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## **"Fit for the Reception of Ladies and Gentlemen": Power, Space, and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Atlantic Playhouses**

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“Fit for the Reception of Ladies and Gentlemen”: Power, Space, and Politeness in  
Eighteenth-

Century Anglo-Atlantic Playhouses

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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ABSTRACT

Eighteenth-century English men and women ventured to the playhouse for a night of festive revelry and entertainment. Despite the raucousness (compared to our vision of a night at the theatre), theatergoing was a polite endeavor and as such equipped with the material pleasantries of bourgeois society. But unlike other spaces reserved for the middle and upper classes, all manner of people could and did attend the theatre. Thus, particular methods of physically and visually separating social classes arose within the eighteenth-century playhouse.

In this thesis, I investigate these material phenomena, particularly the ways in which theatre managers, players, as well as audience members interacted with, interpreted, and created the physicality of the eighteenth-century playhouse. Moreover, I show how eighteenth-century theatrical space – its appearance, its seating arrangement, its lighting – shaped intensifying class antagonisms, the bourgeois demand for comfort, luxury, and exclusivity, and finally the role of women in public, heterosocial venues.

Though not an exhaustive study of playhouse material culture, this work focuses upon those material and architectural attributes of the theatre that reveal subtle yet widespread cultural changes taking place in the eighteenth-century English Atlantic world.

## Prologue

### “Fit for the Reception of Ladies and Gentlemen”: Space, Power, and Refinement in Colonial

#### American Playhouses

Before a “thin” audience, David Douglass’s American Company of players performed *The King and the Miller of Mansfield* in Annapolis, Maryland on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1770. An anonymous critic (self-titled with only the initials Y.Z.) “suppose[d]” this poor attendance was due to an insufficient “acquaintance with the general, as well as particular Merits of the Performers.” To amend this ignorance, Y.Z. wrote of Mrs. Douglass’s “striking” “propriety,” Miss Storer’s “fine genius,” and Mrs. Harman’s “perspicuity and strength of memory” all of which, he suggested, confirmed the worth of Mr. Douglass’s company. In his opinion, Douglass’s troupe was “superior to that of any company in England, except those of the Metropolis.” But none of the actors impressed this commentator more than Miss Hallam, for she “exceeded [his] utmost idea. Such delicacy of manner! Such classical strictness of expression! ... How true and thorough her knowledge of the character she personated...methought I heard once more the warbling of [Colley] Cibber in my ear.” And yet, despite this overwhelming praise, Y.Z. still believed that Miss Hallam’s “melting” “Vox Liquida” as well as her colleagues’

commendable stage qualities suffered from the “horrid ruggedness of the roof, and the untoward construction of the whole [play]-house.”<sup>1</sup>

The New Theatre of Annapolis, Maryland (the one to which Y.Z. referred) had stood for just under a decade, opened by David Douglass in early March 1760. Douglas himself conceded the playhouse’s material and architectural shortcomings in the stage’s first prologue; but in so doing, he also highlighted his optimism for the future of this, his most recent theatre. “Let no nice Sparks despise our humble Scenes,” for though the audience would not hear “*Garrick*[’s] thund’ring” or would they see the mechanized “Feats of *Covent-Garden*’s Harlequin,” Douglass steadfastly assured his listeners that “*Athens* from such Beginnings, mean and low! Saw *Thespis*’ Cart a wond’rous Structure grow.”<sup>2</sup> However, by October 1770, Douglass experienced a change of heart and sought to replace the New Theatre, believing “the situation, size, and aukward construction of the House” was a major “disadvantage” to “the performances of the American Company.” Douglass further argued that a more “commodious” theatre and one in a more “convenient part of the city” would better “stimulate” the audience “to a grateful exertion of their faculties.”<sup>3</sup> Douglass evidently shared the sentiments of Y.Z., as he considered the playhouse’s physicality and its appearance a critical component of English theatergoing. Douglass’s prologue, the comments of Y.Z., as well as the theatre

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<sup>1</sup> *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis) 6 September 1770. Colley Cibber was one of London’s most famous comedians in the early eighteenth century, manager of Drury Lane Theatre, and England’s poet laureate in the 1730s.

<sup>2</sup> *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis) 6 March 1760.

<sup>3</sup> *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis) 4 October 1770. A tinge of sarcasm cannot be ruled out in Douglass’s positive comments of the New Theatre’s humble beginnings.

manager's later pleas for elite patronage and subscription (to build a new theatre) reflected a bourgeois need for politeness and refinement in the Anglo Atlantic. Yet this middle and upper class desire for aesthetically pleasing, leisurely and polite environments frequently clashed with the expectations of working class theatre patrons.

From Kingston to Charleston to the rustling northern cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, men and women in England's eighteenth-century colonies ventured to the playhouse to laugh, to hiss, to see and be seen. Yet this polite endeavor was more than a popular form of leisurely entertainment; theatre was also a means by which Englishmen and women (either in America, Jamaica, Barbados, Ireland, or England) communicated with one another and participated in the Anglo-Atlantic World. This "permeable" world, as Bernard Bailyn described it, of cohesive trade networks and migration included the actors, plays, sets, props, and architectural practices colonists saw, heard, and felt in American and Caribbean playhouses.<sup>4</sup> Y.Z.'s comments reflect as much in his references to English actor Colley Cibber as well as his assumption that American colonists were familiar with the materiality of London's more famous theatres. Though it was often associated with local diversion, annual festivities, and political gatherings (especially in the British colonies), the Anglo theatre remained a focal point for the transatlantic trends of fashion, consumption, and genteel behavior and, as such,

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 83.



was equipped with the material pleasantries of a commercial and increasingly ‘polite’ bourgeois society.<sup>5</sup>

However, the eighteenth-century playhouse was a contested space where varying socioeconomic groups clashed over the theatre’s decorum and play content. Surprisingly, this culture war seldom led to open conflagrations of class-based violence (like that which occurred during the Astor Place Riots in 1849).<sup>6</sup> Instead class, gender, and racial tensions emerged within a complex material dialectic, a discourse of objects that visually and physically separated the heterogeneous theatre audiences of colonial America and Georgian England. Though most of these objects and architectural practices were

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<sup>5</sup> On the theatre as a crucial site of cultural discourse see Lisa A. Freeman, *Character’s Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

I see the eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic World as one of continuous contact and cohesive communication. Oceanic currents, favorable wind patterns, as well as vigorous trade and migration (forced or voluntary) carried ideas and cultural trends quickly and frequently across the ocean. The Anglo-Atlantic World, therefore, was economically and culturally interconnected. For a theoretical discussion of this historical phenomenon see David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History” in Idem. and Michael Braddick eds., *The British Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and Bailyn, *Atlantic History*.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the cultural implications of the Astor Place Riots see Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 58-61; Richard Butsch, “American Theater Riots and Class Relations, 1754-1849,” *Theatre Annual* 48 (1995): 41-59; John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 223-229; and Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 64-68

inspired by what Richard Bushman has called a “beautification campaign” (ornate chandeliers, impressive entryways, cushioned seats, and commodious boxes), others explicitly segregated the audience and threatened violence to those who transgressed social boundaries (a third-tier gallery and sharp iron spikes).<sup>7</sup> Some of these material tactics theatre managers borrowed from other commercialized spaces of bourgeois leisure (coffee houses, bathhouses, pleasure gardens, and mansions), while others were hybrid blends of prisons, private gardens, and city streets. Yet despite their very different social and geographic environments, theatre managers employed these spatial practices of social stratification with a remarkable transatlantic consistency. Moreover, Londoners and colonists alike understood the playhouse’s unspoken messages and the meanings imbued in its materiality.<sup>8</sup>

The semiotics of theatrical space were multiple, overlapping, and often commonly acknowledged, with managers, patrons, and the theatre’s critics infusing the material and spatial practices of the eighteenth-century playhouse with meaning. I argue that these person-object relationships reveal complex cultural constructions of gender, class, and race. Moreover, managers’ and patrons’ interactions with the artifacts and architecture of

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xiv.

<sup>8</sup> On the class tensions and ambiguities caused by the rise of bourgeois refinement see Ibid.; Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London’s Geographies, 1680-1780* (New York, The Guilford Press, 1998); and Robert Blair St. George, *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

the Anglo-Atlantic playhouse shaped and were shaped by discourses of power and consumption.<sup>9</sup>

The material culture of the eighteenth-century theatre was distinct from its Shakespearean and Court predecessors as well as its fragmented nineteenth-century counterparts. Though it shared similarities with each, it possessed its own idiosyncrasies that differentiated it from earlier and later versions. What set the Georgian playhouse apart was its liminal status, as it was in between the rigid cultural and (I would contend) spatial hierarchies of the nineteenth century and the inclusive, more fluid forms of leisure in the seventeenth century.

Behind many of the new and experimental eighteenth-century material tactics of the theatre lay changing conceptions of the bourgeois public sphere, particularly the social ambiguities surrounding the presence of women in public, the rising clamor of democratic rhetoric, and the ever-more intricate tenets of middle and upper-class manners. As argued by historians Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, self-regulation, the suppression of the carnivalesque, as well as the removal of the “grotesque collective body” became “the great labour of bourgeois culture.” Stallybrass and White continue:

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<sup>9</sup> For the implications of theatrical space and meaning see Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 5; and David Wiles, *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003). My theoretical conception of person-object relationships is informed by Dell Upton, “Form and User: Style, Mode, Fashion, and the Artifact” in Gerald L. Pocius, ed., *Living in a Material World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture* (St. John’s, Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1991).

The flux and heterogeneity of the theatre audience in consuming mood must be discharged elsewhere where it will not contaminate *culture*. This is no mere matter of 'refinement.' It is a transformation of certain material conditions of theatre-going which had been largely, if sometimes grudgingly, accepted and even enjoyed in an unremarked way until the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere and its increasingly phobic relation to the grotesque collective body. Under the increasing threat of democratic promiscuity the channels of communication and the circuits of reception within which 'culture' and 'rationality' now flowed had to be sealed off. Manners and political distinctions become interfused.<sup>10</sup>

Also at issue was a more pervasive consumerism, which challenged the rank-based deference of previous generations. And finally, intensifying class and racial antagonisms made it increasingly difficult for the rich and poor to convivially engage in recreational activities. Though these eighteenth-century Atlantic World phenomena continued and even strengthened in the nineteenth century, they did not fracture theatrical space into the brothel, the burlesque, the saloon, or the opera house as that which occurred in the early to mid-1900s. Instead, for a period of time (circa 1670 to 1830s), theatre managers offered differing forms of entertainment, for varying tastes, all under the same roof. Indeed, the Georgian playhouse, open to women, servants, slaves, artisans, the middle-class, and even royalty, was an uneasy and increasingly impossible spatial compromise.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 93.

<sup>11</sup> For descriptions of the sixteenth-century stage see John H. Astington, *English Court Theatre, 1558-1642* (Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999); E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, Vol. 2 (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1923); Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14-57; W. J. Lawrence, *The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies*, Second Series (Stratford-Upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913), 93-118; Richard Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1973), 25-50. For the nineteenth-century fragmentation of theatrical entertainment and the emergence of manners as an

By the mid-nineteenth century, the once heterogeneous theatre audiences, the loud and rambunctious pit and gallery patrons, and the cavalcade of pantomimes, dances, adlib, musical interludes, and encores had all but disappeared from the “legitimate” playhouse. Yet this process of bourgeois exclusion, refinement, and cultural secularization was slow, taking generations to complete.<sup>12</sup> In the interim, theatre managers tried to appease their wealthier patrons (most subscribers) with moral plays and lavish surroundings. Though theatergoers evaluated the materiality of colonial theatres

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indicator of social status see Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*; and Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. For the widespread effects of consumerism in the Anglo-Atlantic world see T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Cary Carson, “The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?” in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 483-697. On changing perceptions of comfort in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries see John Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities & Design in Early America, Modern Britain & Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). On the solidification of class and emergence of class consciousness in the eighteenth century see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); and Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Stallybrass and White contend that the process of the social separation of the rich and poor began with the bourgeois repression of the medieval carnival; see *Politics and Poetics*.

