

## Colonial American Playbills

THE HISTORY of the theater in colonial America has been exhaustively treated.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately for researchers in the field, advertisements in almost complete runs of newspapers which have survived provide the essential facts of performances and casts. Had the historians been forced to rely upon the separately issued playbills no full, consecutive accounts could have been written. Of the thousands of broadside bills which must have been printed for posting in taverns and other public places an inconsiderable fraction is extant.

Typical is the situation with regard to Philadelphia playbills. The company led by Walter Murray and Thomas Kean played the city in 1749-1750, but it has been described as "too poor to advertise its performances."<sup>2</sup> In 1754 Lewis Hallam's company came to town. There are full records of its season in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Furthermore, in Franklin and Hall's account book are records of thirteen different playbills printed from April 12 to May 27, 1754, in quantities of two to six hundred each.<sup>3</sup> One bill of this series is extant in but a single copy, and one slightly later one, not listed in the account book, is known. David Douglass' American Company

<sup>1</sup> The major works are: William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre* (New York, 1832); William W. Clapp, *A Record of the Boston Stage* (Boston, 1858); Charles Durang, *Philadelphia Stage From 1749 to 1821* (Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch*, 1854-1856); Joseph N. Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage from 1750 to 1860* (New York, 1866); Charles Blake, *An Historical Account of the Providence Stage* (Providence, 1868); George O. Seilhamer, *History of the American Theatre: Before the Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1888); Alliston Brown, *History of the New York Stage: From the First Performance in 1732 to 1903* (New York, 1903); Arthur Hornblow, *History of the Theater in America: From Its Beginning to the Present Time* (Philadelphia, 1919); Arthur Hobson Quinn, *A History of the American Drama from the Beginning to the Civil War* (New York, 1923); Eola Willis, *The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century* (Columbia, 1924); George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York, 1927); Thomas Clark Pollock, *The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1933); Hugh F. Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America* (Chapel Hill, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Rankin, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. C. William Miller of Temple University kindly made available to me the galleys of his forthcoming bibliography recording the playbills printed by Franklin and Hall.

was in Philadelphia in 1759, 1766-1767, 1768, 1769-1770 and 1772-1773. Of its performances during these runs single playbills exist for 1767, 1769, 1770, 1772 and 1773.

None of the broadsides bears the name of its printer. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that the bills were printed by the publishers of the newspapers in which advertisements for the performances appeared. Hence, the New York sheets of the 1750's would have been printed by James Parker. The 1752 Williamsburg bill would have come from the press of William Hunter, those of 1768-1771, as well as the Fredericksburg bill of 1771, from that of Purdie and Dixon. We know that the Philadelphia playbills of 1754 were issued by Franklin and Hall, and it is reasonable to assume that the later ones were put out by the successor firm, Hall and Sellers. The 1773 New York piece may have been printed by Hugh Gainé; the 1773 Annapolis bill certainly by Anne Catherine Green & Son.

I have listed twenty-five bills. Of these one really falls into the category of the twelve Franklin and Hall pieces of which no copy has ever turned up. The 1762 Providence playbill was included by Alden in his bibliography of Rhode Island imprints on the basis of a statement by Isaiah Thomas that one of William Goddard's first two articles printed when he set up the first press in Providence was a playbill. Since this entry was recorded by Shipton-Mooney and Bristol, it is included here. Three other bills were once seen by someone, but their present locations are not known.<sup>4</sup>

The major bibliographers of early American imprints have not been kind to playbills. Four were recorded by Evans, but only a photocopy could be located for the Readex card of one of these. Shipton-Mooney added four more, two from photocopies and one from Alden's entry. Bristol noted those four, located one not found by Shipton-Mooney and added one more. Hummel described five not listed by the others, but all from photocopies. In addition, he recorded another which turned out to be a photocopy of a newspaper advertisement.<sup>5</sup> The stage historian Odell knew of three which had escaped the bibliographers; the editors of the *Shakespeare Quarterly*

<sup>4</sup> For references to all the bibliographies, see the notes to the catalogue which follows.

<sup>5</sup> Williamsburg, April 8, [1768,] *Venice Preserved*, Hummel 2993.

used another as an illustration; Pollock noted two not elsewhere recorded; and Rankin saw all those at Williamsburg and reproduced one of them. Four are here located for the first time.

