A Note on British Military Theatre in New York at the End of the American Revolution

By JARED A. BROWN

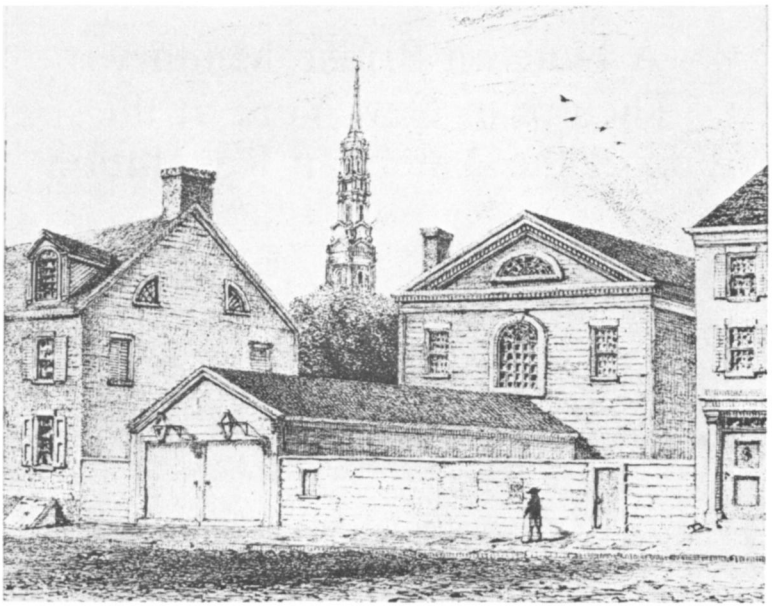
As the war came to a monotonous conclusion, British officers provided a footnote to the history of theatre in America. Jared Brown is Professor of Theatre at Western Illinois University in Macomb.

IN EARLY 1777, soon after the British military occupation of New York City began, a series of theatrical performances was inaugurated at the "Theatre Royal," a structure which had been built ten years earlier by the American Company of Comedians, and had been known as the John Street Theatre.[1] These performances, sponsored by the British, were designed to provide amusement for officers of the British army and navy, whose winters were spent in relative ease and comfort preparatory to resuming battle against the Americans when warm weather returned. British officers played most of the major roles at the Theatre Royal, with civilians—most of whom were paid for their services—playing female roles, minor male roles, and assuming other theatrical functions.

The announced purpose of the performances was to raise money for the widows and children of British and Hessian officers slain in America, but only a minuscule percentage

This is the last in a series of articles, by the same author, which gives a comprehensive account of the theatre in America during the Revolution. Other articles can be found in *Players* (February-March, 1976), *Theatre Survey* (May 1977), *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research* (May 1977), *Theatre Research International* (October 1978), *Southern Theatre* (Winter 1978), *Theatre Annual* (1980), and *The Southern Quarterly* (Winter 1980).

1. For a study of the John Street Theatre during the period 1767-1798, and including the theatre's military actors, see George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (15 vols.; New York, 1927-1949), I, 110-477.



The John Street Theatre, the shed-like building in foreground, was the first permanent theatre built in New York City. Courtesy of Harvard Theatre Collection.

of the theatre's income found its way to charity. Instead, the money was lavished on such production expenses as costumes, properties, payments to actors and musicians, and acquisition of new scripts, and on providing the actor-officers with such comforts as sizable quantities of food and liquor and coach rides to and from the theatre.

The performances were a rousing success. The British military found them entertaining, as did thousands of New Yorkers, with the result that for five successive seasons, beginning in 1777, the number of performances steadily increased, and a progressively larger audience patronized the ambitious productions of the Theatre Royal.

But the war was drawing to a close in 1782. On November 5 of that year, a preliminary treaty was signed by the British and the Americans, although the final treaty was not signed until France and Spain came to an agreement with Great Britain on September 3, 1783. It is perhaps not surprising that the gradual cessation of hostilities was accompanied by a

diminution of theatrical activity by the British military in New York; it is interesting that they had any spirit for entertainments at all. Nevertheless, seventeen productions were given at the Theatre Royal in 1782.

