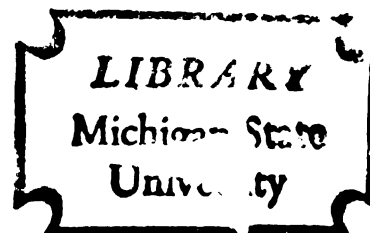


THOMAS WIGNELL AND THE CHESNUT STREET THEATRE

Thesis for the Degree of Ph. D.
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
JOHN HAROLD HERR
1969



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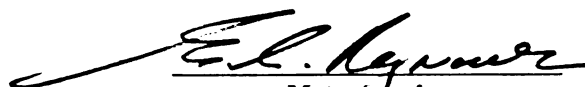
THOMAS WIGNELL AND THE CHESNUT STREET
THEATRE

presented by

John Harold Herr

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in Theatre


Major professor

Date 5/15/69

ABSTRACT

THOMAS WIGNELL AND THE CHESNUT STREET THEATRE

By

John Harold Herr

Thomas Wignell (1752?-1803) is best known as manager of the Chesnut Street Theatre from 1794 until his death in 1803. Wignell was a native of England and a relative of the Hallam family who provided the impetus to the growth of professional theatre in America. At the age of twenty-two Wignell came to America to join the American Company as a performer. Within two days of his arrival, he left with that company to play in Jamaica throughout the period of the Revolutionary War.

Wignell was first seen on an American stage in 1785. He became an immediate favorite and his reputation grew in stature during the succeeding years. In 1791, he withdrew from the company of Lewis Hallam, Jr. and John Henry to establish a theatre in Philadelphia under his own management. He was joined in this venture by Alexander Reinagle.

The years 1791 through 1793 saw Wignell and Reinagle devoted to the funding of their project, the constructing of a theatre, the hiring of a company and overcoming

opposition to the opening of their theatre. In February, 1794, the Chesnut Street (or New) Theatre was opened in the capitol of the young nation. Impressive crowds attended the theatre and the seasons of 1794 and 1794-95 were very encouraging to the managers and their investors. They built and operated a second theatre in Baltimore where their company performed following the seasons in Philadelphia. Near the end of the 1794-95 season in Philadelphia, the financial supporters of the theatres agreed to a large subscription for the payment of existing debts. In order to float this subscription, both theatres were mortgaged.

This newly acquired indebtedness plus payments on the original subscription placed Wignell and Reinagle under an extremely heavy burden of payments. This burden combined with the high cost of opera production caused the managers considerable anxiety over finances. Their situation was made impossible by a recurrence of the plague in the summers that succeeded 1795. The theatres were closed because of Yellow Fever. The result of this combination of problems was that the two men were driven into bankruptcy and the loss of their investment in the Chesnut Street Theatre. Following this loss a new arrangement was made between the managers and the proprietors. Wignell and Reinagle, who had hoped one day to own the theatre, were reduced to tenant lessees from that time on.

The period of greatest financial stability for Wignell and the Chesnut Street Theatre followed this economic crisis of the late eighteenth century and continued through the remaining few years of Wignell's life. The organization and operation of the theatre in those years lay the groundwork for the successful years of management of Wignell's proteges, William Warren and William Wood.

The reputation Thomas Wignell earned as a manager and theatre builder is deserved. Evidence supporting this reputation and the far more interesting details of his experiences as recruiter, intimate of the performers in his company, and struggling servant of his subscribers constitute the body of this work.

THOMAS WIGNELL AND THE CHESNUT STREET THEATRE

By

John Harold Herr

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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Department of Theatre

1969

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1969

Dedicated to

BILL SPIRER

whose death prevented him
from completing his graduate work

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The Historical Society of Pennsylvania must be singled out as an excellent repository of information where there is a ready willingness on the part of the staff members to be helpful. I am particularly indebted to Mrs. Vilma Halcombe and the other members of the Manuscript Department there who aided me when I could provide only the slimest clues to the whereabouts of materials.

Permission for reproduction of the figures used has been received from The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, The Public Library of the City of New York, and the Bath Municipal Libraries and Victoria Art Gallery.

My wife, Linda, has been a marvelous source of strength to me throughout these years, providing a sensitive mixture of confidence, encouragement and patience.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of Thomas Wignell and his relationship to the Chesnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia, from 1791 to February, 1803.

The major purpose of this work is to provide information about the operation of a theatre and the supervision of its playing company at the time the professional theatre began to make important strides towards acceptance in American society. An additional, though secondary, purpose is to correct some information used in other histories and combat impressions that may be gained from writings that are general or superficial in their treatment of Wignell and the period in which he worked as a manager.

Studies in the management of early American theatres begin with the Chesnut Street Theatre, but focus on its history after 1800. The early years of that theatre deserve more intensive study. Philadelphia was considered the theatrical center of America from 1790 until approximately 1815 and the theatre of consequence in Philadelphia was the theatre built by Wignell and his partner, Alexander Reinagle. This theatre, erected in 1792-94, was called "Old Drury" after 1800 because it had established a

reputation which merited, for some, comparison with Drury Lane in London. The efforts of Wignell and Reinagle gained the reputation that invited this comparison.

In this study, because of the desire to provide an objective picture of forces supporting and opposing the theatre, the reader may receive the impression that the theatre was unpopular in Philadelphia. Every community in the early United States had a segment of its population that presented opposition to the introduction of theatre within its boundaries. Usually religious groups led the opposition and the Quakers were strongly opposed to playing in Philadelphia. However, Philadelphia had a population of over fifty thousand in 1800 and sufficient numbers of these people were frequenters of the theatre to insure its success. Indeed Philadelphia was a thriving theatrical center in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Wignell is of particular interest as the manager of the Chesnut Street Theatre responsible for the choice of plays, actors, costumes, scenery, and many of the financial decisions made in the theatre. Wignell's determination, despite numerous disappointments, to produce plays and to entertain single him out as a dedicated and persevering professional. He was an important pioneer in the development and expansion of theatrical activity in this country.

Records of management practices and procedures in the American theatre before 1800 are practically non-existent. William Warren's journal beginning in 1796 is the only extant record of accounts of the Chesnut Street Theatre in its first days, though it was not an official document of the managers in the first years it was kept. Examining the evidence of Wignell's experiences will provide information about the problems of directing the affairs of a theatre and an acting company during the early Federal era in America.

Previous studies of the theatre in Philadelphia in the period 1790-1805 have been general in nature and none has focused on the particular role of Thomas Wignell. Ruth H. MacKenzie's doctoral dissertation, "Organization, Production, and Management at the Chestnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia, from 1791 to 1820," concentrates heavily on the period after 1800 when records were more complete and indicates no knowledge of the managerial crises of 1797, 1798, and 1799. Thomas Clark Pollock's The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century includes an incredibly valuable Day Book of performances and performers, but its treatment is in the nature of a survey of the whole century, and, while it outlines the development of the Chesnut Street Theatre, it is most useful for the day book it provides. Written for newspaper circulation in

the Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch for the years 1855 to 1860, "The Philadelphia Stage from the Year 1749 to the Year 1855" by Charles Durang, has much relevance for this study. Durang's primary source for the period of prime interest here was his father, John, a performer during that time whose memoirs have just recently been published by the American Society for Theatre Research. A dissertation by Richard B. Stine, later published as The Philadelphia Theatre, 1682-1829: Its Growth as a Cultural Institution, is more of an evaluation of a social phenomenon than a specific history of a theatre or a man. The recent and important additions to the general history of American theatre, e.g., Barnard Hewitt's Theatre USA, 1668-1957, and Glenn Hughes' The History of the American Theatre, Dunlap's History of the American Theatre, and the efforts of T. Allston Brown, Arthur Hornblow and others. Reese D. James' Cradle of Culture 1800-1810 is a useful, though not completely accurate, contribution to the history of the Chesnut Street Theatre.

Wignell and his co-manager, Alexander Reinagle, appear not to have kept a record or diary of the sort recorded by their proteges, William Wood and William Warren. Some of the managers' correspondence remains among the manuscripts in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and The Library Company of Philadelphia has approximately a dozen scripts

of the Chesnut Street Theatre Company. The correspondence of some of the prominent citizens who invested in the theatre includes references to Wignell and the Theatre. Diaries are particularly useful for general information about social conditions and customs as well as specific details about the physical theatre and playgoing. Extensive diaries kept by foreign visitors while traveling in America have provided some of the best descriptions of the theatre, its decor, audiences, and details of performances.

Of the newspapers consulted, the most useful are The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser, The General Advertiser and Political, Commercial, Agricultural, and Literary Journal Daily (later simply The General Advertiser), The Pennsylvania Gazette, and Poulson's Daily American Advertiser. The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography and The New York Magazine or Literary Repository are periodicals that contain entries that are meaningful to this study. Included in these works is information about the acting company, competitive entertainments, natural disasters that prevented playing in Philadelphia, problems the theatre experienced with its patrons, and various bits of information that supplement the broader references and provide a more complete picture of the theatre.

The first chapter presents a brief history of the development of the Old American Company to 1791. Included in this account is the entrance of Thomas Wignell into the life of the American theatre, the struggle in Philadelphia for the legal right to play in that city, some account of the players' vicissitudes, and a description of Wignell's separation from the Old American Company.

Following this last event, the guidance in the planning and construction of "The New Theatre in Chesnut Street" was taken up by Wignell in conjunction with Alexander Reinagle, a prominent musician of the period. Chapter II focuses on these men, providing background information about their training and experience. A list of people who were original subscribers to the theatre is included in this chapter. This group included singularly prominent figures in the early Federal era. Their support of the theatre indicates the concern citizens felt for a "rational amusement" as an integral part of a civilized community.

The months of planning and construction from the summer of 1791 when Wignell broke with the Old American Company until the official opening of the theatre in February, 1794, resulted in a structure unique in America at that time. Americans were finally able to attend plays in a "modern" theatre that had been designed expressly for

the purpose of playing. Chapter III is a study of the period of planning and construction.

The theatre was only partially completed when it opened in February, 1794. Descriptions and a drawing of the inside of the theatre suggest the advanced state of completion of the auditorium and stage at that time. However, the facade of the building was not finished for a decade and rooms that were to adjoin the lobby and auditorium were unfinished for some time after regular performances had begun. The accommodations for the performers were considered comfortable and the initial season was begun with enthusiasm and optimism. Chapter IV is devoted to the physical characteristics of the theatre, the company Wignell had hired for the opening of the theatre, and some reaction to the opening.

Chapter V is a financial history of the New Theatre during Wignell's tenure there, viewing the impediments to success, efforts to recover from adversity, financial disaster, and some days when things went well for the company. This chapter also describes the competition from other forms of entertainment and the hardships of playing in cities other than Philadelphia.

The last chapter focuses on the two essential elements in the theatre, the performers and the audiences. Wignell's relationships with his actors and their opinions of his

good offices are the subject of the first part of this chapter. The growth of independence for the individual star is demonstrated and the future of the star system seen in microcosm in Wignell's experiences with Cooper, Fennell, and Hodgkinson. Actor-audience interplay is treated briefly and the behavior of the patrons is depicted by actors and other audience members.

A summary will make an assessment of Wignell as a manager and conjecture about the possibilities of improvements he might have been able to exact to insure continued success throughout his career on Chesnut Street.

The choice of the spelling "Chesnut" as opposed to "Chestnut" is dictated by the desire to be historically correct. References to the theatre as the "New Theatre" are included because most contemporary references identify it in that way.

CHAPTER I
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE OLD AMERICAN
COMPANY TO 1791

The first important theatrical company in America was organized in England by William Hallam. Hallam had been manager of a theatre in Goodman's Inn Fields, London, during the late 1740s. By 1750 the necessity of competing with the royally approved theatres in Covent Garden and Drury Lane drove him into bankruptcy.¹ In a singular and impressive vote of confidence, Hallam's investors relieved him of repayment for losses incurred and gave him the theatrical trappings that remained in the theatre. Hallam immediately determined to return to the theatrical wars, to what Charles Durang called, "a fresh field of action."² In concert with his brother Lewis, William mounted an expedition to the "woods and wilds" of America. "Lewis Hallam was appointed manager, chief magistrate, or king,

¹William Dunlap, A History of the American Theatre (New York: J & J Harper, 1832), p. 3.

²Charles Durang, "The Philadelphia Stage from the Year 1749 to the Year 1855," The Sunday Dispatch (Philadelphia), Chapter I.

and William who staid at home, to be 'Viceroy over him.'"³ Organized into a commonwealth by William, with responsibilities, parts and shares divided, the company was chosen to fill various roles popular in the eighteenth century. Lewis Hallam was the low comedian and his wife played leading comic and tragic parts. Lewis' small band of performers embarked in May, 1752 aboard the *Charming Sally*.⁴ Traveling with his parents was Lewis, Jr., age twelve, who was destined to carry the Hallam name and association with this company for almost half a century.

The troupe arrived in Virginia, where the least amount of opposition to playing was expected, and performed The Merchant of Venice for its initial offering September 15, 1752.⁵ Known simply as "A Company of Comedians from London," they played in the colonies until 1754. Mid-eighteenth century America was predominantly rural; many of the communities were economically depressed and the influence of people with intense religious convictions against the theatre was prevalent in every colony. Therefore in 1754 Hallam transferred the company to Jamaica, where he sought a more lucrative and receptive market.

³Dunlap, op. cit., p. 4.

⁴Durang, op. cit.

⁵Glenn Hughes, The History of the American Theatre 1700-1950 (New York: Samuel French, 1951), p. 17.

Lewis Hallam, Sr., died the next year in Jamaica and the company disbanded there.⁶

David Douglass, an actor who had come to Jamaica from England in 1751, succeeded Hallam as husband and manager. With only Mrs. Douglass and her son Lewis from the original company, Douglass gathered a corps of performers and arrived in America in 1758. From 1758 to 1762 and from 1766 to 1774, Douglass led this band to the larger population centers in the American Colonies to provide seasons of theatrical activity. The company also appeared in other communities for occasional performances between seasons.⁷ The years 1762 to 1766 saw the company in residence in Jamaica for the second time. This second period of absence was prompted by danger to the players from the Sons of Liberty and the difficulties caused by playing during the French and Indian War.

⁶ Arthur Hornblow, A History of the Theatre in America from Its Beginnings to the Present Time (New York: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1919), I, p. 96. Hewitt gives a false impression in his discussion of the Hallam Company, i.e., that its personnel experienced continued membership until after the Revolutionary War; see his chapter on "The Original Pioneers" in Theatre USA 1668-1957 (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, Inc., 1959).

⁷ Philadelphia enjoyed a season from April 15 to June 24, 1754, another June 25 to December 28, 1759. Other cities large enough to support seasons were Annapolis, Williamsburg, Charlestown, Providence and New York. There are records of announcements for seasons as brief as one month and as long as eleven months. Local conditions, e.g., plague or irate moralism, cut short seasons that were planned for longer periods.

Returning from Jamaica in 1766, Douglass was joined in the management responsibilities by two performers in the company, John Henry, and Lewis Hallam, Jr. John Henry, an Irishman, had been brought into the company as an actor during the second sojourn to Jamaica. The three managers gave up the title "Comedians from London." At this juncture in American history, identification with the mother country was not apt to gain popular support for them. They resumed playing in Philadelphia as "The American Company." Douglass executed plans for a new theatre to be raised just outside the city limits of Philadelphia. This was to be the first of Douglass' theatres for he subsequently built playhouses in New York, Annapolis, and Charlestown.

The theatre, built in 1766 in Philadelphia, became known as the Southwark. The area of Southwark had been named after Southwark, an area just across the Thames from London, England. A number of Elizabethan theatres had been constructed in the latter setting to avoid the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor and the Common Council of London. Though Philadelphia had no Lord Mayor nor Common Council, the decision to locate in South Street was undoubtedly made to elude the jurisdiction of the city authorities.

Permission to build had been obtained from Governor Denny on condition that a benefit performance be played for the Pennsylvania Hospital. Quakers residing in the area applied for an injunction against the theatre. The

English Governor, not holding the same prejudices against plays and playing, denied the injunction.⁸ The Southwark opened despite "a strenuous remonstrance"⁹ that included a memorial in opposition to the theatre presented to the local government "from a great number of the inhabitants of the city and county of Philadelphia of several religious denominations."¹⁰ For fifty years the Southwark was to house performances, legitimate and otherwise,¹¹ of actors, dancers, pantomimists, slackwire experts and other entertainers. Philadelphia was to use this theatre almost exclusively until the erection of the Chesnut Street Theatre by Thomas Wignell and Alexander Reinagle during the years 1792-1794.

The Philadelphia season extended from November 14, 1766 to July 6, 1767 and was a success.¹² The length of this season alone attests the good fortune which accompanied it. In the 1766 company, Mrs. Douglass was reduced

⁸Hornblow, op. cit., p. 104.

⁹William S. Dye, "Pennsylvania versus the Theatre," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LV (October, 1931), 357.

¹⁰George O. Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre (Philadelphia: Globe Printing House, 1889), I, p. 152.

¹¹Performances were given more outside the law than within it as it took Philadelphians until 1789 to legislate in favor of the theatre.

¹²Hughes, op. cit., p. 39.

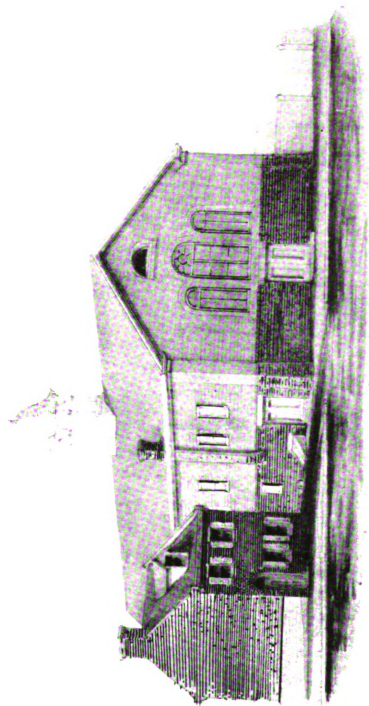


Figure 1.--The Southwark Theatre.

to delivering occasional epilogues and appearing in minor roles. Lewis, Jr. was the leading young actor and the portrayer of heroes.

After closing the Southwark, Douglass and company moved on to New York, where the building of the John Street Theatre was already underway. The route most traveled from Philadelphia to New York was described by John Durang, a dancer and versatile entertainer, in relating his experiences on a trip from Philadelphia to Boston:

I set out with this man in the stage by way of New York to Boston. In our passage we pass'd thro' (Jersey) Bristol, Trenton, Princeton (with a stately college), New Brunswick, Woodbridge, Bridgetown, Elizabethtown. From Elizabethtown point we took passage in an open boat to New York, distance 11 miles. We stop'd one day in New York; next day took passage in a packet and sailed up the East River to New Haven, took passage there in the land stage thro' Connecticut, by way of Middletown and Harford, [sic] then thro' Massachusetts, Springfield, Worcester, and Camebridge; [sic] cross'd a flat bridge upwards of a mile long over a low water and marshy ground into Boston.¹³

On another occasion, Durang took passage at Philadelphia by water to Bordentown, from there to Perth Amboy by coach, then by water again to New York.

The movement of an entire company of performers posed serious problems to its managers. In fact, Mrs. Morris, a member of the American Company, perished while traveling to New York for the opening there in December,

¹³Alan S. Downer, ed., The Memoir of John Durang, American Actor 1785-1816 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966), pp. 13-14.

1767. She and her maid chose to stay inside their carriage while it was ferried across the Hudson River. As the ferry neared the shore the carriage was overturned and both ladies drowned.¹⁴

Douglass and his partners must have been dismayed at the news of Mrs. Morris' death. In 1767, replacing a mature female member of the company would have been very difficult. There were no trained performers from which to choose. A replacement from London would take three months or more. The effect on the company's repertoire would be to alter or curtail it considerably.

The American Company was not as successful in the New York season of 1767-1768 as it had been in Philadelphia. Odell's comments are indicative of the troubles. "We are glad that the perplexed manager had on this occasion [December 17, 1767] at least a crowded house; I fear business throughout the six months of the season was far from uniformly good."¹⁵ He also comments, ". . . what with hard times and hard moralists the company was having a bitter road of it toward ever diminishing returns."¹⁶ The players looked to Philadelphia as a more popular "home" than New

¹⁴The Mercury (New York), December 14, 1767.

¹⁵George C. D. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), I, p. 115. The occasion was the entertaining of ten Cherokee Chiefs who witnessed Richard III and a pantomime, The Oracle.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 126.

York. This was true throughout the period previous to the Revolutionary War despite strong opposition to the theatre in that city.¹⁷ "Philadelphia and the Southland were more lucrative fields for the players." Corroboration for this comment by Odell is provided by a letter Douglass wrote in 1769. Though unaddressed, the thought is advanced that the probable recipient was Governor John Penn of Pennsylvania.¹⁸

Sir,

The great Indulgence, your Honour has, so often been good enough to show me, while it demands every grateful acknowledgement, a breast, I hope, not insensible, can possibly entertain, covers me with Shame, when the Situation of our Affairs, make so frequent Applications absolutely necessary.

I had flatter'd myself, that I shou'd not, for a Year to come, at least, have given your Honour any Trouble, but a Disappointment at Carolina, and the recent loss of a great and honour'd Friend and Patron, whose Memory will be ever dear to the American Theatre, has made such a change in our Circumstances, that nothing but an exertion of that Humanity, which you possess in so eminent a Degree, can save us from Destruction.

Let my Situation speak for me, and, with your usual goodness, do not think me importunate, if I sollicite your Honour for Permission to open the Theatre, for a short time, this Winter, previous to my going to Annapolis, where I propose spending the Remainder of it.

The Maid of the Mill, the Padlock, and some other Pieces, not perform'd, hitherto, on the Stage, will, I flatter myself, give Your Honour some Entertainment.

I shou'd not have made my application in this Manner, but wou'd have waited on you myself, were not my feelings, upon the Occasion, too great, to permit me to say what I ought.

¹⁷Dye, op. cit., and Dunlap, op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁸Thomas Clark Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), p. 25.

I shall intrude no farther upon your time, than to assure you, that it is impossible for any Person, among the Numbers who have been the Objects of your Benevolence to have a more grateful sense of it, than

Sir

Your Honour's most
Obedt. and oblig'd hum. Serv.
David Douglass

October 5th
1769

During the years 1768 to 1774 the American Company played primarily in Philadelphia and the South. In the latter year preparations were underway for a season to extend into 1775 when, because of the imminence of war and the gravity of life at that moment, the Association of the First Congress in session in Philadelphia passed the following resolution:

We will, in our several stations, encourage frugality, economy, and industry, and promote agriculture, arts and the manufactures of this country, especially that of wool; and will discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horseracing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting, exhibitions of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments. . . .

Douglass learned of the move in a personal letter from Peyton Randolph, President of the Congress. The American Company could only bow to such a weighty resolve. "Their [the Association's] recommendation was a law to those who looked to them as the assertors of their rights--the theatres were closed--and the Thespians embarked for the more loyal colonies of the English West Indies."¹⁹ While some

¹⁹Dunlap, op. cit., p. 35.

of the performers might have been sympathetic with American causes, the majority are described as loyalists.²⁰ It seems safe to suppose that they left expecting a rather hasty conclusion to what they considered to be a temporary inconvenience.

Among those who joined this expedition to the West Indies was a young actor who had arrived from London the day previous to the signing of the Resolution by the Assembly. Thomas Wignell, who was not to be seen across the footlights by an American audience for ten more years, had hied himself off to have his hair done and was comfortably settled when he was informed of Douglass' intent to withdraw.²¹ Wignell, having been sent out by his cousin, William Hallam of London, promptly joined Douglass and company.

The decade following the congressional move against playing saw little theatrical activity, particularly where professionals were concerned. During the period from October 1774 to 1777, no theatrical performances are recorded.²² The Congress remained in Philadelphia until the occupation of that city by the British, September 26, 1777. Soon after the entry of the British Army into Philadelphia, some officers of that troop organized performances at the Southwark. The seriousness with which

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²See Odell, op. cit., pp. 179-184 for New York; Pollock, op. cit., p. 130 for Philadelphia.

they approached their playing is indicated by the hiring of a staff consisting of a "clerk, bookkeeper, treasurer, carpenters, sceneshifters, and doormen."²³ The "Martial Players" or "Howe's Strolling Players" gave thirteen performances between January 19 and May 19, 1778.²⁴ The performers were amateurs and predominantly British.²⁵

Less than a month after the final performance in May, the city was recaptured by the revolutionaries and no time was wasted in reaffirming the then historic opposition to the theatre. Unfortunately for those who might have been ambitious to play, the representatives of the Crown, who had formerly interfered in their behalf, were no longer on the scene. The Assembly, meeting March 10, 1779, enacted "An Act for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality" and Section X of that Act reads:

. . . every person and persons whatsoever, that shall from and after the publication of this act, erect, build or cause to be erected or built any play house, theatre, stage or scaffold for acting,

²³Willard O. Mishoff, "Business in Philadelphia 1777-1778," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXI (April, 1937), 175.

²⁴Hughes, op. cit., p. 47.

²⁵Although Dye (p. 360) suggests that the performers were a combination of professionals and amateurs, it is unlikely that the actresses were working professionals, i.e., making their livelihood performing. There were women who traveled with the British army but nothing has come to my attention to support the notion that they were actresses. The male roles were played by officers, amateurs certainly.

showing, or exhibiting any tragedy, comedy or tragic-comedy, farce, interlude or other play or any part of a play whatsoever or that shall act, show or exhibit them or any of them or be in any wise concerned therein, or in selling any tickets for that purpose in any city, town or place in this commonwealth and be thereof legally convicted in any court of quarter sessions in this commonwealth shall forfeit and pay the sum of five hundred pounds.²⁶

History was playing quaint tricks on the theatre in the Western Hemisphere. For, while the British soldiery at various times in Boston, New York and Philadelphia were entertaining what had to be, at least in part, American audiences, the members of the American Company were entertaining almost completely British audiences in Kingston, Jamaica. "The audiences in Jamaica were to a great extent military and naval," says Seilhamer, "the repertoire was naturally moulded to the taste of this important element among the company's patrons."²⁷ A notion of this taste is suggested by the list of the "Familiar Pieces" of the professionals in Jamaica: The Beaux Strategem, The Busybody, The Constant Couple, The Distressed Mother, The Gamester, The Jealous Wife, Lionel and Clarissa, Love in a Village, The Recruiting Officer, several other plays and eight farces.²⁸

²⁶Statutes of Pennsylvania, XII, 313-322.

²⁷Seilhamer, op. cit., p. 145.

²⁸Ibid., p. 146.

Records of the playing in Jamaica between 1774 and 1783 are sketchy. The players continued to refer to themselves as the American Company, despite the persecution it cost them among the loyalists in Kingston and the other communities where they played.²⁹ Familiar names appear in the cast lists of performances. Hallam, Morris, Woolls, Goodman,³⁰ Mrs. Morris and Miss Storer had all played prominently in America before their "exile." Conspicuous by his absence from these roles is John Henry. Seilhamer attributes this to sickness that plagued the man for some time. When he was "brought out" in Jamaica, he continued to be a popular figure, playing leading parts in benefit performances.³¹

Thomas Wignell was playing the major comic roles and third leads for the American Company in Jamaica by the late 1770's. His prominence in the company warranted him benefit performances. John Henry thought highly enough of Wignell to come out of "retirement" to act in one of his benefits.³²

²⁹See letter, pp. 9-10.

³⁰J. T. Scharf and Thompson Westcott, History of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: L. H. Evarts and Co., 1884), II, p. 966. Goodman was added to the American Company in 1770 or 1772. He had studied law in the colonies before experiencing "an irresistible vocation for the stage."

³¹Seilhamer, op. cit., pp. 146-147.

³²Ibid.

While the opportunity to play in Jamaica must have been gratifying, the desire to return to the theatres that Douglass had newly built between 1765 and 1770 was very strong. The Jamaican adventure was unprofitable. The professionals in Douglass' company must have been galled that performances in the island capital by military personnel outdrew their own.³³ As early as 1782, Henry and, in 1784, Hallam were in the colonies again preparing to take up their old stands. David Douglass, the former manager, does not appear again in the history of the American Company, as he retired in the Indies.³⁴

Following the passage of the 1779 law to continue the prohibition of playing, a decade elapsed before the elected officials of Philadelphia legally sanctioned productions of plays in that city. This decade saw a series of stormy exchanges that resulted in the authorized acceptance of this diversion in the second largest city in the English speaking world on March 2, 1789. The struggle in Pennsylvania is well documented in William S. Dye, Jr.'s "Pennsylvania versus the Theatre."

Lewis Hallam, Jr. and John Henry appear to have parted ways during the Jamaican days. We know Henry returned to the colonies as early as 1782 and secured

³³Ibid.

³⁴Hornblow, op. cit., p. 163.

permission to play in Maryland as is indicated in the letter quoted below. Henry's letter, addressed to President Moore of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, gives the impression that he was acting as representative for the American Company.

As I have not the honor to be personally known to your Excellency, I presume the inclosed, which I had the pleasure of receiving the day before my departure from Jamaica, from a gentleman whose attachment to the cause of America (tho' resident among the British) is, I dare say, too well known to your Excellency to need mentioning, will explain who I am and my business on the Continent. At the same time give me leave to observe that our leaving America was at the particular request of the Honorable, the Congress, so early as the latter part of 1774, on which account the Honorable, the Legislature of the State of Maryland, not three weeks ago passed an act in our favor, and which, when happier times arrive, I flatter myself will have some weight in this State on a similar occasion. I find our theatre here entirely out of repair, and a debt for ground rent and taxes incurred to the amount of 174[£] 7s 6d. I learn, also, that it had been used for some time, by permission, for the Exhibition of a Wire Dancer. On this account I presume to address your Excellency for permission for one night only to deliver a Lecture on Heads, for the purpose of paying the above debt incurred since our banishment, the nature of which, I dare say, will have weight with your Excellency in granting me this favor, particularly as I venture to affirm The American Company, for which title (to this hour preserved) they have suffered no small persecution, are as firmly attached to the country (tho' absent by command) as any residents in it.

I shall do myself the honor to-morrow of paying my personal respects to your Excellency, assuring you that I am with the greatest respect,

Your Excellency's

Most devoted, very humble servant,

John Henry

July 1st, 1782

John Henry's plea was denied the very next day. The authorities were not to be fooled by the deliverance of a "Lecture on Heads" which, in truth, would be a play presented under that guise.

After his unsuccessful bid to appear in Philadelphia, John Henry moved on to New York where he performed several of these lectures.³⁵

Hallam appeared in Philadelphia in early 1784. He petitioned on behalf of "the comedians, commonly called The American Company" for the repeal of the law restraining the performers. Certificates accompanied his petition signed by a "considerable number of the inhabitants of the city of Philadelphia and its vicinity." Despite Hallam's efforts, on February 14, 1784, a bill to repeal the restrictive law was defeated. Undaunted by the lack of formal sanction, Hallam opened the old Southwark in December to perform with a small company,³⁶ "Lectures on Heads."

³⁵The entertainment called a "Lecture on Heads" was first attributed to an English writer, George Alexander Stevens, who presented such an evening's diversion at the Haymarket in London in 1762. Included in its various forms were musical interludes, moral admonitions, historical commentaries, and didactic parables using the famous plays as models. For example, part of such a lecture might be a "moral and instructive tale, called 'Filial Piety Exemplified in the History of the Prince of Denmark.'" Lighter plays were accorded serious descriptions. She Stoops to Conquer was introduced as "A Lecture on the Disadvantages of Improper Education, Exemplified in the History of Tony Lumpkin."

³⁶Hallam, Mr. and Mrs. Allen, the dancer John Durang and Durang's sister, Caroline.

Associated with Hallam in the management was a Mr. Allen. Their company played intermittently until July of 1785, when they moved to New York.³⁷

A question arises here as to whether Hallam or Henry was the authentic representative of the company once known as the American Company. Both men had left the colonies for Jamaica in 1774. While there, Hallam's name appears in the cast lists supplied by Seilhamer as the leading male player of the company.³⁸ As was pointed out above, Henry did not play with regularity because of his health. Henry did play at Drury Lane in London in the season of 1779-1780.³⁹ Yet very clearly, he was in America in 1782, as witness his letter to President Moore. His "mission" in May of that year "seems to have been to secure to the American Company a confirmation of the property rights that it had acquired in the theatres built under Mr. Douglass' supervision."⁴⁰

³⁷Hornblow, op. cit., pp. 163-164.

³⁸Seilhamer, op. cit.

³⁹Hugh F. Rankin, The Theater in Colonial America (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 197. John Genest in pp. 125-133 of Volume VI in Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1800 (London: H. E. Carrington, 1832), lists a Mr. Henry in the following performances: October 18, 1779 as Othello; November 15, 1779 as Beverley in The Gamester; January 24, 1780 as Cassius in Julius Caesar; and Posthumus in Cymbeline, a benefit for Henry played April 18, 1780.

⁴⁰Seilhamer, op. cit., p. 159.

Hallam is difficult to trace but may have spent some time in England before his arrival in Philadelphia in 1784.⁴¹ He appears to have returned to America alone, though he claimed to be acting in behalf of the American Company.⁴² At least two items cause this claim to be questioned. Why, if Hallam were acting for members of his old company, did he assemble what might be described as a pick-up collection of local talent when he did lectures at the Southwark and performances in New York in 1785? Also, why was Henry, upon arriving in New York in 1885 with his company that included the Jamaican performers, surprised to discover the John Street Theatre already occupied by Hallam's small contingent?⁴³

Hallam's Philadelphia troupe played New York from August 24 to October 24, 1785. Included in the casts were Hallam, Moore, Lake, Allen, Durang, Mrs. Allen and Miss Durang.⁴⁴ This company apparently disbanded shortly after its New York closing, for Allen appears at the head of his own group in Albany, New York, shortly thereafter.⁴⁵

⁴¹Ibid., p. 177.

⁴²Pollock, op. cit., p. 42.

⁴³Seilhamer, op. cit., p. 176.

⁴⁴Dunlap, op. cit., p. 58.

⁴⁵Hornblow, op. cit., pp. 168-169.

In less than a month after the last performance of Hallam's company, The Gamester by Moore and Macklin's Love a la Mode were announced at the John Street Theatre for November 21, the former of these plays with the following cast:

Beverly....Mr. Henry	Stukely.....Mr. Harper
Lewson.....Mr. Wignell	Charlotte.....Mrs. Harper
Jarvis.....Mr. Morris	Lucy.....Miss Tuke
Dawson.....Mr. Woolls	Mrs. Beverley...Mrs. Morris
Bates.....Mr. Biddle	

Hornblow suggests that Henry proposed a joint venture to Hallam and that they produced this evening's entertainment as partners.⁴⁶ "Hallam brought to the partnership by which he and Henry agreed to be bound his property and prestige-- Henry a company that as a whole was superior to any that had as yet been seen in America."⁴⁷

All this suggests that Henry had been the more rightful claimant to direct lineage with the former American Company despite Hallam's closer blood relation to its founder.

In 1785 the company took the name The Old American Company.⁴⁸ It fell to Henry to provide the prologue to the November 21 performance:

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 164. Dunlap agrees on page 60 of his history. The possibility must be allowed that Hornblow used Dunlap as a source.

⁴⁷Seilhamer, op. cit., p. 177.

⁴⁸Oral S. Coad, "Willaim Dunlap: A Study of His Life and Works," Dunlap Society Publications (1917), p. 31.

We went to the island of Jamaica. Ten years we languished in absence from this our wished for, our desirable home, and though often solicited to return . . . we as constantly refused, supposing it incompatible with our duty to the United States. . . . Many of us have passed the Spring and Summer of our days in your service, and we are now returned, trusting we shall be allowed to wind up peaceably the evening of them, under the happy auspices of your protection.⁴⁹

There is no surprise in the fact that the cast list presented above comes from the annals of the New York theatre rather than the Philadelphia theatre. Playing in Philadelphia continued to be difficult and The Old American Company was absent from that city from its inception in 1785 until January, 1787. In his memoir, Durang wrote, "Great exertions where [sic] making at this time through the city to shut up the theatre." Those performances that had been played illegally roused the ire of the legislature of that Quaker community which, in 1786, repealed the 1779 law in favor of a new law with the same provisions but heavier penalties.

The Old American Company performed at the Southwark during 1787, 1788, and into 1789 despite the more severe law enacted in 1786. These presentations were not disguised as the "Lectures on Heads" had been. The players were brave enough to include footnotes to their playbills, naming the specific plays to be presented. Through these

⁴⁹Hughes, op. cit., p. 54.

years Hallam and Henry continued efforts to secure official sanction for their activities.

Music did not experience the same strenuous opposition as the theatre. Soirees and concerts were popular and accepted. During the seventeen-eighties and nineties, one of the important figures in the development of music in Philadelphia was Alexander Reinagle, a conductor, composer, and expert on the piano-forte. Arriving in the country from England in 1786, Reinagle performed in New York and then to an enthusiastic response in Philadelphia. Reinagle's popularity and reputation led to an acquaintanceship with Thomas Wignell. In 1791 these two men, with the support of some influential Philadelphians, were to provide the driving force that caused the Chesnut Street Theatre to be built. The erection of that theatre and Wignell's success in recruiting performers in England were to significantly improve the quality of production and performance in the United States.

The citizens of Philadelphia were not united in their reactions to the theatre. Numerous arguments were made in support of playing. One of the most sensible arguments put forward by champions of the theatre was that men should have the opportunity and freedom to choose whether or not they would frequent, and thus support, the stage. As early as 1784, token support for the theatre had been provided by selected news publications of the day. An

amusing commentary appeared in The Pennsylvania Packet on April 17 of that year:

Intelligence Extraordinary.--As the Assembly of the State of Pennsylvania have positively refused to admit of plays, Mr. Hallam, we hear, intends to purchase the building erected for the exhibition of grand fireworks in Philadelphia (provided it should withstand a second conflagration), and after they have been displayed to the great joy and safety of every individual present, to convert and metamorphose it into a playhouse and air balloon, and proposes to raise it thirteen hundred miles perpendicular over the State House; for notwithstanding the Assembly have or pretend to have a right to control all terrestrial matters within their jurisdiction, we know [they] have not the least right by charter, the constitution, or otherways, to the celestial regions.

A number of stage balloons are also to be constructed to take up such as are inclined to see the plays and bring them safe back again, GRATIS.