The fragmentary 1750 bill at Harvard deserves more than a footnote commentary, for it has long been enshrined as the earliest extant American playbill. It is a badly defective folio sheet pasted on a piece of board, said to have been the back of a mirror, and heavily varnished. The type under the varnish appears so uniformly black and so regular that one cannot help but think it is a facsimile. To a sophisticated, perhaps overcritical, eye it is just "wrong." However, the text and its arrangement, including the cut of the royal arms at the head, are exactly what a 1750 playbill printed by James Parker in New York should look like. Is it possible that once there was an original fragment from which a copy was made? Incidentally, the "30" of the date has been omitted or erroneously given in several descriptions. Since in its present condition an opinion concerning its genuineness must be a tentative one, the playbill has been retained in the catalogue.<sup>6</sup>

The large-scale disappearance of early American playbills is a phenomenon easily understood. Who but possibly the printer or the manager of a theatrical company would have saved them? Yet, some may yet be found tucked in a file of newspapers, as was the one recovered by the Library Company, or unrecorded in an extra-illustrated work on the stage of which many were put together in the heyday of grangerizing at the turn of the century. Perhaps, this article may summon them from limbo.

*The Library Company of Philadelphia*

EDWIN WOLF 2ND

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Roger E. Stoddard of the Houghton Library for suggesting that I personally examine the 1750 playbill and not take it as recorded.

## *Check-List<sup>7</sup>*

1750, March 30. New York. Thomas Otway, *The Orphan: or, The Unhappy Marriage*; after-piece: Charles Coffey, *The Beau in the Sudds*. Walter Murray and Thomas Kean's company. Begins: [Royal arms] / New-York, March 30, 1750. / By His Excellency's Permission, / At the Theatre in Nassau-Street, / On Monday Evening next [April 2], / . . .

Odell, I, facing 34\*; Shipton-Mooney 40557\*; Bristol B1498.<sup>8</sup> HARVARD (badly defective).

[1752,] February 20. New York. Thomas Otway, *Venice Preserv'd, or, A Plot Discover'd*; after-piece: David Garrick, *Miss in her Teens*. Robert Upton's company. Begins: [Royal arms] / For the Benefit of Mrs. Upton, / (being the last Night of playing.) / By His Excellency's Permission, / At the Theatre in Nassau-Street, / On Thursday the 20th of February . . .

Odell, I, facing 50\*; Shipton-Mooney 40631\* (repro. in NYPL); Bristol 1580 (repro. in NYPL). HARVARD.

1752, September 15. Williamsburg. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*; after-piece: Edward Ravenscroft, *The Anatomist: or, Sham Doctor*. Lewis Hallam's company. Begins: By Permission of the Hon<sup>ble</sup> Robert Dinwiddie, / Esq; His Majesty's Lieutenant-Governor, and Commander in / Chief of the Colony and Dominion of Virginia. / By a Company of Comedians, from London, / At the Theatre in Williamsburg, / On Friday next, being the 15th of September . . .

*Shakespeare Quarterly*, XV, No. 2 (1964), [16]\*; NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center.

1753, November 12. New York. William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*; after-piece: Charles Coffey, *The Devil to Pay*. Lewis Hallam's company.

<sup>7</sup> An asterisk indicates that the piece has been reproduced. Through the kindness of Roger E. Stoddard of the Houghton Library, Rose K. Belk of Colonial Williamsburg, John Melville Jennings of the Virginia Historical Society, Mary Isabel Fry of the Henry E. Huntington Library, Peter J. Parker of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Lewis M. Stark of the New York Public Library, and John H. Lindenbusch of the Long Island Historical Society I have received photocopies of playbills not reproduced elsewhere and firm assurance of the location of originals.

<sup>8</sup> Clifford K. Shipton and James E. Mooney, *National Index of American Imprints through 1800* ([Worcester,] 1969); Roger P. Bristol, *Supplement to Charles Evans' American Bibliography* (Charlottesville, 1970). Reproductions noted of Shipton-Mooney and Evans (below) refer to the Readex microprint cards.

Begins: New-York, November 12, 1753. / By a Company of Comedians, / At the New-Theatre, in Nassau-Street / This Evening, being the 12th of November . . . .

Odell, I, facing 68\* (from facsimile at Harvard, Evans 7077\* (from Odell)).<sup>9</sup>  
No copy located.

1753, November 30. New York. John Dryden, *The Spanish Fryar: or, The Double Discovery*; after-piece: George Farquhar, *The Stage Coach*. Lewis Hallam's company. Begins: [Royal arms] / By a Company of Comedians, / At the New-Theatre, in Nassau-Street, / This Evening, being the 30th of November . . . .

