theatrical entertainment and British tyranny. In 1778 the Continental Congress expanded their ban on theatre to include all Patriot controlled territories. The act stated, "Whereas true religion and good morals are the only solid foundations of public liberty and happiness...."<sup>19</sup> Congress used religious rhetoric, but more importantly, emphasized morals as the foundations of the new society they were trying to build. In the post-Revolutionary period, the definition of morality was debated

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<sup>15</sup> William C. Young, *Documents of American Theater History, Volume 1, Famous American Playhouses 1716-1899* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), 17.

<sup>16</sup> John H. Houchin, "The Struggle for Virtue: Professional Theatre in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia" *Theatre History Studies* 19 (1999), 168.

<sup>17</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey H. Richards, ed., *Early American Drama*, 31.

as it related to theatre. Religious opponents of theatre equated morality with the Bible. Proponents of the theatre also advocated for morality, but they defined it in relation to the Enlightenment beliefs of a secular society.

On March 30, 1779 the Pennsylvania Assembly enacted the first law against theatre that could not be repealed by England.<sup>20</sup> Anti-theatre legislation epitomized independence for the colonists. In 1784, Boston passed a similar law, which revisited a previous anti-theatre act.<sup>21</sup> Again, New York did not pass legislation restricting theatre, yet theatrical entertainments were still subject to the approval of the civil authorities.<sup>22</sup> The 1780s are an important era in theatre history because this was the only period in which laws against theatre were enforced on a large scale and not subject to the approval of the British Crown. This was also the period in which attitudes about theatre began to change and eventually resulted in the repeal of the anti-theatre legislation. In 1782 actors and managers returned to Philadelphia from Jamaica, where they had waited for the end of the Revolutionary War. In his history of the theatre, Dunlap emphasized that these actors “crept from their hiding-places and approached warily to the land in which they felt that they had no part or portion as partakers in its dangers, its sufferings, or its glories.”<sup>23</sup> The manager John Henry asked permission to perform for one night, but local authorities refused, showing the law was being enforced. Although Americans had won their independence, they still resented foreigners, who did not deserve the right to question the law because they had not proved themselves as Americans.

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<sup>20</sup> Harold C. Shiffler, “Religious Opposition to the Eighteenth Century Philadelphia Stage,” 218.

<sup>21</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, 244.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph N. Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1866-7), 67.

<sup>23</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, 105.

Throughout the 1780s in Philadelphia, however, petitions were submitted to the legislature in favor of establishing a permanent theatre. A 1784 petition suggested a theatre should be taxed so that it would economically benefit the community. The petition also called for a superintendent to revise any indecent plays.<sup>24</sup> Theatre would only be accepted as long as it did not hurt the morals the community was based upon, and it benefited the government.<sup>25</sup> In the same year Hallam also petitioned the legislature to repeal the law, but a bill calling for the repeal was defeated by forty-one to twenty-one votes. Although the legislature defeated the bill, many people still questioned the merit of a law that banned entertainment. In 1786, however, another anti-theatre law was passed, and in 1788 the Supreme Executive Council resolved that the law should be given full force and effect.<sup>26</sup> This resulted in the formation of the Dramatic Association “for the Purpose of obtaining the Establishment of a Theatre in Philadelphia, under a liberal and properly regulated plan.”<sup>27</sup> The new law was repealed less than a year after the Council’s resolution, so its enactment was not simply the result of religious revival or a sudden distaste for the theatre. Rather, the 1788 decision to enforce the law was very similar to the 1789 decision to repeal it. The legislature created unenforceable laws that either had to be followed or repealed. When the law was enforced the opposition became so great that it made more sense to issue its repeal.

Hallam reverted to thinly disguising plays as moral lectures in the newspapers. In July 1787 *Hamlet* was advertised at the Southwark Theatre, which had been renamed the

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<sup>24</sup> William S. Dye, “Pennsylvania Versus the Theatre,” 360.

<sup>25</sup> The suggestion of the theatre tax is interesting when compared to the recent quarrel with Britain, which had stemmed from issues of taxation. A theatre tax was not issued, but the proposal highlights the ongoing debate between the right of government to intervene in the everyday life of Americans.

<sup>26</sup> Harold C. Shiffler, “Religious Opposition to the Eighteenth Century Philadelphia Stage,” 221.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Clark Pollock, *The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), 43.

“Opera House,” as “a Moral and Instructive TALE called FILIAL PIETY: Exemplified in the HISTORY of the Prince of Denmark.” There was also a small tagline for those who were slightly dense that read “Shakespear’s Hamlet.” In 1788 *She Stoops to Conquer* was cleverly advertised as “A Lecture on the Disadvantages of Improper Education, Exemplified in the History of TONY LUMPKIN.”<sup>28</sup> Hallam was able to get away with this ruse until January 1789 when he was forced to cancel a miscellaneous entertainment after advertising it in the *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, when the legislature prohibited theatre because it was too closely associated with British entertainment, the plays shown were almost exclusively English because American authors did not have an outlet to showcase their plays.