This seems to be a judicious plan and will be a very great saving to the company of comedians; moreover, as they will be at so great a distance from the earth, their ideas will be subtilized and enlightened and of consequence their plays for the future to be more sublime, rarified and free from all heterogeneous matters, so as not to offend the ears of the most immaculate Puritan.

The struggle wore on and in the spring of 1788, at the behest of Hallam and Henry, the Pennsylvania Assembly appointed a committee to investigate the problem of playing. This committee returned a recommendation favorable to the licensing of a theatre. But time passed and the motion was tabled.

Finally, with the help of a group of prominent citizens, a Dramatic Association was organized to direct the activity in favor of establishing a "Theatre in Philadelphia, under a liberal and properly regulated

plan."⁵⁰ Meeting first on the twelfth of January, 1789, and thereafter almost weekly until the repeal was passed,⁵¹ these interested people prepared a petition to be presented to the General Assembly of Pennsylvania. The petition, entered in the Minutes of the Assembly, for February 6, carried the signatures of nineteen hundred Philadelphians. Eleven days later, thirty-four hundred signatures were provided by inhabitants opposing the theatre.

A petition presented by a committee of the Dramatic Association on the seventeenth of February indicates the enlightened character of that association. The document submitted by the association contended that the existing law took from the citizens "the natural right of every freeman to dispose of his time and money, according to his own taste and disposition, when not obnoxious to the real interests of society."⁵² The objectivity of this epistle is substantiated by the following inclosure: "while . . . we cannot admit that a theatre is the temple of vice, we presume not to insist that it is the school of virtue."⁵³

⁵⁰Independent Gazeteer, January 7, 1789, p. 1.

⁵¹See Independent Gazeteer, January 17, 1789; Pennsylvania Packet and Dairy Advertiser, February 3.

⁵²Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Evening Post, February 17, 1789.

⁵³Ibid.

The debate that accompanied the consideration of the repeal measure was heated. Those sympathetic to the theatre and who spoke for it included Robert Morris, General Anthony Wayne and George Clymer.⁵⁴ Members of the Assembly were undoubtedly aware of the sentiments of that famous American, George Washington. Washington attended the theatre and was in sympathy with its presence in the community.⁵⁵ However, he was not a Pennsylvanian and had no voice in this Assembly.

The final tally of petitioners was approximately four thousand opposed to repeal of the prohibitive law and six thousand in favor of repeal. On March 2, 1789 the Assembly repealed the act prohibiting "theatrical representations . . . within the city of Philadelphia and the neighborhood thereof." It is not clear whether the Assembly was moved by the eloquent plea of the Dramatic Association, the six thousand signatures, or a combination of these interests and supporters of the theatre who were

⁵⁴Morris is referred to as "the financier of the American Revolution." He was a member of the Council of Safety in Pennsylvania, later its President in Franklin's absence, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and member of the Constitutional Convention and U. S. Senator. Wayne was most significant as a soldier in the war with the British, though he worked hard for passage of the Constitution. Clymer was treasurer for the Continental Congress, served on the Boards of treasury and war, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

⁵⁵Paul L. Ford, Washington and the Theatre (New York: Dunlap Society Publications, 1889).

members of the Assembly. While providing for perusal and possible censorship of the literature to be staged in Philadelphia, the measure enacted had no provisions regarding the geographical setting of theatrical productions. Consequently, the young country was soon to see construction of its most sumptuous eighteenth century playhouse in the heart of that city.

Hallam and Henry had not been idle during the exchanges over the legalization of playing. Performances by their company were staged while the battle raged. They may have had petitions available at the theatre in Southwark, although no records have been found by this researcher to attest Henry and Hallam's soliciting signatures for petitions supporting repeal of the existing laws. Immediately following the repeal, it was announced in The Pennsylvania Packet and other newspapers that the "Old American Company BY AUTHORITY" would perform on the ninth of March, 1789:

A TRAGEDY --- called

THE ROMAN FATHER

An Occasional Prologue by Mr. Hallam,

In Act Fifth

AN OVATION

For Publius's Victory over the Curiatti.

End of the Play a Hornpipe,
By Mr. Durang

To which will be added - A Comedy --- called,

THE LYAR⁵⁶

⁵⁶March 9, 1789.

Fifteen more performances are recorded before April fourth when the company withdrew because of commitments to the John Street Theatre in New York.

An examination of the circumstances surrounding the efforts of members and friends of the Dramatic Association to bring about the legalization of the theatre in Philadelphia suggests that the drive to provide "a rational amusement" and freedom of speech and assembly was a drive prompted by other considerations as well. For example, the hope expressed that theatre would not be included in legislation condemning "vice and immorality" was undoubtedly put forth in the firm belief that this was an inappropriate categorization. It is reasonable to expect that some supporters of the association might benefit monetarily from the development of new business on Chesnut Street. In addition, it is conceivable that the supporters of the theatre might have been looking to the future in the hope that performances might one day be more convenient, and in a more pleasant setting than the twenty-three year old theatre in South Street. A prideful motive might have made advocates, interested in the accoutrements of an enlightened and progressive city, anxious for a place of amusement for distinguished domestic and foreign guests.

This conjecturing is not without foundation. The old Southwark, a rather crude building, was constructed as a theatre in 1766. It had been criticized as

. . . an ugly ill-contrived affair outside and in. The stage [was] lighted by plain oil lamps without glasses. The view from the boxes was intercepted by large square wooden pillars supporting the upper tier and the roof.⁵⁷

Nothing leads one to suppose this evaluation is overstated. The unpleasantness described by a visitor extended to the approaches to the theatre.

In rainy [sic] weather it was almost impossible to approach the theatre within one square of it, upon account of the intervening mud and pools of water. South Street, and those streets in its neighborhood, were unpaved. Previously to this time it was usual to lay planks on such occasions from Fourth and Fifth streets down to the theatre. On opening the theatre this season, it was announced that a new brick pavement had been laid down to the theatre from Lombard street. On one evening, before these arrangements, the audience was taken by surprise. The weather was extremely fine when they went to the theatre, but, during the performances, a violent storm came on, which continued the whole night. The audience, male and female, and children of all sizes, had to wade waist deep into the city, there being no hackney coaches at the time to accommodate the public in so sudden an exigency.⁵⁸

In January, 1790, Hallam and Henry opened the theatre and closed only three days later for "Alterations and Improvements . . . to prevent the Complaints of the Theatre."⁵⁹ The heat and humidity during the summers were problems also for, in 1791, fire engines were

⁵⁷ John F. Watson, Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time (Philadelphia: The Author, 1879), I, p. 410.

⁵⁸ Durang, op. cit., Chapter XIV.

⁵⁹ Pennsylvania Packet and General Advertiser, January 13, 1790.

hired to play water on the roof in hopes of providing comfort for the customers.⁶⁰

Dissatisfaction with the theatre extended beyond the physical plant. While loyalty to England was not popular in matters of state, the customs regarding artistic talent were another matter. George Clymer's question of the Assembly during the repeal debate, "Are we forever to be indebted to other nations for genius, wit, and refinement?"⁶¹ might not have received a general acknowledgment, but many Americans expected and demanded that talent be imported. For some older Americans memories of Garrick and Macklin remained and roused thoughts of the fine performances seen in England.

The long war and its unsettled aftermath, plus religious and social opposition to the theatre, acted as strong deterrents to the stage as a vocational choice. It must further be admitted that no training facilities existed in the new States for the preparation of actors. Rarely could a nativeborn aspirant apprentice himself to one of the established companies and hope to be recognized as a talent. In fact, no prominent performers found this the route to success in the eighteenth century. The fact that Dunlap and others make note of any American performer,

⁶⁰Durang, op. cit., Chapter XV.

⁶¹Dunlap, op. cit., p. 56.

however secondary his position in a company, indicates the unlikeliness of rising to importance through an apprenticeship.⁶²

Judging from the following, printed in the Federal Gazette, February 11, 1791, Hallam and Henry had, as early as the first months of 1789, suggested they would replenish their company with English talent:

To Messrs. Hallam and Henry,

The friends of the Drama, more particularly, the members of the late dramatic association, whose labour and influence procured for you the license for opening the Theatre in this city, have become so much dissatisfied with your want of attention, to the promises you made them relative to strengthening your company by good actors from Europe, that they are determined to evince publicly their resentment of your conduct, which is the more seriously roused by the information, that there are now seven or eight good actors in Virginia, who came to America for the avowed purpose of joining your company . . . they have made you a tender of their services . . . and . . . you have refused them. . . . This being the case, you cannot reasonably flatter yourselves with the hope of further indulgence toward some of your company; but, on the contrary, you may depend ere long, to hear hiss! hiss! off! off whenever they appear in characters for which they are not fully qualified. The manner in which your gentleman dancer from Europe was on Saturday evening received, you may consider as a specimen [sic] of this determination; but as that kind of disapprobation to your company comes with reluctance, a reasonable time will be allowed you to procure actors of ability. These sentiments would have been communicated to you privately, but the inattention you have hitherto shown to the personal applications of several respectable citizens, leave us without the hope of attention.⁶³

⁶²Ibid., p. 89.

⁶³Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser, February 11, 1791.

Hallam and Henry replied that they indeed had tried to procure the actors from Virginia and had received an indication of interest from these actors; however, the management in Virginia had increased their salaries, causing them to remain in the South.⁶⁴ In this same reply, the Old American managers submitted that they had "exerted themselves to obtain an addition of good actors to their company from Europe," and that they had every reason to hope that they would be "eventually successful."

The word "eventually" would appear to have been ill chosen. The next volley from the opposition leveled on February twenty-first indicated a desire for early action and a threat of reprisals should there be no action:

To the Editor of the Federal Gazette
Sir,

As the friends to the drama seem dissatisfied with the conduct of the managers of the Theatre, and as the managers conceive they have, in every respect done their duty, I would propose an association of the citizens for the purpose of erecting an independent theatre, and encouraging performers who will make greater exertions to please.

I beg leave just to hint to the managers of the present company, that the act of assembly respecting that theatre, will shortly expire; and I would ask them whether they can expect similar exertions, on the part of the citizens of Philadelphia, to those made some time ago in their favor?

Their promises to bring over performers from Europe have not been fulfilled: Mr. Hallam can sit at his ease in one of the boxes, a whole evening, and oblige Mr. Harper to appear in two different

⁶⁴Ibid., February 15, 1791.

characters: Mrs. Henry and Mrs. Morris seldom, if ever appear on the same evening, though the general complaint is, that they are exceedingly deficient in female performers.

The pity of the audience is excited, on seeing the inferior actors, eternally brought forward in parts above their abilities.

In a word, Mr. Brown, if we are to have no better regulations at the theatre, I shall most heartily give my consent to shut the doors; and this I can assure you, might easily be done. . . .

A Citizen⁶⁵

The proposal for an alternate theatre, the threat to bring pressure against the existing theatre, and the strong dissatisfaction with the managers and the company, presented to enterprising souls the cue for action. Very shortly, the cue was to be taken up.

The Old American Company was not without internal problems to add to its difficulties. Hallam is reputed to have referred always to Henry as "a splendid amateur actor,"⁶⁶ and they were described as being "constantly at odds."⁶⁷ Henry was bad tempered and, occasionally, Hallam beat him for his troubles. One night in 1789 shortly after Henry had been mauled by another man,

. . . he had to set-to with Mr. Hallam in the dressing-room of the Southwark Theatre, in which, notwithstanding he was a large man and Hallam but five feet seven in stature, he was beaten. . . . It was said the two managers never agreed but once, and

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Rankin, op. cit.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 196.

then it was in an emergency. . . . That emergency was in an overturned boat in the Schuylkill.⁶⁸

Mrs. Henry was also a problem. She was harshly criticized for being capricious where her audience was concerned and unwilling to play often.⁶⁹ Dunlap was stymied in attempts to bring out his first play, Modest Soldier, because

There was no part suited to Henry, and he was the acting and efficient manager. There was no part suited to his wife, and she was another efficient manager. The best man's part was intended for Wignell. The best woman's part was cast by the author for Mrs. Morris, as the representative of the lively comedy lady. The acting manager and his manager were jealous of, and at variance with Hallam and Wignell, and Mrs. Morris was patronised by Wignell. . . . Buoyed up by hope and expectation . . . [I] proceeded to write a second, in which, without design, one part was suited to Henry, another did not displease his wife, and the lively lady [Morris] was evidently inferior⁷⁰ to the character assigned to the manager's lady. This second comedy was seized with avidity by Henry. The author was persuaded to let the second come out first, and the first was ultimately consigned to oblivion.⁷¹

Mrs. Morris was the more popular actress but Mrs. Henry's relation to the manager provided her with finest roles when she wished them. As Dunlap indicates, Wignell

⁶⁸Seilhamer, op. cit., II, pp. 269-270.

⁶⁹Ibid. and p. 290 of the same work, plus Hornblow, op. cit., p. 184.

⁷⁰Here "inferior" probably refers to the length of Mrs. Morris' role in the play.

⁷¹Dunlap, op. cit., p. 56.

supported Mrs. Morris. This support was certain not to ingratiate him with the co-manager. The fact that Henry and Wignell had been rivals for some time was an added source of aggravation to Henry. For a number of years Wignell, the people's favorite among the company, had been desirous of being taken into the management. Wignell was a shareholder, as were a few others. Yet, he had not been successful in convincing Hallam and Henry to make their leadership a triumvirate. Wignell told Dunlap that Henry had repeatedly promised to take him on as an equal partner and that Hallam had appeared to agree to this.⁷² However, no formal move had been made firm by the spring of 1791. Despite their hesitancy in this matter, the manager's confidence in Wignell's administrative ability is evidenced by his conduct of the financial affairs as treasurer and financial manager of the company.⁷³

It might be argued that these personalities provided enough problems. However, there may have been other unhappiness for, according to Durang, whose father worked in this company, "Hallam and Henry were proverbial for giving meagre salaries." Durang argued that this was a "mistaken system; it keeps the actor grumbling . . . ever seeking to better his condition, and never suitably or satisfactorily fulfilling his duties to himself or the manager."⁷⁴

⁷²Ibid., p. 91.

⁷³Seilhamer, op. cit., p. 337.

⁷⁴Durang, op. cit., Chapter XVIII.

Whatever difficulties beset the Old American Company in its inner workings, an immediate response to the strong public dissatisfaction of February, 1791, was essential. The managers had given some thought to the problem of shoring up their ranks. It was now necessary to act on the question of recruitment. Wignell volunteered to be the agent and, upon receiving the appointment, had written friends in London that he would be visiting them shortly.⁷⁵

In March an announcement was made in the Philadelphia papers that Mr. Henry would soon be making a trip to London to secure new talent. Wignell, believing himself appointed, accosted Hallam regarding this public statement. Hallam promptly blamed Henry. After exchanges among the three, the sharers were called to a meeting to decide who would be the agent. There ensued an explanation of the existing conditions, the necessity to recruit, and to purchase essentials for the theatre. The concluding statement, undoubtedly made by Hallam, was, "Mr. Henry is willing to go and Mr. Wignell is anxious to go. If Mr. Henry goes, we can continue playing and maintain ourselves. If Mr. Wignell goes, we must shut up." Wignell spoke in his own behalf calling attention to the promises made earlier and, in an ultimatum, demanded a position in the management or the commission as company agent. The meeting was concluded without a decision.⁷⁶

⁷⁵Dunlap, op. cit.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 92.

It may not be a cardinal rule of the conduct of meetings to adjourn when stalemated or when unpleasantness makes progress unlikely, but this sort of conclusion allows for cooling of tempers and regrouping of forces. A simple statement attributed to Wignell suggests that the managers had decided to caucus. At the announcement that another meeting would be held the next day, Wignell declined to attend "as I knew all had been previously determined." His assessment was correct. Henry was appointed the agent.⁷⁷

The rationale behind the company's decision is understandable. It is foolhardy to absent a top drawing card for personal reasons alone or on company business that another might undertake with equal success. Each member's career depended on the general welfare and no person could reasonably expect the others to jeopardize their positions for his sake.

However necessary this particular election may have seemed to the managers and the company, there may have been a miscalculation about Wignell's response. After completing the season in July of 1791, he resigned from the company.

Performing was this man's profession. He was loved and respected by audiences wherever he played and in favor with no less a personage than the President of the

⁷⁷Ibid.

United States.⁷⁸ He would most certainly have been the highest salaried player in the company after the managers. In his defense, the ambition of a man to be a leader in the company was a legitimate goal. The desire to renew old acquaintanceships and to visit London must have been wished for. The animosity between himself and Henry could have lent weight to the desire to remove himself. In this connection an episode must be described that makes Wignell's action more easily understood.

Wignell and Henry had a very bitter altercation during the time Wignell was still convinced that the election as agent would fall to him. The subject of this difference is not recorded. Henry was so inflamed during the argument that he threatened Wignell with the remark, "[your] reign shall not be long." In the subsequent meeting with his fellow actors, Wignell reported Henry's threat, arguing that it was Henry's intention to destroy him by hiring another actor in England who would be suited for Wignell's roles. Wignell also put forth the thesis that Henry's preventing him from sharing in the management would give Hallam and Henry the opportunity to assign Wignell's roles to the new player without Wignell having any recourse in the matter.⁷⁹ This explains Wignell's

⁷⁸O. G. Sonneck, Early Opera in America (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1915), p. 69.

⁷⁹Dunlap, op. cit., p. 92.

demand for either the agency or the managership. Deprived of both, he withdrew from the organization.

Joining Wignell in his defection were Mr. and Mrs. Morris. Mrs. Morris was a particularly important performer in the company. Hallam and Henry were left to face the 1791-92 season minus their best comedian, one of their two best female performers and an established male character actor. Hallam was not in fine form himself. As early as 1787, he was described as declining: "His battered looks, and shrunk carcass looks the debilitated rake but the soul, the animation, the fire, [have] left the withered body."⁸⁰ Henry began the season but sailed March 5, 1792 for England.⁸¹

The effect of Wignell's defection along with his two friends is described as disastrous for the Old American Company.⁸² Henry, after what must have been a hurried stay, returned to America in September, 1792, with John Hodgkinson as his prime find, only to discover that Hodgkinson and the new company were unmanageable. The actor hired specifically to replace Wignell in the hearts of audiences was not a success.⁸³ Henry withdrew from the company in 1794, selling

⁸⁰Rankin, op. cit., p. 196.

⁸¹Seilhamer, op. cit., p. 336.

⁸²Durang, op. cit., Chapter XV.

⁸³Pollock, op. cit., p. 53.

his stake to Hallam. Hallam remained in the company, only to find himself supplanted in importance by Hodgkinson.

Thus, an early and important phase of American theatre history was complete. Durang assessed Wignell's secession to be the occurrence that might be "deemed the dividing event which separates the records of the ancient, or original founders, from the more modern stage history of the continent."⁸⁴

⁸⁴Durang, op. cit.

CHAPTER II

THOMAS WIGNELL, ALEXANDER REINAGLE, AND SUBSCRIBERS TO THE NEW THEATRE

Wignell was spurred into action by the realization that he would not be the company representative to search for new talent in England. Even while playing out his contract with the Old American Company, he began negotiations for a completely new venture. The season in Philadelphia lasted until July 11, 1791. As early as April, Wignell called a meeting to solicit subscriptions for a new theatre, for which he promised to supply performers, scenery and decor.¹

Wignell may have had no notion of the auspiciousness of his timing. He had decided to abandon his position as actor with an established company and, in conjunction with a musician and an organization of active Philadelphians, to embark upon the building, equipping, and outfitting of the finest theatre in America; he and Alexander Reinagle had decided on Philadelphia as the location of their theatre just as that city emerged as capital of the new

¹Pollock, op. cit., p. 50.

nation and the most important community in the infant country. Whatever the limits of their information, however, it seems safe to assume that Wignell had done some preliminary investigation into the possibilities for such an undertaking. He had been well placed to observe at first hand any cues that would indicate success for such a project. As early as the days when his former associates performed in Jamaica, Wignell had been entrusted with financial matters relating to the company.² By 1791 he was a shareholder in the company and performed duties corresponding to those of a business manager today.³ Among the problems to be confronted were the major impediments to the development of a new theatrical company. For example, the managers could anticipate rivalry from the established company that was in the process of adding new talent to its roster, the necessity to win patrons from the Old American Company, competition for the use of the existing theatre, the Southwark, and possible difficulties in their own company morale and management.

The continued and always mounting financial needs of a fledgling effort in the theatre are rarely understood by backers. In this respect, it will become clear that the subscribers to the Chesnut Street Theatre were subjected

²Richardson Wright, Revels in Jamaica (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1937), pp. 204-207.

³Dunlap, op. cit., p. 60 and Seilhamer, op. cit., II, p. 337.

to considerable hardship because of the lengthy delay in opening the playhouse. In addition to the problems mentioned here, there are always unexpected circumstances to be encountered. Unfortunately, the demands of administering and managing often necessitate an unequal balance between planning and responding to crises, with the second of these the more time consuming. The judgment of Wignell's talent for administration and management may be deferred until more is known about his planning and responses.

In the summer of 1791, having completed his contractual arrangements, Wignell broke with his cousin, Hallam, and Henry, and openly joined with Reinagle to launch a new theatre company. Durang suggests that Hallam had proved "somewhat more of kin and less than kind." Whatever bitterness persisted in no way retarded the immediate move into an active partnership with Alexander Reinagle.

Reinagle, son of an Austrian musician, Joseph Reinagle, was born in Portsmouth, England in 1756. While Alexander was still young, the Reinagle family moved to Edinburgh where he studied with Raynor Taylor, an important composer in his time and destined later to compose music for the Chesnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia. Alexander played several instruments, composed, and sang well. Before the age of thirty he had become a member of the Society of Musicians of London. In 1784, he visited C.P.E. Bach in

Hamburg and so impressed this son of Johann Sebastian Bach that the younger Bach asked Reinagle to provide him with a likeness to be placed among mementoes he collected from significant figures in the musical world of that day.⁴

Reinagle and his brother, Hugh, visited Portugal in 1784 and 1785 in the hope that Hugh's health would respond favorably to the warmer climate. During their short stay in Lisbon, they performed for the royal family. Hugh did not live through the spring of 1785 and Alexander returned to England on May 17 of that year. He seems not to have resumed his professional musical career after he had returned from Portugal.⁵

Reinagle embarked for the American continent less than a year later and arrived in New York June 9, 1786. On arriving he had an announcement published, "Mr. Reinagle, member of the Society of Musicians in London, gives lessons on the pianoforte, harpsichord and violin."⁶ In July he gave a concert in New York, performing vocally and on the piano and 'cello. He appeared in mid-September in a musical program in Philadelphia to honor Henri Capron, a

⁴ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, op. cit., p. 118.

⁵ Dictionary of American Biography, edited by Allen Johnson, XI Volumes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), VIII, p. 489.

⁶ John T. Howard, Our American Music (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965), p. 75.

French musician who had been in America only a short time. Capron later performed as a 'cellist in the orchestra of the Old American Company.

Reinagle was warmly greeted in Philadelphia because of his participation in the Capron concert and determined to make that city his home. He found success as a teacher and performer and was partially responsible for "city concerts" from 1786 through 1794. Reinagle arrived at a time when the concerts had been discontinued because of a quarrel among the musicians. He effected a reconciliation and emerged as the "principal manager and featured performer. His superior ability was at once apparent and he forthwith assumed a decisive role in the musical affairs of the Quaker City."⁷

In 1787 at a benefit for another musician, Reinagle was featured before an audience that included General George Washington. On June twelfth in the same year, Washington was present at a benefit performance for Reinagle. The program included a work by Johann Christian Bach, the "London Bach," and two of Reinagle's own compositions.⁸ In ensuing days, Reinagle taught harpsichord lessons to one of Washington's grandchildren.

Very rapidly, Reinagle's contributions to the musical life of Philadelphia won him acceptance in the aristocratic

⁷Gilbert Chase, America's Music (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1955), p. 113.

⁸Ibid., p. 110.

cricles of the new democracy. Other cities as well exhibited interest in musicians of the calibre of Reinagle and Capron. "In Baltimore, when it was impossible to maintain artists of the first rank in permanent residence, singers and players of outstanding reputation--men like A. Reinagle, for instance--not seldom visited the city for special occasions that called for their talents."⁹ The cities of Baltimore and New York were settings for subscription concerts organized by Reinagle.

Thanks to the abilities of Reinagle and his associates, the last years of the eighteenth century have been referred to as the "Blutezeit" of music in Philadelphia. "Its richness in musical ability is seen in no other city at that time."¹⁰ This reference was to American cities. In the same article, Reinagle is reputed to have been the "greatest German American musician of that century." Durang described Reinagle as dignified and impressive, while Dunlap found him genteel and skillful.

Although he had distinguished himself in a number of ways, there is no evidence to support an argument that

⁹Harold D. Eberlein and Cortlandt V. Hubbard, "Music in the Early Federal Era," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXIX, 2 (April, 1945), 115.

¹⁰Robert R. Drummond, "Alexander Reinagle and His Connection with the Musical Life of Philadelphia," German American Annual, V (1907), 297.

Reinagle had been active in the operas and musical farces presented in Philadelphia at The Southwark or in The Northern Liberties during the years 1786-1791. Should there be any remnants of his music for performances other than operas, i.e., for interludes or afterpieces, more might be known about his activities during that time. It is certain he was composing in a very active way for the Chesnut Street Theatre in the 1790's.¹¹ It is possible he chose not to compose for the theatre before productions were declared legal in Philadelphia in 1789, thereby avoiding the wrath of the sizable portion of the populace opposed to that medium.

Having given some attention to the background of the musical partner, it is appropriate here to draw a more specific picture of Mr. Wignell, the central concern of this study.

Thomas Wignell was born in England in or near the year 1752 and was related to the theatre through his father, a performer, and his relatives, the Hallams.

A coy reference in Odell's Annals of the New York Stage must be dispensed with. Odell points out that a man named Wignel [sic] played with Hallam's company at Lincoln's Inn Fields, circa 1750.¹² He then points out that a person named Wynnell played the part of the Duke

¹¹Dictionary of American Biography, op. cit.

¹²Odell, op. cit., p. 50.

in the first performance of Hallam's American Company at Williamsburg, Virginia in 1752. The play was The Merchant of Venice. Odell then writes, "And the name Wynell--how like to Wignell. Yet I dare say nothing."¹³ He might have said more or avoided pursuing the line of thought altogether. There was a Wignell who played at Lincoln's Inn Fields. It is likely he was Thomas' father.¹⁴

The Wynell who played at Williamsburg shows up in the Beaux Stratagem at Annapolis and as Richard in a performance of Richard III. When the Hallam company played The Conscious Lovers in New York in September of 1753 no Wynel, Wynell or Winnell, as Dunlap suggests for an alternate spelling, appears in the cast or in the cast of the afterpiece, Damon and Phillida.¹⁵ Nor do those names appear in cast lists thereafter. Thomas Wignell was probably no relation to any persons who played in America before him, save the Hallams.

Thomas may have been the son of John Wignell, a minor player with Garrick, but it would be enlightening to know the sources for the suggestion John played in

¹³Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁴G. W. Stone, The London Stage 1660-1800 (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), Part IV, Vol. 3, p. 1742.

¹⁵Dunlap, op. cit., pp. 11-13.

Garrick's company at Drury Lane.¹⁶ Genest makes no mention of Thomas Wignell as a player at Drury Lane nor do other responsible sources.

After coming to America and instantly shipping out to the West Indies, Wignell served his apprenticeship in Jamaica, playing at Kingston, Montego Bay and elsewhere. There was another Wignell in the company at Jamaica, a William Wignell, who played in the company's opening performance July 1, 1775.¹⁷ This may have been a brother to Thomas. This same Wignell played Page in The Merry Wives of Windsor. Both Wignells appear in the same cast as late as June of 1770.¹⁸ Seilhamer notes the absence of William in the cast lists after this and conjectures that he might have returned to England.¹⁹ Some of Thomas Wignell's roles in Jamaica included Joseph Surface in The School for Scandal, Bassanio in The Merchant of Venice, Claudius in Hamlet, Benvolio in Romeo and Juliet, and Catesby in Richard III. Comparing the performances recorded of Wignell's work, the number of comedy roles was more substantial than the parts he played in serious drama.

¹⁶Hughes, op. cit., p. 53 and Rankin, op. cit., p. 187.

¹⁷Wright, op. cit., p. 62.

¹⁸Seilhamer, op. cit.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 142.

A physical description of Wignell is provided by Dunlap who knew him personally, had seen him perform numerous times, and, who held him in high regard.

Wignell was a man below the ordinary height, with a slight stoop of the shoulders; he was athletic, with handsomely formed lower extremities, the knees a little curved outwards, and feet remarkably small. His large blue eyes were rich in expression, and his comedy was luxuriant in humour, but always faithful to his author. He was a comic actor, not a buffoon. He was a clown who did not speak more than was set down in his part. . . .²⁰

Most actors who would be as faithful to their texts would be kindly thought of by playwrights and Dunlap, of course, was a playwright.

On December 12, 1785, Wignell made his first appearance in America as Joseph Surface in The School for Scandal, played at the John Street Theatre in New York. This was the first performance of the play in the country. American audiences were immediately captivated by Wignell and he became a great favorite as Joseph Surface. Dunlap was to write of Wignell that his performance in The School for Scandal was "still remembered with pleasure after the lapse of nearly half a century."²¹ Comedy proved to be his forte and his reputation rested as much on success in brief afterpieces as it did in featured roles. Only three months after his initial appearance the following hint was published in The Daily Advertiser in New York:

²⁰Dunlap, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

²¹Ibid., p. 63.

HINT to the Managers of the Theatre. A number of your steady friends who have the prosperity of the Theatre at heart, are full in opinion for the benefit of the House, that the character of Tony Lumpkin, in the 'Mistakes of a Night,' be performed by Mr. Wignell.²²

Hallam had played that part previously and such a notice must have proved galling to him.

The School for Scandal and The Poor Soldier often appeared on the same bill. For those who know the first play, it is understandable that this work would be repeated often. That The Poor Soldier should be placed on the bills of entertainment again and again is somewhat of a surprise today. This musical farce, written by the Briton, John O'Keefe, had been a hit on the stages of England before it was performed in America. At least nine performances of this play were presented in the first New York season of the Old American Company in 1785-1786.²³ This short piece depicted in a comic way the travels of an Irishman named Darby as he toured Europe and the English colonies in America. Darby was played regularly by Wignell. This unfortunate character found great sympathy from audiences for many years. The character became so identified with Wignell that others avoided the role, choosing not to be compared with him.²⁴ Dunlap was impressed deeply by

²²Odell, op. cit., p. 243.

²³Ibid., p. 267.

²⁴William B. Wood, Personal Recollections of the Stage (Philadelphia: Henry Carey Baird, 1855), p. 90.

Wignell as Joseph Surface and as Darby. Dunlap included in his history the comment that the performances were "still remembered with pleasure after the lapse of nearly half a century."²⁵

In a generally complimentary review of the Old American Company production of The True Born Irishman, Wignell received enthusiastic attention:

Mr. Wignell in every situation of Mushroom deserved not only the plaudits of the house, but the embraces of the men and the kisses of the women. Ancient Mythology said that Atlas supported the world upon his shoulders, you are the Atlas of the American theatre; and bear the burden with patience and do not ever in any fit of impatience cast it to the ground.²⁶

Considering the fact that he had only played in the United States for two years, this adulation suggests Wignell rose quickly from anonymity to a position of prominence. Only two days after this review appeared, Wignell was to perform a role for which he gained a place in American theatre history. Jonathan in The Contrast by Royall Tyler is referred to as the first of the stage "Yankees." The role of Jonathan is that of an independent young man from Massachusetts who is traveling as a "waiter" to Colonel Manly, a staunch defender of his country in word and deed. Jonathan prefers the word "waiter" as the word "servant" would not be used by a freedom loving American. Jonathan

²⁵Dunlap, op. cit., p. 63.

²⁶Daily Advertiser (New York), April 14, 1787.

is a rube who goes to the theatre and is not aware he is in the "shop where the devil hangs out the vanities of the world upon the tenter-hooks of temptation." His description of the theatre, its audience, and the performance provided the enjoyment contemporary viewers might be expected to experience at a satire on the theatre of the day. The behavior of a hearty, congenial American is juxtaposed against the dandies who aped the Europeans, especially the English. In Jonathan's recounting of his experience in the theatre, he was told he had seen the "School for Scandalization." He was much impressed with

. . . one little fellow . . . shy, he had red hair, and a little round plump face like mine, only not altogether handsome. His name was--Darby;--that was his baptized name, his other name I forgot. Oh! it was Wig--Wag--Wag-al, Darby Wag-al . . . I should like to take a sling with him, or a drap of cyder with a pepper-pod in it.

"Wag-al" was, of course, a reference to Wignell who was playing Jonathan. Darby was the character earlier made famous by Wignell in The Poor Soldier. A reviewer of the first production of The Contrast said of Wignell, if he "had not quite the right pronunciation of Jonathan, he made ample amends by his inimitable humour."²⁷

While "Candour," the reviewer, thought the performance "very well acted," a criticism aimed at the prompter might more appropriately have fallen to Wignell. "The play was preceded by a good prologue, which was very well

²⁷Ibid., April 18, 1787.

spoken by Wignell, but the effect much spoilt by the unskilfulness of the prompter."²⁸ Two comments are relevant here. Wignell did not have sufficient time to con the prologue or his memory of it was deficient. The role of the prompter in the theatre was accepted by critics and carried out with varying degrees of success. No excuse is offered for Wignell's lapse, only the explanation that specially written prologues were often composed on short notice and with only a brief time for performers to memorize them.

The Contrast was a happy occasion for Americans in 1787. The conclusion of the war had left the colonies in a state of confusion and tumult. The years from 1783 to 1789 were difficult times as the leaders struggled to establish a viable government. Confidence in the leadership wavered at times and there were those convinced the break with England had not been the wisest move. However, there was pride in the accomplishments of this rough-hewn people who had upset the queen of empires. Tyler's play was the whole action replayed in miniature and the virtuous patriot's triumph was the triumph of every member of the audience. The production was repeated four times during the month following its opening. This was a prodigious number of performances of the same play in such a brief span of time. Because Tyler's play had been such a

²⁸Ibid.

rousing success for Wignell and the Old American Company, a second play of his entitled May Day, or New York in an Uproar was chosen by Wignell for his benefit performance May 18, 1787. There is no record of this play having a second performance so one may safely support Hornblow's conclusion that it "probably had little merit."²⁹

Later the same year the company moved to Baltimore where The Contrast was repeated, though Henry refused to appear there in the character of Manly. It is suggested that jealousy over Wignell's critical acclaim for his portrayal of Jonathan had caused Henry to withdraw.³⁰

Undaunted by the company's problems and explaining the absence of a full scale production because of "Impracticability," Wignell gave a public reading of The Contrast at the City Tavern, Philadelphia, on December 10, 1787. It is unclear whether he read the play alone or with a group he rehearsed for the occasion. This reading did take place during the long period when no formal productions were played in Philadelphia, so it may be precipitous to give the impression that internal company problems were the cause of the play's being read rather than performed at The Southwark.

²⁹Hornblow, op. cit., I, p. 172.

³⁰Richard Moody, Dramas from the American Theatre 1762-1901 (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1966), p. 30.

Eleven days after his appearance in Philadelphia, Wignell was in New York for the opening of a season that proved dismal from a financial standpoint. The company played from December 21, 1787 to May 31, 1788 with almost a month's layoff in March and April. "Hamlet," acting as critic for a local paper, was unhappy with the quality of some of the season's performances. Exempted from this criticism were Mrs. Henry, Mrs. Morris, Wignell and Harper. "Hamlet" thought their "many characters entitled them to the applause of the public, and they would undoubtedly receive it, were the other performers capable of affording them the assistance which . . . is absolutely necessary."³¹

Dunlap describes the benefit performances in the Spring of 1788 as unsuccessful and pens this, "Even Wignell, the great favourite, was obliged to call upon a writer to plead for him, as one who was an object of commiseration from long-continued sickness."³² Under the non dé guerre "Humanitas," Wignell's friend wrote,

Those who delight in . . . Tragedy, will remember how they have been melted into tears by the superior abilities of a Wignell; and those, who . . . have rioted in the luxuriance of mirth, at the simplicity of honest Darby, will not fail to give . . . a proof of their liberality and support . . . when we recollect the long disposition of Mr. WIGNELL, and the vast expence thereby accruing. . . .³³

³¹Odell, op. cit., pp. 264-265.

³²Dunlap, op. cit., p. 76.

³³Odell, op. cit., p. 267.

Perhaps Wignell's illness had been a cause of the house being dark for a month. The nature of this sickness is not now known but Wignell performed the "next year, restored to health and in the full tide of popular favor."³⁴

In the years 1787-1791 Wignell was a continuing favorite, playing regularly with the Old American Company. In 1789, William Dunlap's The Father, his second play and his first to be produced, was performed for the first time on September seventh. The comment by Dunlap that "It had been studied carefully" and "was played correctly" is evidence to support speculation about some plays being presented before they were ready. In The Father, Wignell "added to his reputation as a comic actor."³⁵ Dunlap lauded Wignell for not padding his part or altering the lines. If we can believe Dunlap, this vice was becoming more common, but "Mr. Wignell's taste was too good to permit his falling into such an error."³⁶ Two years later, when Wignell left the company, The Father was withdrawn from the repertoire. This would appear to have been, at least in part, due to his absence, though Dunlap admitted, "Its merits have never entitled it to revival."³⁷

³⁴Dunlap, op. cit.

³⁵Ibid., p. 80.

³⁶Ibid., p. 82.

³⁷Ibid., p. 80.

Wignell is credited with a money-making scheme that took form in 1789. The success that had accompanied The Poor Soldier encouraged Wignell to propose that Dunlap write a sequel that would focus on Darby's homecoming and his stories about his visits abroad. The result of this proposal was an afterpiece entitled Darby's Return. Like the first version of the escapades of Darby, this found ready acceptance and was played for a number of years while Wignell continued active as a performer. Dunlap is the person who credited Wignell with the idea for Darby's Return. This adds credence to the belief that Wignell might have been the originator of the proposal.³⁸

One thing that helped to give The Poor Soldier its unique place in the repertoire of the theatre of the day was the great pleasure it gave to a single personage, George Washington. Paul L. Ford has chronicled Washington's experience as a theatregoer from the time Washington was a young man.³⁹ Throughout his adult life, this soldier-statesman seems to have attended the theatre whenever time and his responsibilities would permit. Few presidents, if any, have been in attendance at the theatre as often as he. He took particular delight in The School for Scandal and The Poor Soldier. The fact that these were often chosen for performance when he was present suggests the bill was

³⁸Ibid., p. 84.