<sup>12</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 1-9.

according to different, less severe standards, even English colonists considered the playhouse's appearance an important facet of the evening's entertainment.<sup>13</sup>

In chapter one of this thesis, I investigate the artifacts of comfort that wealthy and middle-class patrons saw and interacted with when they entered an Anglo-Atlantic playhouse. Evidenced by the financial records of theatre managers such as David Garrick and Colley Cibber, the fineries of the playhouse amounted to a considerable expense. Lighting alone accounted for a significant portion of playhouse budgets.<sup>14</sup> Yet, candles and chandeliers had significance beyond the need to illuminate the stage as bright lighting signified wealth and bourgeois comfort.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, upholstery, carpets, and cushioned seats demonstrated the influence of middle and upper class efforts of social refinement and beautification. Though soft to the touch and pleasant to the eyes, these symbols of bourgeois exceptionalism exacerbated class antagonisms and initiated a process of lower-class exclusion.

The second chapter discusses the social and moral ambiguities surrounding the presence of women in the eighteenth-century playhouse. Playhouses were gendered

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in a review of an eighteenth-century play in Maryland, the critic commented upon the ways in which the "horrid ruggedness of the roof, and the untoward construction of the whole [play]-house" sullied the otherwise fine performances of the company. See *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis) 6 September 1770.

<sup>14</sup> E.L. Avery, "Critical Introduction" in W. Van Lennep, ed., *The London Stage, 1660-1800: a Calendar of plays, entertainments & afterpieces, together with casts, box-receipts and contemporary comment. Compiled from the playbills, newspapers, and theatrical diaries of the period*, 5 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960-68), 2: xlviii-xlix;

<sup>15</sup> Bushman, *Refinement*, 125-6.

spaces where particular behaviors corresponded to certain sections. The theatre's boxes were passive, feminine, and on display, whereas the pit and gallery were vociferous, rowdy, and masculine spaces.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, middle and upper class women violated social protocol if they sat in the pit. Despite its gendered divisions, social critics still decried the playhouse as a lascivious site of gender transgression and assignation. However, moral opprobrium did not focus upon women on stage (as it did with burlesque performers in the nineteenth century), but upon the indiscriminate, promiscuous mixture of lower-class women and prostitutes in the gallery, pit, and boxes.<sup>17</sup> Although the third-tier would later become the reserved domain for madams and their ladies, the eighteenth-century did not yet mark out a particular, exclusive space for prostitutes.<sup>18</sup>

And lastly, I analyze a seemingly contradictory material phenomenon of the refined Anglo-Atlantic theatre: spikes. In these spaces of leisure and enjoyment, a row of sharp iron spikes lined the stage and the lower tier boxes of the theatre, conveying threats of violence for any who dared transgress these boundaries. Ostensibly, the spikes protected the players and the middle classes from the unpredictable and sometimes

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<sup>16</sup> On the social uses of gender roles see Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 4-9; and Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Rev. Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). For discussion of the gendering of the nineteenth-century theatre and the feminization of the pit see Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 63-5; and Richard Butsch, "Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies: The Re-Gendering of Nineteenth-Century Theater Audiences," *American Quarterly* 46, No. 3 (Sep., 1994): 374-405.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the social threat nineteenth-century burlesque reformers posed see Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

hostile patrons in the pit and gallery. Yet, I argue that the spikes also revealed the ingrained anxieties of an increasingly consumer-driven gentry, attempting to make its own discrete public identity through fashion (dress, architecture, dishware, etc.), genteel behavior, and space (the city, coffeehouses, salons, pleasure gardens, and bathhouses). Thus, spikes reflected a middle step in a material and architectural process whereby the bourgeoisie excluded its public, leisurely activities from the working classes.



## Chapter One

### Comfort and Luxury

On September 15, 1752, Mr. Rigby stood upon the stage of Williamsburg's recently refurbished playhouse, gathered his composure, and prepared the audience for the evening's performances. Rigby's prologue recounted the virtuous qualities of the stage, thanked the audience for their attendance, and pleaded for their applause. Moreover, it reflected a feeling of pride for the comedians' triumph over "gloomy minds" and other vociferous critics of the theatre, most notably members of Virginia's ruling council.<sup>19</sup> The council could not ignore the public demand for theatre. "In this politer Age," Rigby argued, "on *British* Ground... The brilliant Stage with vast applause is crown'd."<sup>20</sup> Rigby's opening remarks reflected the players' larger strategy to convincingly portray theatergoing as a polite, genteel endeavor. Though Williamsburg had enjoyed periodic theatrical entertainment for nearly forty years, Virginians had yet to

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<sup>19</sup> The Hallam Company most likely held opening night on September 15, but there are two extant accounts which refer to two different dates. I have referenced both of them: John Singleton, "Prologue spoken by Mr. Rigby" (September 5, 1752) in Montrose J. Moses and John Mason Brown eds., *The American Theatre as Seen by its Critics, 1752-1934* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1967), 21-22; and *Virginian Gazette* (Williamsburg), 22 September 1752.

<sup>20</sup> Singleton, "Prologue," 21-22.

see a performance by a professional London company.<sup>21</sup> As early as June 1752, the *Virginia Gazette* informed the public of the impending arrival of Lewis Hallam's London Company of comedians. To further stir curiosity, the announcement went on to mention that "the scenes, cloaths (*sic*), and decorations [were] all entirely new, extremely rich, and finished in the highest taste." "The best hands in London" had painted the backdrops. Furthermore, the actors were "perfect in all the best plays, operas, farces, and pantomimes." Truly, Virginian ladies and gentlemen could depend upon "being entertain'd in as polite a manner as at the theatres in London."<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, I argue Hallam's promise of polite entertainment referenced complex and fluid discourses of eighteenth-century genteel identity and class tension.

During the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, elites increasingly distinguished themselves through fashion, conversation, and polite manner; but such performances of gentility required spatial settings and more importantly audiences.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, theatre managers provided elegant and comfortable surroundings to accommodate the upper and middle class need for conspicuousness and leisure. However, the theatre differed from other eighteenth-century spaces of bourgeois sociability. Unlike the private parlor, ballroom, or salon the playhouse was a commercialized public space, open to anyone of the lower classes who could afford a

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<sup>21</sup> Odai Johnson and William Burling, *The Colonial American Stage, 1665-1774: A Documentary Calendar* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>22</sup> *Virginian Gazette* (Williamsburg), 21 August 1752.

<sup>23</sup> Carson, "Why Demand," 521; and David Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), xix.

gallery ticket (which was usually one third to as little as one fifth the price of a seat in the boxes).<sup>24</sup> Also, the theatre shared few similarities with coffeehouses, as these establishments had clearly posted rules of conduct and served only men (who mostly conversed about political, social, and economic matters).<sup>25</sup>

What therefore distinguished the theater were not only its patrons' varying manners and socioeconomic statuses but also the audience's power to alter programming and create havoc in an otherwise polite and luxurious environment. Moreover, disorderly behavior – yelling, fighting, throwing food, or rioting – could be seen and heard by all attendees. Despite this, class divisions remained distinct and readily interpreted (though not necessarily obeyed) by eighteenth-century Englishmen and women. Through seating arrangements and objects – such as chandelier lighting, seat cushions, and lush fabrics – theatre managers set elites and the middle classes apart from servants and workers. These demonstrations of wealth and luxury recreated and reinforced the social hierarchy within the playhouse. However, signs of elite privilege and exclusivity were also permeated with class tension and hostility. Thus, the person-object relationships of the playhouse were embedded with struggles over the limits of consumer rights, the enactment of social deference, and the dissemination (particularly to the lower middle classes and skilled laborers) of manners. In other words, the unique characteristics of the

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<sup>24</sup> Harry William Pedicord, "The Changing Audience" in Robert D. Hume, ed., *The London Theatre World, 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1980), 243.

<sup>25</sup> E.J. Clery, *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 13-18.

Anglo-Atlantic theatre conditioned the audience's "presence, action and discourse."<sup>26</sup> To understand the power of politeness, we therefore need an awareness of the architecture and materials with which theatergoers interacted.

Ornately decorated interiors were typical in London's first Restoration playhouses. Indeed, baroque excessiveness often clashed with the audience's ability to view or listen to the performance. George Saunders, an eighteenth-century architectural historian, claimed England's first playhouses "paid no attention" to "the voice" and "were as careless with respect to the vision."<sup>27</sup> Opened in 1703, the Queen's Theatre in Haymarket perhaps best illustrated how ostentatious form could sacrifice the stage's function. The structure's cavernous interior and obstructive Corinthian pilasters made it nearly impossible for the actors to be seen or heard by all attendees.<sup>28</sup> Colley Cibber considered the playhouse a "vast triumphal piece of architecture," complete with "vast columns" and "gilded cornices;" but "this extraordinary and superfluous space

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<sup>26</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 57. My discussion of theatrical space is also informed by Wiles, *Short History*, 7-9. On the phenomenological implications of space see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xvii.

<sup>27</sup> George Saunders, *A Treatise on Theatres*, (London: J. Taylor, 1790; reprinted New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1968), 26.

<sup>28</sup> David Thomas, ed., *Restoration and Georgian England, 1660-1788*, Theatre in Europe: a documentary history (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73,75-76. The designer of the Queen's Theatre, Sir John Vanbrugh, intended the playhouse to be a center for opera, which may explain the building's ornateness. However, the theatre's first residing company, Thomas Betterton troupe, performed plays.

occasioned such an undulation from the voice of every actor that generally what they said sounded like the gabbling of so many people in the lofty aisles in a cathedral.”<sup>29</sup> Cibber’s analogy of the Queen’s Theatre to a grand place of religious authority suggested an uncomfortable, phenomenological association of leisured enjoyment and careless revelry with sacredness and spiritual awe. For Cibber and Saunders, highlighting the play and the stage’s spectacles were central to good theatre design. However most middle and upper class consumers sought commercialized spaces which mirrored and thus reaffirmed their material and behavioral refinement.<sup>30</sup>

The late seventeenth century marked a period of steady compromise in playhouse architecture, as the middle and upper classes’ demand for aesthetically pleasing environments and comfort did not necessarily fetter actors’ or pit and gallery patrons’ need for clear views of the stage and improved auditory. As a central architect in this process, Sir Christopher Wren and his two London playhouses, Dorset Garden (1671) and Drury Lane (1674), demonstrated both the conflicts and negotiations within the cultural conceptions of Anglo theatrical space. Celebrated by his English contemporaries for the church of St. Stephen (1681), St. Paul’s Cathedral (1710), and numerous other public edifices, Wren had a knack for building impressive structures that conveyed wealth and

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<sup>29</sup> Colley Cibber, “Colley Cibber describes Vanbrugh’s playhouse,” in *Restoration*, 75. The theatre’s acoustic flaws led to alterations in 1708.