In 1788 the Dramatic Assembly presented a petition signed by 1,900 people in favor of theatre, but a counterpetition with 3,445 signatures against theatre was also presented to the legislature. The Dramatic Assembly linked theatre to freedom of choice for the first time in a widely circulated petition. 1788 was also the year the Constitution was finally ratified and the Articles of Confederation were abandoned.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the debate was now framed within the concept of liberty that the new nation and the new Constitution supported. On February 16, 1789 the Dramatic Assembly gave the Pennsylvania Legislature a statement of rights, and then on February 28, a bill was passed by thirty-five to twenty-seven to allow a theatre in or near the city.<sup>31</sup> Although the Southwark Theatre was legalized it would still have to pay two hundred pounds if caught

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>29</sup> Mr. Hallam, “A Serious and Poetical Lecture,” Advertisement; Mr. Hallam, “Entertainment Unavoidably Postponed,” Play Notice *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, 30 January and 2 February 1789.

<sup>30</sup> John H. Houchin, “The Struggle for Virtue: Professional Theatre in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia,” 182.

<sup>31</sup> William S. Dye, “Pennsylvania Versus the Theatre,” 368.

without a license.<sup>32</sup> The legislature accepted the Dramatic Association's argument for freedom of choice of entertainment, but also questioned the ability of unregulated citizens to establish a moral and upright theatre. The vote was close, proving that many still felt theatre threatened an already tenuous social structure. The tension between those who argued for the right of the individual to choose his own entertainment and those who argued for the right of the public to limit the options of the individual did not disappear with the repeal of Philadelphia's anti-theatre legislation. The repeal of the law, however, provided an important shift in the direction towards individual freedom.<sup>33</sup> The power of group action was vital to the law's repeal because the legislature listened to the opinions of the people as expressed through mass petitions organized by the Dramatic Association, and these people wanted the right to patronize the theatre without fear of persecution.

When examining Philadelphia, New York, and Boston it is revealed that the greater a colony's antagonism toward Britain before and during the Revolution, the longer it took to repeal anti-theatre legislation. New York was occupied by the British for a greater part of the war, and in 1784 a large portion of the city still expressed sympathy with the British, a possible explanation for why New York never prohibited theatre in this era. During the era of the Articles of Confederation the prosperity of the city was manifested through theatre.<sup>34</sup> Although the John Street Theatre was allowed to stay open in the 1780s, it still required regulation by the civil authority. In 1785 Hallam announced he was giving lectures, but then decided it was not necessary to disguise his attempts at putting on a play, and produced a full-length drama. His play was not

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<sup>32</sup> "Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly," *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, 26 February 1789.

<sup>33</sup> Rogan Kersh, *Dreams of a More Perfect Union* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 61.

suppressed, but when he tried to donate a hundred dollars to the Alms-House for the poor, they refused to accept the money because he did not have a license.<sup>35</sup> In 1785, a petition with 700 names was presented to the state legislature to suppress theatre, but a counter petition with 1,400 signatures quickly rebutted and successfully prevented theatre's prohibition.<sup>36</sup> The first American full-length drama was soon after performed at the John Street Theatre in 1787. New York was the birthplace of American theatre in the 1780s because it housed British theatricals during the Revolutionary War.

Boston, however, had a poor relationship with the British during the war, and its strong aversion to theatre partially stemmed from the city's suspicion of anything associated with British luxury. Like Pennsylvania, Boston had a large conservative religious population, but the repeal of the anti-theatre laws in the early 1790s was not simply the result of the loss of religious influence or the secularization of society; it was related to a distinct shift in the ideological and political environment. Popular opinion was against theatre throughout the 1780s, but in 1791 the attendees at a town meeting brought up the subject and formed a committee to discuss the possibilities of opening a theatre. The report of the Boston Town Meeting was sent to the representatives of the General Court, causing another committee to form in the House of Representatives.<sup>37</sup> This committee, however, still refused to repeal the law. Wealthy members of society protested the committee's decision by organizing a subscription to build a theatre. In 1792 they erected the New Exhibition Room and performed *The School for Scandal*. The

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Pressman, "Class Positioning and Shays' Rebellion: Resolving the Contradictions of *The Contrast*," *Early American Literature* 21 (1986), 93.

<sup>35</sup> Abe Laufe, *The Wicked Stage: A History of Theater Censorship and Harassment in the United States* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1978), 10.

<sup>36</sup> Don B. Wilmett and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 46.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Judson Little, "Reactions to the Theatre: Virginia, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania 1665-1793" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1969), 98.