³⁹(See footnote number 55, Chapter I.)

selected after it was learned he would attend. Changes in program could be effected without the problems that would be incurred today. Announcements in the papers would state that the President would be at the theatre on a specific date. For the occasion of his visit his usual box was draped. It must have been a careful business for the managers to display tastefully an appropriate decor, respectful but not ostentatious. There is no question but that Washington was an aristocrat. However, any slight hint of this would bring forth criticism or the accusation that he had monarchic ambitions. Considering how closely he was observed whenever he was before the public or entertaining at his Philadelphia home, he must have possessed great naturalness and an almost total lack of affectation. The President's reserve was noted in his reaction to a performance of Darby's Return when "he indulged in that which was with him extremely rare, a hearty laugh."⁴⁰

On the evenings Washington would attend the theatre, soldiers were on guard at the entrances and at the stage doors as well. Thomas Wignell would meet the President and light his way to his seat. Wignell seems to have been chosen for this honor because he was a favorite of President Washington. Indeed, no other explanation seems reasonable. Though John Henry might have been laid up

⁴⁰Dunlap, op. cit., p. 85.

with gout from time to time, he or Hallam would seem to have been the appropriate person to perform this service, if protocol were to prevail. Placing aside the question of why he was chosen to do so, Wignell enjoyed the distinction of playing host to the first citizen of the time.

In return for this favor and out of respect for the pleasure Washington took in attending the theatre, in addition perhaps to wishing to ingratiate himself with people of importance, Wignell presented to the President the first two copies of the two thousand copies he had printed of The Contrast. Shortly after this play had opened in 1787, Tyler gave the rights to Wignell. Wignell determined to have the play published and in 1790 this ambition was realized. Washington, through one Tobias Lear, wrote a brief note to Wignell thanking him for the copies of the play.⁴¹ The published copies of the play were to be sold by subscription. Dunlap reported that the play "was coldly received in the closet."⁴² There is no explication of the word cold. One can only wonder if this suggested that people did not enjoy reading the published version or if the edition did not sell and Wignell was thereby deprived of a profit.

⁴¹Wignell personal correspondence of April 30, 1790, at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴²Dunlap, op. cit., p. 72.

In 1791 Wignell received critical acclaim in newspapers and proved an important asset to Hallam and Henry. Parts he had played for several years still drew impressive notices:

Last evening were presented, to a respectable and crowded audience, the School for Scandal, and The Poor Soldier. Never were these favourite entertainments performed with more spirit or justness. Wignell in Joseph, Harper in Charles, etc. fully equalled, if not exceeded their former excellence . . . The Poor Soldier was, as usual, received with the most ample testimonies of applause. Wignell was himself in Darby, Henry . . . [et al] gave great satisfaction.⁴³

Wignell and Reinagle came together in 1791 to make preparations for a new theatre in Philadelphia. It is uncertain when they met. As has been pointed out, Wignell had performed a public reading of The Contrast at the City Tavern December 10, 1787. The first positive date that established a performance of Wignell in a theatre in Philadelphia was announced in The Pennsylvania Packet for 1789 where he was listed in the casts for March 11 of Tyrrell in The Fashionable Lover and Count Mushroom in The True-Born Irishman. Wignell, however, had been performing in America since 1785 and, though cast lists are not available, he was a member of the Old American Company when it played in Philadelphia in 1787 from January 15 until February 3 and in 1788 from June 23 through July 26 and again from October 27 through November 15.

⁴³The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser, January 6, 1791.

THE *Gipsy*
C O N T R A S T,
 A
C O M E D Y,
 IN FIVE ACTS;

WRITTEN BY A
 CITIZEN OF THE *UNITED STATES*;

Performed with Applause at the Theatres in NEW-YORK.
 PHILADELPHIA, and MARYLAND;

AND PUBLISHED (under an Assignment of the Copy-Right) BY
 THOMAS WIGNELL.

Primus ego in patriam
 Aonio—deduxi vertice Mufas.
 (Imitated.) VIRGIL.

First on our shores I try *THALIA's* powers,
 And bid the *laughing, useful* Maid be ours.

PHILADELPHIA:
 FROM THE PRESS OF PRICHARD & HALL, IN MARKET STREET,
 BETWEEN SECOND AND FRONT STREETS.
 M. DCC. XC.

Figure 2.--Title page of Wignell's edition of
The Contrast by Royall Tyler.

These appearances, coupled with the fact that Reinagle was performing often in Philadelphia and New York, allow for the reasonable speculation that these men had been acquaintances for some time when they joined talents in 1791. It may be that Reinagle was in the orchestra pit directing the musical proceedings at a number of performances where he faced Wignell across the foot lights. Certainly, they would have known each other's work. The public disaffection with the Old American Company would have come to their attention. Specific proposals for the improvement of the theatre were made public previous to their alliance, e.g.,

. . . as the friends of the drama seem dissatisfied with the conduct of the managers of the Theatre, and as the managers conceive they have, in every respect done their duty, I would propose an association of the citizens for the purpose of erecting an independent theatre, and encouraging performers who will make greater exertions to please.⁴⁴

Wignell and Reinagle were a combination of rare talents for their time. Prominent, popular, respected performers whose reputations were above reproach, they were to improve the theatrical world of America.

The division of labor in the early stages of their relationship was agreed to in the following way: when enough money had been invested in the enterprise to insure

⁴⁴Ibid., February 21, 1791.

the construction of the theatre, Reinagle would remain in Philadelphia to supervise the construction while Wignell traveled to England to organize and engage a company of performers. This plan was carried through.

Attention must be paid here to the patrons whose investment in the theatre brought about its ground breaking and provided money for Wignell's first voyage to England to contract for performers. The list of the original subscribers is included here:

. . . each for one share: Robt. Morris, Henry Hill, J. Swanwick, J. Swanwick (for W. Mackenzie), Walter Stewart, Mark Prager, Jr., J. L. (for C. Febiger), Joseph Rivari, Matthew McConnell, Samuel Anderson, Robert Bass, Pearson Hunt, Samuel Hays, William Gingham, C. Richmond, James Lyle, William Cramond, Edward Tilghman, John Travis, James Cramond, John Ashley, Thomas M. Taylor, George Padst, Robert S. Bickley, John Vaughan, Thomas Fitzsimons, Michael Prager, John Duffied, Richard Potter, John Brown, Thomas M. Willing, Matthew Saddler, Robert Patton, John Leamy, Robert Rainey, David Cay (for a friend), John Mitchell, John Dunlap, Isaac Franks, Charles Pettit, Thomas M. Moore, James Read, Thomas Wignell (for a friend), John Swire (for J.D.A.R.N.O.Y.), Thomas Ketland, Jr., Griffith Evans, James Barclay, Robert Westcott, J. Swanwick (for James Abercrombie), Joseph Harmer, Francis West, Andred Spence, A. Reinagle (for a friend), Thomas Carradine, J. Delaney, Robert Westcott (for a friend), John Brown (for James Crawford), John Harrison (L.M.)

A few of these men should be singled out. Robert Morris was referred to earlier as a legislator and the financier of the American Revolution. His subscription in 1791 indicated a continued support already evident in his battle of 1789 for the legalization of playing. Other prominent men who appear in the list include William

Bingham, banker, legislator, international merchant, friend to Presidents Washington and Adams, and husband of the former Anne Willing, "unquestionably at the head of American Society";⁴⁵ Thomas M. Willing, Anne's father, a Supreme Court Justice, merchant, and president of the Bank of America; Charles Pettit, merchant, congressman, president of the Insurance Company of North America, a member of the American Philosophical Society, and trustee of the University of Pennsylvania; Edward Tilghman, a distinguished member of the law profession; William Mackenzie, bibliophile and book collector; and John Brown, Kentucky senator and friend to five presidents.

Samuel Anderson and Henry Hill deserve special mention. Anderson, a merchant and broker, worked with Wignell and Reinagle in the management of the theatre, and Hill was chairman of the subscribers, instrumental in selling shares and raising money, and correspondent in matters regarding the shares.

Walter Stewart and Robert Bass were on the steering committee acting for The Dramatic Association in its earlier struggle for the legal status of the theatre. Other subscribers were members of that Association.

⁴⁵Scharf and Westcoff, op. cit., II, p. 1693, whose list of subscribers was from the original parchment document in the Society Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

It is plain that, by the spring of the year 1791, there were in Philadelphia persons representing artistic and financial interests who could combine to provide the materials and personnel to begin the precarious business of the professional theatre. The succeeding steps were to secure plans to begin construction of a theatre and to engage talent to support that theatre.

CHAPTER III

PLANNING AND BUILDING THE CHESNUT STREET THEATRE, 1791-1794

Mr. Bache,
By inserting the following notice you will
oblige

A Customer.

It was suggested in a conversation at which I was present, a few days since, that, should a subscription be opened for building a Theatre in a central part of the city, a sum adequate to the purpose might in a short time be obtained. In order therefore to ascertain if this opinion prevails so generally as to render the thing practicable, it is proposed that those gentlemen who are inclined to adopt and support such an undertaking, shall meet at Moyston's Coffee-House on Monday next, between 12 and 1 o'clock.

Mr. Bache was the editor of The General Advertiser and Political, Commercial and Literary Journal; this announcement was printed April 26, 1791. By obliging this "Customer," Mr. Bache disclosed the fact that discussions were being held as to the possible success for the financing of a theatre in the center of Philadelphia.

Although the anonymity of the person requesting the entry does not point to any single person, it may, of course, lead to speculation as to the person's identity.

That person may have been Thomas Wignell, then employed by and playing his last season with the Old American Company. It may have been Alexander Reinagle, who was on the following Saturday night to conduct the last of the City Concerts for that season. Another possibility might have been Henry Hill, who was to become so active in the financial life of the theatre, but who chose not to announce publicly his support of such a project before it showed signs of wider endorsement. Anonymity further allows for the possibility of Hallam or Henry to have taken such an action in response to public pressures. Perhaps they may be counted out. Henry's slowness in leaving for England to recruit talent was singled out by Seilhamer who felt it was "doubtful if the new theatre in Philadelphia had not been destined to become a reality, whether he would have gone at all."¹ Through such a device as this newspaper announcement Hallam and Henry might have received support for the building of a theatre if they had exhibited the energy and determination to improve their company and give the Philadelphians better theatre. They were firmly entrenched by this time, had never known serious competition, and probably saw no need to launch into a campaign to build a new theatre. Probability leads one to think one of the first three mentioned here was the person responsible for the newspaper squib.

¹Seilhamer, op. cit., II, p. 338.

The names of those present at the meeting of May 2 or subsequent meetings are not known for sure. There seem to be no minutes left to us that include roll calls. Reinagle's presence would have been a boon to the effort if we may believe that he was held in the esteem Durang accords him.² The time of the meeting is significant. Wignell could have been present at a luncheon meeting but not the same evening, for there was a performance at the Southwark at six o'clock. A number of those who became subscribers and whose names are listed in Chapter II would have been present. The consequence of the meeting was more important than these details. The result was to have further meetings, which suggests there was an inclination "to adopt and support such an undertaking."

Early business under consideration at these meetings would have included financial arrangements, the designation of those responsible for the various tasks to be performed, a location for the theatre and an expected schedule for completion of the theatre, thence the time when the subscribers might hope for some return on their investments.

The decision about the financing of the theatre is detailed in the "Proposals" Wignell and Reinagle put forth "for Erecting a New Theatre in Philadelphia."

²Durang, op. cit., Chapter XIX.

The portions of this worn document that can be read are reproduced in Appendix A. Though undated, it may be estimated that the signatures to this agreement were affixed in late May or sometime in June, 1791. This estimation is based on the time of the announcement for the exploratory meeting, time allowed for subsequent planning meetings to take place, and the portion of the second paragraph that informs the subscribers of Wignell's intent to embark for "Europe, in October. . . ." The year is set by the further instruction in that paragraph which outlines the due dates of payment for shares, i.e., "One Hundred Dollars at the time of Subscribing One Hundred Dollars on the first day of March and One Hundred Dollars on the first day of September, 1792." Henry Hill's receipt for payment on his subscription, dated October 10, 1791, is conclusive evidence for the belief that the year was 1791.

The financial decision was to sell sixty subscriptions at three hundred dollars a subscription.³ The interest on a subscription was to be 6 per cent per annum. "Ten shares were to be redeemed and paid off annually."⁴ This is interpreted to mean that the managers would be allowed to buy up shares annually until they were the owners of the

³Pollock, op. cit., p. 52.

⁴See Appendix A.

theatre. The arrangement seems to have been on a "tontine principle,"⁵ adapted from the French and Italian practice of annuities shared among a group of persons with the provision that, when each beneficiary dies, his investment accrues to the survivors in the group. The inducement of a percentage income of one's investment was supplemented by another, more apt to please the wives of the male subscribers or the female investors; a few ladies were subscribers, one or two the recipients of gifts of subscriptions. This additional ploy was the inclosure of a season ticket with each subscription purchased. Certain extant subscription certificates include a design for a facade of a building that may have been the planned southern exposure for the theatre. As the subscriptions with this design on them are not dated, it is not clear whether or not the first printed stock certificates included the picture.⁶ The certificates read as follow:

Proprietors of the NEW THEATRE

These are to certify that Clementina Mifflin is entitled to one share in the whole property of the Association of the Proprietors of the New Theatre which share is transferable at the office of the Agent thereof in person or by power of Attorn'y.

Cha Biddle Pres^{dt}

Witness

Bernard Dahlgren Sec'y

⁵James Mease, The Picture of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: B. and T. Kite, 1811), p. 329.

⁶The certificates seen were Number 11, issued to Clementina Mifflin, Number 63, issued to Peter Hahn, and

It is unlikely that this was a 1791 subscription certificate as the names Biddle, Mifflin and Dahlgren do not appear among the list of original subscribers.⁷ Subscriptions were already available in the early fall of 1791 as Henry Hill's receipt indicates. Hill's receipt has no picture on it and we do not have Hill's certificate to place the picture with the date. If the certificates that include the picture of a theatre were issued in the second subscription in 1792, it is possible the facade shown here was made from a sketch that reached Philadelphia in February of that year or of the model that arrived in June. It is here suggested that the picture shown was a replica of one of these models, hence reproduced on the second or third subscription certificates. The possibility that this sketch might have been the intended design for the marquee is supported by the drawing shown on page 113 in Chapter IV. This drawing was one of a series executed in 1800 by William Russell Birch, an artist of the day. While the pediment and upper stories are the only comparable parts shown, the shape of the pediment, the framed wooden decoration around the pediment, the central window, the

Numbers 31, 44-46, 49, 50, 59, 60, and 80 issued to Charles Biddle. These are in the Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁷This list is reproduced on page 63. It should be noted that three names on this list are undecipherable.

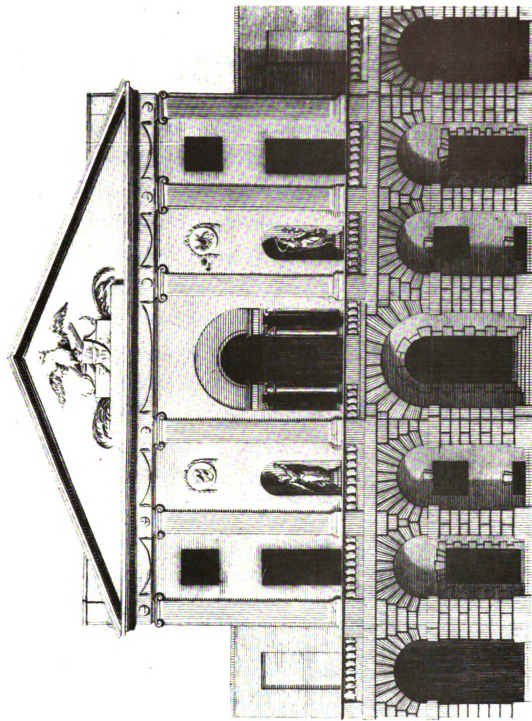


Figure 3.--Design reproduced on subscription certificate.

number of openings in the upper stories are alike, suggesting a close enough likeness to permit an argument supporting this thesis. The absence in the Birch Drawing of the decorative pillars, their capitals, and the recessed sculpted figures is not a deterrent to the theory that they correspond. The unfinished condition of the theatre pictured by Birch in 1800 might explain the necessity that could have prevented a physical reproduction of the certificate design. If the managers did not have sufficient funds to complete the execution of the entrances, as Birch's picture shows, it would have been surprising for them to concern themselves with appliued and non-functional segments of the facade.

Even before the data of Hill's receipt in the fall of 1791, opposition to the project appeared. The following, published September twelfth, is an abbreviated version of a response to a rumor that the theatre might be in the offing:

A report has been confidently circulated, for two or three days past, that a lot of ground in a very central part of the city had been purchased, for the purpose of erecting a play-house--whether this be true, or is calculated for the purpose of including the neighbors to join in the actual purchase of the lot at a high price, to prevent its being applied to that use, I cannot learn with certainty; but I think it calls for an immediate attention from the citizens at large, as the consequences of such a proceeding would be more prejudicial to the manners of the present and future generations of citizens, than any circumstance that has, or perhaps could, arise among us. . . . If play-houses must be liscensed in a city, they should be in such situations as will be least injurious,--where persons who wish to avoid them and the

company which surround them, can do so, without abandoning their industry, their lawful occupations, and their usual walks. The place said to be chosen for the purpose, is perhaps more improper than any other in the city.--Chesnut-street is the middle line dividing the northern from the southern half of the city, Fourth-street divides the improvements of it on an average nearly into equal parts, east and west. The lot in question, is then near to the centre of the built part of the city, it lies in and near the most public walks, frequented by youth going to and from the largest schools, the university, the college, and the quakers' academy, the public library, and the courts of justice. . . . Though I believe the manners of the citizens of Philadelphia are as pure and uncorrupt as in any capital of its size perhaps in the world, yet there are characters enough in it who would rejoice in an opportunity of drawing a dishonest gain from increasing that corruption, by seducing the innocent of both sexes to the gratification of corrupt appetites. . . . Parents . . . Masters and mistresses . . . Legislators . . . Citizens . . . Matrons and virgins . . . I call on you all, to arouse and avert this impending evil.

Mentor⁸

If we may assume that "Mentor" was abreast of the newspaper information of the day, we then know that meetings about the proposed theatre that took place between May second and September twelfth had not resulted in a public statement about the intention to build a theatre or where such a theatre might be located. The report "Mentor" had heard had been "confidently circulated" for only "two or three days past." The person who wrote this letter in September probably had not seen announcements of the May meeting, did not know the results of

⁸ Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, September 12, 1791.

that meeting, nor was he privy to the activities of persons sympathetic to the theatre who might know about the building plans.

Public announcements of the project could have rained down terrific criticism. Many citizens were still actively and vehemently opposed to acting in Philadelphia; therefore, the persons proposing the theatre's construction seem to have been in no hurry to announce their intent, especially regarding the theatre, until they had secured a certain percentage of the desired subscriptions or, what seems more likely, until they had secured the property they wanted for the site.

The location designated by "Mentor" was close to the actual site being considered. That site was in Chesnut Street. Chesnut Street was not considered to be the dividing line between northern and southern Philadelphia, as "Mentor" suggests. The street then known as High Street, a block north of Chesnut, was designated in that way. "Mentor" was correct in writing that Fourth Street was near the east and west center of the city. The Quaker Academy was on Fourth Street south of Chesnut between Chesnut and Walnut Streets. The court of justice referred to was probably the Supreme Court which met in Carpenter's Hall on the southwest corner of Chesnut Street just above Fifth Street. The rather surprising thing is that no mention is made by "Mentor" of the fact that the seat of

government met in what Pennsylvanians call the State House, known to others as Independence Hall. This building was and is on the south side of Chesnut Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets. In the Birch View on page 113, the building that is closest to the viewer and in the left side of the picture is Congress Hall, some fifty feet west of the State House and one of three buildings in that block. The Chesnut Street Theatre is down and across the street in this view.

The actual plot where the theatre was to be located was above Sixth Street on the north side of the street. The owner of the property was John Dickinson, the famous lawyer, legislator, and statesman. The Office of Records of the city of Philadelphia does not have an account of the transaction between Dickinson and the subscribers to the theatre. This may be because the property did not formally change hands in 1791. It is safe to conjecture that a down payment was made to Dickinson and that there was an arrangement for periodic payments towards the purchase of the land.

A close examination of the Birch Drawing shows a sign for Sixth Street. According to one measurement, the distance from Sixth Street to the theatre was twenty feet. Later, the particular lot where the theatre was located was designated 199 Chesnut Street. Rae's Philadelphia Pictorial Directory and Panoramic Advertiser

would seem to confirm the measurement from Sixth Street to the theatre as it shows only one store front between these two points. More specific confirmation is offered in the ground plan of the theatre (shown on page 116 of Chapter IV). This width is determined by a survey made in 1805 that measures the central part of the building at sixty-four feet bordered on either side by wings, each fourteen feet wide. The length usually quoted for the theatre between Chesnut and Carpenter Streets is one hundred thirty-four feet. This measurement differs with the survey performed by a Mr. Justus. On January 4, 1805, Mr. Philip Justus surveyed the building and lot where the Chesnut Street Theatre was located. No mention is made of the reason for the survey (see Appendix B). The description is detailed. The inclusion of information about the materials used to build the structure and the location of the nearest hydrant in Chesnut Street suggests that this survey may have been for some municipal purpose. Mr. Justus' measurement set the length from north to south at one hundred thirty-two feet. This measurement was made from the facade of the building as it existed in 1794 to its front in Carpenter Street. The design of and addition to the theatre of a portico and east and west wings constructed after 1800 increases the overall length to one hundred forty-eight feet. This was possible because the original plan was to hold the building back from the

street. The Birch View shows this hold-back from the street, where the patrons of the theatre are milling about in front of the theatre, ostensibly before a performance. The size of the lot would have measured near to ninety-two by one hundred forty-eight feet.

This location was extremely well chosen from many standpoints. With the city rapidly growing to the west, such a spot would be in the center of the city for many years. A main street like Chesnut would have been easily accessible from many others. Cabbies would be more willing to pull up with their "horses' heads to the Delaware" on Chesnut Street than on South Street. It should be recalled that a serious objection to the Southwark was its setting so far out of town. A walk today from the location of the Chesnut Street Theatre to the location where the Southwark stood takes approximately fifteen minutes and covers only about six long blocks. However, a map of the period shows the older theatre in a remote place and the paths leading to the Southwark would have been rough in the 1790's, while Chesnut Street was a wide avenue.⁹

The area near the Delaware was becoming rougher and many of the more stylish gentry who were perspective theatre-goers had moved, and, were moving to the west.

⁹French visitors were unhappy with many aspects of Philadelphia, but most complimentary about the widths of the streets and terribly impressed with the presence of sidewalks. See the Birch View.

As this demographic change developed, those nearer the river would be less likely to prove patrons of the theatre. The proximity of the governmental buildings and the Bank of North America, on Chesnut south of Fifth, would insure that the neighborhood in which the theatre was located should retain its qualities of attractiveness and acceptability for some time.

As was pointed out in Chapter II, Wignell and Reinagle assumed rather specific functions related to the planning for the theatre. Their primary responsibilities were to engage the best performers, to procure or arrange for the construction of scenery, costumes and all necessary elements of productions, to aid in the raising of funds and to manage the theatre after its opening. They were in need of help in the purchase of the lot and erection of the theatre. Within these general guidelines, the talent and scenery search in England fell to Wignell. Reinagle was responsible for the supervision of construction and, with the help of the most stalwart supporters of the project, dealing with the waiting patrons while the various parts of this complicated puzzle were to be assembled.

The exact date of Wignell's sailing for England is unsure. An estimate would be somewhere between October 15, and November 20, 1791. The date may have been earlier but probably not later than this period. This estimate is arrived at by the use of two newspaper entries for

early 1792. After referring to the difficulties the theatre had experienced in America, a commentator wrote,

To put the theatre on a more respectable footing than hitherto, in Philadelphia (The Athens of America) a gentleman of the stage, from this place, is now in England collecting a more respectable company of actors than has heretofore appeared on the American continent. A lot of ground, it is said, has also been purchased at the upper end of Chesnut Street near Seventh Street, for the erection of a theatre, upon an improved plan, and which, it is expected, will be much more convenient in every respect than that in Southwark, as well as more favorably situated for the resort of the lovers of rational and polite amusement.¹⁰

This account was published January 12, 1792 and was followed a month later by news from Wignell.

By the last Packet letters were received from Mr. Wignell, who gives the most favorable accounts of his success in obtaining performers for the New Theatre in this city--artists of the first reputation have also undertaken to supply him with plans and drafts (which will probably arrive by the next vessel) for the building, scenery, and decorations. The materials are already bespoke, and part of them deposited on the lot adjoining to General Dickinson's house on Chesnut Street--The subscribers to this undertaking, and the public in general, may, therefore, expect, during the ensuing winter, to see the Drama in a more perfect state than has hitherto been known in America.¹¹

The trip to England in very smooth sailing would have taken close to a month. If the packet on which Wignell's letter arrived just previous to February 13

¹⁰National Gazette, January 12, 1792.

¹¹Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, February 13, 1792.

had made excellent time, it may have left England in early January. Wignell would have had to be in that country at least a brief time to receive assurance of plans and drafts and to experience success in "obtaining performers" for the theatre that was to be built.

Assuming this kind of success must have taken a minimum of two weeks and allowing for sailing time, the estimate above is made. There had been a meeting of the subscribers "on special affairs" the eighteenth of November but there is no reason to relate that to Wignell's sailing date.¹² It would be most interesting to know if, indeed, it had been some sort of a bon voyage affair.

The quotation from the National Gazette informs us that the writer had heard that the ground for the theatre had been purchased. This is a significant comment in January, 1792. Numerous secondary sources suggest the cornerstone was laid in 1791.¹³ Evidence militates against this early date. If the ground had been broken and the cornerstone laid, why the Gazette's reporting of hearsay regarding the purchase of the land and not a progress report on the foundation or walls? Also, the

¹²Ibid., November 15, 1791.

¹³For instance, Scharf and Wescott in Volume II of their History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884 on page 970 and Joseph Jackson on page 422 of his Encyclopedia of Philadelphia (4 vols; Harrisburg: The National Historical Association, 1931) place the ceremonies of laying the cornerstone in that year.

last quotation above, a month later, indicates that some building materials were lying in a field adjacent to the theatre's proposed location. Further considering this same letter from Wignell, why would the construction begin before the plans had been received? Any detailed blueprints, i.e., the "plans and drafts" mentioned in the letter, would have taken some time to execute and probably could not arrive by the next packet, as the newspaper suggests.

The hope expressed that the lovers of the theatre might expect an improved quality in the theatre during the following winter seems to have been possible at the time of this writing in February. Though the writer would not have been well informed about construction schedules and the difficulties in the erection of auditoria and stage houses, an estimate of ten months construction time would not seem impossible. At the same time, any delay after February would make the possible completion by winter unlikely. Wignell was undoubtedly recruiting for the 1792-93 season in Philadelphia, expecting the house to be ready for his company. A letter of Reinagle's indicates September of 1792 had been the proposed month for occupancy.¹⁴

¹⁴The original of this letter, dated July 11, 1793, is in the Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Little public notice was given the theatre in March and April. By May there began to be more active development of the structure.

Yesterday, the 1st of May, the foundation of the New Theatre in Chesnut Street was laid, and, as every article for the building is prepared, the work will be carried on with the utmost spirit, and the House be ready to open by the beginning of November next.¹⁵

The time between February and May is not a lengthy period for preparing "every article for the building." This would probably include the cutting and sizing of lumber, the purchase and transportation of the necessary hardware, and the engagement of carpenters and other tradesmen with skills necessary to execute a large structure with some of the problems encountered in raising churches or other buildings with high, open central areas.

It has been shown that at least one estimate of the completion of the theatre was set for October 31, 1792 at the latest. Wignell, in London, would have been watching the mails with great interest for the late spring and summer would have to be the time when he must be asking for commitments from performers. More importantly, he would have to be making commitments. English performers would be reluctant about any arrangement that seemed less than secure, for, if their expected American employment did not materialize, they would lack engagements for the coming theatrical season.

¹⁵Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, May 2, 1792.

The same American Daily Advertiser that reported on May second the foundation laying for the theatre included the following three weeks later.

The New Theatre, the building of which has been retarded for want of the model still expected by the Pigou, is, we hear, to front on Chesnut-street. The front on that street will be about 88 feet, of which the body of the Theatre will occupy 68, with one arch on each side, one of which will afford a communication between Chesnut-street, and the street behind the building. The Theatre will stand ten feet back from Chesnut-street, and run to the line of Carpenter's street 134 feet. The first story of the main front is to be divided into five arches, between which and the doors of the theatre there will be an area the length of the building, and ten feet in width, which will serve to shelter from the weather those going in or coming out. From a view of the plan of this building, it appears well calculated for convenience, and displays a great share of taste.¹⁶

It may be assumed the comment, "the building . . . which . . . is, we hear, to front on Chesnut-street," is a rhetorical device in the style of the writer and not a display of ignorance about the earlier laying of the foundation. The important fact exhibited here is that a definite plan was present and had been seen by the reporter. The importance of the presence of a scale model to advance construction is an interesting phenomenon. Detailed elevations and riggings would seem to have made such a model unnecessary. There are numerous speculations that might be made regarding this. Perhaps the elevations and riggings were not sufficiently detailed. The working drawings may have only outlined certain

¹⁶Ibid., May 22, 1792.

large masses and the ground plan. Also, the configurations and decoration exhibited by a model may have been used in that time to aid during the early construction period. Perhaps a combination of these is the more accurate explanation.

The long awaited model arrived about the middle of June. The announcement of this arrival is worth repeating.

Monday arrived in this city from London, by the way of New York, the model by which the new Theatre of Messrs. Wignell and Reinagle, in Chesnut-street, is to be erected. This plan has been pronounced by European Architects and persons of taste and judgment, to be better calculated for a building, of convenient and elegant accommodation, as well with respect to the performers as the audience, than any Theatre of equal dimensions, hitherto constructed--The model will in a few days be exhibited for the gratification of the curious.¹⁷

It is strange that the clause "to be erected" is used. Supposedly the foundation was laid in May and the work commenced with the parts of the building in readiness. I suggest that the grammatic construction that might have been more appropriate would have been "being erected." Setting aside this possibility, and accepting the quote as an accurate appraisal of progress on the building would suggest unreasonably long delays. The suggestion that progress was underway is reinforced by the fact that a new subscription for forty shares was made available on June 2, 1792. It is difficult to imagine Reinagle proposing an additional subscription one year after the first

¹⁷Pennsylvania Gazette, June 20, 1792.

subscription unless he could indicate some tangible results of the initial investment, and the foundation was certainly a tangible piece of evidence.

Wignell was far from idle during the Spring. Witness a portion of his letter of May twentieth that was printed on July twelfth.

The afternoon, I arrived from a tour of near seven hundred miles; in which I have seen many theatres; --and from some of them shall procure an accession of strength that will amply compensate the trouble and expense. Mr. West, a native of America, and now President of the Royal Academy in London, has just seen the plan of the new Theatre, and is charmed with it. He says it will be the greatest ornament (if finished on the intended plan) that the city of Philadelphia can boast of;--and I have reason to expect, that he will lend us the aid of his pencil, in designing some of the ornaments.¹⁸

By the time Reinagle had received this letter, he must have had to respond to this hopeful enthusiasm with an uneasiness about the expected completion of the theatre. Meanwhile, Wignell's rival for talent was concluding his business and soon to return to the United States. Henry, who had not sailed to England until March of 1792, was not retarded in his recruitment by concern for where his company would play. His plan was to use the John Street Theatre in New York, the Southwark in Philadelphia and a

¹⁸Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser. Benjamin West had been interested in painting while a lad in America. He gained attention as a portrait painter before the age of twenty. After leaving the colonies in 1763 to live and study in Italy, he moved from Italy to England where he married and lived until his death in 1820. During his long stay he enjoyed the patronage of George III and the friendship of Joshua Reynolds and others. He became President of the Royal Academy in 1792 and retained that position, with the exception of one year, until his death.

theatre he and Hallam controlled in Baltimore. Hence, he was able to gather a company in a brief period of time and have that company arrive in New York in late September and perform on October first. Henry arrived after his company but in time for its members to support him in a performance on October eighth.

Wignell's lot was predictable. The building had been delayed, the season postponed, at best. The performers had to be freed from any contracts already made.

Rumblings appear to have taken place in Philadelphia. Reinagle wrote to at least one subscriber explaining Wignell's delay. Wignell, "having been informed from substantial authority that the theatre would not be completed before spring [1793], tho't it was prudent to permit the persons he had engaged to accept of employment for the winter in England."¹⁹ Wignell may have had the subscriber's interest uppermost in his thoughts. His rationale for letting these people go was to avoid the great expense of their being unoccupied in Philadelphia. Their salaries would have to have been paid, whether they played or not. No where is it suggested that the two managers considered playing at the Southwark until their theatre was ready. They might have been able to arrange to play there. It may be they corresponded on this point and wished to hold

¹⁹Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser, January 15, 1793.

off until they could have an opening in the style then envisioned, with no tawdry theatre, outlying district and the other detriments accompanying the Southwark.

The author of the Federal Gazette entry quoted here, regretted that Wignell "was not better informed of the surprising exertions of his partner . . . to get all in readiness for his reception." The author may have judged that all needed to perform plays was prepared by January of 1793. Subsequent evidence indicates he knew little of the readiness of the theatre for the production of plays or operas. Continued and ambitious progress had been made in the Fall of 1792 that must have given the impression by mid-January of 1793 that the theatre was in a state of near completion. However, an annual publication in Philadelphia that included the names and occupations of its citizens, also included the public buildings of interest and the following excerpt is taken from that book:

We have here two theatres, the one called the old theatre situated in Cedar, between Fourth and Fifth Streets, now open. The other called the new theatre corner of Sixth and Chesnut Streets, which we are informed will be open some time in next September.²⁰

On the day Reinagle's letter was quoted in the paper, the theatre was opened for an inspection by the

²⁰James Hardie, Philadelphia Directory and Register (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1793), p. 213.

Governor and the legislature and found to be "beautiful" and "nearly ready for performance."²¹ The subscribers were probably allowed to visit at this time also, though they may have enjoyed privileges at other times as well. This estimate of its readiness for opening might have been the observation of a dilettante gleaned from a Reinagle tour speech. The work was unfinished and in such a state of readiness that

. . . the subscribers to the Theatre, were respectfully informed that at the particular request of the Machinist no person upon any account whatever (except those concerned in the direction of the building) could possibly be admitted till further notice.

This notice appeared the day following the visit of the dignitaries. It was repeated in the same newspaper January nineteenth and twenty-fifth.

The machinist referred to here was probably Charles Milbourne, a scene painter Wignell had hired in London, who was responsible for the decoration of the house, the scenery, also the stage equipment. Milbourne was assisted by Charles Ciceri, a scene painter who was not hired in England but taken on after he had traveled some and worked in several places in America.

On Friday, January 25, 1793, Reinagle provided Dunlap's paper with an announcement of a meeting to be

²¹Jacob C. Parsons, Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer of Philadelphia 1765-98 (Philadelphia: W. F. Fell Co., 1893), p. 188.

held at the City Tavern the following Monday evening at seven o'clock. This announcement was printed on Saturday, the twenty-fifth, and the interest of subscribers to the theatre would have been aroused by another pronouncement in the same edition.

The subscribers having all had an opportunity of seeing the Theatre, are respectfully informed that it will be positively shut from this time till Saturday next, 2d February, when it will be opened for the public, with A GRAND CONCERT, of Vocal & Instrumental Music.

The timing of these two notices bears some comment.

A meeting had been called for Monday evening. Reinagle would have known if he and Wignell were to undergo some serious criticism at that meeting. What better way to greet his patrons than with an announcement that he intended to open the theatre, if only for a concert. This kind of performance would make no demands on the stage machinery and still give the audience something to remember and look forward to. In the interim, closing the theatre to outsiders would have provided Milbourne and Ciceri the opportunity to speed their preparations for public viewing on the second of February.

The meeting on the Monday night at the City Tavern may have been calm. It may also have been stormy. At that gathering someone and, presumably, that someone would have been Reinagle, had to relate "the reasons and motives" that were causing Wignell to remain so long in London before sailing with his company. There was not

just a "hearing" of these causes for a delay but they were subjected to consideration. It does not seem unlikely that this examination of Wignell's motives was heated and provided some differences of opinion.

The subscribers were in Macbeth's position of realizing that going back was as difficult as going ahead. There were few alternatives open to them that would not prove costly. The result of this meeting was published on Wednesday, the thirtieth of January.

At a meeting of the Subscribers to the New Theatre held at the City-Tavern on Monday the 28th January 1793, agreeable to public advertisement,

Dr. Ruston in the Chair,

It was unanimously agreed,

That the subscribers after hearing and considering the reasons and motives which have induced Mr. Wignell to delay bringing out his company, do fully approve the same, and have full reliance on his continued exertions for their interest and the reputation of himself and company.²²

Wignell's vote of confidence bought him some time.

Reinagle would have been able with safety to predict the inhabitation of the theatre by a professional company for the 1793-94 season.

Meanwhile, for purposes of diversion and trying the theatre for acoustical properties, Reinagle was able to announce his program of music for the coming Saturday evening. This program was to consist of an Overture,

²²Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, January 30, 1793.

composed and conducted by Mr. Reinagle and three acts of music, the first two acts to be separated by a dance and, at the close, a "Grand Dance." Performances of plays usually began at six o'clock, but the premier concert was to start at seven o'clock. The box office was open from ten a.m. to five p.m. each day and tickets were 7/6 for Box seats, 5/7 for the Pit, and 3/7 for Gallery.²³

A second concert was performed on the fourth of February with pit and gallery prices slightly higher than on the evening of the opening. The program was not announced in the papers but to be "expressed in the Bill of the Day." Subscribers could obtain their tickets from a Mr. Young "opposite the North Door of the Theatre." The north door would have been facing the rear of the theatre in Carpenter Street. The following description of the theatre, appearing on February fourth could easily have aroused the interest of theatre lovers as well as the curious who had never seen the inside of a structure designed to be a theatre.

