Winter November, 1982

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From October 20, 1774, when the Continental Congress passed a resolution outlawing theatrical activities in America, until the formation of the Lindsay-Wall troupe that began performing illegally in Maryland in 1781 and, under the management of Dennis Ryan, shifted its base of operations to New York in 1783, the theatre in America was in a near-dormant state. The only significant exceptions to this condition were the productions of the occupying British military in various American localities, and a few productions by American military officers given in response. According to the strategy devised by the British high command in America, when British soldiers captured a city, the soldiers' winters were to be spent in comfort in order that they might fight more effectively with the return of warm weather. Thus, secure against American attack and sorely in need of a recreational outlet, British and Hessian officers in Boston, Philadelphia, Savannah, and Staunton, Virginia, began as early as 1775 to take over theatres - and buildings that had been erected for other purposes but could be converted into theatres - and to offer a series of theatrical entertainments for their own amusement. The audiences for these productions were composed of British military personnel and their Tory friends.

By far the most prominent series of British military productions was offered in New York City, over a period of nearly seven years. Such a program was possible because New York was under complete British control from 1778 until 1783. There, a large repertory of plays was lavishly and expensively presented in order to raise money, ostensibly for the benefit of the widows and orphans of slain British and Hessian officers. The enterprise required the services of many actors, actresses, and theatrical craftsmen, far more than had been necessary in performances by the British military in other cities. As George O. Selhamer put it, "Under Burgoyne's inspiration the military Thespians at Boston [in 1775-76] produced plays partly as an affectation, but more in a spirit of offense to New England sentiment; under Howe, both in New York and Philadelphia [in 1777 and 1778], the productions were merely a divertissement of an idle soldiery in the name of charity; under Sir Henry Clinton [who succeeded Howe as commander in chief of the British Army in America in 1778] theatricals became a business." 1

Historians have generally taken the notion that Clinton's New York performances were "a business" to mean only that the British military productions became far more frequent and more lavish during his rule in America. As was true in other cities and in other years, profits from theatrical ventures were assumed to have been given to charity, and the British officers' talents to have been donated gratis. 2 However, as we shall see, both these assumptions may be open to question. Evidence exists which suggests that, rather than donating the income to charity, as they claimed, the managers skimmed off a good deal of it for payments to themselves and to the military actors.

In addition, since New York had been the home of the American Company before the outbreak of the Revolution, and the city would welcome the return of that company after the war, it may be argued that the performances of the British military did more than simply provide a creative
outlet for the energies of idle officers; they also provided a theatrical link for the audiences that attended them, thus keeping the theatre in New York alive, which in turn paved the way for the return of professional performers after the Revolution.

In New York, performances were given at the John Street Theatre, which had been built by the American Company in 1767, but which the British commandeered for their own use and renamed the Theatre Royal in 1777. The military actors were supplemented by civilians, both male and female, who were frequently paid for their performances. But the British officers were the main attraction, and the best roles were generally reserved for them.

From a total of fifteen performances in 1777, the number of presentations rose steadily to a total of thirty in 1779-80. But the most ambitious of all theatrical ventures presented by the British military in any city in America during the Revolution was offered during the 1780-81 season in New York. Therefore, it is that season of performances that will be the focus of this discussion.

In all, thirty-five performances were advertised (and presumably given) in 1780-81, including many plays that had not been seen in New York before. The season began earlier in the year than any previous season had begun, and productions were offered during nine different months. The extent of theatrical activity, at a time when the war was going badly for the British, is truly astonishing.