On December 29, 1781, two months after Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown, *The Royal Gazette* announced the sixth season of military theatre in New York: "THE MANAGERS beg leave to inform the Public, that the Theatre is now repairing, decorating and airing, and they propose opening the House in the course of a few days, of which proper notice will be given." Ticket prices were unchanged from the previous season. The theatre still charged eight shillings for box and pit, and four shillings for a seat in the gallery. Performances were generally given on Monday evenings at seven o'clock.[2]

he 1782 season began on January 14, and continued only until May 8, making it the briefest of all the theatrical seasons sponsored by the British military in New York. The following productions were given that year: January 14: *The Miser* and *Bon Ton;* January 21: *The West Indian* and *The Old Maid;* January 28: *Macbeth* and *The Mock Doctor;* February 4: *The Beaux' Stratagem* and *The Deaf Lover;* February 11: *The Clandestine Marriage* and *Chrononotonthologos;* February 18: *The Revenge* and *The Irish Widow;* February 25: *The Provoked Wife* and *Love a la Mode;* March 4: *The Jealous Wife* and *The Lying Valet;* March 11: *The Recruiting Officer* and *The Note of Hand, or, A Trip to Newmarket;* March 18: *The Drummer* and *Miss in Her Teens;* March 23: *The Miser* and *The Mock Doctor;* April 1: *Douglas* and *High Life Below Stairs;* April 8: *The Lyar* and *Chrononhotonthologos;* April 15: *The School for Scandal* and an afterpiece; April 22: *The School for Scandal* and *Lethe;* April 29: *The Fair Penitent* and *All the World's a Stage;* May 8: *The Busy Body* and *The Irish Widow.* The afterpiece on April 15 was either *The Deaf Lover,* as the *Gazette* of April 10 announced it would be, or *High Life Below Stairs,* as advertised in the newspaper of April 13.[3]

The season was not only shorter than those that had preceded it, but it was also considerably less adventurous. Of

2. *The Royal Gazette,* New York, published by James Rivington, Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, December 29, 1781; January 9, February 13, 1782.

3. Ibid., April 10 and 13, 1782, and various issues Jan.-May, 1782.

the main plays presented, only two—*The Provoked Wife* and *The School for Scandal*—had not been produced by the British officers in the past. *The School for Scandal* was one of three plays advertised as "much wanted by the Theatre" in early March.[4] Evidently the requests for the other two plays, *School for Guardians* and *Maid of Kent,* went unanswered.

Musical interludes were a frequent part of the entertainments in 1782. "Between the Play and Farce" of the opening production on January 14, was featured "a Song by a Young Lady." The second performance was enlivened by another "Song by a YOUNG LADY," who may or may not have been the same one who sang on January 14. "Between the second and third Acts" of the third performance was featured "the favourite song '*Nancy of the Dale,*' " and "the favourite Song of 'War's Alarms' " was sung "between the Third and Fourth Acts" of *The Clandestine Marriage* on February 11. Other "favourite songs" performed that season were "THE SOLDIER TIRED," featured "between the Play and Farce" on February 25 and "*The Fife and Drum,*" which was "introduced" during the epilogue spoken after the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* on March 11. In addition, *The Mock Doctor,* performed as an afterpiece on January 28, offered "the songs in Character, by a Young Lady."[5]

The managers wanted to produce still more musical entertainments. On February 4, they placed an advertisement in *The New York Gazette; and the Weekly Mercury* requesting "the *Music,* in Score, of the following Operas: *Love in a Village, Thomas and Sally, The Duenna, The Padlock, Beggar's Opera, The Waterman.* Any Person in Possession of these Operas," the notice concluded, "may receive a handsome Price for them by applying at No. 80, King Street."[6] None of those operas was produced in 1782, so the advertisement was evidently not answered satisfactorily.