The New Theatre, which is now nearly completed, already affords a very agreeable prospect of entertainment to the lovers of the drama, who seem to be highly delighted with the excellence of the plan, and the elegance of the decorations; for, exclusive of its being very large and commodious, it is, perhaps, one of the handsomest piles of building in the world for the purpose. The stage is admirably constructed with a fall of a few

²³Ibid., January 31, February 1 and 2, 1793.

inches, from the front curtain to the Orchestra, so as to raise the actors considerably to the view of the audience. The scenery is very beautiful, and the perspective well-judged.-- The pit is extremely convenient, as the seats are better adapted with respect to distance and elevation, than is usually to be met with. There are two tier of boxes, supported by rows of fluted Corinthian columns, highly gilt, with a crimson ribband twisted from the base to the capital.-- The tops of the boxes are richly ornamented with crimson, drapery, festoons and tassels. . . . The pannels are of pale rose-color, with all the beadings gilt. The gallery is both large and convenient, and the view, from every part of the House, will command the whole extent of the stage. --The entrances are so well contrived, and the lobbies so spacious, that there can be no possibility of the least confusion or disturbance, among the audience, going to the different parts of the House. There are also two completely-planned bars for wine and other refreshments, at each side of the lobby, pertaining to the first tier of boxes; so that nothing remains neglected for the gratification of both the eye and palate, and, by the assay commenced by a concert last Saturday evening, it has equally charmed the ear of our citizens, by its sweet echo, proceeding from the most perfect vocal and instrumental abilities.²⁴

A third and, for that period, last concert was performed on February seventh. The announcement for that concert was prefaced by the statement that this was to be the "Last Time till further notice." A footnote to the newspaper advertisement for the concert mentions that a "very considerable Number of lights, in addition to the former, are now added by means of branches."²⁵ Apparently it had been discovered during the first two concerts that lighting in the theatre was insufficient. It is not

²⁴Ibid., February 4.

²⁵Ibid., February 7, 1793.

clear if the additional lights were on the stage or in the auditorium. It may be that, by standards of the day, both areas required better illumination.

The popular acceptance of the concerts might have encouraged Reinagle to present more evenings of entertainment. At the opening,

. . . notwithstanding the inclemency of the evening, a large number of citizens appeared in every part of the house--the boxes exhibited a blaze of beauty --the pit was a display of respectable judges, and the gallery was filled with orderly, well disposed citizens whose decency of behavior deserves the greatest applause.²⁶

However, no further performances were forthcoming. Why this was true for the remainder of the winter and spring is not certain. The impression given is that there was work the technicians had to complete in the theatre. Another deterrent could have been a legislative hassle that centered around the theatre shortly after the concerts mentioned above. Some person, observing the opening of the theatre, and apparently impressed with its potential income, had the notion to tax that place of amusement to pay for the completion of a house for the President of the United States. It must be understood that attempts to raise funds for that purpose through legislative action had not been successful, despite the popularity of President Washington.

²⁶Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser,
February 4, 1793.

The proposal that recommended this tax was introduced in the House of Representatives of Pennsylvania and sought to permit the borrowing of seventy-five hundred pounds to complete the presidential residence. This loan would then be repaid by a tax on the theatre of fifty dollars per night.²⁷ Reaction to this legislative move was rapid and adverse.

The citizens of Pennsylvania have heretofore reposed with confidence, believing that at least the ninth article of our excellent constitution was in full force, which contains the declaration of our individual rights as citizens; and why the American work of reformation should begin with the Assembly of Representatives, by an attack on the Rights of Men, is unaccountable. Yet, we are told, with an air of truth, that a tax of fifty dollars per night, was yesterday passed by one branch of the Legislature, to be levied on the Managers of the New Theatre, in violation, as is conceived, of the Constitution, which declares, that "no ex post facto law, nor any law impairing contracts, shall be made."

That the unfortunate managers, after the repeal of the law against the establishment of a Theatre, contracted to pay six percent to the subscribers, previous to the loan for an expensive building, is well known; nor is it urged, that their property, now to be thus partially taxed or fined, is in consequence of any crime whatever by them committed. They are to be condemned and ruined without trial, although no offence is alledged against them, in defiance of the constitution as well as of the Rights of Individuals.

Vivat Respublica.²⁸

Another citizen wrote at length complimenting "Vivat Respublica," commenting on the "public animadversion" to

²⁷ Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, February 22, 1793.

²⁸ Ibid., February 23, 1793.

the plan, and warning that such a precedent could result in public buildings erected by "taylor's," insurance companies, banks or other private agencies at the whim of the legislature. This citizen felt the managers of the theatre had no more interest in paying for the president's abode than would other citizens, and, that a tax peculiar to them relieved the general populace of a responsibility, "necessary or not," that should be shared by all. It was the hope of this citizen that the senate would reject the resolution.²⁹ "Philo justitiae" followed with similar lengthy argument on March first.³⁰

The attempt to pass the legislation for the tax on the Theatre came to nought. The defeat of this unexpected challenge to theatre may have increased the confidence of some in the wisdom of the solons, but the attempt to levy the tax could have been a move to insure the failure of the theatre. It will be seen that, before the theatre was to open officially, a last-ditch campaign was developed to prevent that opening.

Mention in Durang of a concert played April 2, 1793 at the Chesnut Street Theatre seems to be inaccurate. That he uses the second day of the month suggests that his source was correct in that the first concert took

²⁹Ibid., February 28, 1793.

³⁰Ibid., March 1, 1793.

place on the second. However, it is probable the source referred to the performance February 2 and made error in recording it as April.

In the winter, spring, and summer of 1793 Reinagle and Wignell were aiming at an early Fall opening for their theatre. There were impediments but none appeared sufficient to prevent such a plan. The stage and auditorium would be fully prepared for the production and crewing of plays, operas, or concerts. The company of players would have been assembled in England, transported to Philadelphia and prepared for a season featuring comedy and tragedy, farce and opera. Wignell, though detained at length by his release of performers the previous year, was able to promise employment with the certainty that the theatre posed no obstacle. It appeared as though only some disaster of nature could prevent an opening.

In the summer, Reinagle faced what could have proved to be a crucial difficulty. John Dickinson, owner of the property where the theatre then stood, pressed hard for payments he had been promised. From Reinagle's letter of July eleventh, the impression is given that the payment had been requested before and there was a threat to bring some legal action against Reinagle. The co-manager was cordial and respectful in his reply explaining in brief some reasons for the delay. At the same time, he seemed willing to lock horns if necessary.

Mr. Jarvis has this moment been with me with repeated instructions from you to proceed with rigorous measures, which if really pursued will I am convinced be the cause of regret to yourself as well as infinite injury to us. . . .

In a less than conciliatory tone, Reinagle closes the letter by asking a month's indulgence which, if granted, must cause Dickinson to "feel the satisfaction of averting a disagreement and great inconvenience, from Sir your most, etc, etc." On July sixteenth, another letter from Reinagle, more cordial by far, thanked the land holder for his consent to delay the payment.

In the first of these letters Reinagle refers to a communication from Wignell: "From the last letter I have received from my partner in London I have every reason to expect he will be here in the course of the next month immediately after which our business will commence. . . ." He then hedged the prediction of a month by asking "a short indulgence till the month of September."³¹

Wignell's preparations were about to conclude and his company to sail for America. A promissory note for the cost of the company's passage is dated July 27, 1793 and was signed in London. Fifty-six men, women and children were bound for America in the George Barclay. The cost of their passage was set at thirty-two hundred dollars. This figure is established from a letter from

³¹Reinagle's letters of July 11 and 16, 1793 are in the Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Henry Hill to Mr. Meade, dated January 7, 1794. Eight men had made this money available in lots of four hundred dollars each.³² Wignell had indicated in his promissory note of the previous July to the George Barclay company in London that he would pay the first installment against this figure ninety days after his arrival in America. At first glance the cost of passage might seem high, but the total figure divided by the fifty-six persons to be conveyed results in an individual cost of only slightly more than fifty-seven dollars. James Fennell, contracted by Wignell in an arrangement somewhat different than that of his future associates, had sailed in advance of them.³³

The Old American Company, regularly playing in New York during the theatrical season, thought to use its Summer by an engagement at the Southwark. The older house was opened for a season beginning July 1 and intended to run as long as audiences would support the company. The company played through July and into late August. A benefit for Mrs. Pownall was performed August twenty-third and Hodgkinson's benefit was advertised for August twenty-sixth, then rescheduled for August twenty-eighth.

³²This letter is in the Smith Papers of the Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³³James Fennell, An Apology for the Life of James Fennell (Philadelphia: Moses Thomas, 1814), p. 333.

Hodgkinson was not to enjoy the fruits of a benefit that season for, by August twenty-eighth, Philadelphia was torn by a plague of yellow fever that raged through the city. The announcement for Mrs. Pownall's benefit had included the note that Mrs. Henry had been "obliged to go to Bristol for her health,"³⁴ though no mention is made of yellow fever. The intention of the Old American Company to further postpone Hodgkinson's benefit due to the "Indisposition of Part of the Company" indicates some of its members may also have been victims of this dread disease.³⁵

The plague descended on Philadelphia in early August and continued until November ninth. The advent of winter usually was a signal that the epidemic was passing. This period in 1793 was one of "unrelieved horror." Those who could afford to, left the community.³⁶ President Washington, who was seldom able to visit Mount Vernon, was on September tenth spirited away for safety's sake. This respite from his duties at the seat of government lasted until December second.³⁷ By November

³⁴Dunlap's American Advertiser, August 23, 1793.

³⁵Pollock, op. cit., p. 201.

³⁶Edward M. Riley, "Philadelphia, The Nation's Capital, 1790-1800," Pennsylvania History, XX, No. 4 (October, 1953), 374-375.

³⁷Rufus W. Griswold, The Republican Court, or American Society in the Days of Washington (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867), p. 314.

thirteenth, Thomas Bradford's son wrote him from Elizabeth, New Jersey that "from all reports the fever has entirely left the city especially our part of town."³⁸ The number of deaths in Philadelphia in the three month plague was set at five thousand. This would represent somewhere between 10 and 20 per cent of the population. There was talk of burning buildings and meeting places. It was the intent of some to prevent any public meetings.

In the very height of this scourge, Wignell and his troupe arrived from England. Arriving in September, their ship anchored in the Delaware River off Gloucester, New Jersey. Wignell debarked and paid a visit to Philadelphia where he met with the news of conditions there. Fennell, who had been hard pressed for cash since his arrival in the city somewhat earlier, had been teaching English to French fugitives from St. Domingo. He was discovered by Wignell at the home of Morris, the same performer who had defected with Wignell. Fennell aided Wignell in returning to the ship with food and provisions and there met his fellow players. Wignell had no intention of endangering the lives of the company or the investment of the subscribers. No prediction could be made about the duration of the plague. The previous year had been the first in

³⁸The personal correspondence of Thomas Bradford is located in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania Manuscript Collection.

which it had ever been encountered in the United States and little was known about it.³⁹

The ship could not be held so Wignell decided to make arrangements for housing his performers in the rural communities of southern New Jersey. Wignell asked Fennell to aid him in making temporary arrangements for the quartering of his company.

. . . Wignell, whom every one who knew him must have loved, finding himself with so large a company, in such a state of the City of Philadelphia, requested that as I had been some time in the country, I would take the charge of them and procure them lodgings in the Jerseys. The farmers were generous enough to give asylums to the respective families, and the single men were accommodated at a tavern in Sandtown. Here we were visited as strange wild beasts or nondescript animals--the expansion of intelligent ideas not having embraced, in the multitude, the conception of what genus a playactor could be. However, after having visited us, drank our wine, and heard our songs, they concluded that we were something human. Here our revered friend, Wignell, was under the necessity of leaving us, to provide for exigencies, depositing in my hands thirty dollars ———. 'twas all he could, but thus was I left with thirty dollars only, in the charge of fifty-six human beings for three weeks. . . .⁴⁰

The weeks dragged on and the costs of supporting a large body of players mounted. Wignell and Reinagle were contracted to supply salaries for their players from the time they landed in America. Hence, the months of September, October and November were a drain on the resources of the subscribers to the New Theatre. Wignell's

³⁹John Bernard, Retrospections of America, 1797-1811 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887), p. 260; also, Hornblow, op. cit., I, p. 199.

⁴⁰Fennell, op. cit., pp. 335-336.

. . . arrival with so numerous a company (than which the London stage could boast no better) during the first yellow fever, was a mortal stab to the success of his pursuits. Everything that man could do in such a situation was effected by Mr. Wignell: he summoned all his fortitude to his aid; used every exertion to accommodate his company, and bore with patient resignation the misfortunes of the season. If the peevish complaints of inconsiderate individuals sometimes excited an extraordinary acuteness of angry feeling, there was no hypocritical disguise; still was he the same man, open, candid, and sincere. He felt and disclosed his feelings; but remonstrated without acerbity.⁴¹

It is not clear at what point in this period a decision was made to use the talents of this group, but it was determined to transport the company to Annapolis to play there until Philadelphia was safe for its inhabitants and their new theatrical servants. Baltimore seems to have been passed over despite its larger population because the theatre there was owned by Hallam and Henry.

The Annapolis season ran the two months of December, 1793 and January, 1794. Seilhamer lists six performance dates with programs for each date, commenting that this was only a partial list of productions. Two of the performances he notes were in December, the last of the six on January twenty-fourth.⁴² By the end of this period Philadelphia had recovered sufficiently for the managers to set their opening for the middle of February. The

⁴¹Ibid., p. 366.

⁴²Seilhamer, op. cit., III, p. 150.

Annapolis season was opened with The Castle of Andalusia by John O'Keefe, the same piece later chosen to inaugurate the Chesnut Street Theatre. Advantages were undoubtedly gained from playing in Annapolis. The company would have been able to earn some of its salary, friends could have been won should the company return to play there again, and, more importantly, the performers would know each other and have the experience of working together before an audience. It is difficult not to feel sympathy for Wignell and Reinagle, who had intended to present an auspicious opening for the people of Philadelphia early in September of 1793.

While Wignell and Reinagle were with the company in Annapolis, a renewed effort was made by the Quakers and others to stall or prevent the opening of the theatre. In December, several letters to the newspapers opposing and supporting the theatre appeared. They were occasioned by new appeals to the Pennsylvania Legislature to repeal the law permitting playing. On the sixth of December, a committee of Friends (Quakers) visited each house of the legislature with a petition depicting vices abroad in the city and the wisdom exhibited by the governors of public life in 1774 to prevent these vices (see page 10, Chapter I). The particular focus of their petition was aimed at "theatrical entertainments," though there had not been

regular playing in the city for two years and no playing at all in the fall of 1793.⁴³

This petition seems to have been part of a campaign to prevent the opening of the theatre in Chesnut Street or any other theatre in the City. There seems to have been some thought that a hint could be included in these petitions that the recent plague might have been visited on the city by a wrathful god desirous of punishing the citizens for their indulgence in unhealthy and sinful diversions. Again on December nineteenth a petition was submitted to these legislative houses. This address was signed by representatives of various religious denominations "united by the common bond of christianity." The prefatory remarks introduce the notion of some unusual causes relating to the plague, specifically, "having just escaped from a calamity the most terrible, and rendered exceedingly distressing by its peculiar circumstances, etc." [My underline] After praising the representatives of the republic for wisdom shown in so many ways, the petitioners bore in on their target.

Whilst we request your public influence and exertions against the several species of vice, herein reprobated, permit us to remonstrate, also, with all due respect, against the existing law which

⁴³"The Address and Petition of the People called Quakers to the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania," December 6, 1793. The original copy of this petition is in the Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

authorizes theatrical exhibitions, and to petition for its repeal.

In concluding, they could not do otherwise than to regard the theatre

. . . as a public nuisance, and hope, that those now erected in this city and vicinity, will be totally abolished; the proprietors of the buildings be reimbursed for all reasonable expenses incurred in erecting them, and those places be converted into a public blessing, by being appropriated as asylums for the distressed, the widow, and the orphan.⁴⁴

A letter of December twenty-third to the Monthly meeting of Friends of Philadelphia from a committee of three Friends whose task it had been to "use Endeavors for the discouragement of Stage Plays" indicates they were active in supporting the plan to address the legislature. They may, in fact, have originated this idea. They were spurred to their task "more especially as Many of Us have partaken deeply of the Cup of Affliction, during the late awful Visitation."⁴⁵ There is reason here to suggest some persons were relating the plague to the theatre. Though Bernard was referring to a period later in the decade, his observation supports this suggestion.

⁴⁴"The Address and Petition of several INHABITANTS of the City of Philadelphia, and its Liberties to the SENATE and House of REPRESENTATIVES of the Commonwealth of PENNSYLVANIA," December 19, 1793. The original of this document is in the Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴⁵This excerpt is from a letter to the Monthly Meeting of Friends of Philadelphia and the original of it is in the Friend's Archives, Philadelphia.

The Quakers and others, observing our reappearance on the heels of the calamity, discovered the relation between us of cause and effect, and proclaimed that we moved in a perpetual circle, reproducing each other; the fevers, the actors--the actors, the fever!⁴⁶

The battle for the legislative approval of public entertainments had been waged and won in the 1780's. The congressmen were not to open this issue to another round of petitions and debates for and against the staging of plays despite the report of the clerk of the Philadelphia Friend's Meeting, "that the petitions had been favorably received both by the Senate and House of Representatives." Wignell and Reinagle had many friends in positions of strength. Some of these friends were anxious and willing to help as they were investors in the theatre and who would endeavor to prevent the government reverting to its earlier stand on this matter. A letter from Wignell to one of the legislators indicates that someone had appointed a committee to care for the manager's interests in this latest exchange.

Dear Sir,

Enclosed is a general and sincere tribute of acknowledgement, to the gentlemen who compose the Committee appointed to watch over our interests, in the Legislature, during the vindictive and oppressive attack on our properties and livelihood.

Permit me, Sir, to trespass on your kindness by requesting you to forward it to Mr. Evans, with whose abode we are unaquainted, and at the same time, to offer our particular Thanks to you, for this new mark of friendly attachment. . . .

By the date of Mr. Evans' Letter, it appears we should have received it by Friday's Post instead

⁴⁶Bernard, op. cit., p. 261.

of this Evening's--but the business of the office at Baltimore does not seem regularly conducted. We found it at our lodgings on our return from the Theatre: fatigued with the labour of the day and Evening, you will kindly excuse this hasty scrawl, which will I hope serve to assure you of the very nature of the grateful sentiments entertained by Mr. Reinagle and myself, for all your kindness--

Your most obliged
and faithful-humble servants
Thomas Wignell

Annapolis Tuesday morning two o'clock
December 30th 1793⁴⁷

With this hurdle now cleared, Wignell and Reinagle were ready to approach the long-delayed opening of the New Theatre with the hope and expectation that they would enjoy the pleasure of their auditors and accompanying financial success. The long and very difficult period leading up to 1794 had been fraught with frustration and delay. One result of these postponements was a beginning marred by a large financial debt. Many secondary sources use William Wood's Personal Recollections of the Stage as definitive evidence that suggested the debt was approximately twenty thousand dollars. They refer to the quote which reads, "so complete was his establishment on the arrival of his first company in 1793, that before the Philadelphia house could be opened a debt of 20,000 dollars nearly had been incurred." Few refer to or estimate the meaning of the sentences that immediately succeed this quote,

⁴⁷The original of this letter is in the Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

. . . of course this heavy burden was increased by those visitations of pestilence. The frightful state of the city in 1793 . . . compelled him to quarter his large force in different villages of Jersey, where a monstrous debt was hourly accumulating in salaries alone.⁴⁸

The fact is that estimates made on this evidence and which included the twenty thousand Wood mentions would have resulted in the most conservative statistics. The Manuscript Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania provides a more realistic view of the theatre's debt at its opening. A financial statement for the theatre accompanying a resolution passed by the subscribers on June 25, 1795 is among the holdings in that Collection. This resolution was unanimously adopted to relieve the managers from the heavy burden of existing debts by the sale of an additional subscription for a loan. More will be said of this resolution later, but what is of interest here was an abstract attached to the resolution that indicated disbursements for the theatre in Chesnut Street. Unfortunately, these disbursements were not itemized. Even without detailed information we know that:

The amount of monies paid, and debts contracted for, the purchase money of the Lot for erecting the building; for providing scenery, machinery, and other apparatus; for the charge of the Performers, while the opening of the Theatre was unfortunately suspended, in consequence of the yellow fever; for the expence of conveying the Company to and from Maryland, and for other necessary disbursements

⁴⁸Wood, op. cit., p. 43.

preparatory to the production of an income from the Theatre,⁴⁹

was figured at one hundred thousand dollars.

Thomas Wignell and Alexander Reinagle, at last entering into their managerial roles at the Chesnut Street Theatre were faced with enormous responsibilities that were quite apart from artistic and aesthetic considerations. After a view of their theatre we will return to a consideration of how they dealt with these responsibilities.

⁴⁹See Appendix C.

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW THEATRE, ITS PERFORMING COMPANY, AND OPENING IN 1794

The first theatrical performance in the Chesnut Street Theatre was viewed by the public February 17, 1794. First nighters approached an unmarked building that could have been a church or served some other function. St. Mery noted that its brick facade had nothing on it "to indicate that it is a public building." He went as far as to describe the entrance as "shabby" and commented that it differed in no way "from that of an ordinary house."¹ The decorative portions above the entrance depicted in the certificate drawing on page 72 had not been completed in time for the opening. The result was a rather plain structure as approached from any aspect. Later the two niches in the upper face were the locations of figures of Tragedy and Comedy executed by William Rush, the well-known sculptor of ship's insignia. Figure 4 on page 113 shows a temporary structure attached to the front of the

¹Moreau de St. Mery, American Journey, 1793-98
(Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1947), p. 345.

building and covered to protect patrons before and after performances. No mention is made of this structure in descriptions of the building published in 1793, 1794, or 1795.² However, its addition must have produced a canopy welcome to audiences. Though the lobbies were considered spacious, they would have been hard put to accommodate several hundred or a thousand persons socializing before a performance or at intermission and the impermanent entryway Birch showed would have allowed the overflow to be out of the weather.

The building depicted by Birch does not show the wings on either side of the building that are pictured on the certificates. It must be pointed out that the west wing, if there had been one in the early years of the theatre's existence, would have been on the farther side of the theatre in the Birch View and somewhat obscured by the cover in front of the theatre. The thought that the west wing might have been recessed seemed a remote and doubtful possibility. However, a later view of the theatre, shown in page 114 with its neo-classic facade, indicated that the wings were set back from the rest of the building. Unfortunately, the Birch drawing shows

²Ezekial Forman, "Letter to John C. Rockhill," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, X (1886), 182-187; Henry Wansey, Journal of an Excursion to the United States of North America (London: n.p., 1795), 290 pp.; St. Mery, and newspapers.



Figure 4.--Birch View of the Chesnut Street Theater, 1800.

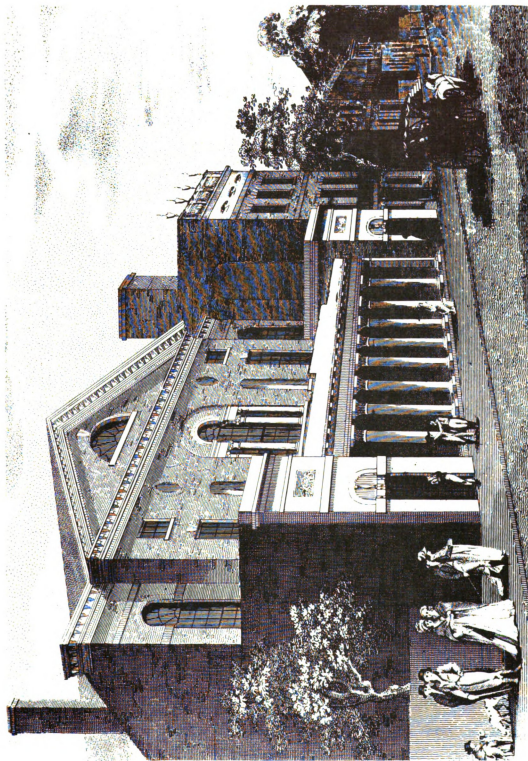


Figure 5.--Facade of the Chesnut Street Theatre designed by Benjamin Latrobe, 1805.

neither wing and we do not know exactly when they were constructed. Indeed, were they present in 1800 and not shown in the drawing? This is important because, in 1805, the theatre had two wings that ran the length of the building. On page 116 an 1806 ground plan by Strickland shows the wings of the building indicating the use of the west wing for important functional purposes. In that wing were the gallery stairs, a scenery storage room, a green room directly off stage right, a staircase to the floor below stage, a large room unidentified as to use but containing a fireplace, and a smaller room with a passage out of the theatre to an alley. In 1794, this exit would have led to an open field. Practical men of the theatre would hope this wing was a part of the original theatre because it contained so many desirable features. However, the absence in the Birch View of the east wing cannot be ignored. It seems unlikely that the west wing was built with the rest of the central part of the theatre and the east wing later when the adjacent store and the stores on Sixth Street were added. The significance for audiences in 1794 of the absence of both wings would have been that all customers would have entered the doors in the front of the building, whether destined for the pit, box or gallery. Gallery folk would have had to mingle with the customers who paid for the higher price seats, at least in the lobby and corridors, and on the stairs. The absence of the wings would deprive

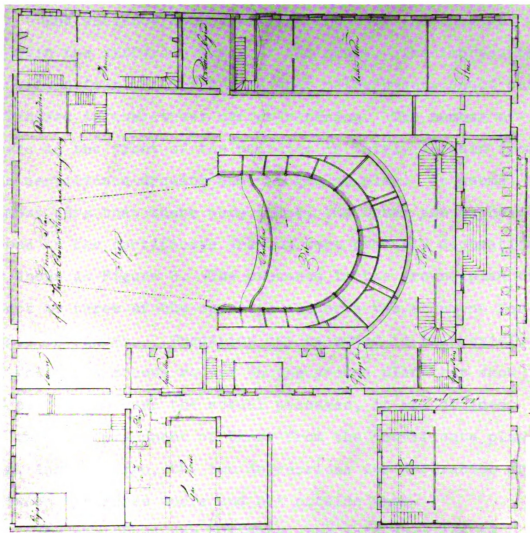


Figure 6.--Ground plan for the Chesnut Street Theatre, 1806.

the audience of a green room or green rooms where they might socialize with the performers, and the performers of a comfortable place to await entrances or lounge before and after performances. As nothing is known of the building's basement, it is difficult to assess the space available there for use as dressing space or green room area.

The audience approached the front of the theatre to gain the different parts of the house. The impression is gained from the Birch View that refreshments could be purchased in the street before entering. The number of doors in the front of the building is fairly certain from the certificate drawing and the ground plan. It seems almost sure that there were three, the other two depressions in the certificate drawing were probably decorations as shown in Figure 3. The presence in the ground plan of steps to three of the openings supports the argument for three entrances. Tradition may be added to this brief. If the three access routes on the ground plan that show steps to them were the actual passages, it was decided to vary the placement of these from the certificate plan, for, in that plan, the two depressions for decoration are between the three doors and not outside them.

As one faced the building, the left door led to the pit. There must have been some passageway through the bowels of the building that led from that door directly to the benches in the pit. This type of an entryway seems

a strong possibility based on British theatre architecture of the eighteenth century.³ "to the boxes you ascend in front, by a flight of marble steps, enter the lobby and pass to the corridors, which communicate with all the boxes."⁴

St. Mery wrote, "The corridors are roomy and comfortable."⁵ This area in the theatre had been fairly well completed a year earlier. At that time, the observer for The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser noted that "the entrances are so well contrived, and the lobbies so spacious, that there can be no possibility of the least confusion or disturbance, among the audience, going to the different parts of the House."⁶ At the time of the official opening in 1794 the bars on either side of the lobby "pertaining to the boxes" and designed to provide "wine and other refreshments" were probably functioning.⁷ It was undoubtedly from these bars that "wine and porter" were carried to the pit and sold during intermissions. One

³See Richard Southern, The Georgian Playhouse

⁴Mease, op. cit., p. 330.

⁵St. Mery, op. cit., p. 329.

⁶February 4, 1793.

⁷Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, February 4, 1793.

visitor noted another diversion: "A shocking custom obtains here of smoking tobacco in the house, which at times is carried to such an excess, that those to whom it is disagreeable are under the necessity of going away."⁸ Fortunately for those who sat in the box seats, there were small "sash windows" in the upper walls that opened on the corridor. St. Mery thought these might be useful as air could enter the boxes without opening the doors.⁹ These windows were probably more important as vents through which smoke could escape the boxes.

Refreshments included ice cream. Made, in 1794, by Monsieur Mercier, a Frenchman, this delight at the theatre was found by St. Mery to be "dear" in price but, mediocre, in fact, "the most mediocre of all."¹⁰ Other sweets sold are not enumerated but there were most certainly a number of these. In another part of his diary, the very helpful St. Mery comments again on the price of "refreshments, of which there is a store in a pretty little shop in the lobby."¹¹ This commentary allows for the possibility that the bars for wine and other drinks were concessions separate from the "store." Mercier may have hawked his

⁸Isaac Weld, Travels Through the States of North America (London: John Stockdale, 1800), p. 23.

⁹St. Mery, op. cit., p. 346.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 323.

¹¹Ibid., p. 347.

ice cream from this shop. If tobacco was sold, this may have been the audience's source for it, although it is uncertain whether or not tobacco was sold in the house anywhere.

The auditorium and stage were physically related as may be observed in the ground plan or the picture on page 121, the latter made from a picture of the interior published in the Spring of 1794.¹² This architectural style which includes boxes that bordered the apron and stage doors right and left was common in the eighteenth century and can be traced to the Restoration theatres. Stage doors appeared in many nineteenth century theatres also, two examples being the rebuilding of the Covent Garden Theatre, London, in 1809 and the Park Street Theatre, New York, opened in 1821 as the successor to the first Park Street Theatre. Nearest the stage, the boxes on either side faced each other across the apron of the stage. St. Mery thought this "fronst" stage, or that part projecting into the auditorium had "wings that represent portions of facades of beautiful houses, but they project too far onto the stage and hide the rear of the stage, as well as the row of side wings, from spectators in boxes nearest the stage."¹³ The next boxes away from the stage faced half

¹²New York Magazine or Literary Repository, V, No. 4 (April, 1794), 195. Mr. L. Lewis of Philadelphia seems to have been the artist who, with the help of a New York Engraver named Ralph, executed the original of this picture.

¹³St. Mery, op. cit., p. 346.

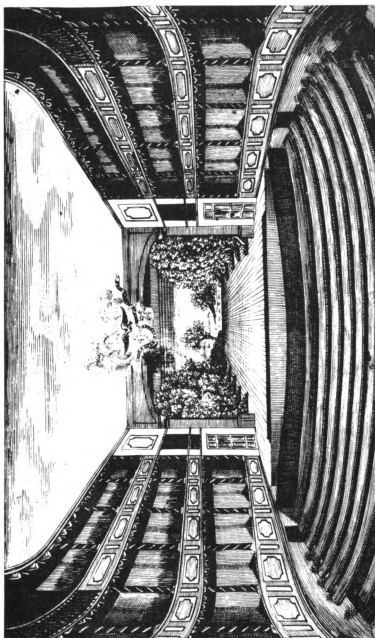


Figure 7.--View of the auditorium and stage from the New York Magazine, 1794.

on the orchestra and half on the pit. In total, there were fifteen boxes on the level of the lobby and stage. Another fifteen boxes were immediately above these. Despite St. Mery's description of the box arrangement, that is, "three tiers of boxes are pleasingly arranged in a semi-ellipse . . . there are fifteen boxes in each tier," several bits of evidence contradict his description of the third tier of boxes.¹⁴ Doubts about St. Mery's description were caused by the fact that he did not refer to a gallery location. He wrote of three tiers of boxes in the configuration of a horseshoe. If, in addition to the boxes he described, there was a gallery, it would have to have been either behind the boxes on the third level or by itself on a fourth tier. The size of the building makes this second alternative unlikely. Left with the first of these choices, one might assume the gallery "gods" were placed just to the rear of the third tier of boxes. However, the boxes were enclosed and would prevent spectators behind them from seeing unless they had no back walls at that level. All this was made clear by the discovery of a letter from Mr. Ezekial Forman to a friend, Mr. John C. Rockhill, and dated March 25, 1793.¹⁵ Mr. Forman,

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Forman, op. cit., p. 183, Forman's letter is dated 1793, but the contents refer to the year 1794. He refers to the opening "on Monday evening the 17th of February," the day of the month of the 1794 opening. No performance was presented February 17, 1793.

describing the theatre to his friends, explained that,

There are three rows of the Boxes, two of which extend from the stage quite round the House and that part of them fronting the Stage is immediately underneath the Gallery, while the third and upper row extends only half way round on each side till it meets with the Gallery which is separated from it by a partition and iron banister with sharp pointed spikes. . . .

The evidence here leads to the conclusion that there were something less than the forty-five boxes St. Mery tallied. Another source describes "a semi-circle having two rows of boxes extending from side to side, with another row above these, and on a line with the gallery in front."¹⁶ The answer to the question, "How many boxes were there?" is provided by a close look at the view of the theatre's interior (page 121). On each of the first two tiers of boxes we see a continuous row of boxes until the view is cut off at either side. On the upper tier there are four boxes on each side separated by partitions that correspond to the ones Forman describes. The decoration of that tier changes at those points to become a balustrade in front of the gallery. Consequently, the number of boxes was thirty-eight, seven less than the figure St. Mery used.

The boxes facing the stage were larger than those on the sides. In these boxes there were seven rows of benches

¹⁶This untitled description of the New Theatre was written March 12, 1794 and published in The New York Magazine for April, 1794. See footnote 12 in this chapter.

raked to provide good viewing for audiences. The benches nearest the pit were arranged at a height to permit spectators there to see over the playgoers in the pit should these members of the audience rise to protest or applaud. As each box in that part of the house is said to have been capable of holding thirty-five persons, each bench must have been designed to accommodate five persons. The side boxes, twenty-eight in number, had two rows of benches, each bench capable of holding four persons.¹⁷ The side boxes were unquestionably more private. The figure on page 121 shows low walls separating these boxes. Small columns, aiding in structural support, separated the boxes at their nearest points to the orchestra. They were "fluted Corinthian columns, highly gilt, with a crimson ribband twisted from the base to the capital."¹⁸ These may have interfered with the view at times, but were relatively unobtrusive. One exception to a clear view of the stage confronted audience members sitting on the benches furthest from the stage in the second tier of boxes at the rear of the auditorium. Apparently the overhang from a steeply raked gallery prevented people in that position from seeing the backdrop furthest upstage.¹⁹

¹⁷St. Mery, op. cit.

¹⁸Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, op. cit.

¹⁹St. Mery, op. cit.

This would mean they also saw none of the drops hanging over the stage or the decoration above the proscenium arch. This same overhang would have prevented patrons from a view of the dome over the pit.²⁰ No picture of this dome exists, but this architectural feature was extremely popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Usually, these domes were decorated with paintings. As would be expected, the view of scenery from box seats nearest the stage was skewed and the proscenium doors and pillars projecting onto the stage prevented spectators in those seats from an appreciation of the perspective. These same spectators would also have found it impossible to see the last drop upstage "as well as the row of side wings" on the same side of the stage where they sat. A close examination of the ground plan discloses what may have been a feeble attempt to remedy the undesirability of these boxes as viewing stations. There is a convex line along the front of the stage box. Perhaps this line, converted into an architectural feature, allowed the inhabitants to edge their benches forward and improve their view slightly.

It was customary for spectators to go to plays to see other citizens and to be seen. In his discussion of sight lines, St. Mery points out that, from certain places

²⁰Seilhamer, op. cit., III, p. 146.

in the theatre, "It is hard to recognize persons seated at the rear of the boxes which have seven rows of benches."²¹

The boxes were papered with red paper which St. Mery found to be "in extremely bad taste."²² His distaste for this feature may have been increased by gilt trim around the boxes. Another observer thought the shade of red to be a "pale rose-color."²³ This same observer did not feel strongly enough about the color to suggest that it gave offense. The benches in the boxes were backless and not cushioned. For important occasions, special arrangements were effected. When Washington visited the theatre, cushions were provided on the benches and the inside of the front of the box.²⁴ Not until the Park Theatre opened in January of 1798 did a theatre in America have cushioned seats in both boxes and pit.

The pit area on Chesnut Street, providing some of the very best seats in the house, was well planned for the viewers who chose to pay the more economical price and still be in the center of activity. In this area, there were thirteen rows of backless benches set as in an amphitheatre.²⁵

²¹St. Mery, op. cit., pp. 346-347.

²²Ibid.

²³Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, op. cit.

²⁴Durang, op. cit., XIII.

²⁵St. Mery, op. cit.

The ascent from the front to the back parts of both Pit and Gallery (but more particularly the latter) was very steep, which tho' it may appear a little inconvenient at the first entering of them still proved of great advantage to the persons in the hinder parts, as it rendered their view of the stage unobstructed by those sitting in front of them.²⁶

Because the stage also was raked, those who sat in the pit, even near the orchestra, had excellent opportunity to enjoy the productions. As they looked about, they could view more of the decorations than persons in the boxes.

The basic decorating color was grey. There were "gilded scrolls and carvings" and the highest tier of boxes had "small gilded balustrades which are quite elegant." Each bench in the pit was long enough to seat approximately thirty persons.²⁷

The seating arrangement in the gallery can only be estimated. Because of its width, it must be assumed that there was more than one aisle, perhaps a center aisle and two outside aisles. There may have been an aisle that crossed the gallery dividing it from front to back. An iron railing of two bars was provided so that there was "very little risque of falling into the Pit."²⁸ My estimate

²⁶Forman, op. cit.

²⁷St. Mery, op. cit.

²⁸Forman, op. cit.

is that the lower gallery could hold approximately two hundred forty-five persons and the upper gallery three hundred eighteen. As there seems to be no record of a view of the auditorium from the stage, the drawing on page 129 is offered. Particular note is made of the gallery location and arrangement.

The total seating capacity was calculated by St. Mery to be twelve hundred. St. Mery's figure includes the pit and boxes which he figured to hold approximately eleven hundred sixty-five persons. Other estimates of that day set the figure at two thousand.²⁹ The figure of two thousand is not broken down. In Reese James' history of the Philadelphia stage, Cradle of Culture, he very flatly states that the theatre sat eleven hundred fifty-five. Unfortunately, he fails to document this calculation.³⁰ Using St. Mery's estimate for the pit, a personal calculation for the seats in the side and center boxes, and allowing for his omission of the gallery but substituting an estimate for that, the seating capacity was probably near fifteen hundred forty-seven. That figure breaks down to three hundred ninety in the pit, five hundred ninety-four in boxes and five hundred sixty-three in the gallery, an estimate somewhere between James', St. Mery's, and the others.

