



American Theatre

Under strict Puritanical control for much of their youth, theatrical performances in the American Colonies were outlawed. Viewing dramatic or comic plays was thought to influence the behavior of the young and lead to maliciousness. Laws were passed prohibiting any such entertainment, but when the actors persisted, the audience was targeted with fines for viewing the devilish acts. We know that amateur companies produced plays, but due to the lack of newspapers and public records, little is known about them. There is even some documentation of professional actors touring with amateur groups, but due to laws prohibiting these performances, there is little physical evidence.

In the early to mid 1700s, ideas began to change. Elegant balls became popular recreation for the wealthy. Tantalizing stories of the glamour of the English stage arrived with each docking ship. The settlers began to feel the void impressed upon them by a government fearful of self-expression. As rebellious attitudes against the mother country grew, so did the acceptance of new ideas. Subsequently, many plays were produced, probably by amateurs, but it is impossible to say when or where the first professional American performance took place. Many were performed in courtrooms or coffee houses, anywhere the actors could find room. At times the overcrowding led to fighting or even riots. New laws sought to keep stage plays out, but the people won their freedom, and American theatre was born.

There were few American-written plays at that time. Whether amateur or professional, the tried and true works of Shakespeare and other British writers became the staple of the local actors. The first American theatre was built in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1716, but its existence was a short one. The mortgage was foreclosed in 1723. It was later used to produce amateur college performances.

Theatrical families were not uncommon overseas, and in the mid 1700s they began appearing in the colonies. It was easier and less expensive to travel and produce plays as a family; all resources were readily available. Each family member had a special trade and several stock roles. Of course, there had to

be some actors from *outside* the family, but where the company branched, another family often developed as actors married actors. Their children, who were exposed at an early age, naturally gravitated to acting careers. One of the most prevalent of these families was the Hallams. Young Lewis Hallam made his debut at the age of twelve with a single line, but he became so overcome by stage fright that he ran from the stage in tears before he could utter a single word. His stage fright in check, his reign on the American stage spanned fifty years until his death in 1808.

Another American theatrical family, the Barrymores, bridged the gap between early American theatre and modern film. Irish actor John Drew traveled to the states in 1846 and married actress Louise Lane. They had three children, and their daughter, Georgiana, married Irish actor, Maurice Barrymore. Their famous children, Lionel, Ethel, and John Barrymore, became some of the stage's first "household names." Today, Drew Barrymore is a favorite in film, not just in America, but around the world. What do you think her great-great-great-grandparents would think if they could see one of her movies?

Even as it grew and strengthened, American theatre lacked its own identity. Companies capitalized on European plays until the early twentieth century when writers like O'Neill, Williams, and Wilder emerged. At the same time, Hollywood was becoming the center of the film industry for the world, sometimes overshadowing but often bringing notoriety to the American stage.

American Playwrights

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) *The Iceman Cometh, Mourning Becomes Electra, A Long Day's Journey Into Night*
Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) *Our Town, The Matchmaker* (from which *Hello, Dolly* was derived)
Lillian Hellman (1905-1984) *The Little Foxes, Watch on the Rhine, The Searching Wind*
William Saroyan (1908-1981) *The Time of Your Life, After the Fall*
Arthur Miller (1915-) *Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, All My Sons*
Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Night of the Iguana, A Streetcar Named Desire*
Neil Simon (1927-) *The Odd Couple, Brighton Beach Memoirs, Barefoot in the Park, Star-Spangled Girl*
Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) *A Raisin in the Sun, Les Blancs*
Beth Henley (1952-) *Crimes of the Heart, The Miss Firecracker Contest*