Palliative for Players: The Lecture on Heads

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, theatrical performers in America turned invariably to one specific work to deal with the particular problems which beset them in a hostile environment. For even cities like Philadelphia and Boston, with numerous citizens up in arms against the theatre, accepted one piece with little comment—George Alexander Stevens’ Lecture on Heads. It was an innovative work, first performed in London in 1764, one which could be easily adapted to diverse circumstances. It was acceptable to governments which welcomed actors or threatened them; it did no violence to religious, political, moral or ethical beliefs that varied from colony to colony and from moment to moment; it was not affected by the lack of a playhouse, nor by the talent, experience, and size of the troupe. The Lecture on Heads is exactly what its title implies, a work in which a lecturer introduces, expounds upon, and even talks to various characters represented by a number of wooden or papier-mâché heads resting upon his table.

In his “The American Career of George Alexander Stevens’ Lecture on Heads,” Gerald Kahan surveyed the history of performances by professional actors. He found it curious that David Douglass, the first known professional performer of Stevens’ opus in America and redoubtable manager of the troupe of actors at the time, “should make such a point about the novelty of the Lecture and the uncertainty of success.” When he first attempted it in Charleston in April 1766, Douglass, so unsure of the value of the piece, hesitated to perform it until an audience had committed itself through subscriptions. He preferred “to form a Judgment of

the Encouragement it is likely to meet with before he engages in any further Expense."

Douglass, as Mr. Kahan affirms, was knowledgeable of theatrical events in America. However, he claimed inaccurately in Charleston that the Lecture was "wholly new in this part of the world." The piece had actually been received favorably in America prior to April 1766, though not delivered by an actor. Indeed, later acceptance of the work was due in part to the social status of its first exhibitor and the circumstances surrounding his performances. He was but a young boy, delivering the Lecture in none other than a religious schoolhouse in the capital of Pennsylvania, a colony notorious for its condemnation of theatre as an instrument of the devil.

No professional actors had performed in Philadelphia for six years prior to 1766. The inhabitants did not lack entertainment however. For years American colonists, and the Puritans in particular, set aside one day of the week as Lecture Day, when a religious leader would expound upon proper behavior. Educational lectures on physics, medicine, and electricity gained popularity in the 1750s. It comes as no surprise, then, that Philadelphians patronized the public evenings at Christ Church's schoolhouse. In January 1766, Joseph Garner, master of the schoolhouse, moved by the "truly deplorable and melancholy Circumstance of some unhappy Debtors and others now in Gaol," informed "the Benevolent,

2 South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal, Apr. 22, 1766.
3 Joseph Garner's unique history as a schoolmaster has been ignored by historians. Appearing in April 1761 "from London," he opened a school on Society Hill where he taught "Reading, Writing and Accompts; as also the whole Art of Navigation." (Pennsylvania Gazette, Apr. 30, 1761.) By July of the same year "at the Request of several Gentlemen, [he] opened the School known by the Name of the Church School, back of the Reverend Mr. JENNY's, in Second Street." (Ibid., July 16, 1761.) According to Benjamin Dorr's Historical Account of Christ Church (Philadelphia, 1841), 129-139, the Rev. Robert Jenney was the rector of Christ Church from 1742 until his death in January 1762. Garner was apparently the schoolmaster of the Christ Church schoolhouse; his position is further verified by an advertisement by a person who "intends to open a School in the Country," who gave as a reference "Messieur JOSEPH GARNER, Master of the Church School." (Ibid., Feb. 13, 1766.) These public announcements are at odds with the Christ Church records cited by Dorr (p. 137) for he lists the last schoolmaster as Richard Gardner, appointed in 1765. Garner left the Christ Church school in April 1766 to open his Academy in Second Street. Dorr (pp. 157-158) reports that as of Aug. 18, 1766, "the school house was... vacant... and it was unanimously resolved that the school-house and chamber over it should not be let."
Humane and Charitable” that he planned a public evening to provide funds so as to procure “such necessities as the unhappy Sufferers stand in need of.” The men selling tickets for the charitable endeavor were influential members of the community and of the Church. Joseph Redman had served as one of its wardens and was High Sheriff of Philadelphia while another vendor, Townshend White, was at that time a warden. Although no program was announced for this benefit, the next advertisement specified the piece to be presented on February 13, 1766. It was “the first Part of that celebrated Lecture on Heads, which gained universal Applause in England; to be expounded by Master Joseph Redman each succeeding Evening, till finished.” The student performing the Lecture under the auspices of the church school was not just any young gentleman, but a member of the well-known Redman family and namesake of the High Sheriff. Having no scruples about employing a pirated script, Garner sponsored a section of the Lecture each week through the end of March, when he announced that