²⁹Mease, op. cit., p. 331.

³⁰Reese James, Cradle of Culture 1800-1810 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), p. 18.

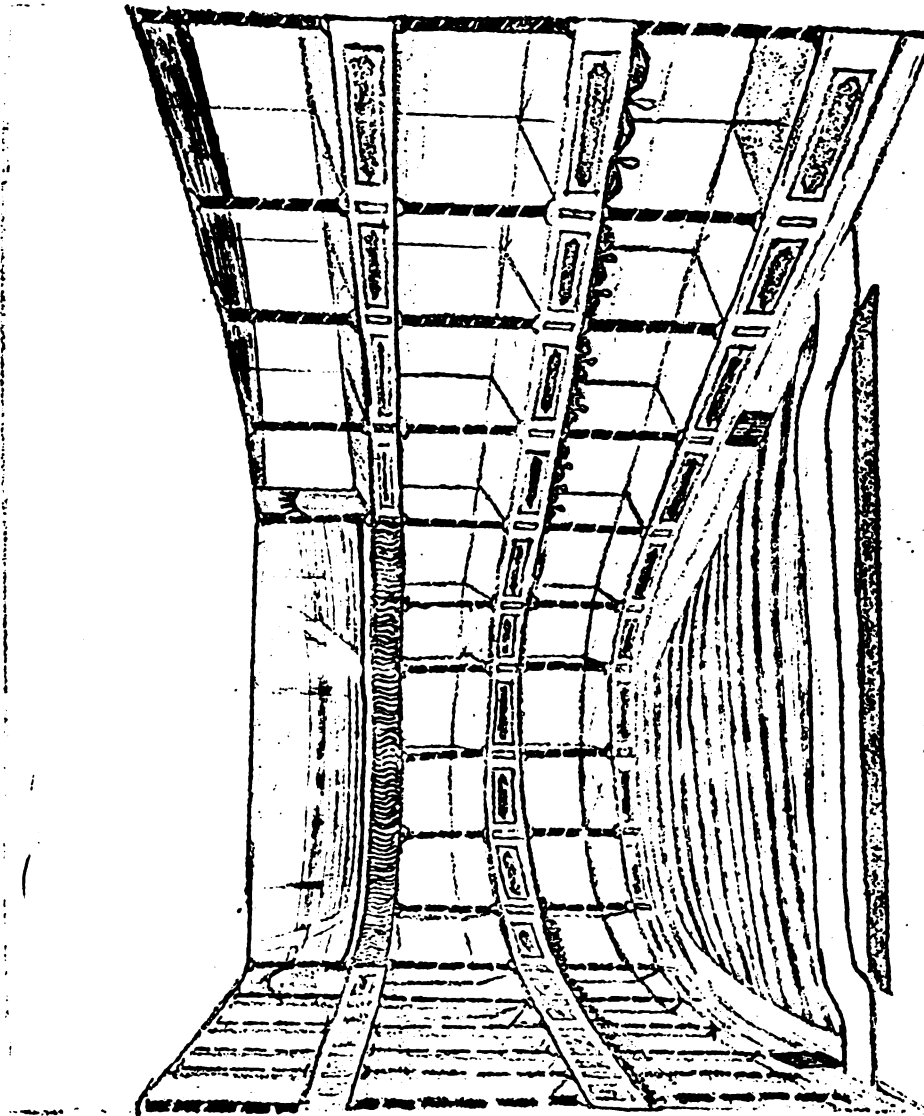


Figure 8.--Sketch of auditorium as imagined by the author.

From most seats in the house, and very clearly from any point in the pit, the decoration around the proscenium would have been available to view. The two stage boxes on the first tier adjoined stage doors that stood between the boxes and the pillars framing the proscenium. Directly above these doors and next to the stage boxes on the second tier were small balconies, fronted by balustrades. The pillars representing the sides of the proscenium arch supported a slightly concave arch leading up from the sides toward the center where an emblematic painting was in view. There were two figures in the painting,

. . . one representing the Genius of Tragedy who sits in a mourning mellancholly [sic] attitude, and the other that of Genius of Comedy who stands a little to the left of where the other sits and in her hand she holds a scarf on which these words are inscribed in large legible characters "The Eagle suffers little Birds to sing."³¹

Over the two figures hovered an American Eagle with extended wings. This last touch of patriotism would seem to have been a public expression of thanks to the legislators who had rejected the Quaker's attempts to prevent the opening of the theatre. Henry Wansey, in the diary of his travels in America, pointed out in referring to this quotation from Shakespeare its applicability, as the State House was so close to the theatre that the legislators were ". . . often performing at the same time. Yet the Eagle . . . is

³¹Forman, op. cit., p. 184.

in no ways interrupted by the chattering of these mock birds with their mimic songs."³² By 1811, this patriotic tribute had given way to "For useful Mirth, and Salutary Woe."³³

The orchestra pit provided ample space for as many as thirty musicians. The orchestra Reinagle conducted in 1794 was made up of only twenty members. With this number of performers, the pit was commodious, if not luxurious.

The stage of the New Theatre was more than half the length of the entire building. One length quoted is seventy-one feet.³⁴ The scale on the ground plan is inexact, but even a rough measurement using that scale approximates seventy feet plus. Another source places the depth of the stage at seventy-four feet.³⁵ The first fifteen feet of the slightly raked stage were in front of the curtain line, leaving nearly sixty feet for the development of perspective settings and the display of machinery for sea fights, fires, and the myriad effects so popular in the late eighteenth and the entire nineteenth centuries. The width of the proscenium is not referred to by the

³²Wansey, op. cit., June 5, 1794.

³³Mease, op. cit.

³⁴Scharf and Westcott, op. cit., p. 971.

³⁵Casper Souder, Jr., The History of Chesnut Street, Philadelphia (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1860), p. 257.

authorities used here, but a figure very faintly printed on the ground plan is "33" [my quotes]. This number of feet corresponds to the scale footage and would be close to the actual measurement, based on a comparison with the published figure of thirty-six feet for the width of the forestage between the boxes.

The New York Magazine for April, 1794 provided a picture of the stage from the "Duke's seat," i.e., the seat in the auditorium from where the perspective would be most perfect (p. 121). This picture of the stage shows five wing flats and a back drop. The distance between the proscenium and the back drop would be difficult to gauge in the set shown. If there were some way of knowing the distance from that back drop to the back wall of the stage, an estimate of the depth used for this setting might be made with considerable accuracy. The space behind that drop would be essential for crossovers for the actors and storage of scenic effects, though the off-stage areas right and left were considerable. No grooves appear on the ground plan but the wing and drop system suggested by the photograph and the contemporary practice in scene changing cause one to believe that there were probably five sets of grooves with perhaps four grooves in a set. St. Mery thought the scenery "shifted easily enough."³⁶ Milbourne was enough of a technician to plan

³⁶St. Mery, op. cit.

his sets to insure good sight lines and prevent, as much as possible, his audiences seeing into the wings. This would have been no easy task in a house where the boxes came so close to the proscenium. The quality of the scenery at the Chesnut Street Theatre was thought to be good for that day. "The decorations are colorful and skillfully painted."³⁷ Wansey found the "scenery of the stage excellent, particularly a view on the Skuykill, about two miles from the city. The greatest part of the scenes, however, belonged once to Lord Barrymore's Theatre at Wargrave."³⁸ It was true that some of the scenery had been imported intact, but it seems doubtful that the "greatest part" was imported except in earliest days. Forman, who may not have been informed enough to compare the Chesnut Street to the Covent Garden as Wansey did, was generous in praise of the sets:

. . . the Scenery and decorations may be justly said to partake of both of the beautiful and sublime, especially those used for some particular plays almost surpass description--of which those used in a new Opera lately introduced here called "Robin Hood or Sherwood Forest" very much partakes.³⁹

The room or rooms off the stage that were existent in 1794 must be spoken of with the understanding that

³⁷ Ibid., p. 347.

³⁸ Wansey, op. cit.

³⁹ Forman, op. cit., pp. 183-184.

there may have been none of these or all those shown in the ground plan. The following from Durang is informative.

The house was very comfortable in every particular for the actors. The dressing rooms were numerous in the wings. Three or four persons only dressed together. There were two green rooms, but not with a view of making the salaried distinction, that then existed in London. One green room was used for musical rehearsals, dancing practices, &c., and it was a place where the juvenile members of the corps might indulge their freaks unrestrainedly. The principal green room was adjacent to the prompt side, in the west wing. In this apartment the perfect etiquette of the polished drawing-room was always preserved.⁴⁰

The frustrating thing about this description is that Durang does not identify the specific time when the theatre was equipped in this way. Certainly, the ground plan shows areas which would provide the spaces Durang describes. Note particularly the green room stage right and the scene shop, near that green room. The second green room and dressing rooms, of which it is said there were a "grateful number,"⁴¹ may have been in the basement of the theatre, though Mease assigns these to the wings, not providing us with anything more specific than that. If Seilhamer's information was correct, the second green room was in the east wing.⁴² It would be that room, not indicated on the

⁴⁰Durang, op. cit., XIX.

⁴¹Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, February 4, 1794.

⁴²Seilhamer, op. cit.

ground plan, where rehearsals were conducted. If these rooms existed in 1794, the theatre was well equipped. In 1805, the wings were one hundred forty-eight feet long by fourteen feet wide, and four stories high on the west side, three stories on the east. The west wing, if it existed, was not that long in 1794 as the building was set back from the street and did not have the elaborate entry constructed after 1800. If, however, this wing had existed, even in an abbreviated form, it would have proved immensely useful. The lower story in the west wing was divided into three rooms (see ground plan). Two of the rooms were finished with "Plain shirting," plastered, and had floors with narrow boards. An investigation into the meaning of the word "shirting" resulted in the explanation that there is no mystery. This material was the same as that used for making shirts. The second floor in the west wing was divided into "apartments" with wooden unplastered partitions. The use of the "apartments" in describing the theatre wing might lead to the supposition that the word was merely meant to indicate the spaces were separated by walls, as Durang used it in the quote above. Not necessarily so in this instance. There is evidence that at least one performer had his address at the theatre and, if one, why not several people. The east wing was of the same dimensions as the west, but three stories high instead of four. The story nearest the street level was

unfinished and used to store lumber. The second and third stories were partitioned into rooms. An open, rough stairs led up to these unfinished rooms. This description of the wings comes from Justus' survey (see Appendix A).

The auditorium lighting was provided by small "four-branched chandeliers placed on every second box," beginning at the stage. This means there were seven chandeliers hanging from at least one tier of boxes. If there were chandeliers hanging on "every second box" on each tier, the total number might be twenty-one. Supported by gilded iron hangers in the shape of the letter "S," twenty-one of these light sources probably kept the general illumination of the auditorium at a level that would provide ample light for St. Mery's contemporaries to study each other as well as the play. Dunlap found the "numerous chandeliers" combined with "festoons of curtains . . . gave a brilliant effect to the whole."⁴³ The stage was lighted by oil lamps that could be dimmed to create some sense of mood for night scenes and other scenes requiring subdued light. The wings were said to have "illuminated lamps," though the difference between an oil lamp and an "illuminated lamp" is not made clear.⁴⁴ Perhaps the latter bore candles. The wing lamps were probably dimmed by revolving

⁴³Dunlap, op. cit., p. 116.

⁴⁴St. Mery, op. cit., p. 346.

metal hoods that swung out and around them. Both oil lamps and candles were used to light theatres in the eighteenth century. There were footlights in the trough just above the orchestra on the apron (see page 121). These, too, were undoubtedly capable of being dimmed by hoods or possibly by lowering the entire trough beneath the stage.

Little reference is made to the acoustics, though St. Mery found them "adequate."⁴⁵ When Reinagle had conducted the concerts in 1793, the reviewer expressed satisfaction with the music, finding "it has equally charmed the ear of our citizens, by its sweet echo, proceeding from the most perfect vocal and instrumental abilities."⁴⁶ Modern acoustical engineers might be dissatisfied with this comment, concerned as they are with preventing echoes. The reviewer seems to have chosen his descriptive term, not for use in the literal sense, but as a term of compliment. Most of the singing would have been performed downstage of the arch and from that position few seats would be further than sixty-five feet from the performance. The effect of this proximity would be to eliminate virtually any possibility of an echo. The critic of The Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser judged the violin performance "exquisite" and thought the harp gave

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser, February 4, 1793.

"infinite pleasure."⁴⁷ The opening performance in 1794 received a generally complimentary review, particularly the singing. The kettle drummer seems to have offended, but that may have been the fault of enthusiasm and not acoustics.⁴⁸

Mr. John Inigo Richards was the Englishman credited with the architectural plans for the Chesnut Street Theatre. Conveniently, this scene painter, with the historic middle name, was married to the sister of Wignell and active in the London theatre in the 1790's. What architectural design experience he possessed is unknown. The Chesnut Street Theatre was thought to have been a perfect copy of the Theatre Royale in Bath, England.⁴⁹ Had this been the case, Richards would have received credit for someone else's design, probably a Mr. Palmer, who had been entrusted with the task of remodelling the Bath Theatre in 1782. The current Director of the Bath Municipal Libraries and Victoria Art Gallery, Mr. Peter Pagan, has provided this researcher with two photographs of drawings of the interior and exterior of the late eighteenth century theatre

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The General Advertiser, February 19, 1794.

⁴⁹ Durang in Chapter XIX of his history was an intermediate in carrying forward this impression. Jackson, op. cit., p. 422; Hewitt, op. cit., p. 39; and Talbot Hamlin, Benjamin Henry Latrobe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 189, may have taken their information from Durang.

at Bath (see pages 140 and 141). The exterior offers no comparison to the New Theatre in Philadelphia. Richards is somewhat redeemed here as he either designed a completely different and new building or copied from some other structure. The interior of the Bath Theatre is quite another matter and extremely interesting when compared with the Chesnut Street Theatre. There are minor differences and the theatre at Bath appears to be more simple in decoration, but numerous similarities appear.

The boxes on the sides of the auditorium are like those at Philadelphia. They appear to have two rows of benches in each box and there are three tiers of boxes. The boxes, as in the case of the Chesnut Street, are divided and supported at the rail by plain pipes, a feature only slightly unlike the wrapped supports. The front box on the audience's left, and in the first tier, protrudes slightly, as does the stage box shown in the same position on the ground plan for the later theatre. The audience members in the pit appear to be standing. It is probable there were benches, unused at the moment the picture was sketched. The orchestra pit at Bath does not follow the graceful line of the Philadelphia theatre, causing one to believe that the musicians entered and exited from under the stage rather than at each side of the pit. An estimate of the number of musicians pictured at Bath approximates the number of Reinagle's charges. The proscenium doors in the

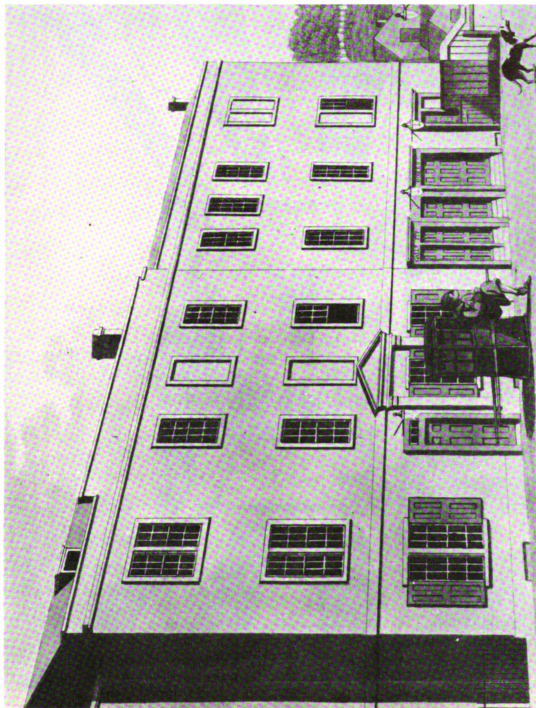


Figure 9.--Exterior of the Theatre Royale, Bath, England, 1784.

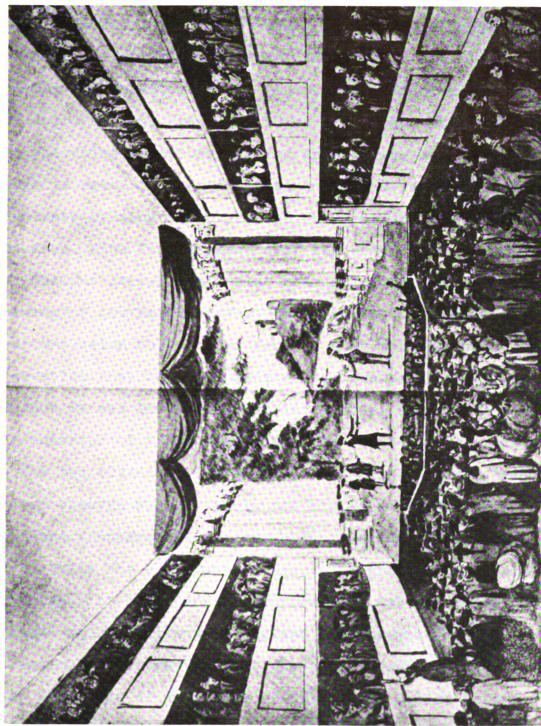


Figure 10.--Interior of the Theatre Royale, Bath, England, 1784.

earlier theatre are in perfect line with the side boxes and no pillars seem to join them at the proscenium line. In Philadelphia, the slight angle of the doors coupled with the pillars was a definite improvement and aid in masking the backstage area. Also, this slight angle of the doors and the small balconies above them might make the balconies functional during appropriate scenes. The stage is raked in both theatres and pictures of each show five sets of wing flats between the proscenium and the backdrop. The frontispiece over the stage that decorated the Chesnut Street would also seem an advantage over an opening of the height and style of the Bath Theatre. The conclusion to be drawn here is that most probably the suggestion that the Bath Theatre was the model for the Chesnut Street Theatre is partially true, as pertains to the interior of the auditorium. The facade and entrances to the two buildings are dramatically different and the second theatre was certainly not styled after the first when the frontages of the two structures are compared.

While the construction was in progress Wignell was in pursuit of a company of performers. His extensive travels and recruiting in England were prompted by the necessity to contract talent that was versatile and could meet the needs of a theatre of that day. Unlike John Henry who was hiring a few actors to fill out his company, Wignell had to organize almost a complete company. The

demands made on performers in England were similar to those the Philadelphia theatre would make. While a leading man or woman might excel in either comedy or tragedy, he or she might be expected to appear in both dramatic styles. Additionally, skills would be desirable that would make for success in farces and afterpieces. Many roles included singing. The ideal performer sought after combined these abilities. The Chesnut Street Theatre, strongly influenced by Reinagle and the musical tradition of Philadelphia, had plans to assign opera a prominent part in its repertoire.⁵⁰ Added to performers in opera and theatre were ancillary personnel, dancers and musicians.

Durang felt Wignell and Henry were both men of "address and tact in theatrical diplomacy, skillful in maneuvering their recruiting service, and both animated by rivalry."⁵¹ Before Wignell was ready to leave for the United States, a third employer, Charles Stuart Powell, recruiting for the Federal Street Theatre in Boston, arrived in England to obtain performers for that theatre. Interestingly enough, the Federal Street Theatre opened in advance of the Chesnut Street, welcoming customers on February 3, 1794. Boston had not experienced the plague.

⁵⁰Dunlap, op. cit.

⁵¹Durang, op. cit., Chapter XIV.

The demand in America for talent provided opportunities for performers to project themselves into prominent positions in companies that did not experience the competition the English companies knew. This is not to criticize the actors who decided to leave London for the provincial theatres. However, young aspirants or those whose specialties were well covered in the established and preferred companies, found a new avenue for their talents was opened. One's judgment of their relative merits must be gleaned from their contemporaries' comments about them, experience they had accumulated before leaving England, and their continued or interrupted popularity in America.

Dunlap, who had spent time in observing the British Theatre, noted with some sarcasm a possible side effect of all this recruiting. It "seems to have conveyed the intelligence to the players of England that a continent existed over seas, called America, where some of the people are white, spoke English and went to see plays. . . ." ⁵²

Repeating a description of Wignell's entire company as it stood at the opening of the theatre would be redundant to the work of Dunlap, Durang, Wood, Bernard, and others. Rather, it may be useful to provide one or two representative

⁵²Dunlap, op. cit., p. 110.

descriptions, and some general characteristics of the company.⁵³

From reading Dunlap and Durang one could gain the impression that the female performer most prominent in the company was Mrs. Oldmixon. The lengthy description penned by each, Durang's obviously a steal from Dunlap, focus on her background and her marriage to Sir John Oldmixon, who had been something of a wag in Bath, England. Her importance as a performer may be summarized. While young, she was a first comic singer, playing comic girls and chambermaids at the Haymarket and Drury Lane Theatres in London. She continued to play comic roles, but her greatest asset seems to have been in pastiches and other musical fare, where she appeared as the best vocalist yet in America.⁵⁴ Despite the assignment of so much importance to this lady by Messrs. Dunlap and Durang, she did not play until May 14, 1794, approximately three months after the theatre had opened. The roles she played were in popular operas and plays, though her name seems not to have appeared in plays

⁵³For extensive portrayals of the individual members, readers are referred to chapters twenty through twenty-two of Durang's The Philadelphia Stage From the Year 1749 to the Year 1855 and chapter ten of Dunlap's History of the American Theatre. These two works provide background information, anecdotal commentary on performers and their personal lives, and references to roles in which they excelled.

⁵⁴Oral S. Coad and Edwin Mims, Jr., The American Stage, Vol. XIV of The American Pageant (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 37.

that have been considered classics of the theatre. She played an average of two nights or less a week in the two months that closed the season on July 18, 1794. She also played more often in interludes or afterpieces than in the major attractions. She was accorded a benefit July 7, 1794, when she appeared in The Spanish Barber by George Colman, Jr.

A lady receiving far less notice from Dunlap but who worked more regularly in important parts was Mrs. Whitlock. Dunlap rather briefly wrote of her,

Mrs. Whitlock was one of the many children of Roger Kemble, and of course sister to Mrs. Siddons, John Kemble, Stephen Kemble, Charles Kemble, and all the rest of this celebrated and fortunate family. . . . Mrs. Whitlock had been the support and ornament of the company of Whitlock and Munden, and had played at Bath and in London before the engagement which brought her to Philadelphia in 1793. She was what may truly be called a fine looking woman, with some of the Siddons and Kemble physiognomy, but fairer of complexion, and not so towering in stature. Her eye and voice were powerful, and reminded the spectator and hearer of her sister, sometimes raising expectations which were not fully realized, of seeing a second Siddons. She was of great value in her profession, and out of it an honour to her family. . . .⁵⁵

Durang was more detailed and devoted more of his evaluation to the impressions the lady made in the theatre. Of Mrs. Whitlock, he wrote,

She possessed the family talent, but not the full weight of its genius, yet she amply sustained the family crest in all its prestine pride and peculiar grace . . . she had all the imperial bearing and intellectual impress, with which nature in her

⁵⁵Dunlap, op. cit., p. 123.

special humor adorned their figures and their features . . . Mrs. Whitlock was a most able actress, but did not possess powerful passion . . . Her countenance was expressive, her voice good, yet deficient in power of intonation. It was said by critics of judgment that she could not soar to the highest flights of genius, but she could make an impression that was never lost on her audience. Her acting did not go beyond the boundary of nature, yet she reached its most lofty points through impressive elocution, appropriate action and clear conception. I heard a very excellent actor once say that "she could not make a good part great, but that she often made a bad one tell"--a singular talent to possess. Her forte was tragedy in its most perfect form. . . . She was deficient in pathos, yet powerful in her appeals. . . . I can only say that, with very few exceptions, I never saw stronger flashes of genius exhibited than this actress displayed. . . . It has also been said that had Mrs. Whitlock been so fortunate as to have had a hearing in London, before Mrs. Siddons, that she would have been the fixed star. This, I think, a very doubtful conclusion. . . .⁵⁶

Mrs. Whitlock was called to give evidence of her power or the lack of it on a regular and demanding basis. Unlike Mrs. Oldmixon, she played consistently from the second night of the first season of the company. She might have performed the opening night, but an opera was staged that night. In the cast lists for the month of March, 1794, her name appears eleven times. She played Lady Macbeth on April seventh and twelfth, also Portia on June thirteenth, two nights after she had performed twice on her benefit night.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Durang, op. cit., Chapter XXI.

⁵⁷Pollock includes a Day Book for the eighteenth century theatre in his work on Philadelphia. This Book within a book is devoted to a reproduction of all known cast lists and performances in the city during the entire century.

Of the male contingent, Fennell, Moreton, and Harwood claim attention over their fellow players. All had aimed for careers other than in the theatre. Fennell and Harwood had studied law, Moreton worked in a bank before his conversion. In compiling information for his history, Dunlap had depended on William Wood for material about Moreton. Wood, in turn, had known the following about Moreton from Wignell,

. . . John Pollard, Moreton being an assumed name, was born in America, somewhere in the neighborhood of Niagara Falls. He was early in life taken to England, and from thence to India. . . . Wignell . . . engaged him as a member of his company in 1793. His first thirty or forty appearances, I have been assured by Mr. Wignell and others, were anything but promising; but his early good breeding and close study soon made him the first of high comedians, either native or imported. I declare I think him in the easy (not spirited) comedy the best, except Lewis, I ever saw.⁵⁸

Dunlap remembered Moreton, the principal high comedian of the company, as

. . . the most elegant gentleman performer that our long acquaintance with the London and American theatres has made known to us. Tall, slender, straight-limbed, and perfectly at ease, his regular features, light complexion, and blue eyes, with the perfect air and manner of a finished gentleman, united to the talent, vivacity, and mind which must combine to make a real actor, gave the spectator a combination rarely seen on any stage.⁵⁹

Moreton played often and consistently during a short career. He was not, however, of strong health and died

⁵⁸Dunlap, op. cit., p. 119.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 118.

only five years after coming to the Chesnut Street Theatre company. Wood saw his last performance as Lothario in The Fair Penitent.

He was obliged to lie long on the stage after falling; the night being severe, he was taken into the green-room in a very exhausted state. He never played again. He died of consumption. . . . I spent an hour with him on Friday, when he talked confidently of playing soon. Calling on Monday, he was dead. . . .⁶⁰

Moreton was found by Fennell to be a most engaging personality. Fennell praised his warmth and general temperament and they became fast friends soon after their acquaintance was made. Fennell, very popular from the time of his arrival, was a source of encouragement to Moreton. Fennell wrote that Moreton had, "many times . . . after imagined disapprobation, thrown himself on my knees, and, in most feeling terms, expressed his fear of being unsuccessful in his profession."⁶¹ A signally interesting comment about Moreton is that he was a native American who served his apprenticeship on the American stage in prominent roles. The rage for English players would have caused Wignell to play down the fact that the man was American. Having been hired in England, he would not have been considered an American by the management or the audiences. How finished a performer he was at his demise is uncertain, for Dunlap also says of Moreton that he had "died before he could

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 119.

⁶¹Fennell, op. cit., p. 337.

have attained the skill his talents would have certainly achieved."⁶² Bernard, who could only have known Moreton in the last year of his life, found him

. . . a young native actor, of singular promise, who had also the advantage of great personal requisites. He was the ideal of a lover, having a natural elegance, as well as great tenderness. . . . His forte lay in sentiment rather than tragedy, rendering his Belcour and Harry Dauntton quite marvels of acting. But he could rise above these; and his Romeo and Jaffier were the very best I have seen.⁶³

Some performers were less fortunate than Moreton and Fennell. Chalmers was to have been the leading gentleman comedian and to perform in tragedies on occasion. According to Dunlap, "he was soon superseded by Moreton in the first, and immediately by Fennell in the second branch of acting."⁶⁴ Chalmers did play some prominent roles in the first season and, with Fennell diverted by one of his projects during the second season, Chalmers played in important roles until the summer of 1795. These parts included Hamlet, Macbeth, Shylock, Charles Surface and others. Chalmers had been a popular Harlequin in England and, when his fortunes wained in Philadelphia, he tried his luck in New York and Boston. He worked at times, then returned to England in 1805.⁶⁵

⁶²Dunlap, op. cit.

⁶³Bernard, op. cit., p. 268.

⁶⁴Dunlap, op. cit., p. 123.

⁶⁵Durang, op. cit.

Others in the company and the characters they played included Marshall (fops, Frenchmen, principal operatic tenor), Harwood (comic), Whitlock (fathers, mostly in tragedy), Green (second young leads), Darley (operatic tenor), Darley, Jr. (a tenor also), Francis (choreographer, director of pantomines, dancer, older character men), Bates (low comedian who spelled Wignell), Blisset (small parts), Warrell (minor vocal roles), Warrell's son (corps de ballet), Mrs. Francis (dancer, pantomimist), Mrs. Marshall (soprano, "country girls"), Miss Broadhurst (second lead in opera, comic, played one season only), and Mrs. Warrell (operatic singer).

The colorful Fennell should not be left with so little mention. Like Harwood, he was a young man when he came to America. Well educated, he spent his life divided between two endeavors. The first, for which he had great natural talent, was the stage; the second, for which he had no talent, was the pursuit of wealth. His considerable and persistent efforts to reach the goal of his second endeavor led to great disappointment again and again and, in the end, abject poverty. He went through several sizable investments of his own and others. Numerous times he returned to the stage where he was always welcome. His schemes to make money usually centered around the manufacture of salt. In the late 1790's, he wrote in his memoirs that, "I have engaged with Mr. Wignell to attend

his company at New York and Philadelphia for the following season, for the purpose of making money for the increase of the (salt) works."⁶⁶ He

. . . successively became saltmaker, bridge-builder, schoolmaster, and lecturer, going back, on the failure of each, to the stage as the only true friend who would give him a dinner. As an actor, he certainly laid small claim to genius, being rather what is known as an excellent reader; but he had great cultivation; and in particular characters, where his coldness and person were equally needed, such as Brutus . . . he could exhibit great force, and tower at moments into positive grandeur.⁶⁷

What makes the events surrounding the life of this man so unfortunate is that he was probably the most talented member of the entire company Wignell engaged and his ventures outside the theatre were motivated by a perfectly reasonable ambition to improve his station and a desire to make a more comfortable life for his family. Fennell's memoir is void of bitterness and rancor. Having sought continually to achieve success through a series of schemes that went wrong, he was "emptied . . . of all possessions but faith."⁶⁸

Reinagle's charges in the pit area were a well ordered, if motley group. They were motley as to origin and training, definitely not in the social sense.

⁶⁶Fennell, op. cit., p. 358.

⁶⁷Bernard, op. cit., p. 267.

⁶⁸Ibid.

Reinagle was extremely well thought of in social circles and ran a very respectable organization. We have the impression that few of the company who debarked with Wignell were musicians. Rather, it seems clear that Reinagle assembled his musicians from the ranks of those who performed for him in the City Concerts and through other local recruiting.

The musical tradition in Philadelphia had been influenced in major part by the German musicians of that city. The Germans claim Reinagle, referring to him as "the greatest German American musician" of the eighteenth century.⁶⁹ Despite this claim of the Germans of that fair city, Reinagle, like Benjamin Carr and George Gillingham, came to America from England. Gillingham was the conductor and, one must judge, the concert master at the Chesnut Street. He had been a celebrated violinist in London.⁷⁰ When his other commitments permitted, Reinagle conducted from his position at the harpsichord. This may have been an infrequent experience for, in addition to performing and conducting, Reinagle arranged the music and adapted musical works, and composed "operas" and pantomimes. The word opera is qualified because most of these works were simply plays with incidental music and vocal numbers interspersed at suitable intervals.⁷¹

⁶⁹Dummond, op. cit., p. 303.

⁷⁰Scharf and Westcott, op. cit., II, p. 1076.

⁷¹Chase, op. cit., p. 114.

As has been mentioned before, there were approximately twenty musicians in the orchestra. Despite the number of German performers in the city, "most of the musicians of the orchestra are Frenchmen, enabled to exist by this means."⁷² These men were political refugees who had escaped the French Revolution, as St. Mery had. Some were musical performers by trade, others had experienced genteel training as youths, a training that included musicianship. "Indeed, tradition has it that pseudo-marquises and counts back of the footlights were accompanied by real marquises and counts in the orchestra."⁷³ Henry Capron was an exception. He had been in America since the middle of the 1780's and made his home in Newark. Today the man might be able to commute, but in the 1790's he would have had to maintain a lodging in Philadelphia while playing with the company there. Reinagle had enough good performers from which to choose that he need not have singled out the French unless they pleased him. Especially if, as St. Mery said, men could exist on the salaries paid them. The word "exist" may have some significance, though, as some refugees were forced to live on very meager incomes. Durang points out that some of these men gained reputations as concert soloists in addition to their orchestral turns.⁷⁴

⁷²St. Mery, op. cit., p. 348.

⁷³Sonneck, op. cit., p. 117.

⁷⁴Durang, op. cit., XIX.

The impact that Reinagle made when he was at the podium is suggested by Durang's romantic account of such an occasion.

Who that once saw old manager Reinagle in his official capacity, could ever forget his dignified personne. He presided at his piano forte looking the very personification of the patriarch of music --investing the science of harmonious sounds, as well as the dramatic school, with a moral influence, reflecting and adorning its salutary uses with high respectability and polished manners. His appearance was of the reverend and impressive kind, which at once inspired the universal respect of the audience. Such was Reinagle's imposing appearance, that it awed the disorderly of the galleries, or the fop of annoying propensities, and impertinent criticism of the box lobby, into decorum. No vulgar, noisy emanations, were heard from the pit of that day; that portion of the theatre was then the resort of the well-informed critic. . . . It was truly inspiring to behold the polished Reinagle saluting from his seat (before the grand square piano forte in the orchestra) the highest respectability of the city, as it entered the boxes to take seats. It was a scene before the curtain that suggested a picture of the master of private ceremonies receiving his invited guests at the fashionable drawing room.⁷⁵

Some mention has been made of specific persons who were performers at the Chesnut Street Theatre. A few reactions to the general quality of the company are included here to add dimension to the assessment of its worth. A critical comment by St. Mery is offered first as the most unfavorable remark found.

The companies which play there are road companies, and also play in Baltimore. . . . The actors are of a bearable mediocrity from the English point

⁷⁵Ibid.

of view. . . . The actors are well enough dressed.
 . . . There are dancers whom Nicolet would have
 been able to claim.⁷⁶

The company was on home ground in Philadelphia. They were not, primarily, a road company, though they did go on the road, because no city at that time could sustain a theatre year round. Philadelphia does not do that even now. We can only assume that St. Mery's reference to "the English point of view," must mean he had spoken with some Englishmen about the quality of the performers. His own view would have been French.

Favorable reactions are numerous. Forman wrote to his friend, "The new Company certainly contains the best, the ablest and the most masterly perfect and accomplished set of performers taking them as a body that have ever appeared before in any part of America."⁷⁷ Dunlap felt

Wignell engaged and safely landed in America a company more complete and more replete with every species of talent for the establishment of a theatre than could have been contemplated by the most sanguine of friends. Everything was to be splendid, every thing was to be new, with the exception of himself and Mr. and Mrs. Morris, the only sharers who had seceded with him . . . a force that defied opposition.⁷⁸

When they arrived "Shakespeare for the first time in America came into his own."⁷⁹ The credence for objectivity that one

⁷⁶St. Mery, op. cit., p. 347.

⁷⁷Forman, op. cit.

⁷⁸Dunlap, op. cit., p. 93.

⁷⁹Joseph N. Ireland, Records of the New York Stage (New York: B. Blom, 1966), I, p. 164.

can give to a performer in the company is left to the reader's discretion. However, Fennell, in his Apology, refers to the company "than which the London stage could boast no better."⁸⁰ Pollock believes the company to have been "chosen so that it would be strong in all its departments."⁸¹ In short, the quality of acting in America was undoubtedly improved by the introduction of this company. Their credentials far surpass those of Hallam's company that had come forty years before. Henry's more recent acquisitions had included the brilliant Hodgkinson, but the general level of his company was below that of the Philadelphia troupe. Some of the members of Wignell's company had sound experience in provincial theatre. A few had known success in London. The company was probably on a par with or better than most provincial theatres in England and equal to most minor companies playing in the suburbs of London.

The orchestra was thought to be "equally superior in power and talent with the other departments"⁸² and "superior to what any other theatre in America ever did

⁸⁰Fennell, op. cit., p. 366.

⁸¹Pollock, op. cit., p. 56.

⁸²Dunlap, op. cit., p. 116.

possess."⁸³ Musical historians support the argument that Reinagle set a high standard of performance for his musicians.

Thus was the company gathered to play in the theatre described at its official opening as a "home for drama in America." The date chosen to display both talent and decor was February 17, 1794. The opening night was to be a combination of celebration and performance. Wignell, home from the wars, was to recite a prologue. This would be followed by The Castle of Andalusia with music by Samuel Arnold and book by John O'Keefe and Who's the Dupe?, an afterpiece already familiar to the Philadelphia playgoers. It may be remembered that the opera by O'Keefe had been presented as the first production at Annapolis the previous fall. This work was first seen in Philadelphia November 5, 1788. Who's the Dupe?, written by Mrs. Cowley, was first played in Philadelphia January 22, 1790.

The versatility of the company referred to earlier was exhibited on this occasion. Harwood composed the prologue, appeared as a bandit in The Castle, and in the principal role of Gradus in Who's the Dupe?. The following is Harwood's prologue.

Past is my toil and fled each anxious pain
 Since I behold my friends, my home again;
 How oft, when far away my fancy rov'd,

⁸³Forman, op. cit.

Lur'd to this spot by every scene I lov'd,
 Here on these boards I trod in waking dream,
 And if I talk'd, this spot was still by theme.