<sup>30</sup> See Miles Ogborn’s discussion of politeness and luxury in Vauxhall Gardens. He argues eighteenth-century Englishmen and women consumed this commercialized space to celebrate not their own wealth and power but also their country’s; *Spaces*, 116-19.

power.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Wren's Dorset Garden stirred the patrons' visual senses with its ornately decorated boxes, gilded carvings, and massive columns (Figure 1).<sup>32</sup> French traveler François Brunet believed the "auditorium [was] infinitely more beautiful and well-kept than those in the playhouses" of France.<sup>33</sup> Yet despite its polite interior, it remained difficult for all those in the audience to see and hear the actors. When commissioned by Thomas Killigrew to design the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane in 1672, Wren altered his playhouse form. In place of the baroque conventions, Wren applied architectural principles used in Elizabethan theatres, clearing and then thrusting the stage into the pit. Blending old modes with the late seventeenth-century consumer demand for spectacle, Wren equipped Drury Lane with ample backstage space for multiple scenic drops. Cibber showered praises upon Wren's changes, as "all objects were thus drawn nearer to the sense; every painted scene was stronger; every grand scene and dance more extended; every rich or fine coloured habit had a more lively luster."<sup>34</sup> While more simplistically adorned, Drury Lane still had an air of elegance, complete with grand entrances, Corinthian pilasters (which did not block views of stage), chandeliers, and a handsomely engraved ceiling (Figure 2). Moreover, the side boxes continued to face the pit and galleries, providing elites a platform upon which they could display their

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<sup>31</sup> *The biographical magazine: Containing portraits & characters of eminent and ingenious persons, of every age & nation* (London, 1794), 140.

<sup>32</sup> Leacroft, *Development*, 86.

<sup>33</sup> François Brunet, "François Brunet describes the interior of the Duke's Theatre" (1676) in *Restoration*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Colley Cibber, "Colley Cibber's description of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, prior to 1696," in *Restoration*, 72.

refinement. Though building size, seating capacity, the commodiousness of boxes, side box angle to the stage, and decorative detail varied from Wren's design, Drury Lane Theatre served as a template for English playhouses in London and her colonies. Playgoers in the Anglo-Atlantic world thus shared a consistent cultural association of object and space to politeness and socioeconomic status.<sup>35</sup>

Promises of elegant theatres and polite entertainment abound in advertisements and reviews of English colonial playhouses. Refinement within British American theatres, however, did not necessarily center upon grand architecture or ornately decorated interiors. Instead, descriptions of elegance and comfort within colonial playhouses stressed warmth during cold nights, lighting, adornment to some extent, and ordered division. As in London's theatres, the social hierarchy was inscribed in the spatial composition of playhouse seating arrangements and objects. In describing Annapolis's West Street Theatre (1771), William Eddis remarked, "The boxes [were] commodious, and neatly decorated; the pit and gallery" held "a number of people without incommoding each other." These attributes led Eddis to conclude that the "structure [was] not inelegant."<sup>36</sup> Other Marylanders more enthusiastically approved of David Douglass's West Street Theatre, expressing their "greatest satisfaction" "with the House" on its opening night. The *Maryland Gazette* "thought" the theatre "to be as elegant and commodious, for its size, as any in America."<sup>37</sup> Douglass's Church Street Theatre (1773) in Charleston received similar approbation for its size, decoration, and lighting. "The

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<sup>35</sup> Leacroft, *Development*, 87-92; Thomas, *Restoration*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> William Eddis, "Another account of the theatre" (1771) in *Colonial American Stage*, 394.

<sup>37</sup> *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis) 12 September 1771.

House [was] elegantly finished, and supposed, for the size, to be the most commodious on the continent. The scenes... the disposition of the lights, all contributed to the satisfaction of the audience.”<sup>38</sup> Englishmen and women in both the colonies and London considered theatergoing a polite commercial endeavor, even though they begrudgingly experienced this form of leisure with the lower classes. But this coming together of multiple socioeconomic groups provided elites a forum to showcase their wealth and consumer power not only to their social peers but also to skilled laborers, servants, and footmen.<sup>39</sup>

The opportunity to be seen by the middle and lower middle class as well as experience spatial distinction in the side boxes persuaded members of the upper class to financially support and politically defend the theatre. English playhouses were spaces of performative display (both in the audience and on stage) and entertainment. The scenery, sets, music, and costumes comprised “a major part of the attraction of a colonial theatrical performance.”<sup>40</sup> But spectacle was not exclusive to the stage. Historian Lisa Freeman argues, “No single controlling gaze regulated the space of performance” as the “power of performance was routinely shared between the audience and performers.” Elites possessed a spatial advantage in this contest as they sat in boxes that began near the stage and ascended along side and then behind the pit. Furthermore, the boxes remained

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<sup>38</sup> *Rivington's New York Gazette* (New York) 24 February 1774.

<sup>39</sup> For a list of colonial theatres see Johnson and Burling, *Colonial American Stage*, 44-58. On the impermanence and eighteenth-century American playhouses see Brooks McNamara, *The American Playhouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969), 46-70.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson and Burling, *Colonial American Stage*, 36-8.



“fully lit throughout the evening.”<sup>41</sup> Both factors assured the elite that the audience could see their material and behavioral fineries at all times. One particularly pretentious elite caught the eye of John O’keeffe and his fellow patrons in a 1760’s Dublin theatre. Seated “in the left-hand stage box,” this “grand gentleman” “placed himself upon the edge of the box, his legs stretched out at full length, crossing each other, his arms also folded and his shoulder resting against the side of the box.” With “his prime wish of an ample display” fulfilled, the “eyes of the audience” could take in the elegant refinement of his person. O’Keeffe remarked “his clothes were silk and richly embroidered; his hair, tastefully dressed with ringlets...his sword, with a large and magnificent silver sword-knot.” Admiration, however, soon turned to “a clamour of mirth” when in “the very height of this proud and careless display” the gentleman “overbalanced himself and tumbled into the pit.” Though “no bones were broke,” O’Keeffe was certain that the gentleman had made his last “attempt to captivate the notice of the audience and turn it from the stage, the true point of attraction, to his own fine self-admired self.”<sup>42</sup> This accident and, more generally, the elite’s tendency of showing off their latest fashions in the playhouse incited a discussion of box size and ladies’ hair.

The trend of wealthy women wearing their hair exceptionally high and placing feathers in it attracted the attention of several eighteenth-century theatergoers in London. At a benefit performance in 1775, one spectator commented upon the need to enlarge the boxes to accommodate “the females of fashion.” These ladies, who had succumbed to “the rage for high feathers,” found the “the roof of the box was rather too low for

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<sup>41</sup> Freeman, *Character’s Theater*, 3-5.

<sup>42</sup> John O’Keeffe, “An exhibitionist spectator” (1826) in *Restoration*, 408.

them.”<sup>43</sup> A self-entitled “Hater of Monsters” claimed that women’s heads had “of late become so enormous, that, in order to behold them without disgust,” he imagined “them so many Patagonians, and consequently that the feet of those in the boxes rest upon the ground on a level with the floor of the orchestra.” Such fantasized conversion was a “much more tolerable idea than to suppose them dwarfs with giants heads.” When the author questioned a “brocaded monster” as to why she wore hair so, “her ladyship” responded: “it is the fashion.”<sup>44</sup> Although revolted by upper class women’s appearances, this Hater of monsters was drawn to the boxes. Moreover, how theatergoing ladies wore their hair signified polite refinement or conversely the absence of wealth.<sup>45</sup>

Occupying a side box seat was a sign of upper middle or upper class status; however members of the lower middle classes could challenge this spatial effort of class distinction. While critiquing English wastefulness, Mr. Senex inveighed the impecunious habits of London’s skilled laborers; “even the journeyman of a milliner’s shop will jostle a lady in the side-boxes, to whom he has possibly carried a pair of ruffles in the morning.”<sup>46</sup> By sitting in the side box, the journeyman and his companion contested the elite’s claims of spatial exclusivity within the playhouse. For an evening, this skilled laborer partook in material fineries usually reserved for the upper class.

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<sup>43</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Norfolk) 23 August 1775.

<sup>44</sup> *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth) 10 June 1768.

<sup>45</sup> Kate Haulman, “Fashion and the Culture Wars of Revolutionary Philadelphia,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 4 (October 2005): 637-38.

<sup>46</sup> *Boston Chronicle* (Boston) 25 December 1769.

The lighting, the cushions, and the decorative detail of side boxes appealed to bourgeois consumers of commercialized space. Upon entering the Anglo-Atlantic playhouse, the middle and upper classes encountered an increasingly necessary attribute of refined eighteenth-century households: a well-lit interior. But this characteristic of elegant space became a requisite of profitable eighteenth-century theatres. As historian Richard Bushman contends, “The need for light... was more than practical.” Ornamented chandeliers and multiple spermaceti candles filled the playhouse with visual and olfactory cues for polite sociability and entertainment. Likewise, the soft feel of cushioned seats and the rich adornment of box interiors instilled in elite patrons a phenomenological sense of social distinction and cultural exclusivity.<sup>47</sup> The sensory experiences of being placed above the pit, illuminated by candles, and framed by engraved columns conditioned genteel behavior and at the same time infused the elite’s interaction with these material signs of wealth with class tension.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, person-object relationships with the Anglo-Atlantic theatre revealed lower and lower middle class challenges to the material diffusion of politeness. A coachman, named Francis Cooke, made such an affront to one refined object of Covent Garden in 1737. After assaulting the sentry “who had the care of His Royal Highness’s” box, Cooke attempted to have sex with a woman he had “picked up.” However, his efforts of

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<sup>47</sup> Bushman, *Refinement*, 126 and for the upholstering of church pews see 178. On furniture shaping human behavior and the tenets of politeness see Mimi Hellman, “Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32.4 (1999): 415-445.

<sup>48</sup> On the use of cushioned pit benches in eighteenth-century Holland see James Ralph, *The Case of our Present Theatrical Disputes, Fairly Stated* (London: printed for Jacob Robinson, 1743), 40.

transforming the Prince's chair into a "bawdy house" were thwarted by the whips of three adamant sentry men.<sup>49</sup> Cooke's daring interactions with the Prince's chair demonstrated a lower class desire to spoil the objects of wealth and upper class exclusivity. This lower class urge to damage or wreck the material symbols of social refinement surfaced violently during London's 1763 Half Price Riots. At Drury Lane, rioters shattered the "glass lustres," which caused the "lighted candles" to fall "to the ground." Moreover, the "benches [were] torn up, the sconces broke[n], the actors pelted, the chandeliers destroyed, and all is anarchy and confusion."<sup>50</sup> Through choice of object, rioting patrons contested upper class conceptualizations of commercialized space as well as the material manifestations of polite sociability.

Refinement permeated the Anglo-Atlantic theatres of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As consumers' tastes for elegance, comfort, and beauty filtered through to the middling classes, theatre managers increasingly needed to refurbish their buildings with the latest trends of polite space and fashionable elegance. Without the regulations practiced in more recent commercial entities of leisure, playhouses had to rely on their physicality to recreate and reinforce the social order. Therefore, commodiousness and elegance not only referred to size, softness, and light but these descriptors also revealed the class struggle over theatergoers' behavior.

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<sup>49</sup> *The London Daily Post* (London) 1 February 1737.

<sup>50</sup> "The Fitzgiggo Riot at Drury Lane, 25 January 1763" in *Restoration*, 401. On the motives and the media's role in this riot see Heather McPherson, "Theatrical riots and cultural politics in eighteenth-century London," *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 43 (Fall 2002): 238.

