The twentieth-century American theater has been so dominated by activity in New York that Broadway and the American professional theater have become synonymous. This trend began in the 1820’s and gained momentum rapidly, but during the years from 1794 to about 1825 Philadelphia’s Chestnut Street Theatre Company was in many ways superior to New York’s major company at the Park Theatre, and, like the Park Theatre, was preferred by local society over theaters presenting equestrian acts, novelties such as tightrope walking, and short plays.

William Warren’s management of the Chestnut Street Theatre from 1805 to 1829 was modeled essentially on English practice. Like most English and American theaters, the Chestnut Street and the playhouses Warren also occupied in Baltimore and Washington were owned by resident stockholders and leased on a yearly basis to the manager. The acting company, probably equivalent to an English provincial group of the period, was hired on a yearly contract to perform as resident stock actors presenting a nightly change of bill. An evening’s entertainment included a full-length play (either serious or comic) and a short “afterpiece” (usually a one-act farce or comic-opera); often dances or vocal solos were included for additional variety. The major change that occurred during Warren’s tenure was the increasing dependence American managers placed on traveling stars, the majority of whom were English actors who were engaged for a few nights with each of the major American companies.

Although Warren’s management was essentially typical of the period, it was unusually long-lived, and this affected the relationship of his theater with its audience. Most theater managements ended shortly in bankruptcy, but Warren’s lasted twenty-three years, enabling him to build continuity and reputation. Until the 1820’s, his acting company was accepted as the best in America; several of his actors were respected citizens of Philadelphia, an important public relations factor in a day of transient actors, and of ministers who
preached against the theater. Part of Warren's success can be attributed to the fact that his was a mobile company that played only the prime winter months in Philadelphia and then traveled to Baltimore for the spring and fall, and to Washington for the summer. Playing these other cities for about half of the year helped to keep his various audiences from becoming satiated with seeing the same resident stock company actors night after night. The engagement of traveling stars also lent variety. Charles Durang, himself a sometime actor under Warren, observed the audience's interest in visiting performers:

The public, however enduring in its affections for its theatrical servants, is not always prepared for home love. It continues to gloat, in imagination for the most part, over beautiful Juliets, Lydia Languishes, and other youthful characters whose peculiar attributes are made to inspire love and admiration. Enthusiasm cannot be felt for such characters when they are represented by comely matrons, who may have adult sons and daughters probably playing in the same play, or peering from the boxes at their parents' cherished excellences.¹

For members of the middle and upper classes play attendance was an integral part of their social lives; for example, when Warren and his co-manager William Wood were arranging for the construction of a new theater in Baltimore, a correspondent wrote:

We have had no plays here this season, in consequence, it is said, of some new arrangements concerning the erection of a new theatre, for which subscriptions have been raised to the amount of twelve or thirteen thousand dollars. "The public stock of harmless pleasure" has suffered by this regretted desertion; and we never felt the value of the actors so much as we have done since we lost them. At the parties, we want something to talk about.²

Much the same attitude existed in Philadelphia:

The theatre, and the conduct of the actors, are here, what the irregularities of the bon ton, and the little incidents which supply Doctors Commons with

¹ Charles Durang, The Philadelphia Stage from the Year 1749 to the Year 1855, a series of articles published in the Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch between 1854 and 1860. The University of Pennsylvania holds a seven-volume scrapbook of them, arranged by Thompson Westcott. I have used the University of Illinois' microfilm copy of the scrapbook, Series II, Vol. II, 225.

pastime, are in England: they constitute the great exhaustless fund from which the charitable draw their resources for the tea-table, and pay in their share of tittle-tattle to the benevolent coteries of the city. . . .

Some insight into how popular playgoing was in this period is gained by comparing an 1808 Philadelphia census which recorded a population of 47,786, with the 1811 statement in The Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor that there were "in Philadelphia, perhaps, between two and three thousand people, who are in the constant habit of attending the theatre." Certainly Durang's description of the excitement caused by the London tragedian George Frederick Cooke's 1811 visit to Philadelphia would indicate that a large segment of the population was interested in things theatrical:

The bills of the day were thus headed: "Nobody on any account to be admitted behind the scenes." The contest for seats was unprecedented. Immense premiums were given for choice of boxes or places in any part of the theatre. Porters, draymen, and persons of every hue, received large sums for securing them. Coats were torn from the backs of those who tried to get near the box office; hats were lost; black eyes and bloody noses were to be seen by hundreds. The struggle to gain certificates for places during the first few days resembled a tumultuous riot. A certain Dr. B——g hit upon the expedient of throwing Scotch snuff into the faces of the crowd. On the first occasion he carried his point by this brutal ruse. He was marked, and on the second trial he was most severely handled for the atrocious act. The crowd blocked up Chestnut and Sixth streets corners even to the courthouse. . . . Such was the curiosity to get a personal view of Cooke that the back door of the theatre, in Carpenter street, was blocked up at ten o'clock in the morning to see him get out of his coach to attend the rehearsals. He was literally followed to his lodgings by a crowd, so great was the excitement during his first engagement.