I painted oft, in colours just and true,
 This glorius scene, so grateful to my view;
 My pulse would quicken and my bosom glow;
 But the true joy I never felt till now.
 Hard was our fate to be condemn'd to roam--
 Tho' sweet our exile, from our destin'd home;
 Warm are our thanks to you who dar'd to brave
 Our foes' worst shafts, the drooping muse to save--
 Before whose phalanx superstition fled,
 And fell fanaticism bow'd her head.
 But I forget--

I come to plead for others, to engage
 Your gen'rous care, to aid a rising stage;
 I come to ask, and for a num'rous band
 Whom I have brought from a far distant land,
 Who have to me their future fate consign'd--
 Friends, parents, country, all they left behind:
 Grant but this boon, no sign of sad regret
 Shall reach the distant shore, no tears shall wet
 This happy land of promise and increase,
 Save the glad tears of gratitude and peace.

I see, I read in each approving smile,
 A kind assent--I have not lost my toil:
 For them accept my thanks--Fancy alone,
 In richest efforts, can conceive my own.
 Nor let the critic, with fastidious eye
 And penetrating search, our faults descry,
 While yet the muse aspires on infant wing--
 'The Eagle suffers little birds to sing;'
 The trembling novice, ere matur'd by time,
 Must fall far short of judgment's happy prime;
 Dispell'd the doubts and dangers he has fear'd,
 You may admire the genius you have rear'd;
 Great be your favor grown, the rising age
 Shall bless the efforts of a moral stage:
 The stage in purity, the stage refin'd,
 Cleared of its dross, may charm, instruct mankind.

Freedom new force from scenes heroic gains,
 The stage impedes not, but its cause maintains;
 Virtue may here its brightest lesson learn
 And scouted vice its ugliness discern;
 Our precepts, well directed, reach the heart,
 And to act well shall be a gen'ral part.⁸⁴

⁸⁴General Advertiser, February 19, 1794.

Casts for the evening were:

The Castle of Andalusia

Don Scipio.....Mr. Finch	Phillipo....Mr. Darley, Jun.
Don Caesar.....Mr. Darley	Banditti...Messrs., Harwood,
Don Fernando...Mr. Marshall	Francis, Cleveland,
Don Juan.....Mr. Morris	Warrell, Blisset, etc.
Don Alphonso....Mr. Moreton	Victoria.....Mrs. Warrell
Pedrillo.....Mr. Bates	Lorenza.....Mrs. Marshall
Spado.....Mr. Wignell	Isabella.....Mrs. Bates
Sanguino.....Mr. Green	Catalina.....Miss Broadhurst

Who's the Dupe?

Doiley.....Mr. Morris	Gradus.....Mr. Harwood
Sandford.....Mr. Moreton	Miss Doiley....Miss Francis
Granger.....Mr. Cleveland	Charlotte.....Mrs. Rowson

In addition to Harwood, Morris, Moreton and Cleveland appeared in both pieces. Of the actors, only Wignell and Harwood received mention in the newspapers. The reviewer for the General Advertiser found Harwood's Gradus to have been performed with "great truth and propriety." Wignell was described as the "most busy character in the opera . . . it is unnecessary to add that he did justice to it;-- the public know his talents, and the brilliancy and number of the audience shew that his friends have not forgotten him."⁸⁵

The character Wignell portrayed had the unlikely name of Spado. The author assigned Spado one song and the part might be described as a poor man's Mosca. A good part of the humor was in the form of puns and the book provided almost all of the action. The songs intruded and

⁸⁵Ibid.

failed to flow out of the situation with naturalness. This opera was divided into three acts and had scenes in a cave, a forest, before a castle, and several settings inside the castle.

This review in the General Advertiser was sympathetic, but reserved. It reminds one of the comments about Mrs. Whitlock. The reader is left with the feeling that much was hoped for, some delivered, but what had been delivered did not match the expectation of the critic. The first four sentences provide the tenor of a surprisingly brief review.

The Theatre on Monday evening opened with a representation of the Castle of Andalusia and Who's the Dupe? to a crowded audience. The performance was preceded by an address from one of the Managers, a copy of which we have been favoured with. The whole went off with considerable eclat, and the sanguine expectations of friends of the drama, were in no particular disappointed. It would be presumptuous, upon so slight a theatrical acquaintance with the abilities of the performers, as one representative can give, to pass judgment upon their respective merits. . . .

Of the singers, Darley, Mrs. Warrell, Mrs. Marshall and Miss Broadhurst drew mentions of complimentary nature.

A somewhat surprising occurrence seems to have been repeated at different times during the evening. "The favorite Ca'ira was the first air played. The orchestra by attending to the call for it, and by a voluntary repetition of it in the course of the evening, shewed that they did not forget their audience was America."⁸⁶ It is

⁸⁶Ibid.

hoped that the occasion for the introduction of this obviously popular tune happened during an intermission between the acts of the opera. The repeating of it could have occurred during like intervals or between the performances.

The initial season of the company ran from February 17 through July 18. The majority of performances were devoted to comedy and opera. The evenings of performance were Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays plus occasional Saturdays. The doors to the theatre were opened at five o'clock, performances began at six and usually ran to near midnight.⁸⁷ The season was successful by almost any standard.

The managers of the company were to hold sway for many years over theatre in the middle Atlantic states. The Old American Company gave up coming to Philadelphia, Baltimore and Annapolis. By the time of the opening, Wignell and Reinagle, encouraged by the effort in Philadelphia and with some of the same backers, were constructing a theatre in Baltimore. Following the first season at Philadelphia, their company moved to play in that house during the summer and fall months.

There were a number of significant developments related to the opening of the Chesnut Street Theatre. The numbers of seasons and performances played in America were

⁸⁷Forman, op. cit., pp. 182-183.

immediately increased. The quality of playing improved. Musical theatre, particularly opera, experienced an important step forward. Philadelphia gained prestige as a cultural center during its tenure as capital of the nation and afterwards, too. The city finally had an attractive centrally located place to house concerts and other events. Employment was provided for many Philadelphians as musicians, vendors, stage hands, ticket takers and in the other tasks essential to the maintenance and operation of a business establishment. Wignell's break with the Old American Company had signalled the end of the old system of actor's shareholding in performing companies. From that time on, actors were salaried. This was an improvement for some, though it encouraged the star system which resulted ever after in enormous discrepancies in performers' salaries. Another unfortunate effect was to delay further the development of native talent for the stage. Sadly enough, imported products in the theatre are still looked to with greater respect than American plays, performers, and productions.

CHAPTER V

FINANCIAL PROBLEMS OF WIGNELL AND THE CHESNUT STREET THEATRE COMPANY

Wignell left no diary or day-book that might help us to know more about his personal life or assess with any degree of accuracy his private thoughts on solutions to problems faced in managing the Chesnut Street Theatre. Left without an autobiographical account, one must turn to the writings of men who worked with and for him. William Wood and John Bernard are of particular help in their recollections. The journal William Warren maintained from the time he joined Wignell in 1796 provides very specific figures regarding the plays performed and the box office receipts for each, plus personal notations about the company's members and activities. Fennell's account of his life provides some commentary about the actor-manager. In addition to these sources, newspaper information regarding bills to be presented, changes in casts, the movement of prominent performers, and the untimely deaths of some of the actors, provides insights into Wignell's responses to difficulties.

Theatre, like other businesses, encounters perennial and "one time only" predicaments. Those in the first of these two categories, once they have been experienced, can be anticipated and met with a degree of competence and preparation season after season. They demand continuous planning to meet their repetition or, at least, to avoid catastrophic results as a consequence of their return.

Some predicaments are of a more immediate sort, short lived, and solved in brief spans of time. A seasonal business, like theatre, subject to the vagaries of nature and man, produces this sort of predicament often. Exigencies in the theatre and the pressures and challenges accompanying them are frequently escalated by the interjection of that unpredictable factor, the audience. A situation that appears firm and healthy can be unsettled and fraught with solicitude in an evening's performance or the next day's reaction.

There are large gaps in the early records of the Chesnut Street Theatre. Instead, a treatment of selected situations and problems will be undertaken here. The focus will be directed toward the three major problems; of finances, performers, and audiences. While no pretence is made that these three problems were the only ones creating difficulties, a consideration of them draws attention to a number of others. The present chapter concentrates on financial problems while in Chapter VI

actor-manager and audience-manager relationships will be surveyed.

The financial problems faced by Wignell and Reinagle were constant throughout their managerial careers, the relative magnitude of the crises being the only inconstant element in this area of their work. The difficult postponement of the Theatre's opening has been related. Despite the hardships attending the period of the planning and building of the theatre and its first two seasons, the close of the second season found its supporters in an optimistic mood. A meeting was held at the City Tavern in Philadelphia on June 25, 1795, to account for the finances to that time and to plan for the future of the New Theatre.

A recounting of that meeting's decisions and abstracts summarizing the Theatre's condition are reproduced in Appendix C. To supplement the two previous subscriptions, the first in 1791 for eighteen thousand dollars and the second in 1792 for an additional twelve thousand dollars, a third subscription was proposed and agreed upon. The amount to be available for subscription was forty-three thousand six hundred dollars. The purpose for the second subscription was the necessity to provide "relief of the Managers, in paying their existing debts, due on account of the Theatre."¹ Under designation No. III in the summary of the meeting, the specific debts to be paid

¹Minutes of a Meeting of the Subscribers to the New Theatre, June 25, 1795.

with the new subscription are enumerated: (1) debts due "tradesmen," for work performed and articles furnished the theatre, e.g., properties, lumber, plaster, bricks, decorative materials, eleven thousand eight hundred and twenty-nine dollars, (2) money owed on personal notes people had been able to make with banks to underwrite the original construction, nineteen thousand five hundred dollars, (3) to repay cash borrowed from individuals, eight thousand four hundred twenty-six dollars, and (4) remaining debts in England, probably for scenery and transportation, three thousand eight hundred and forty-five dollars. The security offered for the new subscription was provided by placing a mortgage on the company's theatres in Philadelphia and Baltimore.

A further examination of the minutes shows the indebtedness at the time the theatre opened, the income of the theatre, and the theatre's indebtedness to Wignell and Reinagle. The two managers appear to have invested four thousand dollars in cash. This apparently was not deemed a "pressing" debt, as it was not included in those debts to be paid out of the 1795 subscription.

One figure given that provided reason for optimism was the twenty-five thousand dollar income from the theatre at Philadelphia for the seasons of 1794 and 1795. It is not made clear whether or not this twenty-five thousand dollars was money above the cost of operation

and against which the investors interest could be drawn. It is reasonable to assume that operational costs would be included in this sum. In any case, it was an indicator of the ability of the operation to be revenue producing. It is strange that no profit-loss statement is shown for the theatre at Baltimore, though a season had been played there in the fall of 1794 and a subscription of six thousand four hundred dollars had been sold to provide for the necessities of that theatre.² The 1795 shares were made available and quickly sold. This response to an expanded speculation indicates confidence in the growth potential of the theatre and its subsidiary interests. Had the risk connected with this investment increased in a significant way, it would have been difficult to engage both new and old patrons. As it will be noted in a study of the Minutes of the Meeting, a prefatory paragraph states that original subscribers were to be given opportunity to subscribe to the new shares before they were placed on the open market. The health of the infant was deemed good and growth satisfactory.

²On August 19, 1794, shortly before the opening of the Holliday Street Theatre, the following appeared in a Baltimore newspaper: "Persons desirous of becoming subscribers to the New Theatre of Messrs. Wignell and Reinagle, are respectfully informed that there are five shares unappropriated of One Hundred Dollars each. Subscribers to draw interest at six per cent, till the money is repaid, and be entitled to a free ticket for the first season for each share. Application to be speedily made to Thorowgood Smith and Robert Gilmore."

Despite the optimism indicated by the meeting in June of 1795, a major philosophical decision that had been arrived at early in the Chesnut Street's planning was to plague the management and cause Wignell to repent having agreed to this decision. The decision was that which placed opera in such a favorable position in the repertoire. The conditions that brought about that decision aid in an understanding of the Theatre's problems.

The pattern to be followed at the Chesnut Street was like so many others in early American life, that of the established British tradition. This scheme was to include dramatic productions of both plays and operas. A more modest beginning might have been profitably considered, but the relative interests of the managers-to-be militated against a move that might have resulted in the introduction of plays first and opera later.

From 1786 on, Reinagle had come to have a strong position of respect as a member of the Philadelphia community. The enthusiasm with which certain people of the city had embraced Reinagle and his musical performances gave to that partner a more influential role in the planning of the theatre. This designation of "certain people of the city" is chosen deliberately. It refers to those who had been in a position to invite the composer-conductor-performer to their chamber sessions or soirees, or who could afford to have this maestro serve as mentor

to their children. They would not be typical of the populace. Also, these same people and others who supported the City Concerts which he planned and helped to perform were, in large part, aristocratic. One cannot fault Reinagle for these contacts. In fact, he deserves praise for their cultivation as they made the theatre possible.

Wignell was well thought of as a performer but his work in traveling with the Old American Company and Philadelphia's opposition to the theatre had kept him from the city months at a time before the legal permission to play was established in 1789. Even after that, he was out of the city a good deal until his alliance with Reinagle in 1791. The obvious result was that Wignell may have been more popular with the hoi poloi, but it is doubtful that persons who could afford subscriptions of three hundred dollars each would have been eager to invest in a theatre proposed by an actor who would debark immediately for England with a sizable part of their investment.

As the planning progressed, Reinagle's friendships with important persons and their financial interest in the theatre, his position as the local representative of the venture during its physical and financial formulation, and Wignell's long and criticized absence during which an enormous debt accumulated, combined to put the central figure in this drama in a less favorable position than his

co-manager. There is no intention here to suggest differences between these men over the planning of the theatre. The absence of any mention of difficulties between them must lead to the assumption that they were unusually well-suited partners. The diligence with which Wignell balanced the company in stocking it with singers and dancers attests his commitment to the decision referred to here.

The fact that an opera was chosen for first performances in Annapolis and in Philadelphia convinces the observer of the premier position this medium was to be accorded. Dunlap's comment was that ". . . Wignell was led to rest his hopes on the operatic department."³ Despite the opera historian Sonneck's enthusiasm for Wignell and Reinagle's decision because "posterity is less interested in Wignell and Reinagle's financial affairs than in their artistic efforts," a picture of the management problems of the theatre must include an estimate of what this commitment to opera was to mean.⁴

The immediate effect of entrusting one's hopes for theatrical success in the production of musical entertainment in addition to plays was to necessitate the engagement of a larger performing company.

³Dunlap, op. cit.

⁴Sonneck, op. cit., p. 105.

The musical part of the entertainment being now made so prominent, greatly swelled the expenditures. These included the enormous charge of a perfect orchestra. . . . Then again the skeleton of a chorus, to be constantly kept and filled up as wanted. . . . A full ballet corps under the direction of Byrne. . . . The musical instruments of all kinds, (then the property of the manager,) including two grand pianos and a noble organ. . . . The orchestra music, (afterwards destroyed by fire,) was obtained at an expense of nearly two thousand dollars . . . added largely to the . . .⁵

costs of operation. Though they were not mentioned in this listing, the star vocalists were among the highest paid members of the company. The managers must be admired for their determination to provide performances of artistic merit. The suggestion that such a commitment to musical drama was an error in judgment is true only when considering their success financially.

The overhead necessary to sustain such a company, combined with the debt incurred before the theatre opened for consecutive seasons of playing, put the managers in a situation of financial stress at the outset. Despite this fact, they had been singularly successful in their appeals for backing or the investors in the Chesnut Street Theatre would not have extended their support of that theatre as well as provided twenty thousand dollars to pay for an additional theatre to be located in Baltimore and available for playing in the summer of 1794. Such support indicates the confidence the managers enjoyed. While the

⁵Wood, op. cit., pp. 92-93.

supporters were undoubtedly aware of the population increase in the new states and the general expansion in the economy and in construction, very few were experienced in investments in the field of entertainment and, thus, must have relied heavily on the experience and advice of the managers.

During his nine years as a manager, it must have been painful to Wignell to compare the receipts and realize the difference in the public reception of the production of plays and operas. In the last years of his life he reflected on this problem and spoke with William Wood, his assistant in the management at that time. Wignell had come to the strong feeling that no theatre could successfully produce opera, comedy, and tragedy. His opinion was that a theatre should be given over exclusively to music and dance.⁶ He might have expressed this view in another way, i.e., that a theatre was more apt to experience success should it confine itself to drama.

To show how badly the union of the two entertainments affected the manager, Mr. Wignell used to refer in later times the advocates of the junction to his book of receipts, which presented such contrasts as "Love in a Village," "Robin Hood," or "Artaxerxes," (all musical dramas,) performed to an audience of one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars; while the "Revenge," "Romeo and Juliet," "Alexander," or almost any other tragedy, seldom fell below a receipt of from five hundred to seven hundred dollars.⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 94.

⁷Ibid., p. 93.

Supporters of the musical drama countered that the gross receipts were often greater than those for plays.

To which, Wood, Wignell's successor replied,

. . . this is a matter of balance of receipts and expenditures; and our books have constantly proved that the extra expenditure for a large chorus force, additional performers, and band, added to the enormous demands of principal singers, render a profit scarcely within probability.

Wood went on to mention that time in preparation for an opera, the more limited run, and the daily occupation of the stage (by equipment and properties) all inveighed against a happy union of these forms of presentation in the same theatre.

Wood closed his comment on the opera-play controversy by confirming Wignell's experience regarding single performances. He recalled listening to fine operas well sung to a house of forty dollars. Lastly, he wrote that his receipt book would prove that the productions of four plays realized more profit than all the operas he had "produced during twenty-five years."⁸

Contemporary experience supports this judgment. There is no longer any expectation that opera will be self-sustaining financially and subsidies are an expected and needed pillar to opera production.

Numerous factors prevented steady progress towards a continued expansion and successful operation of the theatre. One unpredictable block that stood in the way

⁸Ibid., pp. 94-95.

of playing and, accordingly, of revenue was the plague. While there seem to have been isolated instances of this horror before 1792, that year inaugurated a period when the visits of yellow fever proved costly to life and business on a large scale. Philadelphia lost over five thousand inhabitants to this scourge in 1793. Attacks were savage in 1793, 1794, 1796, 1797 and 1798. The movement of the capital of the country to the banks of the Potomac in 1800 was attributed, in part, to these tragedies.⁹ St. Mery wrote, "until 1800 it [Philadelphia] was the seat of the federal government of the United States, an honor which it lost because of its repeated and disastrous epidemics. . . ." ¹⁰ The first sign of yellow fever led to the closing of places of public meeting. Those who could afford to, left for residences out of town or to join relatives elsewhere in the country. On occasion, a particular congregation of a religious sect might decide to meet despite the ban, or an alehouse or restaurant might not be bothered by the health officials should its proprietor continue to operate his establishment.¹¹ The theatres, always an early target should the

⁹Riley, op. cit.

¹⁰St. Mery, op. cit., pp. 257-258.

¹¹Julius F. Sachse, The Religious and Social Conditions of Philadelphia During the First Decade Under the Federal Constitution (Philadelphia: n.p., n.d.), p. 13.

plague appear, were summarily closed. While this prevented income, it gave safety to the players as well as the townspeople. At such times, Reinagle and Wignell turned their attention first to Baltimore, where they maintained their second theatre. However, an escape to that city was not always a satisfactory solution as Baltimore was equally "subject to the scourge of yellow fever," where it "inflicted frightful ravages almost every year since 1793."¹² St. Mery would appear to have written this in 1798.

Few families who remained in the cities were not brought close to this menace. Both St. Mery and his son were stricken. Though St. Mery père was gravely ill with this disease, he denied that he was its victim as he was a "creole," a group superstitiously thought to be exempt from the fever. According to St. Mery's account, twenty thousand people were struck by fever in Philadelphia during August of 1797. The health authorities tagged houses with red flags should any inhabitants be stricken, and St. Mery could count twenty of these markers "within a musket shot" of his house.¹³

In addition to abrupt interruptions in otherwise orderly and financially stable seasons, the closings due to plague brought about unexpected expenditures for transportation to alternate cities, salaries paid when no

¹²St. Mery, op. cit., p. 80.

¹³Ibid., p. 236.

playing was providing returns, and rent for structures not owned by the company.

A second source of anxiety to the producer-manager of an early American playhouse was competition. The cities were not of a size to support competing theatres. Nor was there sufficient cultural interest or economic ability to successfully support competitors in the field of entertainment. In the case of Wignell and Reinagle, they were able to "close" Philadelphia to the Old American Company, but other forms of theatrical fare found popularity in the city. One of these was the Circus, which was to prove a prominent competitor.

The first circus master in Philadelphia was an Englishman, John Bill Ricketts, an expert horseman who had trained in England. Ricketts came to Philadelphia in 1792 and established a riding academy at Twelfth and Market Streets. This school was to provide his livelihood while he gained the backing needed to build a circus. Odell mentions that Ricketts had a circus in Philadelphia before playing in New York in August of 1793.¹⁴ This circus was erected in 1792 on the outskirts of the city.¹⁵ The following year, in expanding his plans, Ricketts contacted John Durang about joining him. Having seen this dancer-actor perform, the ring-master invited the agile gentleman to take a

¹⁴Odell, op. cit., p. 336.

¹⁵Riley, op. cit., p. 377.

position as a clown, providing comic interludes during equestrian performances.¹⁶ Durang at that time declined the offer.

Ricketts was not confined to the Middle Atlantic circuit and played alternately in New York and Philadelphia, building amphitheatres for his attractions in both cities. From November twenty-fourth, 1794 through April twenty-first, 1795 he played a season in New York in competition with the Old American Company. The following year, on October nineteenth, Ricketts was to open a large building on Chesnut Street and, to the chagrin of Wignell, directly across the street from the Theatre.¹⁷ The enterprising Scot called his new ring the Art Pantheon and Amphitheatre, but it was commonly known in Philadelphia as Ricketts' Circus. Ricketts added the performances of plays to his repertoire and these were performed intermittently from December twenty-second, 1795 through April twenty-third, 1796. Wignell countered in the early part of his 1795-96 season by bringing out Signior Joseph Doctor, an acrobat from Sadler's Wells in London, and M. and Mme. Lege, pantomimists from the Italian Theatre in Paris.¹⁸

¹⁶Downer, op. cit., p. 35.

¹⁷St. Mery, op. cit., p. 348.

¹⁸Pollock, op. cit., p. 58.

The following season, 1796-97, found Ricketts again vying with Wignell during December, January and February. The established nights on which the theatre had found it most satisfactory to play were Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Ricketts played when he wished but settled generally on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Ricketts began his season in mid-October. The Theatre managers had opportunity to observe his success before their season began. Saturday nights seem to have proven golden to this equestrian marvel. Ricketts appeared to have a money making operation in a house with over twelve hundred seats, and with far fewer performers to maintain.

The Theatre managers decided to take advantage of this interest in Saturday evening entertainment. So, on December seventeenth, they played a performance opposite Ricketts' own. Undaunted by this turn of events, Ricketts shifted his playing nights to Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, thus competing with the theatre on its regular playing nights. In less than a month, the Theatre personnel capitulated. Peace was restored through the return by each company to the nights it had originally played.¹⁹

To add to Wignell's woes, a second circus was opened before Ricketts closed out his season in 1797 and for a time the Chesnut Street Company was playing in competition with two circuses. The newer and considerably larger

¹⁹Ibid., p. 59.

circus was opened at Fifth and Prune Streets. M. Lailson, its owner, constructed a splendid amphitheatre for equestrian shows and pantomimes. The members of this company, like the manager, were French and comprised the largest equestrian contingent to be seen in America to that day. They played through the spring and well into the summer, closing the season July 27, 1797. Eighteen new pantomimes, farces and comic ballads were introduced by Lailson and his company during that season.²⁰

The 1796-97 season was a veritable nightmare for Wignell. In the midst of a season completely circumscribed by circus activity, he felt it necessary to raise the prices of admission. In this, William Warren thought Wignell had "made a great blunder" as "many were very much hurt at . . . it and kept away entirely."²¹ This unpopular decision was abandoned by the beginning of the following season as it had not appreciably increased the box office receipts.

Warren, a performer Wignell hired in 1796 in England, summarized his thoughts about the season in early May, at least two months before Wignell intended that the season should end. The reason for this early summary will be made

²⁰Ibid., pp. 61-62.

²¹William Warren, "Journal of William Warren," unpublished document in the holdings of the Canning Pollock Library, Howard University, May 6, 1797.

clear directly, but Warren's few remarks are worth repeating.

The Company was very strong and Byrnes Ballets got out in great style. . . . Mrs. Merry made a great impression--Cooper was well received when he took any sort of pains--Moreton a great favorite Harwood also--in fact the prices being rais'd was the only thing complain'd of. . . .²²

Byrnes, Mrs. Merry and Cooper, along with Warren, were newcomers that season. Warren's uncomplaining attitude in this entry of May sixth is almost surprising for he had just experienced an extremely discouraging setback. His benefit was played May first and the receipts were three hundred eighty dollars. Four hundred fifty-six dollars were needed to break even and make a profit for him. By his calculation he owed the managers one hundred twenty dollars. A rapid check of these figures indicates that the difference between the first two is not one hundred twenty dollars. However he figured his debts, he found it "a very discouraging circumstance after working through so difficult a season." He went on to say that "business seems to decline generally." By his admission the managers treated him well, but they were "very much involved themselves."²³

Any important economic fluctuation in a community is bound to affect the theatre in that community. Warren's

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., May 1, 1797.

comments in this regard are pertinent. Beyond commenting that business was declining generally he wrote that, "During the season several heavy failures took place amongst the Merchants . . . the rage of speculation had been so great . . . the consequence was fatal to the general prosperity." Much of this speculation had been in land in the West and had been the product of the expectation for gain through rapidly increasing immigration. Among those brought low were Robert Morris and John Nicholson. Morris' name was the first to appear on the list of original subscribers to the theatre and Nicholson had purchased two shares in the initial subscription. Morris, the great financier of the Revolution, was to spend a good part of the years 1798-1801 in debtor's prison.

The 1796-97 season was abbreviated because of that old nemesis of the theatre in America, the law. In the spring, Wignell was informed that the authorities in Baltimore had passed a law prohibiting playing in that city during the summer, the exact limits to extend from June tenth to October first. The obvious cause of such a law was fear of the plague. Wignell's company had planned to move directly to Baltimore at the close of their Philadelphia season, as they had done the three previous years. Immediate changes in the company's plans were necessitated. One alternative was to pass Baltimore

by until the fall and play elsewhere in the summer. Another was not to play Baltimore that year but hope for some work that would hold the company together until December when they would re-open in Philadelphia. Wignell was particularly anxious to keep his actors working. Nothing was more apt to cause disaffection and, on occasion, desertion, than layoffs.

The theatre in Baltimore belonging at least in part to the Chesnut Street subscribers, was in jeopardy of lying fallow and passing what should have been a profit producing season. Also, many loyal and good friends of the theatre in that city were to be without any dramatic fare for an unknown and possibly lengthy period of time. The idea was put forth to play a brief season before the advent of summer. This scheme was adopted, for the following announcement was published in Philadelphia on May sixth:

The Engagements of the Managers, rendering it necessary, from recent occurrences, that they should open the theatre at Baltimore, so as to close the season there on the tenth of June next, they thought it expedient, (with the approbation of the individual performers, who are particularly interested) to discontinue the present course of Benefits until that period has elapsed.²⁴

The reference to "recent occurrences" seems obviously pointed at the news from Baltimore about the restrictions on playing. The determination to follow this course of action would seem to have been arrived at for some of the

²⁴Pollock, op. cit., p. 339.

following reasons. Philadelphia had been less than a raging success during the winter and into the spring. Lailson's circus was bent on continuing its competition and would cut into the Theatre's income and the player's benefits. The impossibility of providing a season for the patrons in Baltimore for over a year and a half could mean (a) the loss of returning supporters, (b) no opportunity to develop new supporters, and (c) the possible loss of the theatre there because it would produce no income for such a long time. Should some alternate summer season go well, it might be advantageous to extend it into the fall, thence preventing a short season at Baltimore before opening again in Philadelphia. Some or all of these thoughts, plus the prospect of the Baltimore theatre-goers welcoming a surprise season and attending to show their appreciation of Wignell and Reinagle's consideration of their interest in theatre, led the managers to decide to move the company to Baltimore for the month of May and part of June.

The newspaper announcement quoted above suggests the performers were "particularly interested" in this decision to go to Baltimore. If indeed it is true that the actors and singers were enthusiastic to go, it probably means the benefit season then in progress in Philadelphia was not successful. The actors would have fought such a move if they had been receiving good box office response

in Philadelphia. The promise was made to the performers that the benefits would continue to be played in Baltimore. Such an agreement would be essential as the time after they returned would not allow for each to have his benefit before the season in Philadelphia was concluded. The actors may have felt that playing in Baltimore without the competition from horses and international acts would prove more lucrative. A letter from Wignell to Henry Hill, dated June 7, 1797, supports the notion that Philadelphia had proved slow in the spring. In this letter from Baltimore, Wignell expresses thanks to Hill for the loan of money "on the eve of my departure from your City," i.e., Philadelphia. The exact amount of this loan is not stated. Rather, it is described as a "kind accommodation." A "P.S." notes that Wignell was enclosing one hundred fifty dollars, though no mention is made that this is payment in full. In the body of the letter Wignell explains that he had requested Mr. Anderson, the theatre's treasurer, to provide Hill with bank notes to cover the loan.²⁵ Wignell would not have needed to borrow a fair amount of money from Hill if the season in Philadelphia had been a success. It is understandable that a short and unexpected season in Baltimore would necessitate some funds above the normal cost of operation. However, the fact that Wignell went to Hill personally rather than to the banks or to a group

²⁵The original of this letter is in the Manuscript Department of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

of the subscribers meeting in concert allows for the possibility that a certain financial instability existed in the spring of 1797 that Wignell was not anxious for the subscribers to know about.

The engagement in Baltimore was to last only a month because of the new law. To the anguish of the Philadelphia managers, this novel tenet also included a new tax on playing. The assessment was to be eight dollars a night. Baltimore had long been receptive to the theatre and past experience led Wignell to hope that the very brief season might be extended until July fourth so he appealed to the City Council for such permission. Wignell's letter to Hill, while describing business as "tolerably good," had reported that the takings were too small "to do more than pay the expenses" of the trip.²⁶ The deliberations of the Council continued for two weeks as Wignell and his large group waited a determination. The council jointly determined that no extension would be granted. The verdict prompted Warren to comment that these "religious fanatics" proved a "set of 'stony hearted Villains.'" There was nothing left for the company to do but return to Philadelphia.

The indomitable Wignell had now to follow this fiasco with some program for his performers. The Chesnut

²⁶Ibid.

Street was re-opened for five performances, the first of these on July fifth and the last on the fourteenth.

Meanwhile, Ricketts and Durang had been readying themselves for a lengthy sojourn in Canada and were to leave Rickett's New York circus uninhabited. In some way Wignell became aware that Ricketts' circus was available for rent or lease. Durang had returned to Philadelphia on more than one occasion to put his affairs in order and it is just possible that he visited his old associate, informing him of this. Wignell had negotiated with Ricketts in 1795 for the use of his New York circus. In 1797, an arrangement with Wignell would be beneficial by providing Wignell a place to play and Ricketts rental on his building while he was out of town. Wignell seems to have left for New York even before the performances on Chesnut Street were concluded for, on the fifteenth of July, Warren reported in his journal that Wignell was in New York and that, if he could obtain the theatre there, "we are to go there."

In summary, the excursion to Baltimore appears to have been an attempt to salvage part of an expected income that had been impossible to realize because of a new and, as time proved, temporary law against playing in the summers. Also, the desire to please the Holliday Street Theatre's investors and patrons entered into the decision to play. Despite these motives and the willingness of

the performers to participate, the managers were unprepared financially to undertake this extraordinary trip. A precipitous move, the trip proved an economic disaster and added a deficit to the already burdensome financial problems of the Chesnut Street theatre.

Wignell was successful in his negotiations at New York. With very little hesitation, Ricketts agreed to Wignell's use of the circus and, on the nineteenth of July, left for a tour of Canada in partnership with that dancer, whirligig, and bit player, John Durang.²⁷ Durang's account of touring in the wilds of upper New York and Canada is a fascinating and absorbing tale of itinerant performing in the 1790's.

The ease with which Wignell and Ricketts came to terms suggests that some preliminary communication had taken place before they met in New York. This is not contradicted by Warren's comment, i.e., "if the circus could be engaged." From this it may be assumed that the possibility for such an arrangement had been explored previously. The new project seemed to stimulate Wignell for his letter to Henry Hill indicated the high spirits with which he approached the work in New York. The day after Ricketts left for Canada, he wrote,

I have the pleasure to inform you that the prospect of our success here is such as to encourage to anticipate a complete indemnification for our loss at Baltimore--I have taken

²⁷Downer, op. cit., p. 47.

Mr. Ricketts' Circus--which we shall adapt to our exhibitions--and open as soon as it can be made ready.²⁸

It was to take more than a month to ready the theatre located in Greenwich Street, what with converting the ring into an orchestra and pit area, and arranging the stage to include traps and grooves.

A company of what was to prove rival performers opened a season at the John Street Theatre on July eighteenth. One suspects that, in his concern for his own efforts, Wignell neither expected nor concerned himself with this prospective competition. From the tenor of his letter, he was ignorant of its presence or unconcerned by its potential as a threat to his success.

John Hodgkinson, the very aggressive and dynamic personality at the head of the New York descendants of the Hallam-Henry company, had been the manager at the John Street Theatre from the time Henry had left the company and Hodgkinson had driven Hallam out of the management. Hodgkinson had been aware of a plan by Wignell to bring his company to New York for a season in 1795. It was the New York manager's intention to insure the safety of his territory against incursions from any direction after the danger of 1795 passed. The method chosen by Hodgkinson was to form an alliance with a manager who would prove

²⁸The original of this letter is in the Manuscript Department of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

no menace to his own position of prominence in the city. The choice lighted on John Solee, a Frenchman who had found a fertile ground for his performing and managing talents in Charlestown, South Carolina. Solee maintained a company in that city and toured the southern states as far north as Richmond, Virginia.

Hodgkinson had known of Solee's reputation and contracted a five year agreement with him to use the John Street Theatre, this agreement to begin in the summer of 1797. There seems to have been nothing in this arrangement to permit Solee the use of the new Park Theatre, under construction at that time and to be ready for Hodgkinson's company early in 1798. William Dunlap, by 1797 a long time participant in the American theatre as playwright and play doctor, had become a partner of Hodgkinson in 1796. During the summer of 1797, while Hodgkinson was playing an engagement in Boston, Dunlap remained in New York, keeping a close watch on their fortunes and corresponding with Hodgkinson about theatrical affairs. Strangely enough, Hodgkinson does not seem to have taken the playwright into his confidence for, in one letter, Dunlap asked Hodgkinson what kind of an arrangement he had with Solee. Hodgkinson explained by letter that Solee and he were to divide the seasons in New York with Solee at the helm from "June to October" and Hodgkinson from "November to April." The seasons were scheduled for five and six months,

respectively, so the correct choice of words would have been "through" and not "to" the months mentioned. It is not surprising that we find no record of Wignell's awareness that Solee was due in the city. Hodgkinson would have had no reason to inform Wignell of his plans, unless to attempt to scare him off.

Hodgkinson was very disturbed to hear from Dunlap that not only had Wignell invaded his territory while he was out of town but that Ricketts' absence was to continue into January of 1798. Should Wignell experience general acceptance in New York, the possible personal consequence for Hodgkinson and Dunlap would be competition in the first months of the fall and winter season from a company touted by many as superior to their own.

Using Dunlap as his mediator and knowing that Dunlap and Wignell were old friends, having collaborated on some of their most successful efforts, Hodgkinson threatened Wignell with the establishment of a company to play Baltimore in the winters and Philadelphia in the summers, should Wignell remain in New York into the winter. This bluff was an obvious attempt to drive the Philadelphians off, if possible.²⁹ The note of desperation in such a threat indicates the real stature of the Chesnut Street Theatre Company throughout America. Hodgkinson was further galled, at that specific

²⁹Odell, op. cit., p. 446.

time, by the poor beginnings of his own season in Boston.

The five year pact with Solee, commencing with that season, was never to be completed. The sojourn of this Southern manager to New York in 1797 was his only adventure in that city. Using a pick-up company composed of some of his own players and others from Boston and New York, Solee played opposite the Greenwich Street visitors and experienced financial failure and artistic embarrassment. Solee had not intended to play at length in New York, but to travel to Philadelphia. However, he was unable to effect this move due to the plague and had to meet Wignell in head-on confrontation.³⁰

Following the Baltimore season, the Chesnut Street performers had received only half checks for their first week back in Philadelphia. This may have been because they only played the evenings of July fifth and seventh, though half pay seems less than fair for two-thirds of a week's work. The following week provided the last pay-checks until the end of August, because the performers had to await Wignell's preparations in New York. Near the middle of August Warren complained, ". . . for the last 9 weeks, I have only received Forty dollars, this

³⁰The reader is referred to a very fine account of this struggle in Chapter XII, Volume One of Odell's Annals of the New York Stage.

is insufficient for our subsistence . . . out of this I had my journey from Baltimore to pay."³¹ He seemed disappointed to have had fifteen weeks "vacation" in his first year with the company.³² With the other members of the company, Warren arrived in New York to open the Greenwich Street theatre on August twenty-fourth.

Dunlap, in his letters to Hodgkinson, had little good news to report about Solee's stay in John Street. While his reports were almost all bad, Wignell's reports on the Greenwich Street Theatre were not much better. Again, Warren's journal provides the kind of progress report that reflects the success of the effort. The following was gleaned from weekend entries:

Second Week	-	no salary
Third Week	-	half salary
Fourth Week	-	money against salary (exact figure not given)
Fifth Week	-	salaries paid
Sixth Week	-	salaries paid
Seventh Week	-	half salary
Eighth Week	-	half salary
Ninth Week	-	half salary

On the twenty-first of September, Warren noted, "1/2 salaries paid--first year of Engagement expires this day --am much dissatisfied--and don't mean to renew it." Warren avoided the possibility of the kind of loss he had

³¹Warren, op. cit., August 12, 1797.

³²Ibid., August 25, 1797.

experienced when taking a benefit in May by declining that option in New York.³³

In late September the Solee forces were foundering badly and Wignell approached Dunlap about renting the John Street Theatre until Dunlap and Hodgkinson's Park Street Theatre should open or Wignell and his company could return to Philadelphia. This offer was not accepted by Dunlap, so Wignell continued at the Greenwich Street. At about the same time he sought this arrangement, Wignell declared that he could not return to Baltimore.³⁴ This attempt to rent the John Street Theatre and the consideration of a move to Baltimore, whether such a move was feasible or not, attest to Wignell's perplexity over his condition in Greenwich Street and his need for a change of theatres. Not long after this Solee faded from the picture. The "victors" in the season's struggle for audiences played on but were soon set upon by rival forces. For during the last six weeks of Wignell's playing at Ricketts' circus, he was confronted by the bane of his previous season in Philadelphia, the circus. Contending for audiences during the closing weeks of the season would have been less difficult had the circus company been housed in another building.