## Chapter Two

### Sexual Ambiguities: Polite Ladies, Prostitutes, and the Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Atlantic Theatre

On December 10, 1761, the *New York Gazette and Weekly Post Boy* published a letter in which a Mr. “Philodemos” questioned the “modesty” and moral strength of those ladies who regularly attended the playhouse. The theatre, in his opinion, had too “often proved fatal to [women’s] reputations, by criminal assignations, and lascivious intrigues.” His words, however, did not settle well with all who read them. One week later, a woman named Amanda replied in print to the comments of Philodemos. Since no “good write” would likely respond to the comments of such an “impudent fellow,” Amanda, an avid lover and frequent patron of the theatre, believed that the chore of rebutting Philodemos’s “scurrilous” allegations had befallen her. “I imagine” his opinion “is condemned as a piece too low to merit an answer from the pen of a good write. Nay, should think it unworthy of mine (being one of the female tribe) had he not spirited up my resentment to the highest pitch, by the defamatory treatment of my sex.” “Ought not this” [his “insinuation”], ladies” be “resented in the highest manner?” “Surely all must join me in answering in the affirmative.” “In the name of all [her] incensed females,” Amanda asked Philodemos “whether [he could] affirm as matter of conscience, that plays in general will so corrupt a female mind, as to make her lose all sense of virtue.” Believing no written defense from Philodemos could undermine her logic, Amanda

“maintain[ed] that plays have not this tendency.”<sup>51</sup> Amanda’s assertion would stir an ongoing debate in the winter issues of the *New York Gazette and Weekly Post Boy* about the playhouse’s ability to redeem or corrupt the female mind.

Though perhaps few of Philodemos’s urban contemporaries shared his sentiments, his comments nevertheless echoed a long-standing, puritanical tradition of defaming the playhouse’s negative influences. However, Philodemos’s concerns stand apart from sixteenth-century criticisms of the stage. Whereas duplicity (the feigned reproduction of God’s divine works or the lowly actor’s performance of a king) and economic wastefulness (in regard to both the patron’s time and money as well as the theatre’s unproductiveness) lay at the heart of earlier magisterial and religious opprobrium against the playhouse, Philodemos’s anxieties focused instead on the “modesty” of “play-house ladies” and the corruptibility of a woman’s character. “If you [Amanda] want an instance” of plays proving “fatal to the reputation of the [female] sex,” “read the celebrated history of Clarissa Harlowe, and see where the ruin of poor Sally Miller, took its rise.” But not just plays could undermine a lady’s moral education; the theatre itself – its spatial and material composition – triumphed a woman’s appearance, her superficiality, over her inner sanctity. In Philodemos’s words, “I perceive you [Amanda] and your play-house ladies, have been made to believe you are all Goddesses, and proper objects of adoration. A doctrine frequently taught at the theatre!”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *New York Gazette and Weekly Post Boy* (New York) 17 December 1761.

<sup>52</sup> *New York Gazette and Weekly Post Boy* (New York) 24 December 1761. On religious opposition to the stage see Richard Burrage, *A Scourge for the Play-Houses: or the Character of the English-Stage* (1702) in *Antitheatrical Tracts, 1702-1704*, Garland Edition (New York: Garland

The eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic playhouse was a multifunctional space for different socioeconomic groups of women. First, the theatre served as a showcase for bourgeois women's latest fashions, polite manner and conversation. In addition, plays could instruct middle and upper class women in the benefits of a moral life and the tragedies of a sinful one. The theatre also hosted women who did not particularly care for lessons in virtue or an evening of polite banter. Second, prostitutes and orange wenches frequently roamed the interiors of eighteenth-century playhouses for economical purposes. And finally, the stage permitted actresses to play male roles in breeches, skirting the divide between men and women and openly transgressing gender boundaries, often to the delight of male patrons.<sup>53</sup> Within the playhouse walls the rich, the up and coming, the poor, and the libidinous came together to see plays, pantomimes, acrobatic feats, and musical interludes. Although middle and upper class women could mingle with others of similar social standing or observe in dramatic form the consequences of female indiscretion and lasciviousness, the sexual availability of prostitutes in the audience and the cross-dressing of actresses on stage may have rendered the theatre's polite decorum and didactic play content disingenuous. To reconcile this gap between theatre as vehicle for middle-class values and haven for unbridled ribaldry, eighteenth-

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Publishing, 1974); Tom Goyens, "House of the Devil: Opposition to the Theater in Colonial America," *The Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter* 24 (Spring 2003): 8-16; and Edmund Morgan, "Puritan Hostility to the Theatre," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 110, no. 5 (October 27, 1966): 340-7.

<sup>53</sup> For example, Peg Woffington was an incredibly popular cross-dressing actress in eighteenth-century London; see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 48-58.

century managers negotiated the divisions of playhouse space, attempting to appease (or least mollify) all those who entered their respective establishments.

With changes in price, seating arrangements, or programming often resulting in resistance or even violent reprisals from the audience, the separation of commercialized sex and male ogling of women's bodies from genteel hetero-sociability and moral instruction was a long process.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the financial allure of middle-class patronage convinced many theatre managers to struggle for order and sexual propriety in their playhouses; a task complicated by a growing sense of consumer privilege (expressed largely through the gallery's boisterous requests for comedy, music, and spectacle), conflicting conceptions of bourgeois sexuality, and intensifying class opposition. Managers therefore took incremental steps to ensure the theatre's place in the leisurely routines of the upper and middle class: they offered realistic tragedies, which promoted the proclaimed benefits of female sexual discretion and middle-class industriousness; they heeded lower class patrons' clamors, interspersing comedies with plays of moral instruction; and they not only tolerated prostitution but also exploited actresses' and female patrons' sexuality. In this chapter, I first argue theatre managers tried to differentiate the stage's messages of middle-class virtue from the potentially lewd actions of a rambunctious audience through spatial and material practices. Keeping the playhouse peaceful and therefore hospitable to the middle and upper classes, however, required an air of respect for the audience's varying tastes, a bit of musical revelry, and (for many male patrons) the opportunity of visual and sometimes physical titillation. I

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<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the most dramatic examples of change resulting in riot were London's Half Price Riots (1763) and the Old Price Riots (1809); see McPherson, "Theatrical riots," 236-240.



then contend the promise of sexual stimulation influenced a number of men to attend the theatre, including gentlemen. Few playhouse owners failed to capitalize upon men's desire for arousing forms of leisure and entertainment. Moreover, because not all middle and upper class men practiced the tenets of bourgeois prudery in the theatre, managers could not completely segregate prostitutes. The elite's demand for sex brought prostitutes (comprised largely of lower-class, urban women) to the theatre and persuaded some actresses (typically underpaid compared to their operatic counterparts) to exchange sexual favors for gifts and living expenses.<sup>55</sup> Actresses' and prostitutes' need for subsistence (or at least subsidized income) pitted their ostentatious sexual availability against middle class reserve and bourgeois women's desire for polite spaces of pleasure and social refinement.

In a space where the purchase of a ticket translated into a sense of ownership and self-entitlement, restricting the patron's access to the stage brought a semblance of order to the theatre, lessened the possibility of licentious behavior with the actresses, and strengthened the realism of the performance.<sup>56</sup> For the late sixteenth and most of the seventeenth century, elites sat on the stage and visited female players behind the curtains

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<sup>55</sup> On prostitution in eighteenth-century London, including the city's playhouses see Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730-1830* (New York: Longman, 1999). For the sexual proclivities of elite theatergoers and the actresses who took advantage of them see E.J. Burford, *Wits, Wenchers and Wantons: London's Low Life: Covent Garden in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Robert Hale, 1986), 169-184.

<sup>56</sup> James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 160-83.

during performances; but by 1770 managers had finally ended these practices. Beginning in 1704, Queen Anne attempted to clear spectators from behind the scenes. Evidencing the difficulty of altering theatrical traditions, ten years later her proclamation was still attached to playbills. American theatre companies, such as the Holt Company, allowed “no person whatsoever to be admitted behind the scenes.”<sup>57</sup> Famous English actor and manager of Drury Lane Theatre, David Garrick officially banned the audience from his stage in 1762, favoring an enlargement of the playhouse over letting elites on stage during performances.<sup>58</sup> To “render” the Bass-End Theatre “more comfortable to the Ladies and Gentlemen who honour[ed] it with their appearance,” the Leeward Islands Company printed an advertisement in 1770, which prohibited all persons from going “behind the scenes; nor any Negroe whatever in the House.” The announcement claimed that audience members on stage in the St. Croix playhouse had “been disagreeable to several Ladies.”<sup>59</sup> With the Anglo-Atlantic stage cleared of patrons, the illusion of the play was more convincing to the audience.

Moreover, managers insisted upon verisimilitude in their actors’ characters and no longer encouraged the bombastic, flamboyant, and one-dimensional acting styles of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Eighteenth-century critic, John Hill praised actress Mrs. Pritchard because she carried “nothing that is peculiar to herself into the

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<sup>57</sup> *South Carolina Gazette* (Charleston) 30 October 1736.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Davies, “Drury Lane: Garrick bans the audience from the stage and enlarges the auditorium, 1762” (1780) in *Restoration*, 268. See also Leo Hughes, *The Drama’s Patrons: A Study of the Eighteenth-Century London Audience* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 21.

<sup>59</sup> *Royal Danish American Gazette* (St. Croix) 21 July 1770. David Douglass also disallowed people from entering the stage door see *South Carolina and American General Gazette* 6 May 1774.

character.” When Pritchard played “Merope, she [was] Merope; when she represent[ed] the wife of Theseus, she [was] the wife of Theseus.” Hill argued, “This ductility of mind, to continue the allusion, is the only true, as it is the only general sensibility.”<sup>60</sup> English audiences applauded David Garrick for his ability to take on the identity of his characters, to become those he portrayed on the stage.<sup>61</sup> For didactic pieces, Garrick’s and other actors’ embodiment of their parts transformed the stage into a realistic portrayal of human wretchedness and corruption as well as genuine kindness and virtue. In the words of eighteenth-century acting theorist Aaron Hill, “An actor is the professor of an art that represents... the whole diversity of passions whereby human life is distinguished throughout all its conditions, whether good or bad fortune.”<sup>62</sup>

I argue that these efforts of stage realism (along with lifelike scenery and period costumes) disassociated the play, particularly those dramas that stressed politeness and bourgeois chastity, from male audience members courting (sometimes aggressively) the unattended, actresses appearing in breeches, and women actively soliciting sex. Although the verisimilitude of performances varied throughout the Anglo-Atlantic, the true to life nature of mid-eighteenth-century plays and the unambiguousness of their moral messages led New Yorker Amanda and her supporters to defend the social benefits of the playhouse. Amanda’s “much obliged friend” Dolly Blithe argued that all should,

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<sup>60</sup> John Hill, *The Actor or A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (London, 1755; reissued New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972), 60-1.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of Garrick’s role in demonstrating the fluidity of identity in the eighteenth century see Wahrman, *Making*, 170-76.

<sup>62</sup> Aaron Hill, “Aaron Hill outlines a theory of acting in *The Prompter*” (1735) in *Restoration*, 170.