Perhaps because the repertory had become so extensive, the performances so frequent, and the task of managing the theatre so complex, four managers were required to run the operations of the Theatre Royal in its fifth season, whereas one or two had sufficed in earlier years. One of the managers in 1780-81 was Dr. Hammond Beaumont, who had begun his managerial labors with the theatre in 1779. He was now joined by E. Williams, George Vallancey, and Abraham D'Aubant. It seems probable that Beaumont remained in charge of the day-to-day operations of the theatre, as a notice in The Royal Gazette, placed less than a week before the season's end, announced: "... any Persons having any Demands against [the Theatre], are desired to send in their Accounts sealed, to Dr. BEAUMONT, TREASURER, at No. 80, King Street, before the first of July, in order to their being examined and discharged."4

Five days before the 1780-81 season began, the Theatre Royal placed an advertisement for the first performance in James Rivington's Royal Gazette, which concluded by announcing that "Advertisements for Theatrical Performances this Year, will be inserted in this Paper only."5 The managers may have intended to honor that commitment at the time the advertisement was placed, but, in fact, the Theatre proceeded to announce their productions in Hugh Gaine's New York Gazette; and the Weekly Mercury as well as in Rivington's paper during the season. The first performance was offered on October 30, 1780. Fittingly, for a season in which new plays were to appear with regularity, the afterpiece-The Flitch of Bacon - was being produced for the first time at the Theatre Royal. The 1780-81 season consisted of the following productions, according to advertisements in The Royal Gazette and in the Mercury:

1780
October 30          The Clandestine Marriage and The Flitch of Bacon
November 8          Mahomet and Three Weeks After Marriage
November 13         The West Indian and Love a la Mode
In all, fifty plays were presented, of which twenty-four were afterpieces. Any professional theatrical company of the eighteenth century might have envied the Theatre Royal's output, in terms of quantity if not of quality. The most popular play was Venice Preserved, which was given three times during the season. Cross Purposes and Duke and No Duke, also offered three times each, were the afterpieces given the most frequent productions. Only four of Shakespeare's plays were produced, and only one of them Macbeth - was repeated.
The second performance of the season was a festive one, beginning with a prologue spoken before Mahomet that was delivered in the character of an Indian chief. Rivington printed the prologue in his Gazette of November 11, and included a "review," part of which said: "The following was spoken to a brilliant audience last Wednesday night, at the representation of Mahomet, by a young gentleman of the Royal Navy. It was delivered with that grace, gesture and elocution, which we were accustomed to admire in the golden age of Garrick, Barry, Woodward, &c. &c."

As Garrick was the world's foremost actor in the eighteenth century, and Barry and Woodward were noted British professionals as well, it would have been difficult if not impossible for any "young gentleman" to have equalled their achievements.

J. Hemsworth, who served the theatre as prompter and part-time actor, must have found those jobs excessively taxing, for on December 2 the theatre advertised for "an assistant to the Prompter. Any one qualified for that office, and who can be well recommended, will meet with proper encouragement by applying to the Managers of the Theatre." The position was presumably filled, although we do not know by whom. Always eager to produce new plays, the managers advertised for scripts on several occasions in 1780-81. "WANTED for the THEATRE," announced a notice on November 18, 1780, "The Reprisal, or the Tars of Old England, Woman's Revenge, or a Match in Newgate, The Tragedy of Sethona, The Cheats of Scapin, The School Boy." Evidently scripts were not located for most of the requested plays, but Sethona was rushed into production on November 27, and The Reprisal was produced as the afterpiece on the next bill, on December 4. Both plays were originally scheduled to be performed on the 27th, but The Reprisal had to be postponed, "on account of a principal Performer being ordered on Duty ... 'til the next night of Performance."

Later in the season, more plays were requested. For anyone supplying The Spirit of Contradiction, "an handsome Price will be given," said the managers. Also wanted were The Tobacconist, A Trip to Portsmouth, Intriguing Footman and Note of Hand. Only The Spirit of Contradiction was performed, however, so the request for the other plays must have gone unheeded.

"New scenery and Decorations" were in evidence during the fifth season of the military players in New York. And new costumes must have been plentiful, as the management later announced that £780, 3s., 2d. had been spent on the men's wardrobe during the season, and another £298, Is., Id. for the women's wardrobe. Men's costumes were a more expensive item because the plays performed at the Theatre Royal invariably required more male than female performers. It may also be that some of the women's roles were played by men in 1780 and 1781 (as they had been in 1777), and that the costumes made for them were included as part of the men's wardrobe.