³³Ibid., November 15, 1797.

³⁴Odell, op. cit., p. 465.

However, Wignell's nights of playing were to be shared alternately with a group of French, English, and American performers devoted to the equine arts, ballet, pantomime, Indian dances, and other assorted entertainments. Finances may have forced Wignell to this co-habitation, and it is plausible to assume he benefited by a reduction in rent. If he had been taking in enough at the box office, he might not have had to agree to such a schedule of playing and the attending inconveniences.

Deemed by critics of the day and those who followed an artistic coup, the New York season was a disaster for the managers. Wignell's receipts showed the horrendous results--a loss of two thousand three hundred fifty dollars. This, despite the total take of seventeen thousand two hundred eighty-six dollars for forty-six nights of playing from August 21 through November twenty-fifth. The cause?

Friday 29th Mr. Moreton and Mr. Reinagle brought \$30 and informed me that seats were secured in the Stage for us--at 3 PM we cross the North river we sleep at Elizabeth Town Saturday, December 2 we arrive in Philadelphia at 10 PM. Thus ends our New York excursion--the receipts might have supported a moderate establishment--but the Company was very large also the Band. The Theatre inconvenient and so wretchedly Cold--being incompetent to exclude either Wind or Rain--Wignell had expended a very large sum in fitting up the place--for which expenditure the principal part of the funds were mortgaged--previous to our Opening the Theatre and which was the sole Reason of the salary payments being so irregular. Of the benefits one only succeeded. Fennell and Mrs. Merry made \$250 each. December on the 10th Mr. Wignell advanced \$10 to pay freight of my Baggage the vessel in which I shipped it from New York was run ashore I recovered my things--by paying a salvage--the Theatre is in a state of preparation. the loss at New York was \$2350.

This description of the exodus is from Warren's journal entry for November 29, 1797. Odell's summary is of another kind.

And so departed Wignell and Reinagle, with all their starry host. New Yorkers who lamented their going might have consoled themselves--could they have known--with the reflection that all of the leaders, except Moreton, would be seen again in the city, at the new Park Theatre or elsewhere. This had been a great autumn in New York theatricals.³⁵

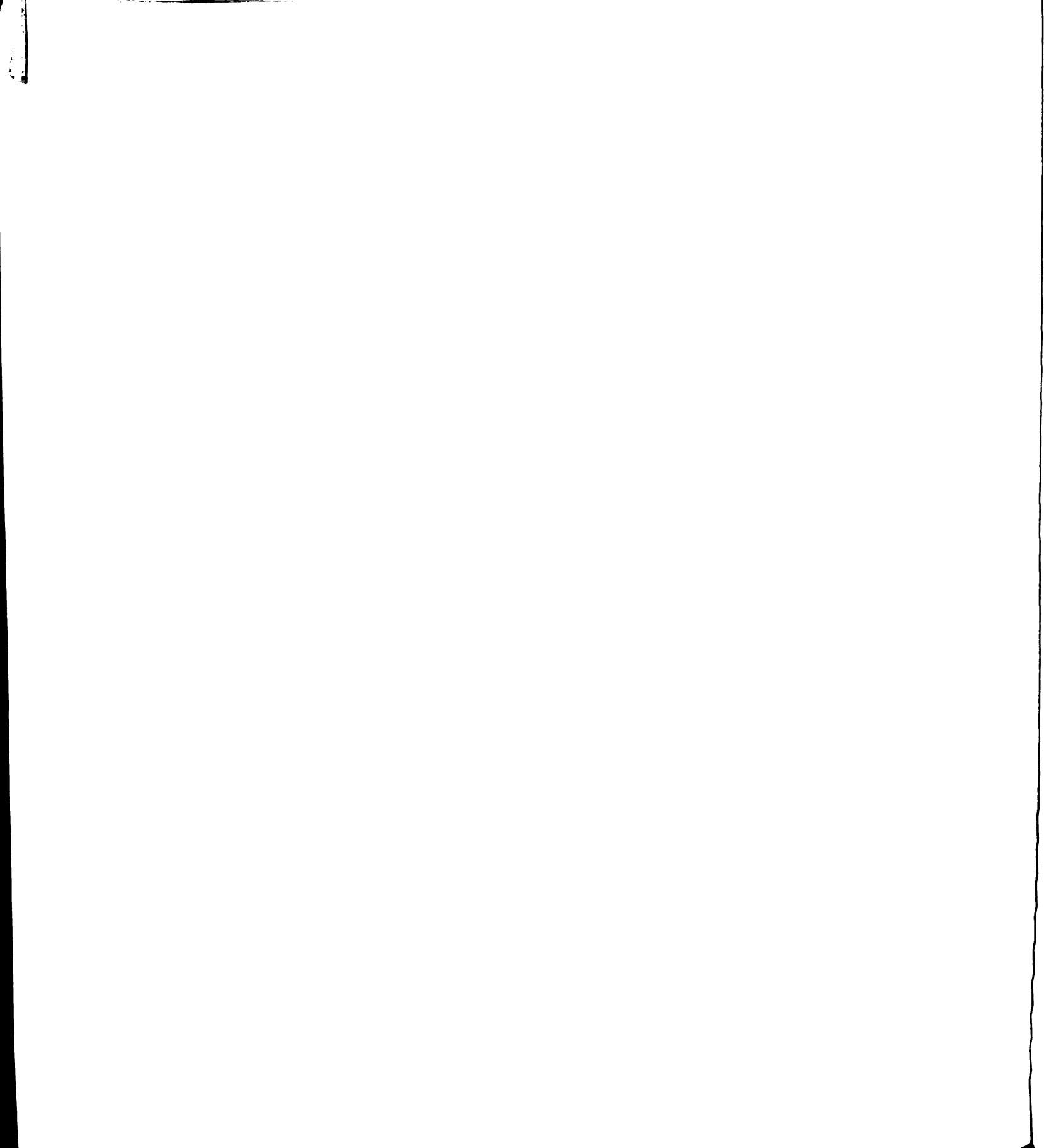
It is pertinent to ask why Wignell remained in New York so long if the receipts continued to fall short of the costs of production. The answer was the plague. The disease kept Solee from Philadelphia and did the same for Wignell. In 1797, the epidemic in Philadelphia surpassed the horrors of 1793 and the years between. The cost to Wignell of a move back to Baltimore would have been prohibitive and the truth was that in no other location could the company have realized a smaller deficit than in New York. Twenty-three hundred dollars was not a small deficit but, in a stand at almost any other theatre in America, the loss might have been doubled or trebled. In his July letter, Wignell had been realistic. While he had hoped to regain the Baltimore losses, he admitted fear of experiencing "some difficulty in a sufficient fund to bring on [to Philadelphia] our large and expensive family" (see footnote 28).

³⁵Ibid., p. 470.

Before passing on to a consideration of the problems of 1798 and 1799 a final note should be made on the fate of the circuses in Philadelphia. It will be remembered that there were both Ricketts and Lialson to contend with in 1797. At the beginning of and well into the 1797-98 season, the theatrical performers were not buffeted about by the competition of circuses. Ricketts, Durang and a small contingent had gone to Canada in July. The travels of these men were to keep them out of the country until the fall of 1798.³⁶ Therefore, during the Chesnut Street Theatre season from December eleventh, 1797, through May fifth, 1798, no trouble was encountered with Ricketts. Laison returned to the capital city to play an abbreviated season from March eighth through April seventh, 1798. Lailson, like the Chesnut Street producers, was over staffed and too ambitious. He was unable to continue, went bankrupt, and sold his theatre and its outfittings in the spring of 1798. Wignell purchased for the Chesnut Street Theatre the larger part of the holdings in properties.³⁷ A few performances were played by temporary companies at the two circuses and at the Southwark between April twenty-fourth and June eighth. These were of almost no consequence to Wignell for they came at the very end or after the close

³⁶Downer, op. cit., p. 93.

³⁷Scharf and Westcott, op. cit., p. 953.



of the Chesnut Street season. As if to place an exclamation point at the close of the circuses and the 1797-98 seasons, the dome of the circus formerly belonging to Lailson crashed to the floor and destroyed the interior of that structure on July eighth, 1798. The circus was uninhabited when this crash took place.

Ricketts returned to Philadelphia to play a season from January ninth through March twenty-third of 1799 and to open a campaign at his circus on November twenty-first of that same year. On the evening of December seventeenth, 1799, Don Juan, or The Libertine Destroyed was announced with an accompanying program note that "The last scene represents the Infernal Regions with a view of the mouth of Hell." The performance was interrupted by fire and the circus burned to the ground.³⁸ One can imagine the comments of religionists about that parley of events. Ricketts was ruined, losing twenty thousand dollars at once, his livelihood and his future in American entertainment. With the help of Durang, he made a valiant attempt to re-coup losses by playing briefly at Lancaster, at the Southwark in Philadelphia, in Baltimore, Georgetown, Alexandria, and by returning north. His troupe even played a short season in Lailson's circus, sans roof. Finally, in a state of despair, Ricketts left America for the West Indies and, after being captured by pirates who sold his

³⁸Philadelphia Daily Advertiser, December 18, 1797.

horses and belongings at auction, was able to make enough money to plan a return to England that was not an embarrassment, only to be lost at sea enroute.³⁹

The theatre was Wignell's life and it was in the theatre that he would attempt to recover the losses of 1797. Entering into the 1797-98 season at the New Theatre, Wignell must have felt some pleasure to be back in Philadelphia mixed with anxiety provided by the close proximity of his creditors. The new season was also to be troublesome with Thomas Abthorpe Cooper a cause of dissension. Cooper was a very young and confident performer whom Wignell had engaged in England only a year earlier. As time passed he was to prove a great American favorite and to amass a fortune acting in the United States. However, he was seldom as diligent about his performing as a manager might have wished.

In September of the 1797 New York season Wignell had hired his popular but sometime performer, Fennell, to put in an appearance. Fennell had never been seen in New York and was well received. The public reaction was enthusiastic and Wignell was especially pleased. Cooper, at that time the leading man in the company, was "dissatisfied with Wignell's preference of Fennell . . . and it was prophesied

³⁹Downer, op. cit., pp. 96-103.

that the young tragedian would not submit to the rule of one who treated him en cavalier." ⁴⁰

Some unpleasantness ensued. Fennell played only briefly during the New York season. He did, however, agree to a guest appearance in early January of 1798. The combination of resounding accolades for this appearance by Fennell and an invitation for Cooper to play a special performance in New York, caused the latter to inform Wignell of his intention to take advantage of the opportunity for a benefit in New York. Wignell refused to allow the actor, under the terms of their contract, to perform. Cooper played Jaffier in Venice Preserved despite Wignell's admonition not to and a legal exchange of two years followed. The effects were more detrimental to the already troubled Wignell than to the young performer. Fennell stayed on at the Chesnut Street but a row with him closed the theatre for a time in February, 1798. All in all, the 1797-98 season proved a spotty one for the Chesnut Street Company. Moreton died during that season, Cooper deserted--"he broke his articles"--"Fennelle (sic)--went to make salt." ⁴¹

Under the restrictions in force, Baltimore performances were again held in May and June. Wignell applied

⁴⁰Dunlap, op. cit., p. 214.

⁴¹Warren, op. cit., May 3, 1798.

to extend the season there so the company would not have to be moved so soon after its arrival. Again this appeal was denied. It was at this juncture that Wignell and Reinagle were faced with a crisis greater in magnitude than any they had previously encountered.

It has been demonstrated that the seasons of 1796 and 1797 were fraught with difficulty and the season of 1797-98 in Philadelphia troubled by personnel problems. These difficulties had prevented the managers from making regular payment on the mortgage for the theatre and the property on which it stood. By spring, 1798, John Dickinson, owner of the property on Chesnut Street and possessor of the lien on that ground was no longer demanding payments of interest and the principal. Instead, he left an "execution" with the High Sheriff of Philadelphia for the sale of the property. Dickinson had tired of waiting for his money and made this move without consulting his debtors. When Wignell was apprised of Dickinson's action, he left Baltimore immediately to return to Philadelphia, directing John Bernard to travel with and supervise the company at Annapolis. Reinagle penned the following response to Dickinson:

June 11, 1798

Sir,

It is with deep concern, that we learn that an execution has been left with the sheriff (at your instance) for the sale of the property we hold in Chesnut Street, to make good the payment of the principal and interest, due you for the ground on

which we have (at a great expence) erected a valuable building.

Notwithstanding untoward circumstances have hitherto prevented the possibility of our punctuality in paying the interest, we are not without the hope of soon being able to effect the payment of both the interest and also part of the principal. Besides what monies we are able to raise by our own exertions, we propose to dispose of such parts of the ground, as we shall endeavor to dispense with, from our own uses. but previous to any step we can with propriety take in this, we must solicit that you will (on receiving the purchase money of such lots) release so much of the said ground, as we may find purchasers for, so as to enable us to give a just and fair title to the purchaser.

This we conceive will by no means weaken your security as to your claim for the residue, for besides lessening the amount of your demand, you will still hold your lien on the ground, & buildings we have already erected thereon.

The gentlemen appointed as Trustees for our establishment are Messrs. Philip Nicklin and John Ashley, who will pay you the money as fast as the sales can be effected.

we beg the favour of a speedy answer & remain
with great respect

Sir

your most obedient
Humble Serts.

Wignell & Reinagle

Phila. June 11th, 1798

Much of the fragmentary correspondence of Wignell and Reinagle that remains is like this letter. At several points during their tenure as managers in the 1790's they were reduced to begging the indulgences of a number of creditors and seeking out favor or permission from private citizens and public officials. They seem to have been able to gain assistance when they needed it which attests not only to the confidence of their associates but the sustained friendship of men like Henry Hill and Samuel

Anderson. Both of these faithful men, and perhaps Nicklin and Ashley later, stood by the managers and dealt for them when they were in Philadelphia and when they had to be plying their trade elsewhere.

If in the previous year the Council of Baltimore had seemed "stony hearted" to the prejudiced Warren, Dickinson must have been accorded far worse description. It should be remembered that he had first been approached about this land parcel in 1791 and had probably received little of what he had been promised in the intervening seven years. His loss of patience is not difficult to understand. At any rate, he advanced his plans to sell the property.

Things were bleak in Philadelphia. Anderson strove to raise money for the back payments. Yellow fever set in during the summer and raged in the autumn. The oldest residents did not remember "a summer so Oppressive."⁴² There was fever in New York also. On September tenth, Warren notes that the company played Road to Ruin. That title could have been the company motto through 1798. On October eighth, the theatre in Baltimore was opened for a second season to a house of only two hundred eighty-seven dollars. During the second week there Wignell, Bernard, Milbourne, l'Estrange and others were sick. By early November all recovered save Wignell who was unable to

⁴²Warren, op. cit., August 25, 1798.

conduct his managerial tasks for some time after that. During that month Warren again intended to leave the company but did not. All, with the exception of Mrs. Merry, remained playing in Baltimore closing the season there January 23, 1798. Mrs. Merry's husband died the day before Christmas, 1798, and she retired to Annapolis for the remainder of the Baltimore season. The desire to reap a profit was so great in the closing weeks at Baltimore that the performers were called upon to face the footlights as often as six nights a week. At the close of the stay in that city, Harwood left the company. It is notable that he was an American actor who had received his apprenticeship on the professional stage in his native country and played prominently for several years, retiring after a career of continuous activity.

February and March of 1799 dragged on with the company back at Chesnut Street for an engagement that reaped small returns. In full knowledge of the consequences for himself and the stockholders should Dickinson sell the building and grounds, Wignell called for an emergency meeting of the stockholders.

At a Meeting of the Subscribers to the New Theatre, at the City Tavern, held in pursuance of public notice, on the 11th March, 1799--

Messrs. Wignell & Reinagle having represented, that the Theatre was about to be sold in satisfaction of Mr. Dickinson's Mortgage--

It was the opinion of the persons present, That it is the interest of the Shareholders and Creditors of the Theatre, to purchase Mr. Dickinson's Mortgage; and therefore they Resolved, That a Special Meeting of the Shareholders be called, to take the immediate measures for that purpose, on Saturday Evening next, at 7 o'clock, at the City Tavern.

John Leamy,
Chairman.⁴³

While the company played on, the shareholders met and began negotiations for purchase of the buildings and grounds. March receipts in 1799 were particularly poor and ended with the band members refusing to play for a performance unless paid first. The managers would not pay under duress, probably because they could not, and the band walked out except for two members. The performance was given and the farce was played to the accompaniment of two instruments.

Warren's entry for the thirtieth of March provides the sad climax, "the Managers take the Benefit of the insolvent law." Looked at from a distance of one hundred and seventy years, this event seems miniscule in its import. The disappointment and despair that the managers felt might best be imagined by projecting oneself into a hypothetical situation where one dreams of a venture, strives to make that dream a reality, the dream becomes a reality, the success of the reality seems sure, and in half a decade all is lost. The theatre remained a painful remainder of their efforts yet a tribute to them also.

⁴³The original of this announcement is contained in the Society Collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The transaction for the purchase seems to have taken only a matter of weeks for the records show the new owners to have taken possession on May second, 1799. Shortly thereafter, five of the proprietors were elected "Agents" to manage the affairs connected with the "lots, Buildings and Premises." The Resolutions and Articles of the forty-one owners are reprinted in part in Appendix D. It is interesting to note that seventeen and possibly eighteen of the proprietors in 1799 were among the original subscribers.⁴⁴ Conspicuously absent are the names of Wignell and Reinagle. The portion of the Resolutions that would be of greatest interest to these two gentlemen appears in the sixth Article and is quoted here.

. . . it shall be the duty of the Agents . . . to lease out for any term, not exceeding five years, the Building called the New Theatre, to such person or persons and for such rents and upon such conditions as they may see fit. But the Agents shall not reserve or exercise any controul in the Theatrical management of dramatic entertainments, or in the employment of performers. And no such lease shall be granted for the said Building, called the New Theatre, unless part of the consideration thereof be, that each of the shares or the one ninety-eighth part interest in this association, shall be entitled to one ticket of free admission into the Theatre on every play night, But no such ticket of free admission shall be transferable more than once in one season,

⁴⁴The seventeen names that appear as subscribers in both cases are: James Crawford, George Plumstead, John Leamy, John Brown, Mark Prager, Jr., Robert Rainey, John Travis, Peter Blight, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Robert Patton, Charles Biddle, John Ashley, Thomas Ketland, John Vaughan, Andrew Spence, Francis West, and Pearson Hunt. Joseph Donalson, Jr.'s name appears in 1799. He was either the same Joseph Donalson who appears on the earlier list or the son of that man.

nor shall the said Theatre ever, during the continuance of this Association, be let for any other purpose than for Dramatic exhibitions, without the unanimous consent of the Share-holders, except in case such exhibitions may be prohibited by lawful authority.

So, Wignell and Reinagle were no longer involved in the proprietary affairs of the theatre. While this turn of events deprived them of former rights, it also relieved them of the heavy burdens of responsibility for the financial affairs of the establishment. One wonders if they were instrumental in the composition of the Article quoted above, particularly for the inclusion of a statement to the effect that the Agents and, one might assume, the other proprietors might be included by implication, would not be involved in the "controul" of the production or management of the theatrical fare or in the "employment of performers." The assurance that the theatre would not be rented for other than dramatic performances would have provided an important safeguard to perspective lessees.

The need for the managers to have recourse to the law of bankruptcy seems to have had a demoralizing effect on the company they managed. Harwood had resigned in January. Wood, a relative newcomer, withdrew in April to leave for Jamaica. He claimed bad health caused his early retirement, but added that "a general depression of spirits in view of my new career, made me determine about this time to abandon the pursuit entirely." Wignell was desperate and asked Wood to investigate the possibilities for a short season in

Kingston.⁴⁵ Warren lost the right to rent the house he was inhabiting in Philadelphia for lack of payment.

A skeleton crew agreed to try Baltimore and to divide evenly whatever receipts were taken. This group appeared to bring off what had eluded the whole company for two years. The City Council of Baltimore voted to allow an extension of the playing beyond June tenth. The joy was shortlived for the head of the Board of Health advised the mayor not to ratify the Council's decision, saying the Board would not bear responsibility for the consequences. The mayor refused to accept the responsibility and complied with the board's wishes. The picturesque Warren branded them a "set of canting thieves."⁴⁶

There was talk of moving to Lancaster but Annapolis was visited instead. Byrne, the dancer, and his wife left the company. Warren's records suggest a state of disarray. Wignell was in Philadelphia seeking support, Bernard and Reinagle were taking the measure of Georgetown as a playing site, while Holland surveyed Lancaster, then Easton, Pennsylvania. In the middle of August a decision to divide the company was reached. At this point, l'Estrange defected. Marshall led Holland, Warren and fifteen others to Easton in late August. Warren was sick for a part of the five weeks played there, but shared in the takings of

⁴⁵Wood, op. cit., p. 67.

⁴⁶Warren, op. cit., June 14, 1799.

twenty-six dollars and fifty cents to each player. He commented, ". . . we might have got more--had we been all in health--but sickness and being but few in number--we could not do even Jane Shore though we often tried it."⁴⁷

Warren borrowed funds to transport his charges to Baltimore where they opened October 1, 1799. It was at this time Wignell formally took Warren into the management. Misfortune dogged the players to Baltimore. Warrell, Jr., a minor player in the company, died during the stay in that city, Mrs. Marshall was at death's door, and Mrs. Merry was in ill health. They braved out a short season with salaries paid most of the weeks there.

Though a formal contract has not yet been discovered, Wignell was apparently the first lessee agreed to by the agents of the New Theatre for December fourth, 1799, found his company performing there. Wood had returned from Jamaica and was again involved. He felt ". . . the state of the theatre . . . was more encouraging than it had been, and began to show syptoms of a probable revival."⁴⁸ After so much adversity, the fortunes of Wignell were to take a turn for the better. From December, 1799, until the time of his death Wignell was not to want for work. During that period he spent less time on the road and it became common

⁴⁷Ibid., September 26, 1799.

⁴⁸Wood, op. cit., p. 70.

for him to entrust trips to the supervision of Warren. This new found security was not immediately evident in December of 1799. Two weeks after the opening of the 1799-1800 season, Mr. and Mrs. Marshall left the company abruptly and without warning to take positions with Solee in Charlestown, South Carolina. That was the same day, December seventeenth, that Ricketts' circus burned.

The next day news reached Philadelphia of the death of President Washington and the city went into a period of public mourning. This event closed the theatre for several days. On the twenty-third, the Chesnut Street played a Washington favorite, The Roman Father. The theatre was draped in black and Wignell preceded the play with a "Monody on Washington" that honored the great patriot and former patron of the theatre. This dedicated performance was well attended and grossed eleven hundred and sixty-four dollars. The twenty-sixth of December was celebrated by marches and eulogies. The theatre participated by repeating the "Monody on Washington" and presenting a play entitled The Constitution. On the thirtieth of December, at the behest of President Adams, Wignell delivered the same monologue and The Secret was performed.⁴⁹ These evenings provided a

⁴⁹ Reese James, Cradle of Culture suggests The Stranger by Dunlap was played, p. 17, but Warren's journal for December 30, 1799 shows The Secret to have been performed. Newspapers of the day support Warren.

substantial return and, despite the solemnity of the period, hope for the manager and his company. The season prospered and extended itself until the last performance on May 19, 1800.

A quick move to Baltimore allowed for the opening of the theatre there four days later. Warren and part of the troupe continued to travel and play after the close of the Baltimore season on June tenth. Wignell seems to have returned to Philadelphia to prepare for an ambitious autumn. He was to catch up with Warren on July thirty-first to direct him and the players to meet him in Washington.

During the spring and summer of 1800 the Federal Government had transferred its departments and personnel to the new capital on the Potomac.⁵⁰ Wignell was particularly anxious to be the first to provide a performance in the new seat of government. Wood wrote that Wignell had received a "pressing request" to mount such a premiere. The performances were to take place in a hotel named The Lottery. It seems safe to assume that Milbourne or Holland or both were dispatched during the late spring to determine the measurements of the room in the Lottery to be outfitted as a theatre. Returning to Philadelphia, they prepared "scenery, an artificial dome, and the embellishments of

⁵⁰ Aloysius I. Mudd, "Early Theatres in Washington City," Records of the Columbia Historical Society, V (1902), p. 65.

the audience part, so as to have them in readiness to be put up without delay upon their arrival. . . ."51

Wood's account seems to match descriptions provided by others and is worthy of recounting.

Poor Wignell's ill-fortune, constant to him on all occasions, did not fail to check his plan, so well contrived and at a large cost. On the way to Washington a furious storm of rain invaded the wagons, and drenched the tasteful labors of the painters so seriously as to make it necessary to repaint nearly the whole, besides occasioning a considerable delay in opening the house. Not a jot discouraged, however, this excellent man persevered in his exertions; and after innumerable difficulties incident to the unprovided state of the place, and at great expense, he at length opened The First Theater in Washington with an appropriate address by the late Thomas Law, Esq., who continued to aid the enterprise not only with his pen and his influence, but with his purse; he was ably seconded by several other gentlemen of liberality and taste. The opening play of "Venice Preserved" was well acted by Messrs. Wignell, Cooper, and Mrs. Merry . . . and warmly received and applauded by an audience, more numerous, as well as splendid, that can be conceived from a population so slender and so scattered. The encouragement continued to exceed his expectations, yet fell very far below his expenditure, as his company consisted of every one of the persons who composed the Philadelphia establishment. Mr. Wignell's main object was to obtain a footing in Washington, where he might keep together his company during the summer, in the event of a recurrence of the pestilence, which was regarded as but too probable. It may be justice to add, that he ever expressed a degree of pride at having established a theatre at the metropolis of our country, and acted on the first night of any performance at the foundation of what was properly entitled The National Theatre.52

At the opening Wignell recited the prologue which included an apology for their lack of scenery.

⁵¹Wood, op. cit., p. 55.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 55-56.

The floods of late, which drowned you many a horse,
 Have caused to us a much severer loss--
 Our groves, our temples gone beyond repair,
 The gorgeous palaces it did not spare;
 The storm has swept our canvas almost bare.
 For this deficiency we will soon atone--
 Would you could build as fast with brick and stone.⁵³

After only a half dozen performances, the Washington theatre was abandoned. Claypoole's Advertiser for September 11, 1800 comments that they played "with great reputation, but no proportionate profit." Warren concurs with the last half of this observation, leaving to others criticism of the performances.

Beginning October 18, 1800, Wignell's company played twenty-eight weeks at the Chesnut Street closing the season on April 11, 1801. One can see that the earlier opening would be of advantage when the spring came around. In other years, seasons at Philadelphia began in December and ended in July. The Baltimore law against summer playing made it impossible to stay in that city after June tenth. Thus, a season from the middle of October to the middle of April in Philadelphia allowed for approximately six weeks in Baltimore before the necessity to close.

The 1800-01 season in Philadelphia was interrupted once for a benefit to help defray the cost of "finishing the theatre." This benefit was scheduled for February 18, then postponed because of rain. The stockholders had been

⁵³For the entire text of this prologue, see Appendix E.

asked to pack the theatre with friends for the occasion.⁵⁴
 The alteration to the facade resulted in Benjamin Latrobe's neo-classic design shown on page 114. Incidentally, Latrobe spent several years trying to collect payment for his work.

After the usual Baltimore season in 1801, the Chesnut Street was opened for just four nights during the summer. Following that, Warren and others of the company played a sharing season at the South Street while work progressed on the New Theatre. Wignell and Reinagle loaned "wardrobe, music . . . (and) set pieces" to Warren without charge.

Very much like the previous season, the 1801-02 season played from October fourteenth to April fifteenth. On March twenty-second, Warren reported, Prigmore, a member of the company for some years, "ran away with his name in the bill," i.e., it was announced he would play, but he deserted the company. The success of the season is suggested by Warren's proud notation of April fifteenth that he had purchased a "new gig--and a house." The order of his presentation of these acquisitions is amusing. The traveling during the summer of 1802 was conducted without Wignell.

The pattern of the two previous years was broken slightly when the company played for a month in Baltimore

⁵⁴Warren, op. cit., February 18, 1801.

from November eighth through December fourth in 1802. Things went well for full salaries were paid each week. The late closing held off the opening of the Chesnut Street until December thirteenth. The season began successfully. During its third week Cooper was hired for four performances previous to his paying a visit to England. Receipts totaled four thousand five hundred thirty-two dollars for the week, nine hundred fifty-five going to Cooper as his agreed share. The Saturday of that triumphant week was January 1, 1803. On that day in the evening Wignell married the female star of the company, Mrs. Ann Merry.

All seemed well with Wignell as he approached his thirtieth year in the American Theatre. He had a prosperous business at last and dependable associates. He had no need to perform unless he chose to. On the seventh of February he played the Archbishop of Canterbury to Warren's Henry in Henry VIII. The records of the following days are conflicting. The sequence of events would appear to have gone something like this.

Hodgkinson and Fennell, having heard of the great success Cooper enjoyed and themselves idle for two weeks as the theatre in New York was closed, came to Philadelphia to make appearances and money. Warren took umbrage with their manner of approach. According to him, they seem to have insinuated their way into the opportunity to play by "raising a tumult in the City--Cooper's success has been

the cause why these lads annoy us . . . and their desire to raise the wind."⁵⁵ We have no word of Wignell's reaction except a report that he had the duo to dinner on Thursday, the tenth. Despite the fact that he had not been well and had been bled in the morning he determined to go ahead and play the host.⁵⁶ There is only Wood's report that the dinner was anything less than a happy experience.⁵⁷ Fennell, who was present, reports of a most cordial evening and he wrote in 1814, forty years before Wood. By Saturday of that week Wignell's arm was badly inflamed, ostensibly from Thursday's bleeding. The process of bleeding could and did in many cases bring about infection due to the primitive process used. This seems to have been the unhappy fate of Wignell. On Sunday,

⁵⁵Ibid., February 12, 1803.

⁵⁶Fennell, op. cit., p. 365.

⁵⁷Wood, in his account, reported that "Fennell and Hodgkinson were dining at Mr. Wignell's hospitable table, when he felt threatenings of blood determining to the brain--a danger from which he had occasionally suffered for many years. The lancet was resorted to, with immediate relief, and he was enabled to resume his seat after a short absence. During the evening, however, sharp pains in the arm awakened a fear that some injury had been received in bleeding. . . . A few hours confirmed our worst fears, and after two days of excruciating suffering, death released my valued and early friend from a life of care and struggle," op. cit., p. 90. The discrepancies between this account and Warren's are clear. Warren's account was from a diary. Wood's was a remembrance of his life forty years before he wrote.

Drs. Wistar, Parker, and Rush were summoned and their examination resulted in the fear of "a mortification."⁵⁸

We learn that Mr. Wignell, of the New Theatre, is confined by an indisposition produced by the following extraordinary circumstance: Having occasion to be bled, a bleeder was called in on Tuesday last,⁵⁹ and the operation performed. On the succeeding day the orifice in his arm became painful, and exhibited symptoms of inflammation.--This indication increased to an alarming degree, insomuch that, we are informed, a consultation of the faculty was held last evening on the question of an amputation. We are happy, however to state, that this has not been conceived necessary, and that Mr. Wignell [sic] was this morning in a fair course of recovery.

We trust this will act as a caution to bleeders, and to those who employ them.⁶⁰

This entry of Saturday, the nineteenth, would indicate the manager had a comfortable week. The man had certainly been dangerously ill on Sunday. However, Fennell last saw Wignell at the theatre during a benefit for Hodgkinson.

The last time that I had the pleasure of seeing this worthy gentleman and friend, was in his private box at the theatre, whither he had invited me to attend the performance of Mr. Hodgkinson in Macbeth. During the play he observed to me that his arm was so painful that he was obliged to request that I would permit him to leave me, and return home; I of course consented, and he retired.⁶¹

⁵⁸Warren, op. cit.

⁵⁹The bleeding was performed on Thursday and not on Tuesday as the newspaper reports.

⁶⁰This report, printed on Saturday, February 19, 1803, in Poulson's American Daily Advertiser was probably written on Monday or Tuesday, following the news of the doctor's decision.

⁶¹Fennell, op. cit., pp. 365-366.

The only benefit in which Hodgkinson appeared that week was on Friday night and the performance was of The West Indian and not Macbeth.⁶² It is suggested here that Wignell found himself well enough to invite Fennell to the performance on that Friday and to be present for part of it and that Fennell's memory about the particular play was faulty.

On Monday, the twenty-first, Wignell succumbed to the infection. Warren's journal for that day shows the following: "poor Wignell died this morning--he had be [sic] married just seven weeks--the Theatre Closed." For the twenty-second the following comprised the entry:

. . . the Funeral of my poor friend took place this day--it was attended by a numerous and highly respectable concourse of friends and Citizens--a melancholy day for me--I lost my warmest my fastest friend and benefactor--his kindness--his goodness--will remain for ever engrain'd in my heart.

A rather sad footnote in Poulson's American Daily Advertiser on Thursday, the twenty-fourth, suggests the possible influence of the American medical profession in the eighteenth century.

We are authorized to inform the public, that the medical gentlemen, who attended the late Mr. Wignell in his late illness, and examined his arm after his death, are convinced that the operation of bleeding was properly performed, without wounding any nerve, tendon or artery, and that the melancholy circumstances which followed the operation ought not to be imputed to the bleeder.

⁶²Warren, op. cit., February 18, 1803.

CHAPTER VI
ACTORS AND AUDIENCES AT THE CHESNUT
STREET THEATRE

For the caprice of some actors are such as you cannot calculate on to a certainty; their affability on the commencement of their engagement has the sincere appearance of reliance, but as soon as they are in possession of money, a consequent dignity will arise and so alter their manner and conduct as to cause the business to be done in a careless lazy way, and take on themselves the assurance to dictate the manager's business and make objections. . . .¹

This commentary came from the pen of Wignell's contemporary and sometime employee, John Durang, but it might as well have been the statement of the manager himself. A manager in Wignell's day dealt with from fifty to eighty people whose financial, physical and social welfare were his concern. A manager was responsible for performers from the time of their engagement through the days or years of their membership in a company. The most important task in recruitment was to make as accurate an assessment as possible of the recruits' staying power, i.e., the probability of their willingness to remain with a company for some time.

¹Durang, op. cit.

Wignell extolled the virtues and advantages of his adopted land in recruiting talent in England. His promised salaries were competitive and in some instances surpassed what certain performers could expect at home. He described the cost of living as less expensive than in England. He could and probably did discuss the new theatre, exhibiting a copy of Richards' plans and emphasizing the inclusion of the most "modern" stage devices and comforts for performers. He could point to the social acceptability players enjoyed, failing to indicate that this acceptability was isolated and accorded to only a few. For example, he could tell his prospective employees of his own experiences with the first head of the American State and the cordiality of their meetings. During his second excursion to England in 1796 Wignell could proudly describe the first two seasons at Philadelphia and Baltimore and the audience's clamor for new faces on the stage. English actors, noting the near continuous playing of actors in America, might hope for year-round employment and the accompanying security that should attend it.

By the 1790's the long tradition of royal patents, begun in the time of Charles I but most effective in their governance of playing after the Restoration, had been so well established in London that the two major houses still provided the opportunities at the apex of the profession. Performers who could not hope to play in these houses

were relegated to the minor houses about the city or in the provinces. New opportunities where playing seemed assured and competition almost non-existent would appeal to players of less than the best ability. This factor would also interest individuals like Mrs. Whitlock who had been reduced to a secondary position by her celebrated sister who enjoyed support bordering on the fanatic.

The contracts that bound actors of the 1790's to Wignell's company have not been discovered. However unbusinesslike practitioners of the theatre are reputed to be, men like Warren, Bernard, and Wood were intelligent and conservative in their dealings and Warren and Bernard made some arrangements with Wignell before leaving England that were in the nature of contracts. One suspects that Fennell could not be bound by a contract and Wignell was wise enough to use him when he could, avoiding the unpleasantness of trying to force him to play by taking him to court. Fennell's talent and popularity allowed him to "job in" from time to time after he ceased to be a regular member of the troupe.

The long legal struggle that Wignell and Cooper carried on resulted from the actor's having "broke his articles," i.e., violated the conditions of his contract. Those articles included clauses which stated that he was to be guaranteed forty weeks work a year and, if he should

break his contract with Wignell, he would "forfeit" five hundred pounds sterling.² The use of the word forfeit should not be misunderstood here. There is no evidence to support the notion that the actors posted a bond with the managers which might then be refused them. Two possibilities are suggested. First, it could have been that the managers extracted a portion of the actor's salaries over a period of time to accumulate a bond that might then be lost to them should they break their agreements. The other and more reasonable possibility is that this forfeiture was more in the form of a fine. In Cooper's case, the second of these seems to have existed for his New York supporters got five hundred pounds together and Cooper delivered it to Wignell to buy up his contract.

Cooper brought two witnesses to observe this transaction which was to take place in Philadelphia. Wignell and Reinagle refused his offer. Cooper's talent was worth more to them than the cash. It is probable his arrival with the money in hand came as a surprise and they needed time to decide on a course of action. Cooper left Philadelphia when they refused to negotiate. They sent after him but he was determined not to return to Philadelphia. Instead, he offered to pay them twelve hundred dollars.

²Ireland, op. cit., p. 16.

Cooper, after being rejected a second time, decided to go ahead with his plans to play in New York where he was well received. At the opening performance on February twenty-eighth, 1798, he played Hamlet. The program had the following note printed in it.

Mr. Cooper, by certain unfortunate circumstances, being prevented from the future exercise of his profession for nearly the term of two years, unless he pays the penalty of his article to Messrs. Wignell and Reinagle, the managers of this Theatre propose to appropriate this his first night's performance toward the discharge of the same.³

An additional contingency of Cooper's contract appears to have been that if he did not obtain his discharge through full payment of the forfeiture he could be legally barred from public performances. The anxiety of the New York managers over meeting the conditions of the contract convince historians that these binders were not casual affairs and that the managers in New York had confidence that the Philadelphia contract would hold up should it be tested in the courts of New York. Indeed, Dunlap records that "the managers of the New York company had been formally threatened with legal prosecution if they suffered him to play on their stage."⁴

According to Warren, a judgment against Cooper was eventually rendered in a Philadelphia court, charging him

³Dunlap, op. cit., p. 220.

