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Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People

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Heather S. Nathans's well-documented study, covering the colonial theatre, the theatre of the revolution, and post-revolutionary theatre to shortly after 1800, focuses on Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. She argues convincingly that the theatre of the time was significantly affected by social, political, and financial matters, therefore located in a social, political, and financial context Nathans calls "crucial" (5).

The book continues the efforts of theatre historians to place the development of the American theatre in a wider social context. In one fascinating section, for example, Nathans persuasively demonstrates how the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793 precipitated a chain of events that not only contributed to the rise of the Democratic-Republican Party but affected the theatre of the city by making room for new voices. John Murdock's The Triumphs of Love explored issues of class in contrast to the plays written by members of society's "elite" (to use Nathans's word) that were customarily performed. The epidemic also indirectly brought about changes in audience behavior as well as changes in the nights during which performances were given at the Chestnut Street Theatre and at Ricketts' Circus.

However, Nathans's inclusion of decidedly nontheatrical information in a book about the theatre goes too far. The material about the political and social conflicts is so detailed that it is, at times, overwhelming. For example, she includes a lengthy section on the clash between State Constitutionalists and Federalists who supported the Bank of North America, her discussion going so far as to offer the vote totals in the Pennsylvania Assembly that approved the bank. Another brief section names the organizations to which the founders of the Massachusetts Bank belonged. Later, Nathans discusses the Bank of New York in nearly as much detail as her discussion of finance in Pennsylvania. In another questionable digression, Nathans devotes several pages to speculation about the identity of Ann White, who provided the land for the Park Theatre in New York but took no part whatever in the running of the theatre.

One can agree with the author's central point about the relevance of social, political, and financial matters to the development of the American theatre, but it's repeated so often, with examples loaded with unnecessary detail, that it's occasionally difficult to read with enthusiasm. Not until the third chapter (out of six) does Nathans leave behind lengthy discussions of finance to focus on the theatrical activities in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia that form the theme suggested in the book's title.

It is worth the wait. In clear, precise prose, she demonstrates the origin of antitheatricalism in Pennsylvania and Boston. She then shows that during the years after the Revolution, the growing new audience for the theatre in Philadelphia and Boston, consisting largely of artisans and mechanics, demanded different sorts of entertainment than the "elite," whose tastes had formerly dominated the theatres' repertoires. This new taste called for the promotion of republican rhetoric and American (as opposed to British) values. In New York, on the other hand, "a strikingly
different theatrical and civic culture" emerged, one that was "surprisingly devoid of republican ideology" (123, 128). That culture was, however, equally as emphatic in its desire to overturn the tastes and privileges of the theatre going "elite," as when the "mechanic population took control of the theatre boxes, the site traditionally reserved for the wealthiest, most 'well-born' patrons" (137). Still, the Park Theatre in New York became "the site for the city's new [merchant] elite to exert their financial and cultural control over American society" (148).

Intriguing bits of information appear regularly throughout the book's pages. For example, the penultimate section discusses "the transformation of American theatre under Jefferson," in which, among other things, Nathans argues that American productions of Kotzebue's plays (as adapted by Dunlap) succeeded because they reflected an acceptance of Jeffersonian-style democracy. Despite her tendency to include more nontheatrical detail than necessary, Nathans's book will certainly take its place among the essential sources for the study of the early American theatre.