

THE RISE OF THE THEATRE AT HALIFAX

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WHEN a building especially devoted to plays was erected on Argyle Street at Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1798, its very name, the New Grand Theatre, was an indication that there had been an earlier theatre in the Nova Scotia capital. That such was the case and that the drama was introduced in Halifax before the American Revolution, and not after it, as has been erroneously stated, are clear, for several plays were acted at "the THEATRE in Halifax" as early as September 1768. Whatever the location of that particular theatre, it is also clear that the large assembly room in the Pontac Coffee House, at the north-west corner of Duke and Water Streets was the place for theatrical entertainments at Halifax for at least the five years preceding the construction of the New Grand Theatre. In the later years of the eighteenth century, moreover, the popularity of the drama at Halifax was attested not only by the need for that new theatre but also by the large number of presentations.

An advertisement in the *Nova-Scotia Gazette* of September 1, 1768 provides interesting information about the theatre at Halifax at that time. It was as follows:

BY PERMISSION
At the THEATRE in Halifax,

By the *American Company of Comedians*,
On Friday the 2d. Inst. will be presented, a

Tragedy, call'd

JANE SHORE.

Duke of Glo'ster, by Mr. MILLS
Lord Hastings Belmour, by Mr. GIFFARD
Ratcliffe, by Mr. PLATT
Catesby, by Mr. HORNER
Attendant, by Mr. PHILLIPS
Dumont, by Mr. MILLS
Jane Shore, by Mrs. MILLS
Alicia, by Mrs. GIFFARD

To which will be added a FARCE call'd,

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THE VIRGIN UNMASK'D;

Or, an Old Man taught Wisdom.

Goodwill, by Mr. PLATT*Blister*, by Mr. HORNER*Coupee*, by Mr. GIFFARD*Quaver*, by Mr. MILLS*Mr. Thomas*, by Mr. PHILLIPS*Miss Lucy*, by Mrs. GIFFARD

To prevent Confusion at the Doors, it is hoped the Ladies and Gentlemen will provide themselves with Tickets, as no Money will be taken at the House.

Tickets to be had of Mr. Rider, and at Mr. Pritchard's—Boxes, 5s., Pitt., 3s., Gallery, 1s. 6d.

No Person can be admitted behind the Scenes.

The Doors will be open at Five, and begin precisely at Half after Six o'Clock.

N.B. — The Evenings of performing are Mondays and Thursdays.

. . . The Inclemency of the Weather obliges the Play to be postpon'd till To-morrow.

The contents of this advertisement give rise to speculation. Where was the theatre? Were these actors and actresses the first professional players to give performances at Halifax? What else is known about the *American Company of Comedians*? What was the state of the theatre in the other American colonies at that time?

Perhaps the advertisement contains a clue about the place of the theatre. It is stated that "Tickets [may] be had of Mr. Rider, and at Mr. Pritchard's." That may mean that the theatre was at the house of Mr. Rider; and that is a possibility, for the house of Mr. John Rider was a place for public auctions in the year 1760. It is also possible that the assembly room of the Pontac Coffee House was even then the theatre. And Mr. Rider might then have been the proprietor of that famous inn. In the next year, at any rate, John Willis informed the public that he had "lately opened the house commonly known by the name of Great Pontack . . ." and in 1785 advertisements referred to the Pontac Theatre. It is also of interest to note that one of the popular coffee houses at Halifax in 1773 was *John Ryder's* and that in 1775 Paul Pritchard kept an inn there.

It is not known with certainty whether these members of the *American Company of Comedians* who appeared in Halifax in

1768 were the first professional players to give performances there. It is known, however, that, while no actors are found among those on the passenger lists of the thirteen transports which formed part of the Cornwallis expedition in 1749, William Paget, "formerly an eminent Tobacconist in Fleet-Street, London, and many years a Comedian in the Houses of Dury-Lane and Covent Garden, and an Author of some ingenious Pieces in the poetical Way," died at Halifax on March 23, 1752.