None of the male performers' names in 1782 are known to us, but four actresses were given a joint benefit performance on May 8. Three of them—Mrs. Batten, Mrs. Fitzgerald, and Mrs. Smith—had all been so honored at the end of

4. Ibid., March 2, 1782.

5. *The Royal Gazette,* January 5, 19, 26, February 6, 20, March 6, 1782.

6. *The New York Gazette; and the Weekly Mercury,* printed by Hugh Gaine, at the Bible and Crown, in Hanover Square, New York, February 4, 1782.

the previous season, and were permitted another benefit on this occasion. The fourth, Mrs. Hyde, was later to begin a professional career with a company of American actors. The benefit play and afterpiece were supplemented by a comic lecture "attempted by a Gentleman" and a song by Mrs. Hyde.[7]

A special performance was held on March 23, for the benefit of "*a Distressed* WIDOW, *with a Large Family.*" The same advertisement that contained this information also asked "Commanding Officers of Corps . . . to send certified lists of such Military Widows and Orphans, as they may deem proper objects of this charity, to the Treasurer, Doctor Beaumont, No. 80, King Street, as a sum of money will soon be issued for their relief." It may be that the commanding officers did not respond satisfactorily to this request, because a subsequent notice, placed only three weeks after the first, appealed directly to the "proper objects" of the charity: "As there will be a sum of money issued by the Managers to be disposed of in charity, any object, either *Refugees* or *Poor of this City,* are desired to send their names properly certified, to the Managers."[8]

In addition to undertaking the duties of the treasurer, Hammond Beaumont was co-manager of the theatre in 1782, sharing that responsibility with E. Williams, George Vallancey, and Abraham D'Aubant. According to the broadside they issued after the season's close, the theatre's contribution to charity exceeded £827 in 1782. Although that represented only 20 percent of the total income for the year, it was a far greater contribution than the theatre had ever made to charity before.

More than £4,138 was taken in during the sixth season, despite the fact that fewer performances were given than in previous years. The nightly average of receipts (including boxholders' rents, and not counting the two benefit performances, which were ordinarily not included in the managers' accounts of receipts and expenditures) was almost £276. That was a much better financial showing than the theatre had achieved in previous seasons. Never before had the nightly average reached £200, and the 1782 average was far in excess

7. *The Royal Gazette,* May 8, 1782.

8. Ibid., March 20, April 10, 1782.

of that figure. Why so much money was received at a time when fewer performances were offered—and almost all of those repeats from earlier seasons—is something of a mystery. The most likely explanation is that the population of New York was increasing at the same time the theatre's activities were in decline. After Cornwallis's defeat, British soldiers poured into the city, nearly doubling the population—from approximately 30,000 (two-thirds of whom were civilians) to approximately 55,000.[9]

Major John André was a popular actor in the army's theatrical productions. From Odell, Annals of the New York Stage *(1927).*



Sir Henry Clinton, commander in chief of the British army in America, paid £186 13s. 4d. for his box in 1782, as he had done the year before despite the fact that the number of performances given was less than half that of the previous season. Clinton was charged the same amount in 1779 and 1781, as records show; no records exist for 1780, but he probably paid the same rate in that year as well. Twice, to our knowledge, other boxholders were charged as much as Clinton, which was the highest amount paid for a season's box at the Theatre Royal. In 1782, four boxholders paid only £12 16s., which probably means that their boxes were not reserved for all of the performances given during the season.

The broadside issued by the managers at the close of the 1782 season gives a general picture of the theatre's income and expenditures in its last full year of operation:

RECEIPTS	
By Cash received from his Excellency General Sir Henry Clinton	£186-13-4
Do. [ditto] from his Excellency Admiral Digby	186-13-4
Do. from his Excellency Lieut. General Knyphausen	120-10-8
Do. his Excellency Lieut. General Robertson	51- 4-0
Do. Lieutenant General Campbell	67- 4-0
Do. Major General Paterson	12-16-0
Do. Major General O'Hara	12-16-0
Do. Major General Dalrymple	12-16-0
Do. Brigadier General Birch	51- 4-0
Do. Brigadier General Gunning	12-16-0
Do. at the Doors of the Theatre	3423-17-8
	£4138-11-0