Throughout the years of Warren's management, the Chestnut Street Theatre remained a place where "the intellectual taste and judgment of our city congregated" in the theater's pit "to listen—to follow the track of the actor's readings." There sat "the elite of the literary young men of the town," and in the boxes "the elder

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3 Ibid., IV (Sept. 1811), 197.
5 "Benefits of the Actors," Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor, III (Jan. 1, 1811), 63.
branches of the same families . . . added brilliancy to the high tone of respectability and accomplishments thus assembled: invoking as it were favor and encouragement on the stage.”

The first two tiers of the boxes which formed a semi-circle opposite the stage had, since the Restoration, been the traditional place for people of fashion to sit, in contrast with the third, or uppermost, tier of boxes which was a notorious meeting place for prostitutes and ruffians. The pit was often used by the serious playgoer, and the gallery held members of the lower class, such as servants. In Warren’s Washington and Baltimore theaters Negroes were required to sit in the gallery.

In the fall of 1828 the Theatrical Censor and Musical Review noted a performance at the Chestnut Street: “A brilliant and overflowing audience attended Mr. Sloman’s benefit this evening. The fashion and beauty of the city graced the dress circle, and such was the crowd that many ladies were obliged to take seats in the back boxes, and others in the second tier.” This fashionable audience had its customs; of the opening night of the 1809–1810 Philadelphia season, the Thespian Monitor and Dramatick Miscellany observed that, although there was a large audience, it was made up mostly of men, because it was a “fashionable custom” for ladies to stay away from the theater on opening night.

Warren’s audiences were not, to be sure, altogether fashionable or totally respectable. At the beginning of the 1810–1811 season “An Old Philadelphian” complained in the Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor of the prostitutes who were soliciting in the theater. He claimed that the boxes (the most expensive seats) were frequented by women of “different gradations from private concubinage, down to public prostitution,” and demanded that those of known immorality be expelled from the theater. By 1817 prostitutes had yet to be turned out, for John Palmer, an English visitor, recorded: “No females, except of the Cyprian order, and very few genteel people

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7 Ibid., 35.
8 Playbill from the Baltimore Theatre, Apr. 20, 1814, in the bound volumes of the company’s playbills at the Maryland Historical Society; Washington, D. C., Daily National Intelligencer, Aug. 8, 1821.
10 Thespian Monitor and Dramatick Miscellany, I (Nov. 25, 1809), 3.
frequent the pit; the boxes are the only place in which it is considered respectable to be seen." Palmer to the contrary, other authorities locate the prostitutes in the third tier of boxes. Francis Wemyss, for example, who served Warren as an "acting manager" at the second Chestnut Street Theatre after the first one was destroyed by fire in 1820, objected to the theater's chandelier:

"[it] exposes to view that very portion which should be kept as much as possible in the shade, and which has contributed more to the downfall of the drama, than all the other causes put together; I allude to the third tier of boxes, where licentiousness prevails in its worst form."

The presence of such people there explains, at least in part, William Wood's statement that most of the theater's disturbances occurred in the boxes. He remembered only two occasions when persons had to be removed from the cheaper seats in the pit and gallery.

Although the theater was an important place for the fashionable to congregate for social reasons—to see and be seen—there were also serious playgoers sincerely interested in the art of acting. Wood tells of the audience's reaction to the great English tragedian Edmund Kean's Philadelphia debut as Richard III: "The verdict . . . was not perfectly unanimous; some determined critics, who had persuaded themselves that Cooke's loss was never to be supplied, were on the first night loud in condemnation of the new actor, whom they honored with the flattering names of Quack, Mountebank, and Vulgar Imposter. Strangely enough his second appearance at once converted these judges into his most enthusiastic admirers."

On occasion audiences demanded of the managers that they have an opportunity to see popular traveling stars play opposite each other for purposes of comparison. Under the repertory system regular playgoers had opportunities to compare actors' performances; perhaps three or four different Hamlets or Richard III's would be available in a single season. During Warren's management, George Frederick Cooke, Junius Brutus Booth, Edmund Kean, William

13 Francis Courtney Wemyss, *Theatrical Biography; or the Life of an Actor and Manager* (Glasgow, 1848), 68.
Charles Macready, Thomas A. Cooper, and Edwin Forrest all played lengthy engagements that offered Philadelphians considerable basis for comparing their talents.

A basic characteristic of Warren's audiences was their rowdiness, an old problem at the Chestnut Street. Three years before Warren took over, the crowd so abused an actor named Fullerton that he was driven to suicide. A disturbance in 1800 almost resulted in a Presidential investigation, and in 1801-1802 the managers' efforts to stop cigar smoking in the theater and to prohibit the practice of giving away "pass checks" went unheeded. Audience misconduct during Warren's years varied from mere distractions to riots. Some of the rudeness must have been caused by liquor; all of the theaters Warren managed had bars either next door or on the premises.