No doubt the theatre at Halifax owed its genesis to the members of the armed forces; and perhaps to some extent to the hostility to the drama which was evinced in New England, New York and Pennsylvania at this time. Acts had been passed in Massachusetts (1750), Pennsylvania (1759), Rhode Island (1761) and New Hampshire (1762), for example, prohibiting stage plays and theatrical entertainments, or forbidding them under severe penalties. Even as late as 1856, when the citizens of Brooklyn were considering the building of a theatre, there was opposition to the word "theatre," and a compromise was reached by calling it an Academy of Music. On one occasion objection was made against a curtain; for, in the words of one, "A curtain is intended to conceal something and concealment suggests impropriety." This objector was so little versed in the lore of the theatre that it was necessary to tell him that a curtain was lowered simply to mark the intervals in the plays. Despite the hostile attitude towards plays, which was common in the eighteenth-century in the New England colonies and elsewhere, stage performances were occasionally given, usually by special permission of the local authorities. As early as 1702, for instance, a theatrical performance was given in New York; and others given in 1714 and 1749 in Boston and Philadelphia. While in the Puritanical New England colonies of those days the playhouse was still considered the highway to hell and vehemently condemned, if not actually forbidden under the severest penalties, in the South the colonists had brought from England a taste for drama along with their other English customs. It was hardly surprising, then, that a theatre was built in Williamsburg in 1716, and another at Charleston in 1736. Others were also opened before 1768; but the first theatre to be built in Boston was erected in 1792, three years after the first building especially devoted to the drama was constructed in Halifax.

The name of the company that was active at Halifax in 1768 brings to mind David Douglass, who was for thirty years virt-

ual theatrical king of the western hemisphere. In 1758 he reorganised the company of players which had disbanded on the death of Lewis Hallam. Throughout the next decade, however, theatres and players encountered opposition. During the 1760's this opposition did not rest solely on religious and moral grounds, and it grew steadily with the growing resentment against England—for the actors were English. The Stamp Act of 1765, for example, was followed by an attempt to demolish the Beekman Street Theatre in New York. Nor was this anti-English feeling confined to that region. Indeed, it was directed at all the players until the end of the Revolutionary struggle, and was probably the chief reason why Douglass changed the name of his organization from the "Company of Comedians from London" to "The American Company," by which it was afterwards known. It was, indeed, soon American in more than name, for most of the players made America their home, and at least one of them became a distinguished officer in the American army.

This company spent the season from December 1767 to June 1768 at the John Street Theatre in New York, but continued opposition to the drama caused this season to be financially unsatisfactory. On October 21, 1768 the Douglass company began a series of performances at Philadelphia. Meantime a new troupe of players, which included some former members of the Douglass company, appeared under the name of "the Virginia Company of Comedians" at Norfolk and Williamsburg.

In the interval between June and October, the Douglass company ("The American Company") may have visited Halifax; for there "the *American Company of Comedians*" presented not only *JANE SHORE* and *THE VIRGIN UNMASK'D* (which were advertised in *The Nova-Scotia Gazette* of September 1, 1768, but also *THE REVENGE* (which was advertised in the same newspaper of September 15, 1768, for that evening and for succeeding Mondays and Thursdays). From the names of these companies it seems very likely that the Douglass company and the one which appeared in Halifax in September 1768 were one and the same*. If so, it would appear that opposition to the theatre in New York and the concomitant unsatisfactory financial returns for the company there led to the visit to Halifax, a place which then had a resident population of about 3,000 in addition to the officers and men of several regiments and ships of the Royal Navy. No

*It is to be noted, however, that the names of the players who performed at Halifax in September, 1768, are not of those who were members of the cast for the presentation of *King John* a short time later.

doubt all of those welcomed the diversion provided by these theatrical entertainments. If this conjecture is correct, it is not very surprising that the company should commence a new season at Philadelphia in the latter part of October, for nearly all the troops which had been stationed at Halifax had been transferred to Boston towards the end of the preceding month, in ships of the Royal Navy. The agitation in the other colonies was thus already a concern for Halifax; and the result meant that any company of players would be likely to seek a larger audience elsewhere. At any rate, from 1768 to 1774 the Douglass company played at various places in the American colonies, until October 24, 1774, when the Congress at Philadelphia called for the immediate suspension of all public amusements, because of the strained relations between the colonies and the mother country. Thereupon the theatres were closed and the players sailed for the British West Indies. From 1775 to 1783, however, the American stage was used by the younger officers of the British army who found in theatricals a pleasant diversion from the rigors of war.

In 1770, two years after the *American Company of Comedians* played in Halifax, interest in the subject of plays was still considerable in the Nova Scotia capital, and the drama was considered an appropriate medium for political propaganda. One correspondent asked the printer of the *Nova-Scotia Chronicle* to insert "A Satire, Inscrib'd to the good People of HALIFAX, wherein the Error of attending PLAYS are [sic] plainly shewn, and the Folly of Encouraging STROLLERS to erect a PANDEMONIUM." About a month later, another correspondent tried to call in the Old World to redress the balance in the New, by asking the printer to publish "The sense of the virtuous Ancients, both Heathens, and Christians, about Plays and Play-houses." He recounted the story of how Scaevola dissuaded the Senate of Rome from going on with building a theatre, by telling them "that this Diversion could bring in foreign Vice." In another place he calls these Theatrical Performances, "the Blemishes of human Nature, the Plague of Reason, and the Ruin of Virtue." He also brought comments from Horace to the support of his argument. Shortly afterwards, however, Robert Fletcher of Halifax announced that he would print and sell a comedy of five acts, *The Jealous Wife*, written by George Colman; and "Don Joseph Azevedo at the Pontac Coffee House" declared that he had ready for the press a tragi-comic farce called *The Present Times*, which was "to be acted by a set of Comedians shortly ex-

pected; at a new Theatre in the *enchanted castle*, at the Palace of the Sons of Liberty." The characters in the latter play included William the Knave, introducing the Spinning Wheels, &c., with a Bill of Taxation in his Hand (in order to suppress Home Manufactures) of Six Pence . . . per Head on the whole . . . ; a great Producer of Affidavits Thomas Trifle, Esq., Leading a drunken man with a Glass of New-England Rum in his Hand, as a Cordial "Specifick" against all Disorders, lately chosen a great Officer for Indian Affairs; and John, Lieut. Mandarin, demanding Audience of the Heads of the Junto, exclaiming against his brother Commissioners of the Tribute Money to be collected—Treating the Rabble with good "Chear" in Hopes of reigning once more alone.

Two plays, *The Suspicious Husband* and *The Citizen*, were presented at Halifax on April 23, 1773. These performances were "by the Gentlemen of the Army and Navy", for the benefit of the poor. Tickets were sold at Mr. Willis's at 2/6 each.

During the winter season of 1773-74 the theatre appears to have been active. In *The Nova-Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle*, of December 21, 1773, there appeared "An occasional Prologue.—For the opening of the THEATRE at Halifax, in the Year 1773." It included the following words:

The summer's suns, no more our spirits cheer,
 And dreary winter desolates the year;
 The pleasing prospect of the verdant field,
 To trackless snow too soon must nature yield:
 Inclement skies prevent our sports by day,
 And tedious nights are spent in cards and tea.
 . . . Since such the case, with ardor we engage
 To furnish entertainment from the Stage . . .

Some new recruits indeed our stage may boast,
 Yet still we must lament the vet'rans lost.
 But tho' unskill'd in acting we appear,
 We dread not satire nor the critic's sneer;
 For, unambitious of an actor's fame,
 To please the audience is our only aim . . .

This prologue thus deploras the departure of the professional players, a reference which may indicate the *American Company of Comedians*, who had been at Halifax five years earlier, and illustrates the significance attached to theatrical entertainments during the winter season.

Early in 1774 a notice appeared in *The Nova-Scotia Gazette*

about "a new Comedy of three Acts; proposed to be acted in the Theatre in this Town; intituled: 'Acadius, or Love in a Calm'." The author stated that his sole intent in writing it was "for its being acted twice, for the Benefit of poor Housekeepers or the late sufferers of Fire." The prologue and abstracts from this comedy were published in the *Nova-Scotia Gazette*. The introduction of comedy into Halifax is thus described in the prologue:

In less than half Man's Post Deluv'an Age;
 In this Septentrion Clime, there was no Stage:
 No Sock'd or Buskin'd Thespis, in a Cart;
 In Drols or Plays, e'er played, any Part,
 But Interludes, in savage Nupt'al strain;
 Were often heard, throughout the whole Domain:
 As were the warhoop, and knell, Death song;
 In voices, hoarse or shrill, Stentor'an strong!
 The Muses, then, knew not, of these frozen Climes:
 So sent no Cargo, here, of Prose or Rhymes.
 But Arts and Trade, at length being wafted o'er,
 From British Isles to this Acad'an Shore;
 Disciples [sic], then, of the Parnass'an Train;
 Adventur'd, over, the Atlantic Main;
 Some came from all the Muses, saving one,
 Her name, I think, is Thalia, she sent none:
 (Tho' Patroness of smiling Comedy,
 Of laughing Farce and pleasing Melody)
 'Till lately one of ancient British Birth,
 Came here: with fine Song, second handed Mirth;
 Which growing stale, to keep the Frolick up,
 Resolv'd one Night, on Comic food to sup:
 Food Al'ment'ry, on which poor Poets feed,
 And live upon; thro' Life, a life, of need:
 A hearty Meal's digestion did begat:
 A Theatric, Comic, (but ill shaped) Brat.

CALLED,

"Acadius, or Love in a Calm."

It is clearly the purport of this prologue that comedy was introduced into Halifax in 1774 by *Acadius, or Love in a Calm*, which had been written in Halifax. And it is certain that prior to 1774 tragedies and farces had been presented there; for in 1768 the *American Company of Comedians* had given performances of Rowe's tragedy, *JANE SHORE*, Feilding's farce, *The Virgin Unmask'd*, and Dr. Young's tragedy *The Revenge*. In addition to these Hoadly's *Suspicious Husband* and Murphy's farce *The Citizen* had been acted in April 1773.

In spite of these developments, however, some opposition to

the presentation of plays persisted. On the day the notice about *Acadius or Love in a Calm* was published, a letter from "Jenks" condemnatory of plays appeared. It began: "Among the world's vanities, I should have numbered the Play-House entertainments;" and continued: "But indeed vanity is not the worst article against the Plays, and their makers, their actors and promoters; which (after all the late expence of sweat and struggle to defend them) are generally such wretched instructors of the age; as to teach and credit nothing more than its profaneness and debauchery; and help set the sparks of Lust and passion all in a flame . . ." Nineteen years later, however, "Theatricus" gave the matter a new emphasis. "I consider the Stage as a School of Morality (at least it ought to be so,) where vice and folly are ludicrously exposed, and sentiments of virtue and morality inculcated . . ."

Notwithstanding the opposition of some who were Puritan in sentiment, plays continued to become popular. In the summer of 1781, for example, plans were made to erect a building in the backyard of Old Pontac, "for acting of plays during the winter." But Alexander Brymer petitioned against this project. Because of his recent losses by fire on Whiston's wharf, he was apprehensive that if by accident the play house should take fire, "it might not only be attended with fatal consequences to the King's Ordnance and provision stores and his own property all being contiguous thereto but to the town in general." The Council thereupon decided that the intended building should not be erected there or in that neighbourhood.

Between the end of the American Revolutionary War and the opening of the New Grand Theatre in 1789, a number of plays were presented. In 1785, for example, "a Comic, Sentimental, Dramatic Emertainment," called *Fashionable Raillery*, was given by William Moore, at the Pontac. This programme consisted of selections from satirical writings and plays. It was presented several times at Halifax by Mr. Moore, "Comedian, from the Theatre Royal in England and last from Jamaica, where he has performed the above mentioned Entertainment with universal applause . . ." Two years later Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* was presented three times. Other performances included *The School for Scandal*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Guardian*, *Lethe* and *The Lying Valet*.

When the New Grand Theatre was opened on February 26, 1789, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Citizen* were presented. The actors were "Gentlemen of the Army, Navy and Town."

The popularity of the theatre in the ensuing years was attested by the improvements made in the building, as well as by the large number of performances. The doors usually opened at six o'clock, and the curtains were drawn up "at precisely seven." Early in 1798 it was announced that the regular play-nights in future would be every other Wednesday during the season. No children in arms were to be admitted into any part of the house; and it was requested that persons would not stand on the seats or wear their hats at the time of performance. It was also wished that whistling, or any other unbecoming noise, might in future be omitted. Prices of admission varied from 5s for a box seat to 2s in the pit; and sometimes the price was one dollar. Until Charles Stuart Powell and Mr. Baker assumed the management of the theatre in 1797, all the actors were amateurs. More than a hundred different plays, operas and farces were presented in the last fifteen years of the eighteenth-century. This then is the story of the rise of the theatre at Halifax in the eighteenth-century. It was one phase in the development of the capital of Nova Scotia.