

Yashdip Singh Bains

The American Company of Comedians in Halifax in 1768

In August of 1768 the American Company of Comedians arrived in Halifax, erected a stage in the assembly room of Pontac Inn, and performed twice a week for ten weeks. C. Bruce Fergusson noted two performances of this company in his study of early theatricals in Halifax, but since he had access to only two issues of the *Nova-Scotia Gazette* for 1 and 15 September 1768, he could not narrate the full story.¹ How was this company received in Halifax? Who were its actors? What was its repertory? This article answers these questions about the first visiting professional company to appear anywhere in what later formed the provinces of Canada.

Even though it was founded much later than Montreal or Quebec City, Halifax developed rapidly in the 1750s and 60s as a British military base and a trade centre. The settlers – chiefly disbanded soldiers and sailors and labourers from depressed trades – were soon joined by fishermen and merchants from New England, who were followed by immigrants from other seaboard colonies. In spite of the reduction in the city's population from 5,000 in 1750 to 1,500 five years later, the settlers established quickly their political, military and economic influence to counterbalance the French fortress of Louisbourg. The Conquest of Quebec accelerated the town's growth and underlined its significance to Great Britain. Dominated by the official class, which included men of breeding educated in England, purified Nova Scotia acquired her reputation for sophisticated entertainment and her market for books, pictures and expensive furniture.² It was probably because of its reputation that this town of over three thousand in 1768 attracted a professional company.

Upon receiving the news that the players were "preparing a large and commodious House" most probably in the Pontac Inn at the northwest corner of Bedford Row and Duke Street facing the harbour, the Haligonians started debating the wisdom of allowing performances of plays. The sentiment against the theatre was represented by many in the columns of the *NSG* but most systematically by Anti-Thespis; the defence of the theatre was offered by an actor who signed himself Theatricus. Anti-Thespis believed that the players would encourage the idle pleasure-seekers to waste their money and to give up honest labour, but Theatricus countered this view by pointing out that the theatre had never sought its patrons among the idle and the poor.

Even though the anti-thespians did not prevent the American Company from performing, their arguments deserve some attention for the puritan, loyalist and conservative viewpoint they reflect in spite of their stereotyped moral and patriotic tone. Anti-Thespis' "indispensable Duty" had inspired him "to warn the Community in which he lives against whatever may be detrimental to it" (*NSG* 11 August 1768). Plays, he suggested, were "particularly destructive of Industry among the lowest Class of People." Referring to Halifax's dependence on the British Treasury for survival, he pointed out "how ill it will sound in England to have it said that Players are not only admitted but encouraged in this young Province, which still continues to be supported by an annual Parliamentary Grant, or in other words, by national charity; and which, on the present Prospect of Things, is like to become poorer before it becomes richer." Fully aware that the army and navy would patronize the theatre, Anti-Thespis tried to win their support by suggesting that "the Gentlemen in the King's Service do not expect, nor indeed wish, to be indulged in a Pleasure injurious to the Colony." For all these reasons, Anti-Thespis concluded, the acting of plays "will impoverish and give an idle Turn to the most useful Part of the People; ruin our Servants, be a Reflection on us among our Neighbours, and be of Disservice to us in England."

Many correspondents supported Anti-Thespis. One person complained that his house carpenter who had been in his debt for many months had "left it unfinished, on purpose to build the Playhouse" (*NSG*, 18 August 1768). Someone signing herself "Doll Tearsheet" wrote satirically: "When will the Plays begin? I'm ready to die of Impatience." She also hoped that the actors "are not all married. You

understand me." Writing for "the first Time" anything to be printed, shopkeeper suggested that "many a labouring Man whom I have trusted with a check shirt, a pair of Shoes, or some such little Article, instead of coming Saturday Evenings to pay me part of his Week's Earning will lay out his Money to buy a Ticket for the Play" (*NSG*, 25 August 1768). Even after the plays had been staged, this shopkeeper was "still weak enough to think that the acting of Plays here in the present Situation of the Colony is a very bad Thing" (*NSG*, 8 September 1768).

This campaign against the theatre did not bear any fruit. The officials, the armed forces, and the merchants favoured entertainment and their views found a spokesman in *Theatricus* who argued that "every great, wise, and polite Government, has ever with the Rise and Progress of the Arts, encouraged, and maintained Theatrical Amusements; and that, for these political reasons, as they give entertaining Pictures of the ridiculous of Mankind, convey a useful Lesson of Morality, and are an instructive School for Oratory" (*NSG*, 11 August 1768). *Theatricus* also showed without difficulty that "it is not from the Poor that the Playhouse either desires or expects Encouragement" (*NSG*, 25 August 1768). Those who are already immoral "cannot be suspected of becoming worse, by seeing Vice Punished and degraded, Virtue applauded, and rewarded." After reading the *Anti-Thespis* essay against the players, one Haligonian ridiculed these criticisms in a poem in the same issue:

It's no great Compliment to think,
Our morals with our Cash must sink
 When Shakespeare comes to Town;
Or that our Farms and Fisheries all,
Our Merchandize too, great and small,
 and Women must come down.