DISBURSEMENTS	
Paid to liquidate the Debts of last Year	300- 6-11
Do. House Rent to 31st December 1782	100- 0- 0
Do. for Repairs, Decorations, Scenery, Painting, &c. &c.	251-11- 5
Do. hired Performers	314- 0- 0
Do. weekly and nightly Servants, Extra Attendants, Band of Music, Door-keepers, &c. &c. &c.	803-18- 0
Do. for Men's Wardrobe	386- 1- 1
Do. for Women's Wardrobe	342-12- 7½
Do. for incidental Expences	158-10-88
Do. for Printing, Advertising, Stationary, &c. &c.	216-15- 4
Do. for Lamp Oil, Candles and Wood	189-10-10

9. Wilbur C. Abbott, *New York in the American Revolution* (New York, 1929), pp. 261-63.

Do. in CHARITY to the Widows and Children of the following Regiments, &c. VIZ	827- 7- 6
	£3890-14- 4½

There follows a long list of regiments, thirty-seven in all, to which charitable contributions were made, and a precise accounting of the amounts of money given to each. The broadside concludes with the following information:

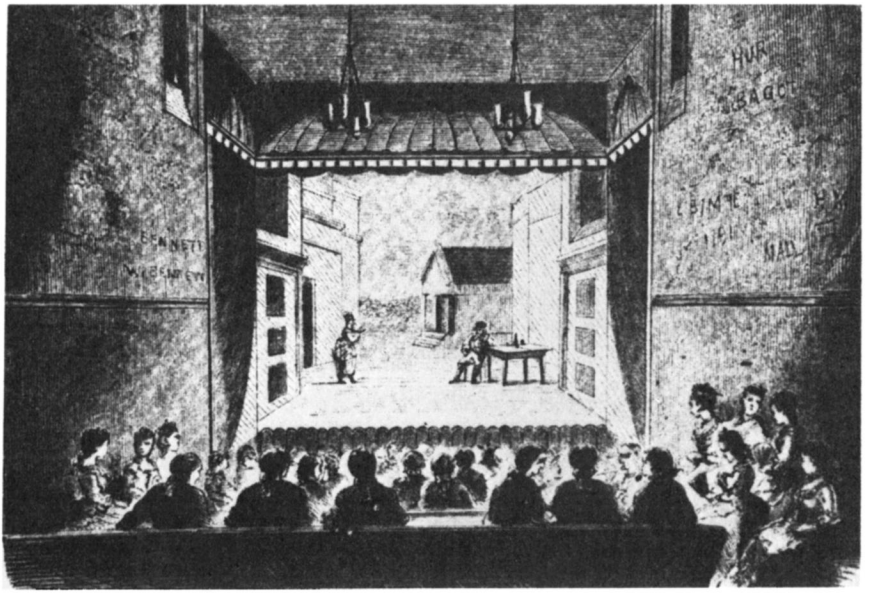
Receipts for 1782	4138	11	0
Disbursements for 1782	3890	14	4½
Balance in Hands the 24th of June, 1782, N. York Cur.	£247	16	7½

The above is an exact Copy from the Books of the Theatre, now in the Possession of the Treasurer, No. 80, King-street, for public inspection . . .

H. BEAUMONT
W. WILLIAMS
GEO. VALLANCEY
AM. D'AUBANT
} Managers[10]

For nearly six years, British officers had monopolized all theatrical activity in New York, but professional American performers began to reappear in the city soon after the last performances of the British military in 1782. The first of these was John Henry, who had been one of the leading actors with the American Company before the outbreak of the Revolution. New York was still occupied by thousands of British soldiers, who would have another year-and-a-half to wait before they would be evacuated. Henry evidently calculated that the idle soldiers would welcome the entertainment he could provide, and he placed an advertisement in *The Royal Gazette* announcing his arrival. "*By Permission,*" it began, "To-Morrow the 1st of August, Mr. HENRY, Will deliver, in TWO PARTS, *A Lecture on Heads* . . . After which, Mr. HENRY will recite a MONODY called the *Shadows of Shakespeare,* or *Shakespeare's* CHARACTERS *paying Homage* to GARRICK."[11]

10. "General Accounts of Receipts and Disbursements for the two last Seasons," 1782 broadside, New-York Historical Society.