as the Season is so far advanced, as to render the finishing the LECTURE ON HEADS impracticable if continued but once a Week it is proposed to have three public Evenings in Easter Week, viz. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, by which Means those who have not yet attended may have an Opportunity of seeing the whole exhibited. Tickets, as usual, at One Shilling each.

By April 24, 1766, performances had been transferred from the school to the Assembly Room in Lodge Alley. “By particular Desire of several Gentlemen and Ladies . . . the much applauded Lecture” was performed for four nights in Lodge Alley by “Master JOSEPH REDMAN, with several Orations by some of the Children

5 Pennsylvania Gazette, Feb. 13, 1766.
6 Joseph Redman, high sheriff, was born in 1721 and died in 1779. Another Joseph Redman in 1789 was a member of the Committee of the Dramatic Association that presented a petition to the Governor favoring the repeal of the law against theatre. This was undoubtedly the lecturer of 1766.
7 See Professor Kahan’s footnote 2 on p. 70.
8 Pennsylvania Gazette, Mar. 20, 1766.
9 Ibid., Apr. 17, 1766.
of Christ-Church-School House” for the last public evenings of the season.10

At this time David Douglass had almost completed his one-man exhibition in South Carolina. He journeyed north to Philadelphia to initiate the construction of a new permanent theatre, and his American Company of Comedians began to perform in November when the Southwark opened. In the meantime an anonymous exhibitor delivered the Lecture for three evenings at the Assembly Room. Although he shunned the publicity-seeking actions of both Garner and Douglass, the anonymous lecturer did point out that he had personally “altered and improved the piece.”11 The American Company’s season continued until July 1767. Its offerings were well received and Douglass saw no need to present the Lecture. However, in January 1767, at almost the same time that William Verling was performing the Lecture in Williamsburg,12 Joseph Garner, urged by “frequent solicitations,” again presented an evening’s entertainment to help “alleviate the deep distresses of many indigent families and prisoners in this city.” Accompanied by “several orations by students of the academy, and a concert of vocal and instrumental music,” the Lecture was presented at Garner’s Academy in Second Street on four nights.13 The schoolmaster’s endeavors to succor the poor did not end with this production, for in February he persuaded Douglass to loan actors for a charity concert of vocal and instrumental music.14 The announcement, which emphasized Douglass’ humanity and deep concern, was as much an advertisement for the American Company as for the charitable performance.

As of February 1767 most of the performances of the Lecture on Heads in America had been given by Garner’s scholars as “educational exercises.” It was regarded as one of the “present little inoffensive entertainments amongst us.” However, other performances at “Play-houses . . . and the like bewitching modes of ruin” were still considered to be “a snare to virtue, a stab to industry,

10 Ibid., Apr. 24, 1766.
11 Ibid., July 24, 1766.
12 Kahan, 64.
13 Pennsylvania Gazette, Jan. 8, 1767.
14 Ibid., Feb. 5, 1767.
[and] a motive of the highest excess." Actors were quick to realize the value of a dramatic piece reputed to be unobjectionable.

In July 1767 Douglass led his troupe to New York, where, aided by Stephen Woolls singing popular vocal selections, he presented the Lecture until August 6th. Douglass, one of the few people in possession of Stevens' Lecture, may have inadvertently caused himself financial harm in New York by selling or giving copies of it to printers. No matter from whom the script of the Lecture was obtained, John Holt, printer of the New York Journal, published it in book form, while James Parker printed it over a period of three weeks in his Weekly Postboy, beginning August 6th. At the same time, in the face of popular indignation, Douglass was compelled to lower prices of his performances. Wishing to avoid public disfavor he added an original "dissection of the Heart of a British Sailor and His Agent for Prize Money," which he retained in his Philadelphia performances.

Due to judicious use of the Lecture, members of the American Company were able to perform in 1769 in communities where they might otherwise have been denied access. While his troupe was performing in Albany, Douglass delivered the Lecture in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, while probably at the same time attempting to gain permission for the American Company to perform in various New England colonies. Two weeks after his company began performances in Albany, Douglass was lecturing on his own in Boston. After he gave his final performance a month later on August 18th, he did not rejoin the actors immediately but continued north through towns which possessed no newspapers to record his passing. He appeared in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on September 8, where he presented in Mr. Staver's large room "A LECTURE ON HEADS, Coats of Arms, Ladies Head-Dresses,

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15 Cato's letter in Pennsylvania Packet, July 24, 1766.  
17 Pennsylvania Chronicle, Sept. 9, 1767; Pennsylvania Gazette, Sept. 24, 1767.  
18 New York Gazette or Weekly Mercury, July 3, 1769.  
19 When Douglass began to perform in Boston he charged one dollar, but as in New York (see Kahan, 64), he soon reduced his price to half a dollar.  
While Douglass was in the north, two of his actors who had journeyed south to organize a season in Charleston also turned to Stevens' opus to help finance their undertaking. John Henry and Miss Ann Storer, attempting to negotiate subscriptions for the building of a theatre for the American Company, ran into the political furor over the Townshend Acts which resulted in enthusiastic support for Massachusetts' policy of nonimportation of English goods. The actors discovered that British plays and players fell into that category. Henry and his lady, "very disappointed to find the Colony involved in the present disagreeable (though glorious) Struggle," abandoned their task. Rather than leave the town completely empty handed, they announced several performances of a piece which they hoped would prove acceptable to South Carolinians—The Lecture on Heads. They soon returned to Philadelphia where Henry joined with Lewis Hallam in a pre-season performance of the Lecture. The American Company left Philadelphia approximately one year later in June 1770, after Thomas Wall had provided "A Rhapsody of Stevens" as a postscript to the season.

The Lecture was not only useful to "the most prominent performers of the period" but to local amateurs of whom little is known. In 1772, an amateur lecturer performed in Philadelphia. The exhibitor preferred not to reveal his name, all advertisements for the six evenings from July 27 until August 18 preserving his anonymity. Philadelphians who attended undoubtedly recognized him; his advertisements, in any case, left no doubt as to where he

21 New Hampshire Gazette, Sept. 8, 1769.
23 South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal, Aug. 1, 1769; South Carolina and American General Gazette, July 24-31, 1769.
26 Kahan, 68.
lived. Such reticence in print is curious. His last performance—and this was unusual for a solo performer with no obvious attachments within a community—was a charity benefit for the Pennsylvania Hospital. His motives soon became apparent however. When announcing “his Intention to open a dancing school on the first of October,” he made reference to the charity benefit, thereby capitalizing upon past recognition and approval. At the end of September an advertisement for a school taught by a “Professor of Dancing and Music” at the Assembly Room established that the lecturer was none other than Martin Foy, a dancing master who had been in and out of Philadelphia for years.

After his lectures were completed in Pennsylvania, Foy went to New York, where he announced himself as “the Gentleman who lately arrived from London and has had the honour of exhibiting ... in Philadelphia, Mr. George Alexander Steavens’s [sic] celebrated lecture.” After two command performances for some “Ladies of Distinction,” Foy, in his guise as lecturer, sponsored a concert and ball and then returned to Philadelphia to open his school.

New Yorkers were not deprived of the Lecture for long. In January another anonymous entertainer announced that he was continuing his performances, accompanied by “the singing by the young man who has already been so justly admired.” In February, this exhibitor revealed himself to be Mr. Hoar, a musician who had organized concerts and balls previously in October 1772. Mr. Hoar, accompanied by the “young lad,” continued to entertain New Yorkers through March with the “new Lectures (with charactura heads and dresses)” A ball followed each performance.

Mr. Kahan observes that the antitheatre resolution of the Continental Congress in October 1774 effectively halted further performances by the American Company. But the departure of most professional actors did not put a complete damper on entertain-

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29 Ibid., Sept. 28, Oct. 5, 12, 26, 1772.
30 New York Journal, Aug. 27, 1772.
33 New York Gazette or Weekly Mercury, Jan. 18, 1773.
34 New York Journal, Feb. 4, 1773.
ments. In Boston, a town which had always successfully barred troupes of actors, W. S. Morgan performed a suspiciously familiar work. In April 1775 he announced a "CONCERT of Vocal and Instrumental MUSIC; between the parts of which will be deliver'd (gratis) several Comic Lectures, on various subjects." Mr. Morgan was employing a statagem which English actors had used successfully in their attempts to evade Britain's restrictive Licensing Act of 1737. Ostensibly, the evening was to be a musical one lightly spiced with some dramatic material. However, a note appended to the advertisements in the Boston papers reveals that a concert was first on the program, while "the Lecture" was reserved for the latter half of the evening.\(^{36}\)

Thomas Wall and his family did not depart with the other members of the American Company when it withdrew to Jamaica, but went instead to Annapolis. One of the most persistent performers of the Lecture before the war, Wall was not about to abandon it. He presented it in Baltimore on June 22, 1781 "at Mr. L'Argeau's Dancing Room . . . with Entertainments, viz. An Epilogue by Miss WALL, a child of Seven Years."\(^{37}\) In July, performances moved to Johnson's sail warehouse on Fells' Point, at which time Adam Lindsay (Wall's future co-manager in the Baltimore Company) sold tickets at his coffee house on the Point.\(^{38}\) Mrs. Wall joined her husband in Annapolis on August 17 to perform the Lecture under the titles of "A Medley of Theatrical Trifles" and "A Farrago of Theatrical Amusements."\(^{39}\) When they returned to Lindsay's coffee house in Baltimore, their "Medley of Theatrical Amusements" included "A Critical Dissertation on Noses" but not the Lecture.\(^{40}\)

When hostilities ceased, John Henry reappeared, followed by Lewis Hallam, each requesting permission to perform in Philadelphia. Neither got it. Hallam, however, ignored the refusal and on April 1, 1784, began quietly with a series based on the Lecture, to

\(^{37}\) Broadside dated June 21, 1781, Maryland Historical Society.
\(^{38}\) Broadside, July 4, 1781, *ibid*.
\(^{39}\) Broadsides, Annapolis, Aug. 17, Sept. 18, 1781, *ibid*.
\(^{40}\) Broadside, Oct. 1, 1781, *ibid*. 
which he occasionally added "a Monody in honor of the Chiefs who have fallen in the cause of America." Temporarily in Baltimore and Annapolis, Hallam continued his one-man exhibitions before returning to Philadelphia where his variations upon the Lecture were standard fare until the law against theatre was repealed early in 1789.

New York in October 1787 saw Mr. Smith, "a Performer from the Real American Company of Comedians," presenting "A Medley of Theatrical Entertainments consisting of Prologues, Epilogues, Music and Singing." In March 1788 Mr. Smith invited the Ladies and Gentlemen of Philadelphia to attend his program of "admired moral LECTURES," later entitled "Temple of Apollo," during which he presented many of Stevens' heads, songs, dances, epilogues and the frequently performed "Picture of a Play-house or Bucks Have At Ye All." His last performance in Philadelphia was for the benefit of Mrs. Harriet Foy, who had assisted him during his stay in that city. It included a favorite section of the Lecture, the "Epilogue in Character of Nobody, by Somebody, not aimed at Anybody and addressed to Everybody."

The attraction which the Lecture and its many variations had for Philadelphians is best illustrated by the success of another performer's exhibition of the piece at the same time as Mr. Smith's. Less than a week after Smith's appearance, Mr. Pursell offered, "at the request of a number of Friends to a Family in Distress . . . another course of LECTURES on HEADS and MANNERS with alterations and additions." Pursell continued for a month charging a quarter of a dollar, the same low price as Smith.

In 1790 two professional actresses proved once again that the Lecture was the best means to provide an adequate season for a few players. Dennis Ryan's widow became a producer and joined

41 Pennsylvania Packet, Apr. 17, 24, May 11, June 9, 1784.
43 Maryland Gazette, Sept. 23, 30, Oct. 7, 14, 1784.
45 Independent Gazettier, Mar. 6, 7, 10, 14, 26, 29, Apr. 2, 1788.
46 Ibid., Apr. 2, 1788. It is impossible to determine whether Mrs. Harriet Foy was any relation to Martin Foy, erstwhile dancing master and anonymous lecturer of 1772.
48 Ibid., Mar. 11, 17, 25, 28, Apr. 11, 1788; Pennsylvania Packet, Mar. 28, Apr. 11, 1788.
with the daughter of that other celebrated lecturer, Thomas Wall, to present, first in Charleston, then in Augusta, Georgia, a series in which cuttings from well-known plays and the Lecture were predominant. The selection entitled "Bullum vs. Boatum" was by far the most popular. It satirized lengthy court cases, legal jargon, and empty verbosity. It was so successful that it was reprinted in toto in the Charleston Morning Post, with much favorable criticism. In 1790 the actresses filled out their repertoire in Augusta with the already familiar "dissertation on hearts." The latter was undoubtedly copied from John Henry's 1769 "lecture on Hearts" (which was the offspring of Stevens' work). Mrs. Kenna had delivered the lecture in Philadelphia in February 1787 and again in May 1792. During a concert of vocal and instrumental music, she "examined the hearts" of an honest soldier, a captain, a miser, a milliner and an amiable woman.

After 1790 professional troupes abandoned the Lecture, but players who journeyed alone or in very small groups continued to find it attractive, even in the northern colonies which still frowned upon theatre. In November 1791 Mr. Ashton began the piece "with Vocal and Instrumental Music" in Hartford, Connecticut, and the Solomons traveled through New Hampshire and Massachusetts performing variations on that old theme.

The first amateur performances of the Lecture on Heads had set the tone for productions by professionals. The exhibitions at Garner's religious school established it as a didactic, moral, and altogether proper piece for religious and economically conservative communities. At worst it was labelled "inoffensive little entertainment." The Lecture's reputation was of great importance to actors, but the piece was in fact so mild that they quite often found it necessary to overemphasize its dramatic aspects, at times even to

49 Wall and Ryan were key members of the Baltimore troupe of comedians in the 1780s. Mrs. Ryan had remarried on the death of her husband and become Mrs. Robinson, but was again widowed. She and Miss Wall performed in Charleston in 1789, according to Eola Willis, The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century (Columbia, S. C., 1933), 146-149. Their experiences in Augusta are chronicled by Mary Julia Curtis in "Augusta's First Theatre Season: 1790-1791," Southern Speech Communication Journal, XLIII (1978), 283-295.

50 Charleston Morning Post, July 14, 1786.

51 Independent Gazetteer, Feb. 6, 7, 8, 9, 1787.

52 Connecticut Courant, Nov. 21, 1791.
insist, as did David Douglass, on its "serio-comic-satiric" nature. After the Revolution, when citizens in a number of states opposed the theatre even more actively than before, actors tended to de-emphasize the Lecture's theatricality and to play up its educational and moral qualities. But toward the end of the eighteenth century, the Lecture on Heads was abandoned by actors and was taken up again by amateurs and independent professionals until, in the early nineteenth century, "the never-dying Lecture on Heads" faded away.