The American Company of Comedians, the subject of this controversy, came from Brunswick, North Carolina, under the leadership of an actor named Mills. Having decided to tour the New England Cities, Mills thought of performing in Providence and got a letter of recommendation written in his behalf by W. Gryon to Governor Ward of Rhode Island on 15 June 1768: "Mr. Mills, who is the manager of a Company of Comedians, intends to solicit your permission to act in some parts of your Government. He has therefore entreated me to mention the behaviour during their stay here of six months, which, as far as I hav

understood, has been decent, orderly, and proper.”³ The Puritan sentiment against the theatre during this period prohibited Mills from acting in New England, and he decided to take his company to Halifax where a theatrical performance was welcome.

Among the actors in Mills’s troupe the most outstanding was Henry Giffard, who tried in vain to become a minister in the spring of 1768 and about whom Governor Tyron of North Carolina wrote to the Bishop of London on 11 June 1768: “I was solicited a few days ago by Mr. Giffard, a young man who is engaged with a company of comedians now in this province to recommend him to your Lordship for ordination orders, he having been invited by some principal gentlemen of the province, to be inducted into a parish and to set up a school for the education of youth.” The Governor went on, “If your Lordship grants Mr. Giffard his petition you will take off the best player on the American stage.”⁴ Giffard may have been the son of the Mrs. Henry Giffard who appeared on the stage of Drury Lane, and the Henry Giffard who at one time was the manager of a theatre in Goodman’s Fields.

The only other member of the Mills troupe about whom information has turned up is Platt, who was one of the new actors to appear in David Douglass’s company in Philadelphia from 14 November 1766 to 6 July 1767 at the Southwark Theatre.⁵ At the end of his year in Philadelphia, he appears to have gone south and joined Mills in Brunswick, North Carolina.

Mills opened his season in Halifax on 26 August 1768 with the popular John Home’s *Douglas* and Garrick’s *Miss in her Teens*. A seat in the boxes cost 5 shillings and those in the pit and gallery 3 shillings and 1½ shillings respectively. The doors of the theatre opened at six and the performance began “precisely” at seven. “To prevent confusion at the Doors,” the ladies and gentlemen were requested “to provide themselves with Tickets, as no Money will be taken at the House.” No person could be admitted behind the scenes. The tickets could be purchased of Mr. Rider and Mrs. Pritchard’s. The evenings of performance were Mondays and Thursdays unless the inclemency of weather forced the company to change the date (*NSG*, 1 September 1768).

The American Company began its performance on 26 August 1768 with a prologue spoken by Giffard who knew of the criticisms in the Halifax weekly and who tried to answer them to the satisfaction of the

audience. The role of the theatre, he proposed, is "To wake each tender feeling of the Mind/Reform our Manners and be more refin'd" (NSG, September 1768). Addressing those in Halifax who were apprehensive about the moral effects of tragedy, Giffard urged them "to swell with Zanga's honest Hate", "to mourn a Juliet's fate", and "to touch the heart-struck woe of Lear." The comic muse, he went on, would "las each Folly with her archer Grin", and in the end stood up to Anti-Thespis:

Nor heed th' Advice which Anti-Thespis gave,
For sure we know how Britons will behave,
Since none were ever cruel that were brave.

Mills and Company acted in Halifax until the end of October, but the NSG never published a word about the quality of acting or the reaction of the audience. It may be assumed that a moderate view of the theatre prevailed, as it was expressed by "Moderator" who advised the weekly "to print no more of those Writings, which may have a Tendency to create ill will in the Minds of the Inhabitants, either against one another, or against Strangers, or the Players who are really so much below the Attention of Men of Sense, that I think it an act of no great Wisdom, either to defend or abuse them. According as they behave, or more properly speaking, as they perform their various Parts on the Stage, so should they be encouraged or sent out of the Province" (NSG 8 September 1768).

Appendix

Calendar of Performances

26 August 1768 John Home, *Douglas*: Lord Randolph, Mr. Platt; Glenalvon & O Norval, Mr. Mills; Officer, Mr. Phillips; Servant, Mr. Horner; Norval Douglas, Mr. Giffard; Matilda, Lady Randolph, Mrs. Mills; Anna, Mr. Giffard.

Garrick, *Miss in Her Teens*: Fribble, Mr. Giffard; Flash, Mr. Phillip; Capt. Loveit, Mr. Platt; Puff, Mr. Horner; Jasper, Mr. Mills; Miss Bidd Mrs. Giffard; Tag, Mrs. Mills.

2 September 1768 Nicholas Rowe, *Jane Shore*: Duke of Gloster, Mr. Mills; Lord Hastings & Belmour, Mr. Giffard; Ratcliffe, Mr. Platt; Catesby, Mr. Horner; Attendant, Mr. Phillips; Dumont, Mr. Mills; Jane Shore, Mr. Mills; Alicia, Mrs. Giffard.

Henry Fielding, *The Virgin Unmasked*: Goodwill, Mr. Platt; Blister, Mr. Horner; Coupee, Mr. Giffard; Quaver, Mr. Mills; Mr. Thomas, Mr. Mills; Miss Lucy, Mrs. Giffard.