“that would be good Christians, diligently attend the theatre, and learn to play the devil well.” Had Philodemos “put on his spectacles,” Miss Blithe contended, he would have “seen it by their [the plays’] very titles” how “very instructing” the theatre was to women.<sup>63</sup> During the spring of 1772, one Virginian critic lamented over the lack of “moral plays.” “If the comick writers would [only] pursue” such dramas “the stage would become (what it ought to be) a school of politeness and virtue.”<sup>64</sup> Later that year, Mr. Morgan’s company of players “assured” its New England public “that nothing [would] be delivered... but what is conducive and consistent with politeness and morality.”<sup>65</sup> Through dramatic example, bourgeois theatergoers and managers argued, the stage could teach female patrons how to avoid the consequences of a libertine lifestyle, gambling, sexual promiscuity, and drunkenness.<sup>66</sup> The Anglo-Atlantic playhouse, however, did not accommodate a cohesive group of Englishmen and women.

Yet the audience’s differences in taste and disparities in motives did not drastically change the theatre’s position in polite society. The eighteenth-century playhouse was a place of bourgeois refinement and enjoyment and as such it remained a heterosocial space and, more importantly, an establishment which upper or middle class women could attend without fear of damaging their reputations. In his study of rise of the public sphere in Europe, historian James Van Horn Melton argues “Enlightenment

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<sup>63</sup> *New York Gazette and Weekly Post Boy* (New York) 17 January 1762.

<sup>64</sup> This review appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg) 2 April 1772 in response to Hugh Kelly’s 1770 drama entitled *A School for Libertines, or a Word to the Wise*.

<sup>65</sup> *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth) 19 June 1772.

<sup>66</sup> For the European discussion of the stage’s role in moral instruction see Melton, *Rise of the Public*, 165-6.

notions of sociability ... considered mingling of the sexes crucial to the progress of civil society.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, authors of Restoration and Georgian prescriptive literature believed women could refine masculine excess and inhibit male boorishness. Historian E.J. Clery contended “the ‘feminized’ man [was] a model of politeness, shaped by his contact with the female sex.”<sup>68</sup> In one eighteenth-century advice manual on theatergoing and politeness, women functioned as exemplary models of civil interaction and appropriate behavior. The anonymous author paid particular heed to Lady Betty; “I know no person that possesses the foregoing qualifications in a more eminent degree.” She embodied the best characteristics of a patron. She reserved her box months in advance, she familiarized herself with the plays before attending the theatre, and she exuded an air of “self-approbation.”<sup>69</sup> Yet another contemporary of Garrick suggested “the ladies” were “the brighter part of [his] constant audience.” Therefore, “Let it be a resolution... that you [Garrick] will pay a regard to” “DECENCY” in the theatre.<sup>70</sup> Middle and upper class women, like Lady Betty, most likely socialized in public space to refine as well as to participate in the genteel enjoyments of an urban landscape. Whatever their intentions, women in public were subjected to a scrutinizing gaze from men attempting to decipher,

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Clery, *Feminization Debate*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> *A Guide to the Stage: or, Select Instructions from the Best Authorities Towards Forming a Polite Audience; with some Account of the Players*, Second Edition (London: Printed for D. Job, 1751), 10.

<sup>70</sup> *A Letter to Mr. Garrick on the Opening of the Theatre, with Observations on the Conduct of Managers, to Actors, Authors, and Audiences and particularly to New-Performers* (London: Printed for J. Coote, 1758), 7.

through material signifiers and spatial contexts, not only a woman's socioeconomic status but also her sexual availability.<sup>71</sup>

Men's reading of women in the theatre however was complicated by consumerism, the ever-changing tenets of politeness, and ambiguous uses of space. Within the playhouse, prostitutes indiscriminately mixed with the middling classes seated in the pit, the back boxes, and first gallery, while orange-wenchers circulated throughout the theatre. Henri Misson, a seventeenth-century Frenchman in England, remarked in 1698 that "men of quality... ladies of reputation, and virtue, and abundance of damsels that hunt for prey, sit all together in this place [the pit], higgledy-piggledy, chatter, toy, play, hear, hear not."<sup>72</sup> Moreover, prostitutes answered the calls of elites and ascended into the side and front boxes. This social promiscuity incensed social critics such as Richard Burridge. During his early eighteenth-century theatrical experience, he witnessed some "persons of quality... bestowing Complements on common Harlots, huff'd up with so many Hyperbolical Expressions of their Beauty." "As for the Women-kind," who sat among the gentry, he "could not well distinguish common Jilt from Jilt of Quality: But [he] saw they were all as well pleased with the Diversion of Sinning."<sup>73</sup> Prostitutes to author James Wright had become a particular nuisance in Restoration playhouses. In contrast, during Elizabeth's reign, the ticket "prices were small (there

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<sup>71</sup> Coffeehouse barmaids negotiated space and used objects to preclude any sexual advances from their exclusively male clientele. See Clery, *Feminization*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Henri Misson, *Memoirs and Observations in his Travels over England, With Some Account of Scotland and Ireland*, trans. John Ozell (London: D. Browne, 1719), 219.

<sup>73</sup> Burridge, *Scourge*, 5.

being no scenes) and better order kept among the company that came, which made very good people think a play an innocent diversion for an idle hour or two.” But, eighteenth-century playhouses were “so extremely pestered with vizard masks and their trade, (occasioning continual quarrels and abuses) that many of the more civilised part of the town are uneasy in the company and shun the theatre as they would a house of scandal.”<sup>74</sup>

Despite their whereabouts in the playhouse, prostitutes made the availability of their services obvious. This conspicuous sexuality and vociferous bartering over price may have persuaded late eighteenth-century theatre managers to mark out spaces for prostitutes that were far removed from the stage, the side boxes, and the pit. A 1754 issue of *The Connoisseur* hinted at such a spatial process when it “took notice of that division of the upper boxes properly distinguished by the name of the flesh market.” Within this place, there was “frequently as much art used to make the flesh exhibited here look wholesome ... as there [was] by the butchers to make their veal look white.”<sup>75</sup> Their distinct appearance and unambiguous use of theatrical space made prostitutes less offensive to polite bourgeois society. Eighteenth-century Englishmen Charles Dibdin, “if [he] may judge by what [he] [him]self witnessed,” attributed one theatre’s well “conducted” audience to the segregation and regulation of prostitution. Upon a visit to Portsmouth’s playhouse, Dibdin was surprised to observe a seaport theatre so free of “vice and infamy.” “It [was] true, prostitutes were seen there in plenty, but there was a space set apart for them where they were obliged to conform to rules and order or be

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<sup>74</sup> James Wright, “Wright describes the nuisance of prostitution in the London theatres at the turn of the century” in *Restoration*, 189.

<sup>75</sup> *The Connoisseur* (London) 21 November 1754.

turned out. They did not dare to bar up the lobbies and insult modest women.” In his opinion, “More barefaced profligate indecency [was] practised (*sic*) at Drury Lane or Covent Garden Theatres in an evening than at Portsmouth Theatre in a season.”<sup>76</sup>

However (as Dibdin suggested) in most mid-eighteenth-century playhouse, prostitutes could still move around the theatre, answering a gentry-man’s call for sex or (if none had yet requested their services) attempting to gain one’s attention. “If these ladies would appear in any other quarter of the house, I [*The Connoisseur*] would only beg of them, and those who come to market, to drive their bargains with as little noise as possible.” Prostitutes’ ability to go throughout the theatre particularly unnerved the article’s author. “I have lately observed with some concern that these women deign to appear in the lower boxes, to the destruction of all order and great confusion of all modest ladies.” It was “absurd to endeavor the removal of their market into the front and side boxes.” The author further “hoped that some of their friends [would] advise them not to pretend to appear there, anymore than at court.”<sup>77</sup> *The Times* also complained about the open solicitation of sex and clearly visible presence of prostitutes in the lower front boxes in Covent Garden and Drury Lane.<sup>78</sup> Yet, managers’ dependence upon an elite, which held conflicting opinions of sexual propriety, made it difficult to confine prostitution to a specified space. The larger playhouses of the 1770’s, built with third tier galleries, eased this process, as distance and height rendered the exchanges between gentlemen and

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<sup>76</sup> Charles Dibdin, “The Problems of playing in a garrison town: Portsmouth” (1801) in *Restoration*, 406.

<sup>77</sup> *The Connoisseur* (London) 21 November 1754.

<sup>78</sup> Henderson, *Disorderly Women*, 59.



prostitutes more discreet.<sup>79</sup> Then again, not all men who sought an evening of theatrical entertainment and mingling with women wanted to procure the services of a prostitute.

Theatergoing upper and middle class women dressed fashionably, behaved politely, and represented an enticing reason for some men to go to the playhouse. In addition, managers often encouraged bourgeois women to sit in the boxes, which were raised and well-lit sections of the eighteenth-century theatre. In 1752, Lewis Hallam asked “the ladies” of Williamsburg “to give timely notice... for their places in the boxes, and on the day of performance to send their servants early to keep them.” He made this plea “in order to prevent trouble and disappointment.”<sup>80</sup> If bourgeois women seated themselves in the boxes, their separation from the crowd would preclude any unwanted sexual advances – groping or fondling – in the tightly packed pit. Perhaps, Hallam also realized the allure of polite women and therefore offered elite female patrons their own, moral zone in which they could display their expensive dress and refined manner. A similar tactic helped fill David Douglass’s Williamsburg theatre with women. After several evenings of enjoying Douglass’s company in 1771, Virginian Hudson Muse confessed to his brother that the female patrons affected his appreciation of the actors’ abilities, specifically actress, Nancy Hallam. Miss Hallam’s “luster was much sullied by the number of Beauties that appeared at that court. The house was crowded every night, and the gentlemen who have generally attended that place agree there was treble the fine

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<sup>79</sup> On prostitutes in the third tier of New York’s nineteenth-century theatres see Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 107-09.

<sup>80</sup> *Virginian Gazette* (Williamsburg), 21 August 1752.

Ladyes (*sic*) was never seen in town before.” The sight of so many “Beauties” compelled Muse to question the benefits of spending the rest of his life with just a single partner.<sup>81</sup> Gentlemen, like Muse, interacted with women in the playhouse, either through conversation, flirtatious glances, or ogling. The opportunity to see or be seen by members of the opposite sex was an incentive for men and women to partake in the theatre.

Despite the possible presence of prostitutes and men seeking sexual stimulation, polite ladies still considered the playhouse a space of moral instruction and social refinement. Amanda as well as those women who came to her defense went to the theatre because they appreciated the stage’s realistic portrayal of both human decency and vulgarity. Though most women did not address the public in print, they did show their support for the theatre with their attendance. On the other hand, Philodemos, James Wright, Richard Burrage, and other critics of the theatre chose to focus their attention and social commentaries upon the behaviors of the audience. If the eighteenth-century theatre were to remain a polite form of leisure, these men argued, playhouse managers would have to rigidly stratify their establishments.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the divisions within the theatre had to be readily interpreted by the varying socioeconomic groups which entered the building. Unfortunately for Wright and Burrage, not all middle and upper class men thought alike. Thus, the Georgian and Restoration theatre became a microcosm of the cultural tensions that existed within the bourgeoisie. Fear of the lower

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<sup>81</sup> “Letter from Hudson Muse, of Virginia, to his brother, Thomas Muse, of Dorchester, Maryland,” 17 April 1771, *William and Mary Quarterly* 1<sup>st</sup> ser., 2 (April 1894): 240-1.