A number of actors who had not appeared on the stage of the Theatre Royal in earlier years participated in the 1780-81 season. The advertisement for the performance of Zara and High Life Below Stairs announced "the principal Characters in both Play and Farce, by Gentlemen of the Army who never appeared on [sic] this Theatre."

And on April 23, the Gazette informed the public that "the Part of Pierre" in Venice Preserved would be played by "a Gentleman who has not performed this Season." That this last named "Gentleman" was not identified as being a member of the army or navy raises the possibility that male civilians were by this time being
imported not just to supplement the military actors, but to play leading roles on occasion. It was not an uncommon practice in the English and American theatre of the eighteenth century to permit amateurs to perform in major roles, and to charge them for the privilege. Managers of professional theatres who employed this device generally looked upon it with favor, for the theatre benefitted not only from the money paid by the amateur actor, but also from the sizable audience – composed largely of the friends and acquaintances of the amateur - who paid to see him perform.

A number of actresses performed at the Theatre Royal during its fifth season. One of them evidently preferred not to be identified. The Royal Gazette simply announced that, when Miss in Her Teens would be performed on December 11, "the part of FRIBBLE, by particular Desire will be performed by A LADY." Other actresses were not so reticent. Four of them - Mrs. Batten, Mrs. Fitzgerald, Mrs. Smith, and Mrs. Shaw - were given a joint benefit on May 3, 1781. A Mrs. Shaw had performed at the Theatre Royal in 1778 and 1779, and it seems almost certain that this Mrs. Shaw was the same person. Mrs. Batten and Mrs. Smith were apparently newcomers, but they acted with the military players again the next year, and they were again accorded a benefit. The same was true of Mrs. Fitzgerald, who had a short career as a professional actress after the Revolution.

The four actresses given a benefit were undoubtedly among those performers who received regular payments for their performances in 1780-81. A total of £765, 3s., 4d. was paid to "hired Performers" during the season, according to the managers. Unfortunately, there is no indication who these performers were, or how much was paid for any individual performance. Benefit performances were also given for Mr. Hemsworth and for George Bunyan, the clerk of the theatre, in 1781. Hemsworth's benefit was first announced for March 3, but a subsequent advertisement claimed that the March 9 bill of Douglas and Cross Purposes was "for the Benefit of MR. HEMSWORTH." It is highly unlikely that the prompter was permitted two benefits, so there was probably a re-scheduling at the last minute. Hemsworth may have felt that Douglas was likely to attract more patrons than A Bold Stroke for a Wife, the principal play given on March 5. Bunyan's benefit was offered on the last playing date of the season, June 11, 1781. In order to make the bill of Jane Shore and Miss in Her Teens more attractive to potential customers, "A HORNPIPE and SONGS" were performed "at proper intervals."

There were other occasions on which the conventional evening's entertainment was supplemented that season. Two afterpieces were offered on February 19, 1781, with The Farmer's Return from London described in the Gazette as an interlude "between play and farce." When Macbeth was produced on April 16 (having been postponed from April 9), a notice advised that "in the fourth Act will be introduced The original Dance of the Witches." The Fashionable Lover, on June 2, was preceded by an "Original Prologue" spoken "in the Character of A PRINTER'S DEVIL." After the third act, "a new HUNTING SONG" was sung, and "Between the Play and the Farce" was "a HORNPIPE." And two performances of short operas were given: The Flitch of Bacon on October 30, 1780, and The Mock Doctor, on January 15, 1781.

Various scheduled performances were postponed or cancelled during the season. The reasons ranged from "the Indisposition of a principal Performer" to a leading actor "being ordered on
Duty," to the "departure of the fleet." Military duties interfered on relatively few occasions with the production of plays, however, if the reasons stated in the advertisements are to be believed. One typical notice informed the public simply that "The play advertised for Monday night is unavoidably postponed."

On the other hand, theatregoers were told in detail why the scheduled performance of Mahomet had to be put off for two days until November 8, 1780. A notice in the Gazette announced: "The Managers were under the Necessity of postponing the Play till Wednesday, as the House is painting and decorating, and could not be finished by Monday. The new Scenery, Dresses and Decorations for the Tragedy of MAHOMET, requiring more time than they were apprized of. But they propose after that to continue performing every Monday."