Interior of the John Street Theatre. From Odell, Annals of the New York Stage *(1927).*

Henry eventually presented five performances of his one-man show in New York during August and September. A performance of another kind took place at "Mr. Roubalet's Tavern," on November 20, 1782. This featured the "Celebrated Isaac Levy," whose entertainment featured sleight of hand. And still another entertainment, also given in November, featured "A Curious Fish, almost in the shape of a Woman."[12]

The British military may have intended to meet this competition with a new series of theatrical performances in 1783. But Dr. Hammond Beaumont, who had guided the productions at the Theatre Royal, as manager and treasurer, for several seasons, died on the first day of October, 1782. The notice announcing his death in *The Royal Gazette* called him "A Gentleman of infinite pleasantry and humour, very respectable in his profession, and greatly esteemed by a numer-

11. *The Royal Gazette,* July 31, 1782.

12. Ibid., November 20, 27, 1782.

ous acquaintance."[13] Beaumont's absence may explain why the British officers participated in relatively few theatrical productions in 1783, and why several of those in which they did perform were given in conjunction with Dennis Ryan's professional company, which came to New York after a busy season in Baltimore and Annapolis.

Ryan's New York engagement began on June 19, 1783, with *Douglas* and *The Wrangling Lovers,* and continued for more than four months. During that time, his company was occasionally joined by amateur actors, and at other times it was supplemented by British officers. When his actors had performed in Baltimore, Ryan had produced plays and prologues that had appealed to American patriotic sentiment. Now that he was in British-occupied New York, however, Ryan addressed British sensibilities. Advertisements for his performances noted that "Between the Acts will be performed, the celebrated air of 'GOD SAVE THE KING.' "[14]

Two months before the British finally evacuated New York, Ryan's company and the officer-actors joined forces. "Some of the Characters" in Ryan's performance of *Macbeth* on September 27 were played by "GENTLEMEN of the NAVY and ARMY." Again, on September 30, British officers acted with Ryan's company in *Tamerlane* and *High Life Below Stairs*; and the "Gentlemen of the Navy and Army for their Amusement" performed *Love in a Village* on October 16, with the professional actors playing in the afterpiece.[15]

The British officers took over the theatre entirely for six performances that were listed in the press as being for the "Benefit of a Distressed Family" and for "an ORPHAN FAMILY." It is probable that Ryan's actresses played the women's roles in the plays, which included: August 9: *The Beaux' Stratagem* and *Miss in Her Teens;* August 20: *Venice Preserved* and *Love a-la-Mode;* September 24: *Othello* and *Miss in Her Teens;* October 4: *The Conquest of Canada* and *Lethe;* October 23: *Love in a Village* and *Too Civil by Half;* October 25: *The Fatal Falsehood* and *Cross Purposes.*[16] The

13. Ibid., October 2, 1782.

14. Ibid., June 18, July 9, 1783. See also Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage,* I, 226-29.

15. *The Royal Gazette,* September 27, October 15, 1783.

16. Ibid., August 6, 16, 1783 and various other issues, 1783.

last production by the officers of the army and navy was given exactly one month before the British evacuated the city.

Considering the fact that New York in 1783 was being occupied by soldiers and sailors who had already lost a war, and were only waiting for the day to arrive on which they would return home, it must be regarded as surprising that the military continued to have zest for producing and attending plays. But the British seem to have been determined to enjoy themselves to the last. In 1776, Thomas Stanley had written that Sir William Howe, then commander of the British forces in America, had adopted as his motto: "*De la gaité, encore de la gaité, et toujours de la gaité.*"[17] Although Howe returned to England in 1778, the attitude of the British officers who remained in America seems not to have changed at all.

17. Thomas Stanley, quoted in George O. Seilhamer, *History of the American Theatre* (3 vols.; Philadelphia, 1888-1891), II, 19.