<sup>82</sup> Pedicord, “The Changing Audience,” 243.

and lower middle classes and their growing consumer power would eventually unify bourgeois social and cultural interests in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

### Chapter Three

#### A Material Manner of Distinction: Eighteenth-Century Playhouse Spikes, Class, and Consumption in the Anglo-Atlantic Theatre

On the night of December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1752, “one white man and two Negroes” broke into Williamsburg’s playhouse and “violently assaulted” the unsuspecting actor, Patrick Malone. After wounding him, the “villains” threw Malone upon the “iron-spikes, one of which [ran] into his leg.” Unable to lift himself up, the actor helplessly hung from the stage “for a considerable time, till he was [finally] relieved by some Negroes.” But before his eventual rescue, Malone may have pondered the irony of his grave situation: impaled and nearly killed by the very objects meant to ‘protect’ him.<sup>83</sup> Though it is

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<sup>83</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg) 8 December 1752; Malone survived this ordeal and later died in St. Croix on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1770, see *Royal Danish American Gazette* (St. Croix) 14 November 1770. For a brief history of Hallam’s London Company of Players (later the American Company) see Weldon B. Durham, ed., *American Theatre Companies, 1749-1887* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 10-29; and Tom Goyens, “Lewis Hallam: An English Actor in America,” *The Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter* 22 (Fall 2001). This incident is also described in Hugh F. Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 57-8. For a further discussion of the use of spikes in Southern colonial theatres see Susanne Ketchum Sherman, *Comedies Useful: A History of the American Theater in the South, 1775-1812* (Williamsburg: Celest Press, 1998), 1. To see the same use of spikes in the Anglo-Atlantic world Allardyce Nicoll, *The Garrick Stage: Theatres and Audience in the Eighteenth Century*, Sybil Rosenfeld, ed., (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 25-6; and Johnson and Burling, *Colonial American Stage*, 161n.

unlikely that this thought ever crossed the player's mind as he waited in agony, his unfortunate dilemma illustrates the inherent paradox of eighteenth-century playhouse spikes.

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, playhouse spikes emerged as a new means of separating the unpredictable and sometimes riotous rabble of the pit and galleries from the players on stage and the elites in the boxes; but unlike the spikes' material predecessors, these boundaries threatened violence (Figure 3). Arranged tightly together, sharp, and measuring in length from eight to ten inches, the spikes resembled a line of bayonets, poised to strike down any who thought of traversing them. However, despite this menacing divide, the spikes were ultimately unsuccessful at keeping people from climbing on stage or descending into the pit and boxes. Indeed, Malone himself perhaps questioned the usefulness of the spikes several times during his "horrid" experience.<sup>84</sup> This paradoxical material practice, then, was more than a theatre manager's response to a persistent fear of rowdy audience members.<sup>85</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that spikes, specifically the peril they threatened, reflected intensifying class antagonisms largely caused by the rise of gentility. During the eighteenth century, the gentry created and then reinforced its own discrete public identity through fashion (dress, architecture, and dishware), polite behavior, and space

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<sup>84</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg) 8 December 1752.

<sup>85</sup> My ideas of space are informed by Lefebvre, *Production of Space*; Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989); and Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Providence: Berg, 1991).

(coffeehouses, salons, pleasure gardens, and bathhouses);<sup>86</sup> while at the same time, elites grew increasingly fearful of an up and coming artisan-class empowered by consumerism.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, in a space where varying classes entered occupying the same role as patrons, playhouse spikes clearly marked the social hierarchy and openly asserted violence if artisans and skilled laborers transgressed class boundaries.<sup>88</sup> As members of the audience and as paying consumers of commodified space, members of the pit and galleries believed it was their right to voice their opinions regardless of spiked barriers.<sup>89</sup> Thus, peoples' relationships to these threatening signs of social exclusivity and elite privilege reveal class tensions and conflicts otherwise lost.<sup>90</sup> Whereas Anglo-American theatre historians have focused upon the passionate religious animosity colonial officials held toward the acting of plays; have scrutinized the dynamics of play selection and its reflection of a burgeoning independent American/ anti-British identity;

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<sup>86</sup> On genteel self-fashioning in the colonies see Kenneth Lockridge, "Colonial Self-Fashioning: Paradoxes and Pathologies in the Construction of Genteel Identity in Eighteenth-Century America" in Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections of Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 274-339.

<sup>87</sup> Melton, *Rise of the Public*, 161-2; and Nash, *Urban Crucible*.

<sup>88</sup> Lisa Freeman argues that "seating arrangements in the playhouse could be read as a study in social stratification," *Character's Theater*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> On audience power see Hughes, *Drama's Patrons*.

<sup>90</sup> Upton, "Form and User," 162; for this approach to artifacts see also James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, Expanded and Revised Edition (New York: Double Day, 1996); and St. George, *Conversing by Signs*.

or have analyzed the cultural nuances of eighteenth-century theatre audiences; I contend that playhouse spikes remain an understudied facet of theatergoing culture.<sup>91</sup>

Though I could not establish a precise date, the spikes most likely made their first appearance after the 1660s, as these iron canines were not present in Elizabethan or

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<sup>91</sup> On religious prejudice towards the colonial American stage see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 152; Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1981); Goyens, "House of the Devil" 8-16; and Peter A. Davis, "Puritan mercantilism and the politics of anti-theatrical legislation in colonial America" in Ron Engle and Tice Miller, eds., *The American Stage: Social and economic issues from the colonial period to the present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 18-29. On theatre and the fashioning of American identity see Jeffery D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor, eds., *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Jeffery Richards, *Theater Enough: American culture and the metaphor of the world stage, 1607-1789* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1991); S. E. Wilmer, *Theatre, Society, and the Nation: Staging American Identities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5; Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theater from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the hands of the People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Chapter 1; Sherman, *Comedies Useful*, 19; Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 47-48; Butsch, "American Theater Riots," 41-59; Idem., *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chapter 1; William Pencak, "Introduction: A Historical Perspective" and "Play as Prelude to Revolution: Boston, 1765-1776" in William Pencak, Matthew Dennis, and Simon P. Newman, eds. *Riot and Revelry in Early America* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 6-7, 127; Thomas Jason Shaffer, "Transatlantic Performances: Politics and the Early American Theatre" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2002). On the colorful behavior of eighteenth-century audiences see Hughes, *The Drama's Patrons*.

Jacobean playhouses.<sup>92</sup> Based upon contemporaneous drawings and personal accounts, some sixteenth and seventeenth-century English stages – both public and royal – were instead lined with wooden railings. These one to three feet banisters separated the acting space from the seating areas, but did so without conveying violence. For example, in images of the Fortune Theatre as well as the famous seventeenth-century theatre, the Cockpit-in-Court, we see a wooden balustrade framed each respective theatre (Figures 4 and 5). Perhaps, the latter theatre’s aristocratic (and hence ‘well-behaved’) audience rendered the use of spikes unnecessary; yet, public amphitheatres (like the Globe, the Red Lion, and the Swan) did not protect their stages with sharp iron objects despite the varied social classes of their audiences. Instead, these commercial playhouses relied upon elevated platforms to create the boundary between players and standing patrons in the pit; attendees who, according to English gentry man Richard Brathwait, were as “distastefully rude” as their eighteenth-century counterparts.<sup>93</sup> Despite this apparent unruliness, neither the stages nor the boxes of open-aired theatres had iron spikes. The evident absence of spikes in both public and courtly venues suggests that the use of these artifacts occurred sometime after England’s Civil War destroyed most of London’s sixteenth and early seventeenth-century playhouses in the 1660s.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> My ideas on the emergences of objects and their relationship to discourse are informed by Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

<sup>93</sup> Richard Brathwait quoted in Gurr, *Playgoing*, 56.

<sup>94</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 2; Gurr, *Playgoing*, 14-57; Lawrence, *Elizabethan Playhouse*, Second Series: Shakespeare Head Press, 1913), 93-118; and Leacroft, *Development*, 25-50.



To narrow this further, I looked at images and scrutinized contemporaneous accounts of the Restoration playhouses of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Although two public theatres opened their doors in the 1660's (Thomas Killigrew's Vere Street Theatre in 1660 and Sir William Davenant's Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre in 1661), the majority of theatre building in London began in the 1670s (Dorset Garden in 1671 and Drury Lane in 1674) and ended in the early 1740s (King's Theatre, Haymarket in 1705, Goodman's Fields in 1714, and Covent Garden in 1732). A 1747 painting of Covent Garden substantiates the use of spikes and according to theatre historian Allardyce Nicoll little or no architectural changes were made to any of London's playhouses between 1740 and 1780 (Figure 6).<sup>95</sup> Outside of London, however, a number of theatres arose in England's resort areas, such as Bath (1746) and Bristol (1766), as well as in the British colonies during the 1730s, 40s and 50s.<sup>96</sup> In December 1752, actor Patrick Malone was thrown "upon the iron-spikes" that lined the stage of Williamsburg's theatre.<sup>97</sup> Thus, spiked barriers in Anglo-Atlantic playhouses most likely became a common architectural practice of division sometime between the 1670s and the late 1740s. This time period coincides with two other interconnected historical processes

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<sup>95</sup> Nicoll, *The Garrick Stage*, Chapter 3; Idem., *A History of Early Eighteenth-Century Drama, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1925), 271-3.

<sup>96</sup> Alfred Nelson, "James Winston's *Theatric Tourist*, a Critical Edition with a Biography and a census of Winston Material," vol. 1 (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1968), 1-3; Johnson and Burling, *Colonial American Stage*, 44-62.

<sup>97</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg) 8 December 1752.

taking place in eighteenth-century Europe and its peripheries: consumerism and the rise of genteel sociability among the middle and upper classes.<sup>98</sup>

The Consumer Revolution dramatically affected the theatre, making a playhouse's profitability dependent upon the manager's as well as his actors' ability to cater to the whims of an increasingly consumerist society. Unfortunately, to the dismay of many owners and performers, the Anglo-Atlantic playgoing public did not enjoy the same types of entertainment. There was however one notable exception: the seemingly pervasive love of spectacle. In numerable advertisements managers promised fantastic settings and costumes to lure potential patrons to their theatres. At the same time, eighteenth-century theatergoers increasingly came to expect elaborate scenic effects, avoiding theatres that did not use such technology, props, or costumes.<sup>99</sup> Though it represented a considerable expense, stage spectacle, in some shape or form, became a necessary feature of successful playhouses.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps, this additional capital clarifies the functional need spikes

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<sup>98</sup> Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain, 1660-1800* (New York: Pearson Education, 2001). Linebaugh and Rediker argue that the democratic rhetoric of Cromwell's Revolution also strengthened class antagonisms; see *The Many-Headed Hydra*.

<sup>99</sup> This is not to suggest that peoples' tastes were similar throughout the British world. Ultimately, people had different standards for theatres outside of London. Nevertheless, patrons demanded some effort at spectacle.