Monday was the favored evening for performances in 1780, 1781, and 1782. In the Theatre Royal's first season, 1777, the managers had tried to schedule all performances on Thursdays. The following year, Thursday began as the evening for production, but in February the managers decided that Fridays would be preferable. In 1779, the theatre was generally open on Saturdays. Throughout the years of the military productions the managers attempted to perform on a weekly basis, but frequent postponements were necessary each season, and the schedule was always irregular.

From the beginning of the Theatre Royal's existence, the management was plagued with difficulties concerning ticketholders and boxholders. Several advertisements placed in the Gazette in 1780-81 make it clear that these problems had not been resolved. On November 15, a notice stated: "Several gentlemen having engaged Boxes for the Season, their respective Names are put on the Doors of each Box; and it is requested that no Person will go into one of their Boxes without a Ticket for that particular BOX."

Three months later, another recurring difficulty was brought up once again: "The Managers beg leave to advertise the Public that for the future a particular set of tickets will be issued for each night, and those of any other impression will be stopped at the door." And late in the season, the management was forced to face the problem caused by parents bringing their children to the theatre without having purchased tickets for them. "No Children in laps can possibly be admitted," said two separate advertisements in April.

Financially, the season of 1780-81 was a bonanza for the Theatre Royal. Total income was more than a thousand pounds greater than for any previous year of which we have record. However, expenses were also far higher than ever before, with the result that the managers claimed to have ended the season with a deficit of just over £300. No accounting of the 1780-81 season was made until after June 24, 1782, when the managers distributed a broadside covering both the fifth and sixth seasons of the theatre's operation. That part of the broadside that referred to 1780-81 offered the following account of receipts and disbursements:

**RECEIPTS**

By Cash received from his Excellency Sir Henry Clinton,

- Do. [Ditto] Do. His Excellency Lt. General Knyphausen, 186-13-4
- Do. Do. His Excellency Lt. General Robertson, 186-13-4
- Do. Do. Major General Phillips, 102- 8-0
Do. Do. Brigadier General Birch, 102- 8-0
Do. Do. Daniel Weir, Esq. 102- 8-0
Do. Do. At the Doors of the Theatre, 102- 8-0
Do. 4520-17-6

£5303-16-2

DISBURSEMENTS
To Cash paid for the Men's Wardrobe

Do. Do. Women's ditto, 780- 3- 1
Do. Do. for Repairs of the House, Timber, 298- 1- 1
Boards, Stoves, Tin Work, Masonry, Candles,
Lamp Oil, New Scenes, Decorations, Ironmongery,
Painting, Printing, Advertising, and Stationary [sic],
all included under the Head of General Expences,
Do. Do. for incidental Expences 20 1- 18-5
Do. Do. for hired Performers 756- 3-4
Do. Do. Mr. Hugh Gaine, on Account of Rent 50- 0-0
Do. Do. Towards liquidating a Debt incurred
by the late Managers of the Philadelphia Theatre,
Do. Do. To weekly and nightly Attendants, House
Servants, Door-Keepers, Band of Music,}
&c. &c. &c. &c.

Distributed in Charity to the Widows and Children
Of the Army, &c. &c. &c. 291-10-0

Allowed from the Boxes paid for by the Season to the
hired Performers on two Benefit Nights. 102- 8-0

New York Currency £5303-16-2

Remained due at the Close of the Season, including
50 for Rent of the Theatre, £300- 6- 11³⁴

Based upon the detailed knowledge we have of the 1779 season, when impressive sums are
known to have been spent for liquor, elaborate suppers, and "Coach-hire attending the Theatre"
for the actor-officers,³⁵ one suspects that a goodly number of complete dinners and rides to and
from the theatre were included in the vaguely defined "incidental Expences" category.

Considering the fact that the justification for all of the Theatre Royal's performances was the
money that would be raised for "Widows and Children," it seems remarkable that only £291, 10s.
out of income totaling more than £5300 - was turned over to charity. But an item in the Upcott Papers, reprinted in the Magazine of American History, asserts with surprising candor that - despite the constant assurance of the theatre's managers - charity was no more than an elaborate ruse constructed to conceal the real purpose of the performances, which was considerably less altruistic.

THE BRITISH THEATRE IN NEW YORK - An American Correspondent says (1781) that the officers of the Army in New York concerned in the management of the Theatre there form a body like any other Company of Comedians and share the profits arising from their exhibitions. To people on this side of the waters, it may seem mean for the British officers to perform for hire, but in New York necessaries are so extremely dear, that an inferior officer, who has no other resource than his pay, undergoes more difficulties than the common soldier; and circumstanced as many brave men are in America, such an exertion of their talents to increase their incomes draws the greatest encouragement. 36

If this report is true, it means that all the accounts released by the managers throughout the Theatre Royal's history were falsified in order to conceal payments to the military actors, as well as to the managers themselves. It would certainly help to explain why so little money was distributed to charity, and why expenditures for so many items seemed to be extraordinarily high.

In any case, the British military actors were unknowingly laying the foundation for the return of the American theatre in New York. Historically, when a country has been engaged in a war fought on its own soil, its citizens have understandably paid little attention to the performing arts. But the period of the Revolution in America was a notable exception. Far from destroying the infant American theatre, the Revolution stimulated it by introducing new plays from England (many of which remained in the American repertory for years afterward), and by producing those plays with lavish care. It may also be reasonably argued that a new and dedicated audience was formed by these productions, an audience composed of citizens who had rarely or never attended the theatre in the past, but who did so during the Revolution because the British, whom they admired, demonstrated by their example that play-acting and play-going were legitimate activities.

Beginning in 1783, professional American performers began to return to New York City to be seen in a varied assortment of plays and entertainments. Audiences for these American productions included the new audience of Tories who had patronized the Theatre Royal during the Revolution, as well as Whigs who had boycotted the performances of the British officers but were pleased to support the efforts of Americans. Thus was the audience for the theatre in America increased by the efforts of the British military performers during the Revolution.37

NOTES
2 However, Gordon Eugene Beck, in "British Military Theatricals in New York City During the Revolutionary War," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1964, suggests that officers may have been paid for their performances.
The audience was composed of all segments of New York's population (even including some few Whigs, who otherwise thoroughly detested the British presence in America), although the civilian audience must have been smaller than the military audience on most occasions. According to the estimate of many historians (one of whom is Bruce Catton, "Introduction" to The American Heritage Book of the Revolution, New York, 1971, p. 6.), only one-third of the population of America in the mid-1770s actively favored the Revolution; another third, the Tories, hoped for a British victory, and the final third was uncommitted. Assuming that New York's sympathies closely resembled those of the country as a whole, it can be seen that no more than one-third of those civilians who had attended the theatre in New York before the British occupation of the city would have been likely to boycott the productions of the British officers.

4. The Royal Gazette, New York, published by James Rivington, Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, June 6, 1781.
5. Ibid., October 25, 1780.
7. The Royal Gazette, November 11, 1780.
8. Ibid., December 2, 1780.
9. Ibid., November 18, 1780.
10. Ibid., November 25, 1780.
11. Ibid., April 28, 1781.
12. Ibid., April 21, 1781.
15. The Royal Gazette, December 30, 1780.
16. Ibid., April 25, 1781.
17. Ibid., December 9, 1780.
18. Ibid., April 28, 1781; Mercury, April 30, 1781.
20. Ibid., March 7, 1781.
21. Ibid., June 9, 1781.
22. Ibid., February 14, 1781.
23. Ibid., April 7, 1781.
24. Mercury, April 16, 1781.
25. The Royal Gazette, June 2, 1781.
26. Ibid., May 26, 1781.
27. Ibid., November 25, 1780.
28. Ibid., February 3, 1781.
29. Ibid., January 6, 1781.
30. Ibid., November 4, 1780.
31. Ibid., November 15, 1780.
32. Ibid., February 17, 1781.
33. Mercury, April 16 and 23, 1781.
34 Broadside, "General Account of Receipts and Disbursements for the two last Seasons," 1782, New York Historical Society.