Odell, I, 63. LONG ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

1753, December 20. New York. William Congreve, *Love for Love*; after-piece: Colly Cibber, *Flora, or, Hob in the Well*. Lewis Hallam's company. Begins: For the Benefit of the Poor, / Thursday, December 20, 1753. / At the New Theatre in Nassau-Street, / This Evening . . . .

Shipton-Mooney 40660\* (repro. in NYPL); Bristol B1618. HUNTINGTON.

1754, February 4. New York. James Shirley, *The Gamester*; after-piece: David Garrick, *Lethe: Or, Aesop in the Shades*. Lewis Hallam's company. Begins: For the Benefit of / Mr. Rigby. / By a Company of Comedians, / At the New Theatre, in Nassau-Street, / On Monday Evening being the 4th of February, . . .

Unrecorded. HARVARD.

1754, May 27. Philadelphia. Thomas Baker, *Tunbridge Walks; or, The Yeoman of Kent*; after-piece: Thomas Doggett, *The Country Wake; or, Hob in the Well*. Lewis Hallam's company. Begins: For the Benefit of / Mr. Lewis Hallam, / By a Company of Comedians from / London, / At the New Theatre, in Water-street, / This present Evening (being the Twenty-seventh of May, / 1754) . . . .

Pollock, frontispiece\*; Bristol B11243. HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

1754, June 10. Philadelphia. James Shirley, *The Gamester*; after-piece: David Garrick, *Miss in her Teens*. Lewis Hallam's company. Begins: For the Benefit of / Miss Hallam, and her two Brothers, / By a Com-

<sup>9</sup> Charles Evans, *American Bibliography* (Chicago, 1903-1934; Worcester, 1955).

pany of Comedians from / London, / At the New Theatre, in Water-street, / This present Evening (being the Tenth of June, 1754) . . . .

Hildeburn 1361; Campbell 518; Evans 7294\*.<sup>10</sup> HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

1761, November 26. New York. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*; after-piece: Henry Carey, *A Wonder! an Honest Yorkshireman*. David Douglass' company.

Odell, I, 82, noting that a copy hung for years in Windust's Restaurant, Ann Street, New York. No copy located.

[1762,] ———. Providence. Play unknown.

Alden 265; Shipton-Mooney 41301; Bristol B2333.<sup>11</sup> No copy located.

[1767,] April 7. Philadelphia. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*; after-piece: David Garrick, *Lethe, or Aesop in the Shades*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins: By Authority / [line] / By the American Company, / At the New Theatre in Southwark; On Tuesday, / The Seventh of April, . . .

Hildeburn 2283; Evans 10573\*; *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XV (1964), [24].\* NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center.

[1768,] April 15. Williamsburg. Thomas Otway, *The Orphan, or the Unhappy Marriage*; after-piece: *Harlequin Skeleton, Or the Burgomaster trick'd*. William Verling's Virginia Company. Begins: By Permission of the Worshipful the Mayor of Williamsburg, / At the Old Theatre near the Capitol, / By the Virginia Company of Comedians, / On Friday, being the 15th Instant (April) . . . .

Hummel 2992 (repro. in ViHS).<sup>12</sup> COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG.

[1768,] May 18. Williamsburg. George Farquhar, *The Constant Couple, or A Trip to the Jubilee*; after-piece: Robert Dodsley, *The Miller of Mansfield*. William Verling's Virginia Company. Begins, partially printed in red: [Royal arms] / [line] / By Permission / Of the Worshipful the Mayor of Williamsburg, / (For the Benefit of Mrs. Osborne) / At the old

<sup>10</sup> Charles R. Hildeburn, *A Century of Printing, The Issues of the Press in Pennsylvania 1685-1784* (Philadelphia, 1885-1886); William J. Campbell, *The Collection of Franklin Imprints In the Museum of The Curtis Publishing Company With A Short-Title Check List* (Philadelphia, 1918).

<sup>11</sup> John Eliot Alden, *Rhode Island Imprints 1727-1800* (New York, 1949).

<sup>12</sup> Ray O. Hummel, Jr., *Southeastern Broad-sides Before 1877, A Bibliography* (Richmond, 1971).

Theatre, near the Capitol, / By the Virginia Company of Comedians, will be presented on Friday [in MS: Wednesday], the / 17th [in MS: 18th] of May, . . .