Disrespect for a performer could stir the audience to disorder. A singer named Webster who made "a Beastly attempt upon some young men in the City" was harassed for more than a year until Warren discharged him on April 13, 1808.

I had given Selim [in Blue Beard] to Wilmot being afraid to Venture Webster after the repeated Riots his presence had occasioned—previous to the Curtains rising for Blue Bd he came on the stage and abused me most grosly—I knocked him down—but stepping on some grease, I fell and hurt my Knee—he was then turnd out of the house—and I resolved never to let him enter it again. let the consequence be what it may.

Perhaps the Chestnut's worst riot was the result of hostility between Edmund Kean and a portion of the audience. Durang states that Kean gave an "eccentric" performance of Jaffier in Venice Preserved in the spring of 1821 to a large benefit audience; the little tragedian's attitude irritated the audience, and he was, in turn, offended by them. Kean made a speech which resulted in "apples, oranges, and other light missiles" being thrown toward the stage, a defender of Kean being hurled from the boxes, and the lights finally being turned out to disperse the mob.

17 Durang, Series I, Volume I, 70.
18 The Diaries of William Warren, kept from Sept. 9, 1796, through Dec. 6, 1831, are located at Howard University, Washington, D. C. For this study I used a microfilm copy held at the University of Illinois. The above reference is to Apr. 3, 1807.
19 Ibid., Apr. 13, 1808.
20 Durang, I, II, 154.
The Kean riot moved the management to action, for on the second day of the following season the announcement was made that: “Proper officers are appointed who will rigidly enforce decorum.” 21 Constables were retained for the remainder of Warren’s management, both at Philadelphia and at Baltimore. While this innovation was apparently acceptable to theatergoers, the opening of the new Chestnut Street Theatre with separate entrances for box, pit, and gallery patrons was not. A handbill that was circulated soon after the theater was opened reads in part:

You, citizens, whose patronage the drama is proud to acknowledge, and whose inclination, taste, or means may lead to the Pit or Gallery, why subject you to an entrance comparatively less respectable than what has been assigned to those whose assumed superiority has led to distinctions wherein no distinctions are at all justifiable?

The national spirit of America has triumphed over the pride of European armies; shall that spirit slumber under the degradation of European distinctions? 22

The special door for pit customers was soon closed off.

On another occasion Warren and Wood apparently attempted to institute an arrangement under which private boxes could be reserved by the night or for the entire season. On September 9, 1811, the theater advertised: “Places to be had of Mr. Pullen, at the Box office; where seats may be taken for any night or number of nights, during the season.” 23 This notice, in effect, set up the system of private boxes, a tradition in the English theater, but evidently galling to local republicans. About a week after the theater opened under this new seating plan, the first copy of The Cynick appeared, crediting as its editor “Growler Gruff, Esquire, Aided by a Confederacy of Lettered Dogs.” From its first issue, September 21, 1811, the periodical began a series of weekly attacks on the Chestnut’s managers in general and William Wood, Warren’s co-manager, in particular. Gruff nicknamed Wood “Lignum,” after the Latin word meaning “wood,” and wrote essays and poems accusing Wood of being influenced by a coterie of rich friends who were paying hundreds of dollars in order to assure themselves of seats for George

21 Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, Nov. 14, 1821.
22 Wood, Recollections, 291.
23 General Advertiser (Aurora), Sept. 9, 1811.
Frederick Cooke’s appearances that were scheduled for later in the season. Gruff appealed to republican principles, and in October he began to write essays which suggested that citizens should stay away from the theater because it was not being run in a patriotic manner.  

For four weeks Wood suffered Gruff’s attacks, until on October 31, 1811, the theater advertised:

The public are respectfully informed, that the arrangement for letting the boxes, which was recently introduced, will be continued no longer. The few seats engaged under said regulation, will be considered to belong to the persons in whose names they have been taken. The managers had designed this regulation for general convenience—but understanding that the change has not been considered eligible, they have resolved to meet the public wishes by a return to the original system. The places will henceforward be engaged on the day of performance, and on the morning of the day before—each box will be let for twelve places at most, or not a less number than four seats.

The overall impression gained from studying the Chestnut Street Theatre’s patrons is one of an audience to whom the theater was vitally important. It was an audience of educated taste, exposed to a variety of plays and actors, an audience which knew what it wanted. The evidence reveals the theater of the period as an integral part of Philadelphia’s social life to a much greater extent than it is today, a theater of rowdy and sometimes riotous audiences which were a far cry from our docile contemporary playgoers with their polite applause at the end of the third act, no matter how good or bad the play or the performers.

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24 “Growler Gruff, Esquire, Aided by a Confederacy of Lettered Dogs,” The Cynick, I (Sept. 21, 1811-Nov. 2, 1811), the majority of issues 1-6, pp. 1-90, are devoted to attacking Wood.