5 September 1768 Nicholas Rowe, *The Fair Penitent*: Sciolto, Mr. Platt; Horatio, Mr. Giffard; Altamount, Mr. Horner; Ressano, Mr. Phillips; Lothario, Mr. Mills; Colista, Mrs. Mills; Lavinia Lucilla, Mrs. Giffard.

The Wonder: Muckworm, Mr. Platt; Gaylove, Mr. Mills; Sapsoul, Mr. Giffard; Blunder, Mr. Horner; Slango, Mr. Phillips; Arabella, Mrs. Mills; Combrush, Mrs. Giffard.

15 September 1768 Edward Young, *The Revenge*: Don Alonzo, the Spanish General, Mr. Mills; Don Carlos, Mr. Platt; Don Alavarez, Mr. Horner; Manuel, Mr. Phillips; Zanga, Mr. Giffard; Leonora, Mrs. Mills; Isabella, Mrs. Giffard.

Henry Fielding, *The Virgin Unmasked*

30 September 1768 George Farquhar, *The Beaux Stratagem*: Aimwell, Mr. Farrell, being the first time of his appearance here; Archer, Mr. Giffard; Sullen, Mr. Horner; Boniface & Foigard, Mr. Platt; Sir Charles Freeman, Mr. Phillips; Gibbet, Mr. Leggett; Scrub, Mr. Mills; Mrs. Sullen, Mrs. Mills; Dorinda & Cherry, Mrs. Giffard.

Henry Fielding, *The Mock Doctor*: Sir Jasper, Mr. Horner; Leander, Mr. Farrell; Doctor Helebore, Mr. Platt; James, Mr. Mills; Gregory, Mr. Giffard; Charlotte, Mrs. Mills; Dorcas, Mrs. Giffard.

10 October 1768 For the benefit of Mr. & Mrs. Giffard, Susanna Centlivre, *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*: Col. Fainwell, Mr. Giffard; Sir Phillip Modelove, Mr. Horner; Tradelove, Mr. Leggett; Perriwinkle, Mr. Mills; Freeman, Mr. Platt; Sacbut & Obadiah Prim, Mr. Farrell; Simon Pure, Mr. Mills; Ann Lovely, Mrs. Mills; Mrs. Prim & Betty, Mrs. Giffard; Quaker Girl, Miss Tunbridge.

Arthur Murphy, *The Citizen*: Old Philpot, Mr. Mills; Young Philpot, Mr. Giffard; Sir Jasper Wilding, Mr. Horner; Young Wilding, Mr. Farrell; Beaufort & Quildrive, Mr. Platt; Dapper, Mr. Leggett; Maria, Mrs. Giffard; Corrinna, Mrs. Mills.

14 October 1768 For the benefit of Mr. & Mrs. Mills, Edward Young, *The Revenge*.

Smollett, *The Reprisal*: Heartly, Mr. Mills; Brosh, Mr. Horner; Monsieur Champignon, Mr. Mills; Lieut. Oclabber, Mr. Farrell; Ensign Maclaymore, Mr. Giffard; Lieutenant Lyon, Mr. Leggett; Jack Hanlyard, Mr. Phillips; Ben Block, Mr. Platt; Harriet, with the songs, Mrs. Giffard.

21 October 1768 For the Benefit of Messrs. Platt and Horner, George Lillo, *The London Merchant*: Thorowgood, Mr. Mills; Uncle, Mr. O'Farrell; George Barnwell, Mr. Giffard; Trueman, Mr. Horner; Blunt, Mr. Platt; Millwood & Maria, Mrs. Mills; Lucy, Mrs. Giffard.

Garrick, *Catharine & Petruchio*: Petruchio, Mr. Giffard; Baptis Mr. O'Farrell; Hortensio, Mr. Platt; Grumio & Music Master, Mr. Mil Biondello & Taylor, Mr. Horner; Catharine, Mrs. Giffard; Bianca Cook, Mrs. Mills.

28 October 1768 George Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer*: Justice Ballance, M Mills; Captain Plume, Mr. Giffard; Capt. Brazen, Mr. Platt; Mr. Worth Mr. Horner; Burlock, Mr. Leggett; Constable, Mr. Phillips; Sergea Kite, Mr. O'Farrell; 1st & 2nd Recruits, Messrs. Mills and Horn Sylvia, Mrs. Giffard; Melinda, Mrs. Mills; Rose & Lucy, by a person wl never appeared on this stage.

Garrick, *Catharine & Petruchio*:

Footnotes

1. "The Rise of the Theatre in Halifax," *Dalhousie Review*, XXIX (January 1950), 419-27.
2. D.C. Harvey, "The Intellectual Awakening of Nova Scotia," *Historical Essays on the Atlan Provinces*, ed. G.A. Rawlyk (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967), pp.113-14.
3. George O. Willard, *History of the Providence Stage*, (Providence: Rhode Island Ne Company, 1891), p.18.
4. *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, ed. William L. Saunders, VII (Raleigh: Joseph Daniels, 1890), p.787.
5. Thomas C. Pollock, *The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelph University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933).