Hummel 2994 (repro. in ViHS). COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG.

[1768,] June 3. Williamsburg. John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*; after-piece: Edward Ravenscroft, *The Anatomist, or Sham Doctor*. William Verling's Virginia Company. Begins, partially printed in red: [Royal arms] / [line] / By Permission / Of the Worshipful the Mayor of Williamsburg / (For the Benefit of Mrs. Parker) / At the old Theatre, near the Capitol, / By the Virginia Company of Comedians, on Friday the 3rd of June, / . . .

Rankin, facing 113\*. COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG.

[1768,] June 8. Williamsburg. Thomas Shadwell, *The Miser*; after-piece: Thomas Sheridan, *The Brave Irishman*. William Verling's Virginia Company. Begins, partially printed in red: Mr. Charlton. / By Permission of the Worshipful the Mayor of Williamsburg / At the Old Theatre near the Capitol, By the Virginia Company of Comedians, / On Wednesday the 8th Instant (June) . . . .

Hummel 2995 (repro. in ViHS). COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG.

[1769, September] 30. Philadelphia. Susanna-Maria Cibber, *The Oracle*; after-piece: *The Dwarfs, or the Cascade Assignment; with the Animating of Harlequin*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins: By Authority. / [line of type ornaments] / At the Theatre in Southwark, This Evening, the Thirtieth Instant / . . . .

Pollock, 108. HARVARD.

[1770,] March 30. Philadelphia. Richard Steele, *The Tender Husband, or the Accomplish'd Fools*; after-piece: David Garrick, *Miss In Her Teens*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins, printed entirely in red: For the Benefit of Miss Storer, / By Authority. / [line of type ornaments] / Never Acted There. / By the American Company, / At the Theatre in Southwark, On Friday / Next, The Thirtieth of March, . . .

Hildeburn 2530; Evans 11867\*. HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA (defective at bottom).

[1770,] June 20. Williamsburg. David Garrick and George Colman, *The Clandestine Marriage*; after-piece: Isaac Bickerstaffe, *Thomas & Sally; Or, The Sailor's Return*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins: [Royal arms] / By Authority / [line of type ornaments] / By the American Company. / At the Theatre in Williamsburg, this present Wednesday / (the 20th of June) / . . . .

Unrecorded. COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG.

[1771,] May 28. Fredericksburg. Colley Cibber, *The Provoked Husband; Or, A Journey to London*; after-piece [in MS]: Charles Macklin, *Love a-la-mode*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins: By the American Company. / At the Theatre in Fredericksburg, on [in MS: Tuesday] being the [in MS: 28] of [in MS: May] / . . . .

Hummel 3001 (repro. in ViHS). COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG.

[1771,] May 1. Williamsburg. Isaac Bickerstaffe, *Love in a Village*; after-piece: Samuel Foote, *The Buck; Or, The Englishman in Paris*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins: [type-ornament line] / By Authority. / [type-ornament line] / By the American Company. / At the Theatre in Williamsburg . . . the 1st of May, / . . .

Hummel 3002 (repro. in ViHS). COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG.

[1772,] December 16. Philadelphia. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*; after-piece: Arthur Murphy, *The Old Maid*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins, printed entirely in red: Theatre. / [type-ornament line] / By Authority. / By the American Company, / At the Theatre in Southwark, On Wednesday, / The Sixteenth of December, . . .

Unrecorded. LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA.

[1773,] March 27. Philadelphia. Henry Jones, *The Earl of Essex*; after-piece: Arthur Murphy, *The Citizen*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins: Theatre. / [line of type ornaments] / The Last Benefit But One. / [line of type ornaments] / For the Benefit of Mr. Woolls and Mr. Wall. / [line of type ornaments] / By Authority. By the American Company, / At the Theatre in Southwark, On Saturday, / The Twenty-seventh of March, . . .

Pollock, 126. HARVARD.

1773, April 16. New York. Richard Cumberland, *The West Indian*; after-piece: David Garrick, *Miss in her Teens*. David Douglass' American Company.

Odell, I, 160 (stated to be at Harvard); no copy located.

1773, October 9. Annapolis. Nicholas Rowe, *Jane Shore*; after-piece: David Garrick, *The Irish Widow*. David Douglass' American Company. Begins: [line] / By Authority. / [line] / By the American Company, / At the New Theatre in West-Street, / This present Saturday, October 9, 1773. / . . .

Unrecorded. HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA.