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Theatre of War: a witness to love, tragedy, and parody

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Abstract
Central to American nineteenth century life was the theater. As the fratricidal fighting of the American Civil War broke out and divided the nation, this centrality remained, and audiences crowded into the theaters. For both north and south, the theater provided an outlet through which Americans could enjoy plays, performances, music, and variety shows that appealed to all social classes of American society. However, in order to understand the operations of theater companies during the war itself, it is first essential to examine the state of the theater as a concept during the mid-nineteenth century, and in the pre-war years.

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Theatre of War: a witness to love, tragedy, and parody

January 31, 2014

By: Val Merlina, ’14

Central to American nineteenth century life was the theater. As the fratricidal fighting of the American Civil War broke out and divided the nation, this centrality remained, and audiences crowded into the theaters. For both north and south, the theater provided an outlet through which Americans could enjoy plays, performances, music, and variety shows that appealed to all social classes of American society. However, in order to understand the operations of theater companies during the war itself, it is first essential to examine the state of the theater as a concept during the mid-nineteenth century, and in the pre-war years.

Professor Richard Sautter, a Pennsylvania Humanities Council speaker and third year instructor in the Gettysburg College Theater Arts Department, gave a lecture the evening of January 23, 2014, at Kline Theater concerning nineteenth century theatrical arts. Sautter introduced the topic through a quote that explained a nineteenth century theater critic’s appreciation of theater: “there is music and poetry in playbills [which serve as] records of old friends and of old times . . . [The theater] afforded us much enjoyment . . . and [those involved] are remembered.” Indeed, theatrical performances allowed nineteenth century Americans to travel to lands uncharted, witness love, tragedy, and parody, all the while remaining seated in the theater spaces which were designed to house between two and three thousand guests. Despite the vast interest the American public demonstrated in attending theaters during this time period, Sautter expressed the niche-like feeling of studying the theater during the war; that though many today consider themselves to be Civil
War “buffs,” very few are aware of the culture of theater, theater life, and those involved in delivering opportunities of intellectualism and escapism during the American Civil War.

Sociality of Theater Life

Theatrical life during the mid-nineteenth century could be described by use of the 1859 American Encyclopedia. As Sautter noted, the entry for “actors/actresses” included the description that “as a body, actors and actresses can be regarded as social pariahs,” and take part in the “most laborious of tasks,” were “charitable to the risk of recklessness,” though tended to be “loose” in terms of marriage. One actor was cited to have “at least two wives living,” but otherwise, these individuals were “great.” For women involved in theatrical life, the encyclopedia entry writer explained that the theater, and therefore the stage, was the “only place where women [were] equal to those of the stronger sex.” Sautter went on to ask the audience to look past the misogynistic language and realize the unique freedoms women had in the theater. “For every hero, there was a heroine,” Sautter said. Many of these women were also active in the ownership of theater buildings themselves.

Some women, as typical to the theater tradition, also took on the portrayal of male roles. Charlotte Cushman, particularly, performed lead male roles and became known worldwide for her successful portrayals. The roles of Romeo (*Romeo and Juliet*) or Hamlet (*Hamlet*) were the preferred roles for cross-gendered acting, Sautter explained. No matter the reason why they preferred to portray male characters, women like Cushman had the opportunity to perform the typically better-written and heroic lines, and also, as Sautter jested, “had the chance to show a bit more of their legs in front of mass crowds.”

These freedoms for men and women alike in the theater did not come without skepticism, Sautter explained. Social bans on actors, and prejudices against performers were raised by the clergy. Congregationalist pastor Henry Ward Beecher, became a public figure by taking on the evils of theater, stating that the theater was an “infamous place the young learn to love,” and that “these schools of morals . . . were the very house of death!” Sautter stated that females living the theatrical life were most negatively viewed, as many saw a thin line separating theater from prostitution in terms of mid-nineteenth century understanding. For instance, the fact that they would dress and undress without proper privacy, were in continuous, close contact with multiple men, and of course travelled without chaperones were particularly scandalous aspects of life in the theater. These examples of questionable morals mirrored the very worst of womanhood in the era. Such led many women to quietly retire and find respectability, while others were socially accepted because they exhibited true talent on the stage. Despite it all, many of these women felt the pay was enough to compensate their somewhat soiled reputations, and so many continued to perform for massive audiences.
Indeed, the pay was sustainable. For a novice actor during the mid-nineteenth century, and during the Civil War specifically, pay was ten dollars per week, while the leading man or leading lady earned forty dollars per month. Students of the Civil War will call to mind the pay of a private in the Union Army in 1861 as thirteen dollars per month, and only reaching sixteen dollars per month by the end of the conflict. It is therefore evident that acting provided an economically sound income during the performance season. In addition to the pay, Sautter explained the concept of benefit performances. Benefits were held on behalf of a particular performer. When the performer’s turn came up, they chose the roles they would portray, and received almost all of the money from the gate, and on a good night, the performer might double their yearly income in just one night.

Sautter also dedicated a large portion of the lecture to discussing the types of theater available to the American public. In addition to plays, theater goers could watch varied types of performances that appealed to nearly every social class, from symphonic performances, to minstrel shows, to ventriloquists, to comedy. Among these was popular theater; “popular” in that it appealed to the population and to the masses. During the war, it is through popular theater that the largest displays and spectacles of explicit flag waving, music, and patriotic fervor were presented on stages for wide audiences. One such performance, Sautter mentioned, advertised on a playbill that the performance would include “eighty young ladies” portraying characters such as “Liberty, Justice . . . and The United States herself in costume.” How did this atmosphere of patriotism coincide with the Civil War? Stay tuned for more!

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.