North America Gets a Theater...Riot: Crash Course Theater #29

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=DA16n8ilUp8
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/DA16n8ilUp8

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital Studios intro)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today we're going to the land of the free and the home of the showboat. That's right, it's America. He's lovin' it. We'll look at precolonial performance, post-colonial performance, some attempts to exoticize indigenous cultures, and a theater-related riot. Lights up.

(Crash Course Theater intro)

As you'll remember from our episode on Sor Juana, performance in the Americas doesn't begin with colonizers. In North America, many of the indigenous communities practiced ritual performances, including song and dance and varieties of storytelling. These performances transmitted histories and re-enforced beliefs. Before and after the American revolution, governments often suppressed and outlawed these performances, maybe because settlers didn't understand them or because they realized that suppressing them weakened indigenous communities or both, but indigenous performance traditions do eventually meld with the theatrical traditions of colonists in sometimes surprising ways, surviving efforts to stamp them out or starve them of an audience. Later, some versions of these performances resurface as popular entertainment for white audiences, via 19th century spectacles like Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show.

The first scripted play performed in North America is performed in Canada, or as colonists call it at the time, New France. The play is called "The Theater of Neptune" and it's performed in a harbor outside the French settlement of Port Royal in 1606. The play is basically a bunch of speeches by (?~1:42) chiefs swearing allegiance to the King of France, saying, "No, it's fine. Please colonize us," and then Neptune, who I guess is tight with the King of France, is all like, "Thanks. Let's get together with my Tritons and have a banquet."

We don't know what the actual (?~1:59) of the time think about the play, but we can assume they'd have been surprised to see themselves depicted as subjugated people, especially because Port Royal is barely hanging on at this point, close to starvation and facing an uncertain future, but the play also provides a record of early cultural exchanges.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

(?~2:20) words appear alongside French ones, suggesting that settlers were learning from the First Peoples. In the colonies to the south of Canada, theater has some trouble catching on.

A lot of the first American colonists are Puritans, and if there's one thing we know about Puritans, it's that they hate themselves some theater. Theater is sinful and America is gonna be a city on a hill, which means a city with no theaters, apparently. William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania and a Quaker, told lots of persecuted religious minorities to come and hang out, but even he was like, "How many plays did Jesus Christ and his Apostles recreate themselves at? What poets, romance, comedies, and the like did the saints make use to pass their time with all?" These are presumably rhetorical questions.

Another problem with the theater? So British, and America is trying really hard to not be like its parents. During the Stamp Act riots, New Yorkers tear down a theater when they learn a British troupe is performing there. During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress issues an edict saying, "We will discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing and all kinds of gaming, cockfighting, exhibition of shows, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments." Buzzkills!

But here's a surprise: theater sneaks in anyway. Okay, that's not really a surprise. I mean, you know what Jeff Goldblum says. Theater finds a way. For a long time, people believed that the first play performed in America was a production of "The Merchant of Venice" in Williamsburg, Virginia that the Hallam Company brought over from England.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Remember the Hallams? They got caught infringing on the Licensing Act and they had to leave London and ooh, they were quick but first, maybe not. As early as 1665, there's a record of an English language play called "Ye Bare and Ye Cubb" being performed at a tavern elsewhere in Virginia. We know this because the writer gets accused of public wickedness and he and the cast have to perform the play in court in costume and are found not guilty. Huzzah!

Before the Revolutionary War, purpose-built theaters go up in Williamsburg, New York, and Charleston. Another professional company, led by Walter Murray and Thomas Keane, forms a few years ahead of the Hallams and performs a bunch of plays in a Philadelphia warehouse in 1749. The lineup includes Richard III, The Beggar's Opera, and The London Merchant, because who doesn't need a friendly reminder that messing with rich people is bad news.

"Ye Bare and Ye Cubb" aside, the pre-Revolution (?~4:54) is pretty much all English at this point. A few Americans are writing plays, including Androboros, a really mean satire by the colonial governor of New York and New Jersey making fun of his political rival but these are all closet dramas. During the Revolution, satirical closet drama really takes off. A bunch of American writers pen anti-British plays, a lot of them in blank verse, so take that, Tories. How do you like your sinful theater now? But the edict from the Continenental Congress means that these works aren't staged so Tories probably never saw them.

After the Revolution, New York is like, hurray for America, down with the British but maybe we can keep theater? And they do. And so do other cities. New York and Philadelphia become the early capitals of American theater. Some troupes are imported from London, some are made up of homegrown actors, most troupes tour and touring gets even easier when companies have the bright idea to make theaters out of boats and send those showboats up and down the Mississippi. The (?~5:53) is still mostly English, Shakespeare and sentimental comedy, but after the war, plays by American writers become increasingly popular.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

The first homegrown hit is Royall Tyler's 1787 play, "The Contrast". The play is basically a rip-off of "The School for Scandal" by Richard Brinsley-Sheridan, but Tyler has the smart idea to make the bad characters snooty wannabe English types and the good characters hardy American types. American audiences love it. They love dunkin' on the Brits. It also creates the stage Yankee, a stock character known for his 'aw, shucks' no-nonsense attitude and hilarious New England dialect.

Some American plays even make it back to England. The first is probably James Nelson Barker's 1808 work, "The Indian Princess" or "La Belle Sauvage" because, you know, exoticism. This play is a version of the Pocahontas story written as a ballad opera. It kicks off a trend of stories about, but definitely not by or for, Native

Americans.

Let's look at another one as we meet America's first American-born stage star: macho-man Edwin Forrest. He was so macho, he supposedly used to wear prosthetic calf muscles on stage for a little extra manliness in the gam. Edwin Forrest was born in 1806 in Philadelphia. He was interested in theater from a young age and made his professional debut at 11 playing a girl. He tried to become a printer or a cooper, but while he was under the influence of nitrous oxide, he started reciting Shakespeare and a lawyer who overheard him arranged a spot for him at Philadelphia's most prominent theater, what a break, America is bananas. Forrest was an athletic, uninhibited actor. People called his school of acting 'physical' or 'heroic'. Basically, Forrest was a manly guy and he took on manly roles, and a lot of those roles were in blackface or redface.

We'll talk about blackface in the next episode so let's take a moment for redface, a racist American phenomenon stretching back at least as far as the Boston Tea Party, in which white people dress up as Native Americans.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

After the success of the Indian princess and James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of The Mohicans*, redface became a big deal on stage, though mostly in the Northeast, where the frontier wasn't a pressing issue.

Forrest's most popular redfaced role was in "Metamora", a play he commissioned. He played the title character, a noble Indian chief betrayed by his treacherous white enemies. Is it daring to make a Native American character the good guy? Maybe, but not that daring. "Metamora" opened at the same time as the Indian Removals Act. It made audiences cry but it didn't make them oppose the persecution of indigenous peoples. "Metamora" isn't really about Native Americans. It's about white Americans wanting to believe in the dignity and naturalness and authenticity of the American character. The play wants to help define America as a nation, but a nation by and for white people

Forrest's main rival was William Charles Macready, a Scottish actor who preferred a subtler and more intellectual style of acting. In a tribute, the poet Tennyson called him "moral, grave, sublime". On a visit to London in 1845, Forrest decided to play Macbeth, which is not a macho role and it did not go well. Audiences hissed at him and Forrest decided that Macready, the most famous Macbeth of the day, had put them up to it. Actually, Macready had been really supportive of Forrest, but Forrest was not the kind of guy to let logic stand in his way, so Forrest went to Edinburgh, where Macready was playing Hamlet and he hissed at him during the performance. Rivalry on, and in the Thought Bubble.

Forrest had support among street toughs and the working class in America. Macready's fans were upper class Anglophiles and the animosity between the two groups reflected a common tension at the time between the rich and the poor, between immigrants and nativists.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

A few years after those hissing incidents, Macready came to America for a tour and Forrest's fans harrassed him, once throwing half a dead sheep carcass at Macready while he was performing, which is sort of worse than a whole sheep carcass?

In May of 1849, Macready was playing Macbeth at the Astor Place Theater. Forrest, who still hadn't figured out that he was just plain bad at Macbeth, was also playing him only a block away. Forrest's fans bought lots of tickets to Macready's performance and threw so many lemons and potatoes and rotten eggs on stage that it stopped the show. They also threw their own seats. Macready tried to leave for England but a bunch of New Yorkers, including Herman Melville, signed a petition encouraging him to stay.

Three days later, Macready played Macbeth again and that's when things went really wrong. Forrest's supporters were prevented from entering the theater by Macready's crew, so they surrounded it, throwing stones and trying to set it on fire. Macready had to sneak out in disguise but the mob didn't disperse and the state militia, called in by the police chief and the mayor, opened fire. More than 20 people were killed and more than 100 were injured. Thank you, Thought Bubble.

Bananas! Clearly, this is not a deadly riot about performance styles, it's about nativism, anti-immigrant sentiment, spurred by economic inequality, but the Astor Place riots also show the anxieties that challenged theater in America. Worries about who was allowed to produce theater and who was allowed to enjoy it. The Astor Place riots are upsetting but the upset isn't over yet. We're staying in America for another episode exploring race melodrama, abolitionist drama, and minstrelcy. We're gonna keep talking about who gets to make theater and who gets to see it, and we're gonna see some pretty disturbing trends in stage makeup.

===== (12:00) to (12:40) =====

Thanks for watching us strut and fret, we'll see you next time. Until then, curtain.

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows, like Origin of Everything. Origin of Everything, hosted by Danielle Bainbridge, PhD, explores the history behind the stuff in our everyday life, from the words we use to the pop culture we love, the technology that gets us through the day, or the identities we give ourselves.

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