<sup>100</sup> The beginnings of this consumer-driven shift are perhaps best reflected in the success of Sir William Davenant's Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre (1661) and conversely the failure of his rival, Thomas Killigrew's Vere Street Theatre (1660). Davenant smartly employed simple yet novel scenic effects in his productions to the delight of his upper and middle class patrons, whereas Killigrew did not. Edward Langhans attributes this newfound desire to the London-return of exiled upper classes, fresh from the theatrical experiences of Paris and Rome. See Edward Langhans, "The Theatres" in Robert D. Hume, ed.,

fulfilled; after all, the destruction of valuable hand-painted backdrops or the theft of pricey clothing could potentially ruin a traveling company of players. But the outwardly menacing spikes did not create the formidable boundary we may assume; nor did these sharply pointed objects necessarily inhibit riotous patrons from damaging theatre property.<sup>101</sup>

A brief recount of well-known theatre riots in London and the American colonies illustrates the spikes' failure to keep the more rambunctious audiences from wreaking havoc within eighteenth-century playhouses. The Chinese Festival Riots resulted in two days of verbal hostility in November 1755, breaking out into open fighting on the eighteenth of that month. At some point in this skirmish, Drury Lane's pit patrons tore up the theatre's seats and demolished costly scenery. On another occasion, during the 1763 Half-Price Riots, people ascended Covent Garden's stage and bullied the performers with swords.<sup>102</sup> Finally, in May 1766, rioters shredded New York's Chapel Street Theatre to pieces and "to the Satisfaction of Many" burned the remnants in a bonfire.<sup>103</sup> Though other minor disturbances frequently took place, these extreme examples complicate a purely functional interpretation of the spikes. Put simply, when

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*The London Theatre World, 1660-1800* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 35-39; and Colin Visser, "Scenery and Technical Design" in *The London Theatre World*, 66-118.

<sup>101</sup> Sherman, *Comedies Useful*, 2.

<sup>102</sup> McPherson, "Theatrical riots," 236-239.

<sup>103</sup> *New York Mercury* (New York) 5 May 1766; this incident is also described in Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America*, 109; Johnson and Burling, *Colonial American Stage*, 243-4; Butsch, "American Theater Riots," 42-7; and George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, vol. 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 92-94. Odell suggested that the Sons of Liberty orchestrated the riot.

enraged theatre audiences wanted to break or steal something, they could do so—despite stage spikes!

However, most eighteenth-century actors played their parts free from any violent commotion, with the majority of plays ending with applause, not riots. Moreover, playhouse spikes surfaced in cities and communities with no history of disruptive spectators. Managers' fears of loss, therefore, do not entirely explain the emergence of spikes as a material practice. Instead, I see the cultural significance of playhouse spikes within elite discourses of polite sociability and, more specifically, their relationships to power, space, and material culture.

Though not a novel idea in the eighteenth century, politeness acquired a newfound significance among elites grappling with the disruptive social effects of the Consumer Revolution. As historian Cary Carson argues, no longer could a man's social standing be "measured by the number of cows" he owned "or his acres of plow land but by the cut of his coat and the fashionableness of his wife's tea table."<sup>104</sup> Thus, the ability to purchase the latest periwig or dish set distinguished the gentry from the lower rungs of society. Yet another means of differentiation was the conspicuous display of polite behavior. But like the trends of fashion, the tenets of politeness frequently changed. To stay current and therefore recognizably genteel, elites diligently read the most recent and ever-growing body of etiquette manuals; or they familiarized themselves with prescriptive literature, complementing what they learned from books with peer interaction. Either path to gentility required assiduous refinement in public, which subsequently led to an increase in commercialized spaces of leisure and polite sociability.

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<sup>104</sup> Carson, "Why Demand," 494.

Coffeehouses, bathhouses, pleasure gardens, opera houses, and theatres became places where elites demonstrated and refined their mannerisms; but playhouses, in both form and function, differed from other ‘polite’ environments.<sup>105</sup> Though heavily reliant upon middle-and upper-class patronage, English theatre managers nevertheless opened their doors to any who could afford a ticket, regardless of appearance. In fact, managers’ attempts to make the theatre more exclusive often met with fierce resistance from better-off workers, artisans, and servants.

Theatre managers, especially those in the British colonies, depended on elite and upper-middle-class patronage to supplement their expenses. Subscriptions, in particular, provided owners the necessary startup capital to build relatively elegant playhouses, purchase costly scenes, and any other materials theatergoers thought appropriate “for the reception of ladies and gentlemen.”<sup>106</sup> Needless to say, elites expected special treatment for their financial investments, while managers tried to satisfy (or in some cases mollify) not only their rich and more financially influential customers but also their poorer and potentially more violent patrons.

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<sup>105</sup> My ideas on the bourgeoisie public sphere are informed by Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991); Melton, *Rise of the Public*; and Shields, *Civil Tongue*; On commercialized forms of polite leisure see Carter, *Men and Emergence*, 53-76; Carson, “Why Demand,” 509-13.

<sup>106</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg) 21 August 1752. See also *New York Mercury* (New York) 2 July 1753. Theatre managers’ pleas for middle and upper class patronage abound in early American newspapers. See Rankin, *Theater*, 18, 27, 31, 61-2, 159, and 161; and Johnson and Burling, *The Colonial American Stage*, 85-87.

This juggling act theatre managers practiced in the Anglo-Atlantic was obviously problematic, as subscribers, gallery and pit attendants, as well as government authorities held differing perceptions of the playhouse's purpose. First, a number of officials sanctioned theatrical performances because they believed in the potential moral influences of the stage. Through the medium of performance, audience members could see in brief, yet dramatic form, the wretched consequences of gambling, theft, or adultery.<sup>107</sup> Second, elites went to the theatre to socialize with their own kind and possibly even learn from actors the latest tidbits of polite decorum or more clever turns of phrase. Third, some gentlemen ventured to the playhouse to laugh, flirt with young, unattended ladies, or perhaps satiate more prurient desires. Lastly, the skilled artisans or the aspiring lower-middle classes in the pit and galleries ventured to the theatre for these reasons and possibly others. In contrast to what elites preferred, members of the pit and galleries demanded farcical comedies, pantomimes, and the occasional display of fireworks, forms of entertainment that unnerved most in the boxes.<sup>108</sup> Theatre managers, therefore, catered to a fickle body of consumers, who held different and at times conflicting opinions of what they expected in return for their paid admission.

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<sup>107</sup> For an eighteenth-century critique of the playhouse as an instructor of politeness and morality see the ongoing debate in *The New York Gazette and Weekly Post Boy* (New York) 10, 17, 24 December 1767. See Melton, *Rise of the Public*, 161-65 for the moral utility of the playhouse.

<sup>108</sup> On changing tastes and the alternating of play content to accommodate workers on one night and elites the next see Hughes, *Drama's Patrons*, Chapter 3; and Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Chapter 2. For a similar process in the nineteenth century see Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

This clash over who ‘owned’ the theatre or who determined its purpose occurred in dramatic form in Philadelphia’s Southwark Theatre. The *Pennsylvania Chronicle* reported that on the night of October 28, 1772, “some ruffians in the gallery” ruined the otherwise exceptional presentation of *The Padlock*. According to the self-titled “Philothetaticus,” these “despicable” “rioters” “frequently interrupted the performance,” calling for songs and prologues “of which no notice [was] given in the bills” while at the same time outraging “that part of the audience who [went] there really to see the play, and be instructed and entertained.” Then the author asked if “those vociferous... carpenter[s], mason[s], or taylor[s]” would not want an “adequate compensation” if someone demanded more work than what was previously bargained for? Finally, the article ended with a public plea to the “directors of the theatre,” desiring constables to stand guard, “to apprehend, and carry to the Work-house” any who should make the “smallest disturbance.” Only this severe response to disruption, he argued, would “deter others from similar outrages.”<sup>109</sup>

Significantly, two and half months after the *Chronicle* published this review, the box spikes were stolen. On the night of December 9<sup>th</sup> 1772, “a number of evil disposed persons” broke “open the gallery door” of the Southwark Theatre. Once inside, these men “burglariously and feloniously” tore off and “carried away the iron spikes,” which had divided the “galleries from the upper boxes.”<sup>110</sup> Through the choice of object, the thieves challenged upper and middle-class claims to the ‘ownership’ of theatrical space.

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<sup>109</sup> *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia) 22-31 October 1772; Butsch, “American Theater Riots.”

<sup>110</sup> *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia) 10 December 1752.

Though Philo-theatricus believed his words (as well as those of his elite readership) outweighed the shouted demands of the lower-middle class, all patrons had an equal voice within the playhouse, despite its menacing boundaries.

In Philadelphia and throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world, this class-based conflict over the meaning of theatre distinguished the playhouse from all other commercialized spaces of leisure. In contrast, within coffeehouses, pleasure gardens, or bathhouses servants attended the rich, establishing a clear hierarchical interaction. Yet server and served were nominally the same within the context of the playhouse. There, elite, lower-middle class, and footmen alike were all patrons of the audience, giving rise to class-based contests over which plays actors performed, as well as the number of songs, dances, or encores. Of course, in the midst of this debate, actors and managers tried to make their livings. The buildings themselves, or their material makeup, subtly conveyed this inherent ambiguity of the meaning of the theatre.<sup>111</sup> As a common material characteristic of theatrical space, the spikes communicated messages readily interpreted by those entering the theatre.

The unmistakable violence spikes portrayed reflected elite anxieties of lower-middle-class behavior. From the gentry's perspective, artisans and skilled laborers represented a dangerous social entity, which could afford to participate in the leisurely activity of theatergoing that upper-class men and women so enjoyed. In other words, the Consumer Revolution raised the standard of living for the majority of English people, blurring and unsettling myriad material signifiers of social standing.<sup>112</sup> The elites

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<sup>111</sup> Ogborn discusses a similar ambiguity in the meaning of Vauxhall Gardens, *Spaces*, Chapter 4.

<sup>112</sup> Carson, "Why Demand," 502-3.



response to this phenomenon was to instill the spatial landscape as well as the politics of crime and punishment with an array of violent threats, each of which suggested that class lines were not to be crossed.<sup>113</sup> Thus, managers thought of spikes as a fitting concession to elite patrons unable to predict the actions of relatively empowered lower-middle-class consumers.<sup>114</sup> As threatening signs of social exclusivity, the spikes therefore located class antagonisms.

Few eighteenth-century playgoers and theatre managers ever mentioned the spikes, but this silence implies a familiarity with or ordinariness of these objects. Contemporaries understood the meanings of the spikes as symbols of class boundaries and bourgeois privilege within the theatre. However, their emergence, their menacing threat, and ultimately their ineffectiveness suggests that working class patrons were not so willing to abandon their right to challenge elite claims of 'ownership' and cultural dominance. Thus, the clashes between elites and skilled workers shaped by the rise of gentility, capitalism, and consumerism, showed themselves in playhouse spikes.

To provide an ending or an epilogue to this object analysis, the use of spikes began to decline when designers adapted more aspects of the French theatre model and also when a growing number of businesses began catering exclusively to the elite. As to the first, sometime during the 1790s, separate street entrances for playhouses (one for the box patrons and the other for the pit) became more frequent in Anglo-American theatres

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<sup>113</sup> On the oppression and violence wrought by the rise of capitalism and waged by the bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century see Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>114</sup> Melton, *Rise of the Public*, 161-2.

and therefore elites and lower-middle-class people came into less contact with one another. In addition, the larger theatres of the 1790s moved the cheap seats to the very back

of the playhouse, which further lessened lower-middle-class and elite interaction. As to the second point, new venues emerged that were too expensive for skilled workers, as owners of opera houses, hotels, and salons predicated their spaces upon the notion of exclusivity. In historian Richard Bushman's words, "The rude had to be excluded for the refined to achieve the elevated position that was their desire."<sup>115</sup> Conversely, the lower-middle classes in the early nineteenth century increasingly went to saloons, burlesques, and taverns to experience the forms of entertainment that they actually enjoyed. But the spikes continued to linger for a few decades into the nineteenth century (seen in *Killing, No Murder*, an image from the Old Price Riots in London's Grand National Theatre), testifying to their lasting effect upon material culture.

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<sup>115</sup> Bushman, *Refinement*, xv.