Sheriff interrupted the performance and the audience tried to unsuccessfully persuade the players to finish the play. The New Exhibition Room also displayed tightrope walkers, songs, and gymnastic tumbling.<sup>38</sup> Dunlap claimed that the theatre resorted to these vulgar and irrational amusements because Boston citizens were not allowed rational, uplifting amusements by the law. A banned theatre was not a regulated theatre. Governor Hancock made a statement that “the existence of a legislative enactment, which has become obsolete, or is contrary to the sense or will of the community, is at all times the source of evil.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, an unenforceable law hurt the public’s respect of the legislature and undermined the fabric of society. The February 1, 1792 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* recorded the speech of a member of the committee on theatre. He said he would only vote against theatre if the opponents could prove that it was “detrimental either to Liberty, Morality, Religion, or the Rights of Society.”<sup>40</sup> The opponents and proponents of theatre all sought to safeguard these four tenets, but they disagreed over whether theatre undermined them. Finally, in 1793 the anti-theatre legislation was repealed and Massachusetts joined the nation’s theatre culture.<sup>41</sup>

Elaborate partisan theatres were constructed in the 1790s. In Philadelphia the Chestnut Street Theatre was built in 1791 and modeled after the Theatre Royal in Bath, England.<sup>42</sup> By 1796 Boston had two theatres, the Federal Street Theatre and the Haymarket Theatre, each catering to a separate partisan political group and both built by subscription.<sup>43</sup> The Federal Street Theatre even had Corinthian columns and a dancing

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<sup>38</sup> Barnard Hewitt, *Theatre U.S.A., 1668-1957* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), 33.

<sup>39</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, 252.

<sup>40</sup> “Legislature of Massachusetts,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1 February 1792.

<sup>41</sup> Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Barnard Hewitt, *Theatre U.S.A.*, 33.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*; Joseph N. Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage*, 175; William C. Young, *Documents of American Theater History*, 33.

room at the end of the building.<sup>44</sup> The elaborate architecture of these new buildings reveals that theatre was quickly accepted by all levels of society, but it also shows that America still modeled its entertainments after the British. Religious groups blamed the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia on God's displeasure with the city for allowing plays.<sup>45</sup> Yet, overall, public protest against theatre declined rapidly after the laws were repealed.

Theatrical criticism flourished in the late 1790s and early 1800s with the appearance of *The Thespian Oracle* and *The Thespian Mirror*, whose sole purpose was to examine dramatic compositions. Additionally, a company of critics frequented the theatre and published theatrical critiques.<sup>46</sup> The appearance of the critics suggests theatre was successfully regulated, but the plethora of pantomimes, dancing ballads, and comedies meant the hopes of the theatre supporters for a moral and rational entertainment never actually materialized. New American plays were occasionally performed, but the theatre schedules from the late eighteenth century show that they never achieved the popularity of this lowbrow entertainment. The debate over theatre in the 1780s must be addressed to understand how the cultural and religious climate of the new country changed to such a degree that not only was recent legislation against theatre abandoned, but theatre became accepted by all levels of society and political groups. The arguments put forth in legislative committees, newspaper editorials, petitions, pamphlets, and sermons, for and against theatre elaborate on the mindset of the citizens in post-

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<sup>44</sup> S. E. Wilmer, "Partisan Theatre in the Early Years of the United States," *Theatre Survey: The Journal of the American Society for Theatre Research* 40 (1999), 4.

<sup>45</sup> "Petition to Pennsylvania Legislature by Clergy of Various Denominations," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1 January 1794.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Clark Pollock, *The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century*, 52.

Revolutionary America and explain why Americans thought they had a right to choose their own entertainment.

## THE ARGUMENTS

The *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, the first daily United States newspaper appeared in 1793, providing the forum for a debate on theatre that was updated continually and contributed to by all sections of society.<sup>47</sup> It also provided citizens with a wide variety of arguments for and against theatre so that they could make informed decisions. The newspapers gave detailed information on the decisions made by the state legislatures and local town meetings, prompting those who disagreed with the resolutions of their representatives to quickly organize large-scale petitions. Advertisements for plays were also highlighted in the daily newspapers.

Religious groups maintained the longest and most sustained attack on theatre. Puritans believed the element of spectatorship made theatre an especially dangerous crime because it hurt not just the performers, but also the audience who chose to participate. It was not a crime of passion because the performers rehearsed and the audience bought tickets with the knowledge it would view something pernicious. The argument against theatre's duplicity carried over from the pre-Revolutionary period. Puritans believed that men came closest to God when they were honest, sincere, and unvarying. If a person changed it was considered a re-enactment of the first change of Lucifer and his fall from Heaven. Even in 1793 Reverend John Witherspoon, a famous American Presbyterian who signed the Declaration of Independence, still attacked theatre because it caused a loss of sincerity and a move away from God.<sup>48</sup> The religious

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<sup>47</sup> Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 92, 105.

arguments for theatre did not alter because of the new political, economic, and social environment after the war, rather only the number of people who subscribed to these beliefs decreased.

Clergymen in Philadelphia also made the case of theatre's inherent danger. They claimed that any person who was not corrupted by comedy was already wicked, and that if anyone claimed not to be negatively affected by theatre, he was unaware of the damage. Additionally, they assumed the actors must be depraved because those who represented a passion had internalized it.<sup>49</sup> The clergy predicted that women would expect to be treated like goddesses after viewing a play, causing the family to fall apart. They ultimately argued that the community was responsible for group morality and anyone who encouraged theatre with his consent, money, or presence would rip apart society's moral fabric. They did not accept the argument put forth by theatre proponents that drama was not forced upon an audience, and consequently did not affect those who chose not to attend.<sup>50</sup> In an address to the Senate and House of Pennsylvania a group of clergy stated that "each individual shall be bounded to his pursuits, by the limits of the *public good*."<sup>51</sup> Theatre opponents saw the furtherance of public good as essential to the safety of private good.

The religious arguments against theatre also stemmed from a distrust of the British. The historian Bruce C. Daniels explains the Puritans' fear of theatre in reference to the reasons for their immigration to America. Puritanism emerged in England at the same time theatre appeared as the center of entertainment in the Elizabethan era.

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<sup>49</sup> "Extracts from the Writings of Divers Eminent Authors, 1789," in *American Bibliography*, ed. Charles Evans, Number 21813, 2-5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-9.

<sup>51</sup> "Address to Senate and House of Pennsylvania by Clergy," Evans number 25986.

Therefore, the stage became associated with English monarchical life and luxury.<sup>52</sup> Fear of British extravagance was then adopted by non-religious groups before and after the American Revolution. In 1785 as members of the Pennsylvania Legislature argued over the anti-theatre bill, many members addressed the distinction between America and Britain. Dr. Logan, a prominent Philadelphian, said theatres were only fit for monarchies. He claimed the kings of France and Sardinia tried to establish a theatre in Geneva to subvert the republic. Another member agreed with Dr. Logan and suggested amusements made people forget their political duties. He said that Cardinal Mazarine established the Academy of Arts and Sciences in France to make the French unquestioningly accept their despotic government.<sup>53</sup> In 1785 the American political structure was still tentative, and local politicians feared any activity that threatened the nation they had fought to create. The freedom of the American people rested upon the restriction of their freedom to attend dangerous forms of entertainment. These opponents of theatre concluded that monarchies have theatre, therefore America should not. This argument against theatre reveals a distrust of monarchical forms of government, but also of the inherent intellect of the masses. The masses could not be trusted to know what to believe because they were subject to the whims of dishonest playwrights and players.

The distinction between the rights of citizens versus the rights of the government appeared often in the arguments against theatre. A 1791 issue of a Boston newspaper printed a letter aimed at theatre supporters. The author criticized the supporters because “they ought to regard the character of their country; and not connect the solemn ideas of natural and inalienable rights, for which so many lives have been lately sacrificed, with

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<sup>52</sup> Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play*, 66.

<sup>53</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, 106-7.

the amusements of the theatre, and frolic of a playhouse.”<sup>54</sup> The arguments put forth in Boston were the most concerned with national rights because theatre was not permitted in this state until after the ratification of the Constitution and the election of George Washington as President. The language used for other issues of national importance permeated into the debate over theatre. The dissenting minority against the repeal of the anti-theatre law in the 1789 Pennsylvania Legislature explained that every free government has the right to preserve its own existence by restricting any conduct of its citizens that it deems injurious.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, prohibiting theatre was associated with freedom. This viewpoint coincided with the legislation of the Continental Congress that banned plays during the war because public responsibility meant abandoning frivolous activities. The government had the right to restrict activities to preserve the foundation of the country and the experiment of republican government.

The theatre opponents also emphasized the impracticality of theatre regulation. The clergy argued that judges can not regulate theatre without destroying it, and if judges had been successful at stopping vulgar and vile entertainments then petitions would not be necessary. The clergy stated that in a republican society the taste of the people must be consulted, yet when the masses have control over the theatre, the ability of government to regulate becomes impossible. Ironically, the opponents of theatre defined the rights of the masses more liberally than many theatre supporters when they suggested that any entertainment for the public must be subject to the control of the public. Those who argued for theatre consistently called for government regulation. The opponents, however, did not trust the spectators and surmised that “it is the part of wisdom and

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<sup>54</sup> *The Columbian Centinel* (Boston), 9 November 1791; quoted in Paul Judson Little, “Reactions to the Theatre,” 100.

sound policy to discern not only what is possible, but what is practicable...”<sup>56</sup> The author of a letter to the editor in *The Independent Chronicle* satirized the concept of a regulated theatre by comparing it to a brothel. A brothel may be regulated, but government can still not eradicate its immoral purpose.<sup>57</sup> Opponents of theatre were aware that the pantomimes and farces were most popular, while their opponents envisioned an idealized version of the future.

The debate around theatre did not split along political party lines, but some members of the different political parties, especially in Boston, had varying reasons to oppose theatre. Democratic Republicans who opposed theatre said it fostered luxury and class division, while anti-theatre Federalists claimed it sprung from the depravity of the lower class and undermined the authority of the nation’s leaders.<sup>58</sup> The anonymous author of a letter to the editor in the *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post* said most plebeians opposed theatre because they valued simplicity, moderation, and sobriety. The common man had fought for his country, and had signed petitions against theatre because he wanted to return to his daily labor and safeguard his family from “ruinous amusements.”<sup>59</sup> The Dramatic Assembly, however, also claimed to speak for the common man. Thus, before political parties became firmly entrenched in the national identity, the controversy over the identity of the masses had already begun. This conflict was later carried out in the plays of the time period as the vision of the yeoman farmer and patriotic plebian was adopted by city authors for urban audiences. While the elite

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<sup>55</sup> “Reasons of the Dissent of the Minority,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 18 March 1789.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Anonymous, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Independent Chronicle* (Boston), 1 November 1792; printed in Paul Judson Little, “Reactions to the Theatre,” 124.

<sup>58</sup> Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 126.

<sup>59</sup> “Reply to Dramatic Association,” *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, 20 February 1789.

claimed the common man would not understand drama, the author of the editorial said the common man does not want to be corrupted by aristocratic values. Therefore, the opponents could not agree on whether theatre was the institution of the elite or the work of the poor, but both agreed it threatened the values upon which America was founded.

The religious and political environment shaped the arguments against theatre, but economics also played a small role. The historian Peter Davis argues Puritans reacted against theatre because they did not want to appease London based trade. The acts of the 1760s against theatre were in response to the London acts, such as the Molasses Act and Stamp Act, and Puritans were sensitive to the trade imbalance. Therefore, by 1790 the depression of 1785-86 was over, and Boston had a secure bank and political stability.<sup>60</sup> Davis's analysis puts the debate in a broader economic historical context and it makes sense that Bostonians accepted theatre at a time when they had extra money to spend on the entertainment. But a purely economic approach to the issue does not explain why Puritans continued their arguments against theatre when the legislation was repealed, and were the most vigilant opponents to theatre even after the Revolutionary War. Additionally, the end of the depression must have made the legislature more confident and willing to extend the rights of the public, but the arguments for and against theatre were remarkably void of economic discussions, with the exception of the concern that the lower classes would waste their money. This does not mean theatre opponents were not concerned with the economy, but economics was not as important as ideology.

The printer of the *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, however, was unusually preoccupied with the economic problems of theatre. While some supporters

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<sup>60</sup> Peter A. Davis, "The Plays and Playwrights," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume I*, eds. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 244.

said theatre should bring money into the city, Mr. Brown argued it would hurt the individual tavern owner. His argument is not logical, but his preoccupation with his individual rights gives an example of how the relatively uneducated common man saw his position in individual economic realities, rather than in broad notions of national liberty. Mr. Brown could not bear to see the public deceived by the tax-gatherer. The tax-gatherer made people believe he was against theatre, but Mr. Brown claimed he was actually working for Hallam. Hallam supposedly told the tax-gatherer if he informed against him in public he would let him see plays for free. Mr. Brown believed that “after goin to a play, instead of taking up and studyin his tax book, when he got home...he takes up the works of that Heathen riter Shakespur...and then goes to Hallum, and tells him that the best means of establishing his cumpany in the city, will be to raise up a law purseution against him, which will bring many friends and strenthen his party.”<sup>61</sup> Mr. Brown was not opposed to theatre on moral grounds because half of his letter detailed the plots of all the plays he had ever seen. But he said that it was the duty of the citizen to attend taverns that pay a license fee to the government. If theatre was legalized, taverns would lose money, and then the government would suffer. It is not until the end of the letter that Mr. Brown revealed he owned a tavern. This letter is intriguing because Mr. Brown attempted to disguise his individual motives for disapproving of a theatre in language that called for the common good. He had also internalized the rhetoric of the elite and religious, but used this rhetoric in a contradictory way. His argument does not address the obvious fact that the theatre could also be taxed and bring in revenue for the public. Furthermore, he called Shakespeare a “Heathen,” but he inadvertently praised his

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<sup>61</sup> Mr. Brown, “Letter from Printer,” *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, 12 January 1789.

plays by reciting their plots from memory. His argument against theatre was not about democracy, or the right to choose entertainment, but about his right to make a living.

The arguments for theatre were not drastically different than the arguments for its suppression. Few theatre enthusiasts defended the drama as it existed, but expressed optimism about what it could become. Supporters of theatre responded to the argument that theatre corrupts society, by emphasizing its power to improve manners and virtue. William Dunlap desired a rationally governed society, and believed common sense and democracy would uplift and improve theatre. Many theatre proponents connected democracy with literary potential.<sup>62</sup> If given an opportunity, American drama would differ from British drama because Americans were a more enlightened and rational people. The eighteenth century historian and playwright, Mercy Otis Warren, defended theatre in the introduction to her 1790 book of plays. She asserted that theatre was sometimes used for vice, but in “an age of taste and refinement, lessons of morality, and the consequences of deviation, may perhaps, be as successfully enforced from stage, as by modes of instruction...”<sup>63</sup> Fittingly, she dedicated the introduction to the new American president, George Washington, who was an avid fan of drama, but who also embodied the characteristics of the virtuous and hardworking American citizen.<sup>64</sup> The defense of theatre with a moral argument, however, insinuated theatre could be banned if a country did not retain its virtue. In her introduction Warren alluded that the sole goal of

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<sup>62</sup> David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 1, 139.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin V. Franklin, ed. *The Plays and Poems of Mercy Otis Warren* (Delmar, New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1980), 11.

<sup>64</sup> It is recorded that George Washington purchased four tickets for the Southwark Theatre in 1784, years before theatre was officially legalized in Philadelphia. Thomas Clark Pollock, *The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century*, 42.

public entertainment was to instruct and enlighten the audience, but it is of note that most of her plays were not intended for the stage.

The arguments for theatre were concerned with America's place in world history. As a civilization progressed, so did its art. The Athenians were more civilized because they had Aeschylus, and conversely Aeschylus was able to produce his masterpieces because Athens embraced democratic values.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, if theatre reverted to portraying the wicked or deceitful, it was the fault of a nation's citizens. As late as 1830 theatre was defended with classical references. An anonymous author in *The American Monthly Magazine* wrote, "If, in the licentious periods of Grecian or Roman history, Aristotle or Ovid denounced it as immoral, the fault was in the people and not in the amusement."<sup>66</sup> Thus, this argument alluded that the opponents of theatre did not trust the new republican citizens if they did not trust theatre. Supporters argued that theatre was only as good as its government, and if Americans doubted theatre then they obviously did not trust their government. This stance, however, failed to address the lack of American plays in the theatres and the public's eagerness to consume British drama.

Many theatre proponents also blamed theatre opponents for trying to ban all of theatre, when only improper plays and farces should be regulated. In his history Dunlap compared the suppression of theatre because of a horrible play, to the eradication of the press because a vile book was printed. If it was illogical to ban print, then theatre must also be accepted. Dunlap further argued that if the educated and rational members of society were allowed to frequent the theatre then the plays would embody wise principles. Dunlap suggested the government build and open a theatre, and then pay a man to

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<sup>65</sup> William C. Young, *Documents of American Theater History*, 17-20.

manage it so that he would not be concerned with profits, and consequently cater to the immoral.<sup>67</sup> The editor of *The Thespian Oracle* presented a similar argument when he said the more secret a theatre is forced to become, the more vices it can hide.<sup>68</sup> The argument for regulation presupposed that theatre was divided between the enlightened and the vulgar. Like religious opponents of theatre, supporters who used this argument did not believe the masses had the right to choose any form of entertainment, but rather that the enlightened had the duty to uplift the ignorant through theatre.

The Bostonian William Haliburton claimed in a pamphlet entitled “Effects of the Stage on the Manners of a People” that the stage, if regulated, would help the “public weal” by reforming morals.<sup>69</sup> He alluded that government and entertainment should not be separated because is the duty of government to protect its existence by encouraging decent morals. Theatre opponents also believed government had a duty to protect society, but they favored prohibition as the solution. Haliburton rebutted the opponents by stating theatre would not just disappear if banned. His image of the perfect theatre was a building reserved for drama and for town meetings. He suggested that any registered poor who was convicted of disorderly conduct pay a fine and promise good behavior in the future. Also, he thought playwrights should be paid between twenty five and fifty pounds by the government, depending on the moral merit of their work.<sup>70</sup> Haliburton’s scheme was never realized, but it proves that he did not view theatre as a right. It was a

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<sup>66</sup> “Of the Tremont Theatre Investigating Committee,” *The American Monthly Magazine*, December 1830, 587.

<sup>67</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, 122-31.

<sup>68</sup> “Introduction,” *The Thespian Oracle*, 1798, vi.

<sup>69</sup> William Haliburton, “Effects of the Stage on the Manners of a People: And the Propriety of Encouraging and establishing a virtuous theatre,” 1792, Evans number 24371, 15.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

privilege that the government might take away, but theatre's intrinsic merits were too great to justify its disappearance.

The basis of most of the support of theatre was over its benefits as a rational amusement. Americans believed their government was rational, therefore its citizens had the right to participate in other rational pursuits. In an essay from 1792, the Bostonian Philo Dramatis blamed Puritan bigotry for the anti-theatre law. He said the determined minority does not have the right to force its notions of morality into the law. He wrote, "cunning has invented a thousand terrors to alarm simplicity..." and that "patriotism is cold to the bigoted heart."<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Philo Dramatis grouped together all opponents of theatre as members of an outdated religion. Puritans not only hindered rational entertainment, but they were bad Americans. In Philadelphia, the Dramatic Association expressed a similar argument in a statement of rights to the Pennsylvania Legislature when it wrote that it is peculiar that "men, who have suffered under the lash of persecution, should now wage a virulent war against freedom of thought and action."<sup>72</sup> The Dramatic Associations' arguments, however, did not situate the role of government within public entertainment. Attending theatre was a right, not a privilege, which had come with the liberty obtained by the Revolutionary War. If Americans allowed an ignorant minority to curtail their rights then the present freedom would revert to the bigotry of the Middle Ages. The Dramatic Association claimed if a group can dictate the types of amusements that are allowed, they may easily dictate mode of dress, or religion.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the supporters of theatre broke into two camps between those who

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<sup>71</sup> Philo Dramatis, "The Rights of Drama," Boston 1792, Evans number 24691.

<sup>72</sup> "Petition by Dramatic Association," *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, 17 February 1789.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

believed government must regulate theatre and those who believed the freedom of individual choice about entertainment was as vital as religious freedom. A letter by Civis in a Philadelphia newspaper took the Dramatic Association's argument even further. He said if the opponents of theatre who were trying to infringe upon American liberties had worked as hard during the war for the "noble cause of liberty," then the years of bloodshed would have been lessened.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, he equated theatre opposition to British tyranny.

Not all the arguments for theatre were related to patriotism, rights, or morality. A few tried to justify theatre with economics. Some theatre opponents feared the poor wasting their money on frivolous entertainments, but theatre supporters said the poor not only had a right to choose how to spend their own money, but that theatre would benefit the economy of an entire city. John Gardiner, Esquire, delivered a speech to the House of Representatives in Boston in 1792 in which he emphasized the economic potential of theatre in the city. He claimed, many trades, such as masons, bricklayers, carpenters, merchants, and even shoemakers, would benefit from the construction of an elaborate building and the outfitting of an acting company. Also, visitors to Boston would no longer shorten their stay so they could attend the theatres in New York or Philadelphia. He called the current anti-theatre law "illiberal" and "despotic."<sup>75</sup> Gardiner's focus on economic benefits was similar to the Dramatic Association's concern with the fundamental rights of the people; both articulated the necessity of establishing a theatre by villainizing their opponents as irrational and un-American. They equated the right to

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<sup>74</sup> Civis, pseudonym, "Letter to Printer," *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, 19 February 1789.

<sup>75</sup> "The speech of John Gardiner, Esq. delivered in the House of Representatives in Boston on Thursday January 26, 1792," Evans number 24338.

attend the theatre with the “natural right of every freeman” to spend his money how he pleased.<sup>76</sup> Theatre supporters looked to the future and put faith in the form of government they created.

Each side in the debate over theatre insisted they spoke for the common man. Although, it must be noted that the citizens who composed the petitions were not the average theatre goers, but were most concerned with theatre as it related to the rights of freemen. The true common men were the citizens who bought tickets for the farces, pantomimes, and foreign plays to escape the concerns of their everyday lives. The debate was largely played out through petitions. Although petitions allowed men and women who were not part of the privileged classes to have a voice in government, the petitions over theatre did not represent a cross section of all parts of America because they were primarily urban. In 1789 the Pennsylvania General Assembly received a petition against theatre from 3,446 inhabitants of Philadelphia, including schoolboys, servants, and blacks. A few days later, a local newspaper noted that not only boys, servants, and blacks signed the petition, but also girls, apprentices, and mulattos. The next day a letter to the editor criticized the General Assembly’s acceptance of a petition that included the signatures of boys under the age of eighteen.<sup>77</sup> The theatre opponents tried to strengthen their case by advertising the diversity of their signatures, but their need to resort to the signatures of young boys and girls reveals they could not get the support of the rest of society.

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<sup>76</sup> “Report of a committee of the assembly of Pennsylvania, to whom has been referred a petition of Messrs. Hallam and Henry, praying to have a bill passed to license a theatre in or near Philadelphia,” February 1789; quoted in Jurgen Wolter, ed. *The Dawning of American Drama: American Dramatic Criticism, 1746-1915* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1993), 31.

<sup>77</sup> *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, 19 February and 20 February 1789.

The faith in petitions by both sides, however, was a faith in government and rationalism. Dunlap provided an example of a clergyman who attacked the theatre from the pulpit so harshly that his audience threatened to pull down the theatre, but the clergyman told them to petition instead.<sup>78</sup> The truth of this story is less important than Dunlap's emphasis on the power of petitioning to the people who were not given a voice in other forms. The abundance of petitions also relates to the importance of theatre as a social art form because all members, elite or poor, were affected by its presence. They either desired the right to participate in theatrical entertainments, or they felt it was their right to live in a community free of the vicious influences of theatre. Each side assumed others would agree with them if they were only better informed. Newspaper editorials referred to the ignorance or prejudice of their opponents. A letter in a 1789 issue of the *Federal Gazette and Pennsylvania Evening Post* admitted that many German countrymen were enemies of the theatre, but the author said they were simply ill informed and had never even read a play.<sup>79</sup> Theatre proponents blamed ignorance for the continuance of the law against theatre, while theatre opponents said the supporters were unrealistic in supposing theatre would not corrupt society. Both sides claimed to advocate the side of reason. At the top of every issue of the *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post* there was a quote by George Washington; "Whatever measures have a tendency to dissolve the union, or contribute to violate or lessen the sovereign authority ought to be considered as hostile to the liberties and independence of America."<sup>80</sup> Both the

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<sup>78</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre*, 119.

<sup>79</sup> "Thoughts on Theatre Translated from Mr. Steiner's German Paper," *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*, 14 February 1789.

<sup>80</sup> *The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post*. I looked at all the copies from January and February 1789 and each day included this quote. I do not know when the paper started or stopped placing it at the top.

supporters and opponents of theatre measured their case against this quote, only they disagreed over whether the absence or presence of theatre was hostile to American liberties.

The successful campaign for the repeal of the laws against theatre reinforced the belief that Americans had fought for, and created, a government founded upon the people. The small regulations imposed upon theatre in the new laws also implied that a licensed theatre was necessary to regulate the people. The laws, however, were never able to solve the double bind of theatre in the 1790s, between the government's desire to control what people saw, and its recognition that the nature of an egalitarian and democratic society allowed the audience to choose its entertainments.

### **CONCLUSION**

The incongruity in post-Revolutionary America between the prejudice against American authors and the country's concern with breaking free from English culture shows that the ideological arguments for and against theatre did not greatly affect the type of plays shown after the repeal of the anti-theatre laws. Rather, the arguments are important because they follow the creation of an American self-identity after the Revolutionary War. The opponents of theatre did not argue against specific plays, but against the degradation of society because of the hypocrisy, duplicity, and immorality that was inherent within theatre. They argued that these negative qualities came from England, and it was in the best interest of the young nation to separate itself from its former ruler. The definition of freedom for those who protested against theatre meant freedom to live in a safe and well-regulated society. The proponents of theatre, however, agreed that negative English values should not permeate American society, but that

Americans must create their own theatre culture. The laws were circumvented and would have continued to be ignored if the government had not listened to the people. They argued government control would prevent immoral plays from being shown, and that America deserved the right to showcase artistic achievements similar to the historically great nations. The arguments over theatre were idealistic, and connected to the meaning of independence for the new American people.

Realistically, however, the political and economic environment of the late eighteenth century had some influence on the timing of the repeal of the laws. The short period of time from when theatre was banned until when anti-theatre legislation was repealed, shows that the revision of the laws was directly connected to anti-British sentiment, the end of the Revolutionary War, and then the desire to form a new nation on its own terms. As the country was able to politically distance itself from England, Americans were more willing to embrace British culture and accept theatrical entertainment as separate from the moral fiber of the nation. But politics and economics do not adequately explain why the laws were repealed. The lectures, petitions, and letters to the editor stayed away from specifically referring to the Constitution or the past economic crisis. References to theatre's place within the country were most concerned about abstract values, such as virtue, reason, and the common good. The disjunction between the ideal image of theatre and its reality also proves that the debate about theatre was not only about religion, or morality, but about who had the right to control entertainment in the new nation. Each side in the debate believed in the "natural and unalienable rights" of the American people, yet disagreed over whether this meant the right to attend theatre, or the right to be protected from theatre's vices.

The success of petitioning and the repeal of the laws shows that the common man ultimately could affect the legislative process. The fear of tyranny overcame the fear of chaos, and once Americans claimed their right to attend theatre, the elite could not regulate the type of entertainment they chose. When the majority of the petitions opposed the establishment of a theatre, the state governments passed laws against it. But when supporters of theatre began to mobilize and use their numbers to appeal to their elected representatives, the governments reversed their previous decisions. The definition of independence changed as a result of the Revolutionary War and the laws accordingly reflected this change. Few desired an unregulated theatre, and most still feared the vices of the masses might ruin their hopes of a great nation. Yet, most Americans agreed that the laws must suite the needs of the people for a rational entertainment. Ultimately, the ideological beliefs of the opponents and proponents of theatre did not differ greatly, reflecting a trend in American thought that was connected to, but more important than, the political and economic environment.

#### APPENDIX:

“Prologue” to Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast*<sup>81</sup>

EXULT, each patriot heart!—this night is shewn  
A piece, which we may fairly call our own;  
Where the proud titles of “My Lord! Your Grace!”  
To humble *Mr.* and plain *Sir* give place.  
Our Author pictures not from foreign climes  
The fashions or the follies of the times;  
But has confin’d the subject of his work  
To the gay scenes—the circles of New-York.  
On native themes his Muse displays her pow’rs;  
If ours the faults, the virtues too are ours.

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<sup>81</sup> Royall Tyler, *The Contrast*, in *Early American Drama*, ed. Jeffrey H. Richards (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1997), 7-8.

Why should our thoughts to distant countries roam,  
When each refinement may be found at home?  
Who travels now to ape the rich or great,  
To deck an equipage and roll in state;  
To court the graces, or to dance with ease,  
Or by hypocrisy to strive to please?  
Our free-born ancestors such arts despis'd;  
Genuine sincerity alone they priz'd;  
Their minds, with honest emulation fir'd;  
To solid good—not ornament-aspir'd;  
Or, if ambition rous'd a bolder flame,  
Stern virtue throve, where indolence was shame.

But modern youths, with imitative sense,  
Deem taste in dress the proof of excellence;  
And spurn the meanness of your homespun arts,  
Since homespun habits would obscure their parts;  
Whilst all, which aims at splendour and parade,  
Must come from Europe, *and be ready made*.  
Strange! we should thus our native worth disclaim,  
And check the progress of our rising fame.  
Yet *one*, whilst imitation bears the sway,  
Aspires to nobler heights, and points the way.  
Be rous'd, my friends! his bold example view;  
Let your own Bards be proud to copy *you*!  
Should rigid critics reprobate our play,  
At least the patriotic heart will say,  
“Glorious our fall, since in a noble cause.  
The bold *attempt alone* demands applause.”  
Still may the wisdom of the Comic Muse  
Exalt your merits, or your faults accuse.  
But think not, 'tis her aim to be severe;--  
We all are mortals, and as mortals err.  
If candour pleases, we are truly blest;  
Vice trembles, when compell'd to stand confess'd.  
Let not light Censure on your faults offend,  
Which aims not to expose them, but amend.  
Thus does our Author to your candour trust;  
Conscious, the *free* are generous, as just.