Figure 1  
The Dorset Garden Theatre, 1671. Reproduced in Leacroft (1973), 86



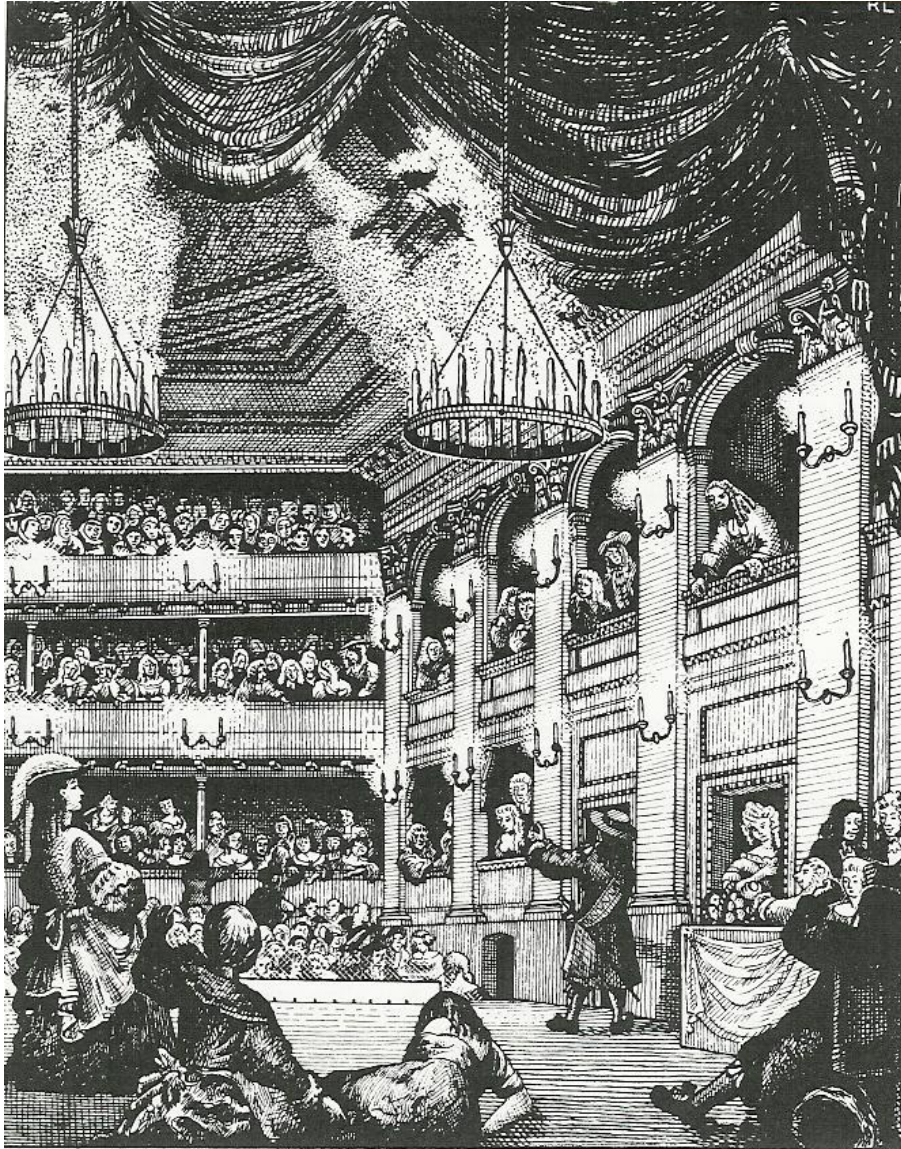


Figure 2  
Interior of Drury Lane, 1674. Reproduced in Leacroft (1973), 97



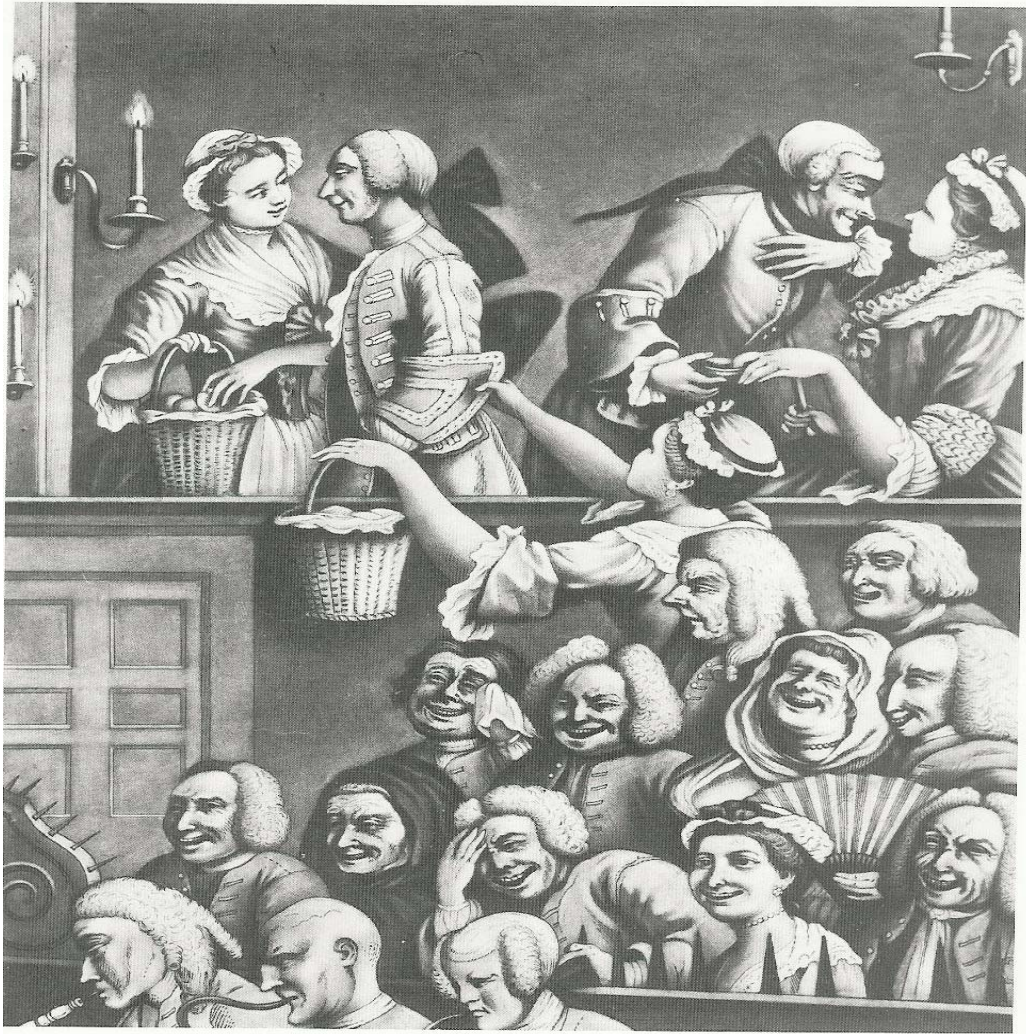


Figure 3  
William Hogarth, *The Laughing Audience*, 1733



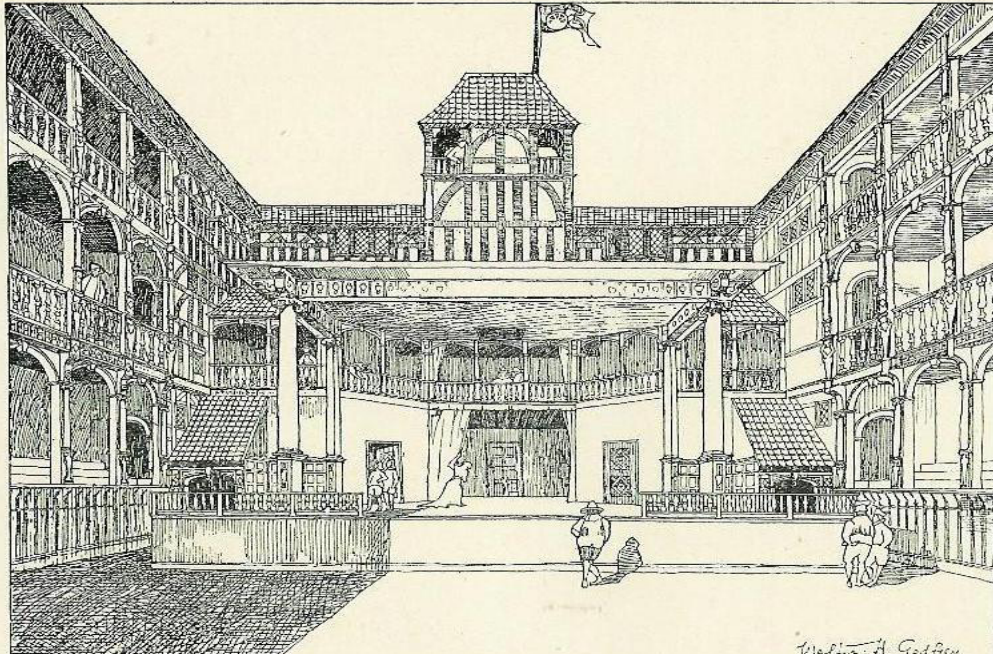


Figure 4  
The Fortune Theater. Reproduced in Nicoll (1980)

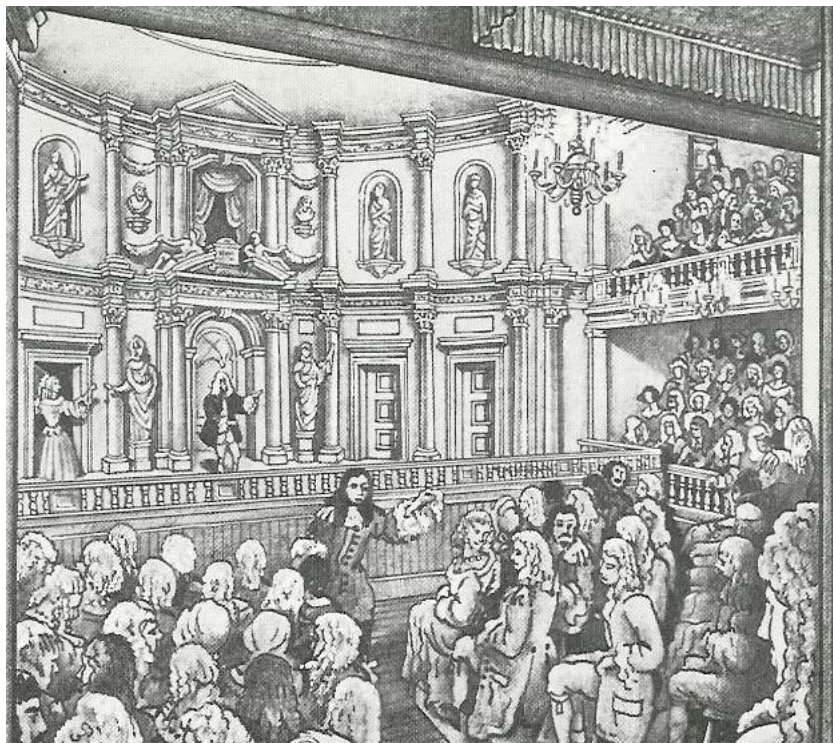


Figure 5  
The Cock-Pit in Court, Seventeenth Century. Reproduced in Leacroft (1973), 77



Figure 6  
Interior of Covent Garden, 1747

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