⁴Ibid., p. 219.

the five hundred pounds sterling, six months interest on that amount and the court costs. This judgment, arrived at in March of 1800, did not settle the controversy involving Cooper. In January, 1801, he left New York to return once more to Philadelphia and try for a solution satisfactory to him. In the exchange Cooper took offense at something Wignell's lawyer said and demanded satisfaction. Nothing came of this demand, but during Cooper's absence from New York, Hodgkinson had to make announcements of program changes, postponing works in which Cooper was to appear. On his return Cooper was notified of these announcements and that the tenor of them had not been very sympathetic to him. He became indignant and withdrew from the Park Street Theatre company. This reaction, in view of his apparent ostracism in Philadelphia, seems to have been high-handed. However, there is the strong possibility that, while he had a combative exchange with their attorney, Wignell and Reinagle may have proposed that Cooper work out his differences with their company through playing. They were always in need of a strong tragedian and could have known of his treatment at the hands of Hodgkinson and Dunlap, i.e., Hodgkinson played the important Shakespearean roles. Cooper performed leads in Dunlap's translations of Kotzebue and other lesser works. It will be demonstrated that Cooper was less than a diligent student of his parts,

so his departure was probably less than a complete dis-
appointment to Dunlap and Hodgkinson.⁵

Almost immediately following his withdrawal from
the New York company, Cooper appeared at the Chesnut
Street Theatre.

Performers could exhibit capricious and undependable
behavior in numerous ways. To safeguard against such
deviations from workmanlike habits, managers of the period
resorted to financial penalties. The following is a por-
tion of a contract between Warren and Wood, managers of
the Chesnut Street Theatre in 1815, and a new performer.
No similar system of regulatory fines has been discovered
for the period of Wignell's management but there is the
possibility that one did exist so the reproduction of part
of it may be instructive.

Contract between Warren, Wood and Charlotte Placide

- I Gentlemen are not to wear hats in greenroom, talk
vociferously, or enter into disputes which might
lead to quarrels. Fine \$1.00
- II Fine of one week's salary for appearing at a
rehearsal or performance while intoxicated.
- III For making the stage stand [missing a cue].
Fine \$5.00
- IV Performers must attend every rehearsal.
 - For each scene missed Fine \$.50
 - For the entire rehearsal Fine \$4.00

⁵Ireland, op. cit., p. 21.

- V Rehearsing with vox [prompter] at last rehearsal.
Fine one night's salary.
- VI Walking across or standing on stage when not
engaged in business. Fine \$.50
- VII Introducing improper jests not in the text.
Fine \$2.00
- VIII Opening stage door except for required business.
Fine \$5.00
- IX Any person talking with prompter or talking aloud
behind scenes during a performance. Fine \$1.00
- X Each performer is to be dressed in greenroom at
the beginning of play, or forfeit. Fine \$5.00
- XI All dresses regulated and arranged on the morning
of the performance by manager. A performer who
makes any alterations or refuses to wear them
forfeits a night's salary.
- XII Any performer who neglects or refuses to give out
a play when called upon by prompter by order of
manager, forfeits. Fine \$5.00
- XXVII In all plays in which modern clothes are worn,
gentlemen are expected to wear powder, shoes and
buckles, unless the character particularly requires
a different dress. This rule to be observed under
pain of forfeiting a night's salary.⁶

While the standards of decorum implicit here are directed primarily at the life of the performers in relation to the theatre, their effect would extend to the personal lives of the players. Beyond these gray areas that overlapped and acted as an encouragement to a temperate life, little is known of attempts by the managers to govern the social lives of their performers. It is reasonable to assume the managers would have preferred to spend little time concerned about personal habits as long as they did

⁶See Appendix F.

not interfere with company business. The performers were professionals whose livelihood depended on continuous and disciplined participation in the repertoire; moreover, the nature of the work provided constant pressure to review parts played in the past or to learn new additions to the seasons' offerings.

Wignell's first company, arriving in September of 1793, was confronted with adverse circumstances. After the lengthy boat trip and the expectation of staging the works they had been rehearsing on shipboard, they were informed that they could not enter Philadelphia because of the plague. It has been pointed out in an earlier chapter that Wignell, unable to hold the ship and unwilling to expose them to illness, deployed the actors and their families in various homes in communities in southern New Jersey. They were scattered in this way for some weeks before they were brought together again to play in Annapolis.

The effect of this interruption in their preparation for appearing as a company is not recorded. Presumably they could have used their time in New Jersey to con the lines for various roles they were to play. When they were finally settled in Philadelphia, much of their time was occupied with playing or preparing to play.

The profession of an actor, though demanding, was not a harsh one. Ordinarily performances were given only every other day and almost never did they play over four

nights a week. Yet, unlike our contemporary performers, they were expected to be prepared for many roles. Rehearsals, when they were held, were in the mornings. At what hour these were held and their average length is unknown. They were flexible as Fennell was, on one occasion, "detained beyond my usual time." He was in a hurry to arrive home to attend to one of his lectures.⁷ He was rehearsing in the morning, lecturing in the afternoon, and performing at night.

Certain performers were loath to attend rehearsals and avoided them whenever possible. An example was Hodgkinson. While he was never a regular member of Wignell's company, the specific reference to him sheds light on another kind of problem managers faced. Hodgkinson was not overly fond of playing. He loved good food and wine and enjoyed hunting. Bernard thought Hodgkinson would have gladly given up six nights of Shakespeare for a day's shooting.

He played but three nights a week, and being well-studied in every character of the "Stock Drama," new pieces, which were not more than two in a season, were the only chances that dragged him to a rehearsal.⁸

Bernard was in error in the number of new pieces that were tried most seasons. In an ordinary season at the Chesnut

⁷Fennell, op. cit., p. 340.

⁸Bernard, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

Street, e.g., 1794-95, twelve new plays and operas were added to the repertoire in addition to twenty-three new afterpieces. During the same season over sixty plays already in the repertoire were played.

Under demands like these, it is not surprising that some players were faulty in their lines. Though some players have phenomenal retentative powers, Charles Abthorpe Cooper was not one of these. Despite his other "splendid mental and personal requisites for the stage, the man was said to have a bad theatrical memory."

Wood goes on to say,

Indeed, I scarcely recollect half a dozen of our most distinguished actors, stars, or regulars, who did not labor under this disadvantage. Moreton, Warren, Blissett, Francis, Bernard, and Mrs. Merry, were striking instances.

This shortcoming would have been less noticeable in a minor player but Cooper played the great tragic roles. When Wood adds the comment that this fine actor "was not careful in his study for certain parts" and resorted to the use of lines planted various places about the sets, we are left with a picture of a far from ideal performer, despite the high regard some of his contemporaries had for him. On one occasion, when the announcements stated that Cooper was to undertake the role of Othello, the following resulted.

In the full face of Fennell's well deserved popularity in the Moor, Cooper exhibited himself so miserably imperfect as to make his performance wholly ineffective, and not infrequently ridiculous. So bewildered and confused did he become that in

the last scene, where he should have exclaimed--"I will not scar that whiter skin than snow and smooth as alabaster," he substituted "I will not scar that beauteous form, as white as snow and hard as monumental alabaster."

This was rather too much for the audience, who testified their dissent from his new reading by a general titter.⁹

Instances like this may account for some of the animosity between Wignell and Cooper for it seems unlikely Wignell would allow such an error to go unmentioned.

Those today who may think it ingenious to write notes or other cues on their clothing for aid during examinations or performances might be surprised to know what an old device this is. While protecting the performer by not mentioning her name, Wood related tales of a female singer in the company who "never, by any chance, learned the words of her song." Though she had been a performer with the company for numerous years, it was her custom to print her cues of the palms of her gloves to aid her during performances.

This was invariable practice. This glove manoeuvre, however, was not always available, and her ignorance of the text frequently led her into the most ludicrous blunders. In Laura, (in the "Agreeable Surprise,") instead of saying, "Eugene's virtues have made me a proselyte," she . . . substituted . . . "Eugene's virtues have made me a prostitute." A hundred similar absurdities might be related of this lady, whose husband, an inferior person, fully equalled his dame in these new readings.¹⁰

⁹Wood, op. cit., pp. 76-78.

¹⁰Ibid.

Such carelessness or unwillingness to learn would have provided the managers with anxious moments, especially if this kind of thing were to go on for years. It may have been that the lady came to know her songs but kept the habit of recorded cues as a crutch in case she went blank on stage. Wood certainly doesn't give that impression.

Few of the players made enough money consistently to sustain themselves in any other than modest conditions. We know little of the style of life of the lesser players. The ambitious and energetic Fennell provided some information about financial problems of the players. His strong drive and restlessness led him to seek other employment to compensate for losses or lack of pay. Even he may have intended to confine himself to performing but unexpected circumstances prevented this.

Comfortably settled in Philadelphia, but finding myself unpleasantly disappointed in the estimated expenses of housekeeping, I thought some employment, in addition to theatrical pursuits, necessary; the influx of the French having greatly increased the price of provisions, house-rent, &c. from what they had, while in England, been represented to me to be. I mean not to cast the smallest imputation on Mr. Wignell's integrity, in his relations to me of the cheapness of living in Philadelphia; for as he described them to me, things were on his departure from America. The sudden and extraordinary advance on the prices of provisions, had taken place during his absence.¹¹

¹¹Fennell, op. cit., p. 339.

Fennell wrote in another place that his "first engagement with Mr. Wignell, would not support a family without collateral aid. . . ." ¹² Warren agreed when he found periods of draught "insufficient for our subsistence." ¹³ Though he threatened more than once not to, Warren remained in the company. His main reasons for despair were caused by financial hardship. It is interesting to note that a study of Warren's journal shows that, after his employment as a junior partner with Wignell and Reinagle, he diligently paid full salaries, even in hard times.

If these better paid members of the company were in difficult straits, how hard it must have been for the minor players when half salaries or less were paid. Despite the adversities Fennell indicates that there were those who could and did save enough money to have some available for retirement. While he found this kind of saving a personal impossibility, he had the highest regard for those of a frugal turn. He wrote of those in Wignell's company who made less than a fourth of the money he had accumulated in his travels, yet they "by discretion and economy, arrived at that honourable 'auream mediocritatem' before hinted at; and may they enjoy it as they deserved it." ¹⁴

¹²Ibid., p. 475.

¹³Warren, op. cit., August 13, 1797.

¹⁴Fennell, op. cit., p. 342.

There would have been few in the company who made the salaries that Fennell, Mrs. Oldmixon, Cooper, Mrs. Merry, and Mrs. Whitlock could command. Bernard's indication that, in the 1790's, "incomes maintained a fair level," seems to have been a distant recollection and, for him, the fact that no player received less than four pounds a week seemed adequate, if not liberal.

The leading personalities of the company could and did supplement their twenty to forty dollars a week with benefit performances, usually one in Philadelphia and one in Baltimore. These special performances added to their incomes as much as one-third of their basic salaries.¹⁵ Many of the actors found additional employment in teaching, giving concerts, and lecturing.¹⁶ These forms of income do not seem to have been confined strictly to the leading players. An actor had merely to "visit some town in the interior where no theatre existed, but 'readings' were permitted; and giving a few recitations from Shakespeare and Sterne, his pockets in a night or two were amply replenished."¹⁷ Fennell, unable in the winter of 1796-97 to perform with the Chesnut Street Company (as Cooper had

¹⁵Bernard, op. cit., p. 263.

¹⁶Scharf and Westcott, op. cit., II, pp. 962 and 1078.

¹⁷Bernard, op. cit.

just been added to the company and Wignell had no intention of engaging two tragedians), performed a series of "readings and recitations" in Philadelphia. He had planned on offering thirty of these, but the "success of them was so encouraging, that I extended them to fifty-seven."¹⁸

Philosophies of management varied from the somewhat tight-fisted approach of Hallam and Henry to the liberal attitude of Wignell. Charles Durang, an admirer of Wignell's treatment of his players, had some thought regarding this important problem.

To permanently maintain a good theatrical establishment, the salaries should not be too high or too low, so that the management may sustain its influence, leaving to enterprise a bonus to meet emergencies, or to produce novelty. The actor's remuneration should be as liberal as possible, in ratio to his abilities, that he may be enabled to do justice to his duties by appropriate costume on the stage, and to appear with gentlemanly neatness in private; and, in the exercise of prudence, be allowed the power of saving a modicum out of his earnings which would impart to him in after life all the blessings of a theatrical fund.¹⁹

Financial hardship was only one of the causes of unrest. As a neophyte, Wood found the theatre less romantic than he had anticipated. After only a brief stint in the back stage world, he recorded the following.

How different is a theatre from our preconceived notions of one! A few weeks have shown me the violence of envy, jealousy, and the pangs of disappointed hope and ambition. Am I then doomed to

¹⁸Fennell, op. cit., p. 357.

¹⁹Durang, op. cit., Chapter XIV.

pass my life, short as it promises to be, in this strange mimic world? No one do I see of either sex, even moderately contented, much less happy. The greater proportion, particularly the comic department, are positively miserable. One or two professional disputes have occurred of so violent a character, that nothing less than the firm authority exercised by Mr. Wignell could have checked or prevented their becoming a public talk. I am sick at heart, but will still hope to find some calmer sphere of action.²⁰

Perhaps a like reaction accounted for the brief stand of Miss Broadhurst who remained with Wignell's first company for only a season.

The antics of some performers were a source of aggravation to the managers, as they were to fellow performers. Cooper presented the managers with problems from the beginning of their business relationship. At his first benefit performance, despite a guaranteed income, he privately engaged for an elephant to appear, intending to assure himself of a full house.²¹ Even Cooper's apparent intention to amend his style of life could not be counted upon by Wignell. After the long legal exchange outlined above, the young tragedian returned to the Philadelphia company in 1801. His attitude seemed altered for he agreed to open as Alexander in Alexander the Great, a part he had formerly refused. In partial reparation for his harm done the Philadelphia managers

²⁰Wood, op. cit., p. 51.

²¹Ireland, op. cit., p. 15.

. . . five hundred dollars of the first night were paid to the Creditors of Wignell and Reinagle--as a compromise suit gained against Cooper he on respect agreed to act Alexander, a character particularly stipulated against in his Engagement.²²

Cooper's independent spirit was unchanged by this apparent compromise. Only a few weeks later he was announced for a performance but the house remained dark as he decided to join a "sleighbing party."²³

The managers could make decisions intended to please their public and see them backfire. One such example is related here.

On the production of the charming comedy of "The Heir at Law," Mr. Wignell was unfortunate enough to commit one of those mistakes in cast, not uncommon, except among the best and most experienced managers, and as this case showed, sometimes committed even by them. Desiring to retain the important aid of both these favorite actresses, he allotted Cicely to Mrs. Merry; and Caroline, a very insipid young lady, to Mrs. Marshall. This lady properly considered such an allotment an affront to her acknowledged talent, and stoutly refused to accept it. She acted the part, however, for a few nights in a very careless manner, determining to secede from the company, with Mr. Marshall, at the first opportunity. On arriving at Philadelphia this determination was carried out, and the Marshalls privately took shipping for Charleston. On this fact becoming known, Wignell obtained a legal process, with which an officer was dispatched in search of the fugitives, but failed to overtake them. The loss of Mrs. Marshall was deeply felt and regretted by the public for many succeeding seasons. Wignell, who seldom committed mistakes of any sort, and especially this, the worst error of management--wasting, I mean, the best talent of his company on insignificant parts, which no possible ability or exertion could raise to notice--often feelingly

²²Warren, op. cit., January 12, 1801.

²³Ibid., February 14, 1801.

regretted the circumstance of this false cast.

It is painful, indeed, to recollect the great number of actors driven in disgust from their situations by thoughtless degradations of this kind. . . .²⁴

Wood, who in another part of his book described the development of the star system, is here arguing a point of view that would encourage its growth.²⁵ Of greater importance to this study is Wood's value of Wignell and the comment that the manager "was one of the best" who rarely made mistakes in casting. Wignell may be lauded for his intent to put one of his best talents in a minor role. At the same time the loss of Mrs. Marshall, temperamental or not, was not worth the determination to have her play this insignificant character. The admission that he erred and the regret for having made such an error are meaningful indicators of Wignell's personality.

The manager's problems with performers extended to the ranks of the employed singers. Wood's weak pun which he emphasizes, introduces such a problem.

It is needless to say the discords among the singers proved a great addition to the poor manager's cares. As most of the operas have been composed with a view to the peculiar powers and voices of some original representative, it frequently happens that these pieces were not suited to the ability of later singers, and it became necessary to omit much of the

²⁴Wood, op. cit., pp. 60-61.

²⁵Ibid., p. 58.

composer's music, substituting such popular and approved airs as were most certain of obtaining applause. As a natural consequence, each artist insisted on a share of this privilege until the merciless introduction of songs, encored by the admirers of the several singers, protracted the entertainment to so late an hour, as to leave the contending songsters to a show of empty benches, and a handful of tired-out hearers; the audience preferring to retire at a reasonable hour.²⁶

The vision one has is of an announced opera punctuated by popular and unrelated tunes. Managers were guilty of introducing music at convenient, if not appropriate, places in their productions. Adding popular ditties which were even farther removed from the story line must have resulted in productions that were aesthetically disturbing. Should the composers of the operas have been present, there might have been disturbances other than aesthetic.

Some of the quotes above point to the serious problem of retaining performers. A rating of Wignell's performers that was published in 1796 provides graphic evidence of this aspect of personnel management. The evaluation was provided by Philo-Theatricus, probably a single reviewer, and personal prejudices undoubtedly influenced his ratings. The designations "Performers Absent" and "New Performers" indicate the turnover in company personnel.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 92-95.

Performers Absent		New Performers	
Mrs. Whitlock	13	Mrs. Merry	15
Shaw	10	Mechtler	4
Marshall	9	Miss L'Estrange	4
Cleveland	5	Mrs. L'Estrange	3
Green	4	Mr. Cooper	11
Rowson	3	Warren	9
Miss Broadhurst	10	Fox	6
Mr. Fennell	13	L'Estrange	4
Bates	12		<u>56</u>
Chalmers	12		
Whitlock	11		
Marshall	7		
Cleveland	5		
Green	5		
	<u>119</u>		

A perfect score or one assigning true excellence to the performers was 15. Mrs. Merry was the only performer to be accorded that honor. Rated next highest with a 14 was Mrs. Oldmixon whose name does not appear because the lists include only new performers in 1796 and those who had left the original group. She began with the company and continued with it through the time of the rating in 1796. Of the established male contingent, Moreton received the highest rating at 14. Fennell and Harwood with 13 each and Bates and Chalmers with 12 each were rated above Cooper.²⁷ This is probably because Cooper had just begun to play in Philadelphia and had not had enough time to display his talent. Wignell was allotted 10 points on the scale. From this list at least fourteen persons are identified as having left the company less than three years after its organization.

²⁷The Gazette of the United States, December 16, 1796.

Philo-Theatricus was most impressed by the differences in total tabulation. The 1796 performers whose rating tallied fifty-six points was not half of the point accumulation of the company of 1794. The intent of this criticism would appear to be aimed at reminding the managers of the audience's awareness if a first rate company was not in residence.

Occasionally a manager would bring together the very best available talent and the audiences were treated to superior performances. Wignell's engagement of Fennell and Hodgkinson in 1803 was such an occasion. Wood bemoaned the necessity to depend on sometime leading men. But, their absence must have been worse than not having them available.

In their absence some droll performances took place. The play-bills record . . . examples of poor substitutions, singers playing tragic heroes, old men playing juveniles and vice-versa. . . . These odd casts were the consequence of difficulties in obtaining actors, not from ignorance or inattention of the managers.²⁸

The uncertainty of the availability of some performers concerned Wignell. This has already been demonstrated in the case of Fennell. In the 1790's companies vied for talent and the practice of piracy developed. During the 1799-1800 season, Wignell's whole choice of offerings was influenced by the absence of a strong tragedian.

²⁸Wood, op. cit., p. 96.

Fennell was off somewhere and Cooper was playing in New York. Left with only a youth who was confined to the younger tragic figures, Wignell structured the repertoire to concentrate heavily on comedies and other "novelties."²⁹ Because it was impossible to avoid the serious drama altogether, Bernard was called upon to play Shylock, Hotspur and others, though his forte was comedy. In March, Cooper returned from New York and the repertoire was broadened immediately. "Cooper's return enabled the manager to revive many of the plays in which Mrs. Merry excelled, and long unrepresented from want of anything like a suitable male tragedian."³⁰ As time passed, the Chesnut Street Theatre was referred to in a complimentary way as "Old Drury" but, in spite of this reputation, "inferior parts in tragedies were almost uniformly butchered."³¹ This quote is from a twentieth century author and is not a contemporary criticism. However, it is probably true.

In the development of a company like the Chesnut Street, there came times when the older players had to give way in certain parts to the junior members. Unlike his former employers Hallam and Henry, Wignell seems to have stepped aside gracefully in roles which no longer

²⁹Ibid., p. 66.

³⁰Ibid., p. 70.

³¹Coad and Mims, op. cit., p. 60.

suited his age. An instance of this came about when Wignell and Bernard, both born in the 1750's, agreed that their days of playing the Surface brothers in The School for Scandal were past. In 1796, they were the established interpreters of these roles in the company. Wignell had played Charles Surface to Philadelphia audiences for over a decade. Wood wrote that he and Cooper, the chosen successors, felt like "men going to execution," so clearly were the former players identified with the parts. The younger men concentrated on a "careful study of the characters" to make as good a first impression as was possible. Curiosity about their interpretations made for good audiences. Wood was coldly objective about the performances in assessing them to have been "far from satisfactory." Nonetheless, they were encouraged by a public who received them graciously. The day after they played the parts for the first time, they were lunching in a restaurant and overheard, from an adjoining table, a conversation in which there was a dissenting opinion. Of Cooper, the critic said, "He sometimes seemed ashamed of the imposition he was practising. The excellence of his Richard on the previous night saved him from the severity of his auditors." Wood received his share of comment by comparison. It seems Cooper's performance

. . . was a melancholy failure, but saved from general execration by the superior badness of the wretched young person, whom the manager thought proper to substitute in his most perfect

character; that if he designed the professional ruin of the actor . . . he could not have hit on a surer course.

Cooper, the eogist he is pictured to have been, advised Wood not to be downcast and thereby determined they would succeed. The two men relayed their experience to Wignell who was greatly amused by what must have been a fairly devastating experience to Wood, at least. A fine example of the manager's temperament and manner of dealing with his company is related by Wood.

[Wignell] kindly assured us that he was in possession of certain opinions, which, if not flattering, were at least of sufficient value to convince us that the public were not so hard to please as our late critics. He maintained that the whole play had been so favorably received as to warrant an immediate repetition. He argued with great force against the folly of actors suffering themselves to be over-influenced by individual judgments, however well meant. He instanced Garrick's theory, that every sensible actor should receive with deference the suggestions offered by friends and foes, but avoid the error of the Old Man, Boy, and Ass. You cannot please every one, he said: the public, and the public alone is your master. By their verdict you must stand or fall. Above all, consider individual strictures or praises as only expressive of one opinion. He ridiculed the folly of some thin-skinned actors, who wasted the precious time due to their studies in idle search of criticisms and eulogy, often written with no other reason than to flatter some weak-minded person, or perhaps still more frequently of strictures to gratify a personal dislike. He advised young actors to maintain an obstinate ignorance of anonymous notices, whether friendly or otherwise.

One gets the impression that Wignell took advantage of this exchange to play the mentor and indulge in some unsolicited instruction. His judgment in continuing to have Wood and Cooper play was supported as "time gradually

wore away earlier impressions, and rendered their efforts satisfactory to the public."³²

The interaction of a manager and his players is personal and sometimes related in diaries and biographies. From such accounts, it has been shown how Wignell was understanding, encouraging, firm and patient. The relationship of a manager with audiences in his theatre is very different. It is impersonal and his role as servant to the public causes him to show it a dispassionate and confident exterior. He must be sensitive to the wishes of the audience and give an ear to its complaints. But, seldom does he confide in his patrons or express his personal opinions before them. Consequently, managing directors are often unknown to their clientele and it is rare to find directors mentioned in either correspondence or biographies of their audiences. Such is the case with Wignell. Little is known of his confrontations with patrons and his reactions to those confrontations.

Certainly, he was a favorite as a performer. Some audience reaction to his acting has been described in earlier chapters. It appears to have been complimentary in almost every instance with some superlatives accorded his playing of certain roles.

All indications point to the conclusion that, as a manager, he strove constantly to please audiences whenever

³²Wood, op. cit., pp. 72-75.

that was possible. He produced all popular forms of dramas for them, providing the newest London hits and the Shakespearean favorites. His dramatic fare included more comedy than tragedy and comic afterpieces followed the performances of both. Demands for new faces on the stage were met by recruiting in England and inducements for the best players in America to perform in Philadelphia in guest appearances or as members of the Chesnut Street Theatre company.

The theatre was arranged in the most modern fashion known. The comforts of the audiences were considered with care and their pleasure catered to. Refreshments and tobacco were available in the lobby before, after and during performances. For the comfort of those in the pit, "wine and porter" were sold there "between the acts, precisely as if they were in a tavern."³³

There is one clear and important exception to Wignell's willingness to provide patrons with comfort and privilege. This exception had to do with Mrs. William Bingham, the former Anne Willing, and the leading lady of fashion in the early 1790's. Mrs. Bingham's husband was a large land owner and had been elected to several positions of prominence. They spent five years in France from 1784 to 1789 where he held an ambassadorial post. When they returned they became enthusiastic patrons of the New Theatre. Mrs. Bingham led the fashionable people to the theatre and was anxious to

³³Weld, op. cit., p. 24.

exhibit her place of prominence by the purchase of a box for her personal use. She was willing to pay any price "fixed by the manager." Such an offer would have been most tempting for the money it might bring but more for the insurance it could buy for the continued support of the Bingham and their friends. Mrs. Bingham proposed that, as part of the agreement, she be permitted to furnish the box according to her taste and hold the key to that box.³⁴ Wignell, however, declined the offer and refused to allow the purchase of the box. One author has explained this refusal in the following way: ". . . he was an American manager, and that within the walls of his playhouse all men --and women--must be free and equal."³⁵ Considerations other than equality and democracy were at work. Very probably, the income from a box sold to a single member of the community, even with the cost of unkeep included, would be less than income expected from constant sale of seats in that box.

Mrs. Bingham, who probably had announced to friends her plans for the box and was embarrassed by the rebuff, proceeded to blackball the theatre, placing it "under a social ban."³⁶

³⁴Scharf and Westcott, op. cit., II, p. 1695.

³⁵Coad and Mims, op. cit., p. 30.

³⁶Scharf and Westcott, op. cit.

Wignell's decision was not an easy one to make. Mrs. Bingham's reputation in the society of the day would have insured requests by others for the same privilege. The initial offer of a "price to be fixed by the manager" was a generous opening. Perhaps Wignell did not want to permanently tie up thirty-five seats in a large box. It is reasonable to assume that a precedent such as the purchase of a box could lead to difficulties with others desiring the same opportunity. Those difficulties could have been compounded if, of an evening, Wignell had a large enough audience to fill the theatre and he could not sell vacant seats because they "belonged" to wealthy patrons who could not be present. There was also the possibility of a box owner giving friends or acquaintances use of his box free, thereby depriving the managers of paid admissions.

The Bingham's and their acquaintances were in the minority at the theatre. The social background of the larger audience was different than the Willings, Bingham's, etc. "In a puritanical, as well as boisterous, new society, the theatre drew a barroom patronage and neither skilled playwright nor actor found a congenial atmosphere at first."³⁷ Men were predominant in the audiences. Women

³⁷Frank Klingsberg, "Ideas That Did Not Migrate From England," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXIII, No. 5 (October, 1939), 381-382.

could, of course, appear in box seats and in the pit, "but these are not women of any social standing. The upper gallery admits women and colored people who can't sit anywhere else."³⁸

The behavior of the audience varied in its manner and intensity. St. Mery found performances "boisterous" and "the interludes . . . even indecent."

It is not unusual to hear such words as Goddam, Bastard, Rascal, Son of a Bitch. Women turn their backs to the performance during the interludes . . . the style of the plays, which are English and in the English taste, is extremely coarse and full of pleasantries highly repugnant to the French taste.³⁹

Wansey's impression was that the conditions of performance were such that he could have easily imagined himself back in England. This likeness extended to the clothing styles.⁴⁰

The presence of eminent personages was no guarantee of good behavior in the house. Indeed, that presence might have acted as a spur to some of the perverse and proud young democrats. For, despite Washington's presence one evening,

. . . the house could not be kept in order. As soon as the curtain was down, they would throw apples, nuts, sometimes bottles, on the stage and in the orchestra . . . and call out for "Carlisle March," "Cherry Charlot's Jigg," "Mother Brown's Retreat," and the names of many noted characters.⁴¹

³⁸St. Mery, op. cit., p. 347.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Wansey, op. cit.

⁴¹Durang, op. cit., Chapter XIII.

One habit seems to have been a source of unpleasantness to more than one observer. "A shocking custom obtain's here of smoking tobacco in the house, which at times is carried to such excess, that those to whom it is disagreeable are under the necessity of going away."⁴² In the record of his voyage to America, Monsieur Du Lac found the same condition.

Il ne règne dans l'intérieur de la salle ni ordre ne décence. Le bruit des allans et venans trouble continuellement l'attention du spectateur qui, malgré les defenses portés sur les affiches, à souvent encore beaucoup a souffrir de la mauvaise odeur des cigarres qui l'on y fume continuellement. Les hommes gardent le chapeau sur la tête et restent aussi placés devant les dames; il s'en trouve rarement d'assez galans pour leur offrir leur place. Tout y prouve que la politesse et la liberté marchent difficilement de compagnie. . . .⁴³

Unpleasant behavior during performances varied from simple rudeness and inattentiveness to deliberate and vicious attack. Mrs. Merry, a great favorite, was the recipient of the first of these two styles of behavior one evening. Before describing this incident in which Mrs. Merry was treated in a rude fashion, a look at Royall Tyler's second act of The Contrast may be instructive. This satire would seem to have come very close to recounting comportment not at all rare in the actual theatres of the day. Tyler's play was written in 1787.

⁴²Weld, op. cit.

⁴³Francios M. P. DuLac, Voyage dans les deux Louisianes etc. (Lyon, France: Bruyset, 1805), p. 367.

. . . Oh! That you could be with us at a little snug party . . . with some other ladies, in a side-box at the play. Every thing is conducted with such decorum. First we bow round to the company in general, then to each one in particular, then we have so many inquiries after each other, and it is so many ages since we last had that pleasure, and if a married lady is in company, we have such a sweet dissertation upon her son Bobby's chincough; then the curtain rises, then our sensibility is all awake, and then, by the mere force of apprehension, we torture some harmless expression into a double meaning, which the poor author never dreamt of, and then we have recourse to our fans, and then we blush, and then the gentlemen jog one another, peep under the fan, and make the prettiest remarks; and then we giggle and they simper, and they giggle and we simper, and then the curtain drops, and then for nuts and oranges, and then we bow, and it's pray Ma'am, take it, and pray, Sir, keep it, and oh! not for the world, Sir; and then the curtain rises again, and then we blush and giggle and simper and bow all over again. Oh! the sentimental charms of a side-box conversation!

Approximately a dozen years after this scene was written, the highly rated Mrs. Merry was faced with just such a collection of ladies who had taken a box very near the stage. The ladies became so engrossed in their own conversation that they were extremely rude to the players. This rudeness was the more disconcerting for its source was a group who were regular patrons and well thought of by the manager and the performers. In situations of this sort it fell to the players to draw the offenders to the performance. On this occasion Mrs. Merry was exposed to abuse for some time before she paused to glare at the offenders. The remainder of the audience responded with a round of applause for Mrs. Merry's handling of the situation. The pleasant result was that the ladies responded

by giving over their attention and the incident did not give offense as their friendship to the theatre and its performers continued.⁴⁴

The seasoned performers knew what to expect from audiences and, undoubtedly, developed personal ways of responding to manners that were disturbing. Why is there no mention of Wignell's stepping forward to intercede in behalf of the players? Perhaps, on rare occasions, he did this. However, such a ploy would have to be reserved for special or severe cases. Periodic and indiscriminate appearances would make a manager the butt of audience ridicule. In an atmosphere like that which Weld, St. Mery and others describe, a manager would be wise to avoid speeches or exhortations to patrons of a state that was newly free and very aware of its independence.

There was a device that might more readily have found acceptance and that was the use of the prologue. Wignell could have called on one of the performers who was also a writer and asked him to compose a prologue to beg the indulgence of the audience.

While a stern look from Mrs. Merry was capable of quieting a bevy of local belles, other performers could not expect the same kind of response. Popularity in the theatre is a most tenuous thing and very easily won and lost through

⁴⁴Wood, op. cit., p. 80.

the fickleness and caprice of both performers and patrons. Wignell engaged a family of dancers whose name was Byrne. This hiring around the year 1800 was at the behest of "constant supporters" close to the theatre. Unfortunately, from their first appearance, both Mr. and Mrs. Byrne were not to be allowed to perform without molestation from the audiences. As time passed, Mr. Byrne was abided but his wife was subjected to cruel insults. Their stay with the company was brief.

Exaggerated and increased insults could become part of a plan of harassment. Such an effort was aimed at Fullerton, a member of the Chesnut Street Company in the 1801-02 season. Fullerton was an import from Liverpool whose assignment was to replace Cooper during one of his absences from Philadelphia. During the summer of 1801, this newcomer was greeted with politeness, if not vigorous enthusiasm. However, from the opening of the winter season in mid-October, he underwent censure from audiences in the theatre and critics in the newspapers. At first, some singular outbursts aimed at him were put down by other audience members. When these taunts mounted in number and were organized into deliberate efforts to distract those playing with Fullerton, the more timid were ruled by the bullies. Wignell may be assumed to have been central in what Wood describes as the use of "every possible effort . . . to ascertain the cause of this continued persecution."

The cause was diligently sought in the hope of applying a remedy. The available remedy, of course, was to replace Fullerton. However, Wignell could not so easily resort to a measure of that sort. He had not recruited Fullerton by having seen him perform but hired him on the recommendations of others. Fullerton was hired as a leading man and could only be let go at a considerable loss to the manager. The player had a comfortable contract in hand and the assurance of its articles. In addition to this, there was not a supply of leading men from which to pick a replacement. We may suppose Wignell was optimistic about the passage of this period of disapproval.

No one seems to have calculated the sensitivity of Fullerton. He was an extremely nervous man at all times and this was undoubtedly detected by his detractors who enjoyed his discomforts. He became almost incapable of playing. "His terror and agony on entering the stage was truly pitiable."⁴⁵ Giving signs of being seriously disturbed, the distracted actor threatened and attempted suicide. There is no way of knowing Wignell's thoughts regarding this behavior or his efforts to assuage the hurt mind of this sensitive soul. On the evening of January twenty-ninth, 1801, Fullerton played "with less than usual exhibition of outrage from his persecutors," and

⁴⁵Wood, op. cit., p. 85.

left the theatre in apparent good spirits. He did not arrive home and a search provided no clues to his whereabouts. The following morning his body was found floating in the Delaware River, seemingly a victim of suicide brought on by the treatment he had received in the theatre.⁴⁶

How Wignell responded to Fullerton's difficulty is not known. The attempt to discover the cause of the actor's persecution was doubtlessly intended to aid in bringing an end to that persecution. There is evidence that Wignell was unwilling to expose his players to harm. During the season previous to the untimely demise of Fullerton, Wignell had kept the theatre dark on March fourth as this was the day of Jefferson's inauguration. Though the inauguration was conducted without ostentation and in a spirit of conciliation, great fear and discord ran through the country. A regularly scheduled night for playing was passed up by Wignell as there was fear the advocates of Jeffersonian democracy and their adversaries would use the theatre to champion their opinions and ideas. Warren reported, "By the advice of his friends and the Consent of the Company--he does not perform this night."⁴⁷

Audiences proved generous at times. In periods of emergency they would enthusiastically support benefits for

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Warren, op. cit., March 4, 1801.

charitable causes. The managers were gratified on these occasions to witness the sustenance of the sick or beleaguered. Such a performance might be for the relief of another city suffering from plague, or to ransom captured American seamen.

The citizens of Philadelphia came to a determination a few evenings ago to purchase the freedom of such S[eamen] belonging to this port as are now in captivity at Algiers, and a large Committee was appointed to solicit subscriptions for that purpose--During the time of the appointment of this Committee, a letter addressed to the Citizens present, was received from Messrs. Wign[el]l & Reinagle declaring their obligations to the Citizens of Phil an[d as] a proof of their gratitude prop[osed an evenin]gs--entertainment at the New Theatre as a benefit for those unfor[tunate] persons in slavery in Algiers. This was received with the loudest shout of applause and last evening the Comedians fulfilled their promise. It is supposed they got at least two thousand dollars--Preceding the Play Mr. Wignell delivered an animated and well written address suited to the occasion.⁴⁸

Performances of this sort added good will to the sympathies many citizens already felt towards the theatre and may have gained new friends.

St. Mery commented that other attempts to collect money for the prisoners at Algiers had resulted in approximately one-fifth of the amount raised by the theatre and added, "thus it was chiefly actors, needy themselves . . . , who showed the greatest sympathies for unfortunates, who, in going afar to serve the welfare of their country, have left their women and children in misery."⁴⁹

⁴⁸Forman, op. cit., p. 187.

⁴⁹St. Mery, op. cit., p. 272.

An example of audience generosity was rendered to an individual performer. Miss Westray, definitely in the second rank of actresses in the company, was disappointed when her benefit, after a strong advance sale at the box office, took place the evening of a day on which a violent snow storm occurred. The theatre's expenses were four hundred dollars a night and Miss Westray's loyal and very sturdy friends came to the performance but only in numbers that brought slightly over three hundred dollars into the till. The poor actress had sustained a loss of approximately ninety dollars. A day or so later she received an anonymous note "regretting the circumstances which had blighted her prospects, civilly noticing her talent and worth, and enclosing the sum of one hundred dollars from 'a few unknown friends.'"⁵⁰ Other performers experienced the allegiance of the company's supporters.⁵¹

Wignell was received with warmth and enthusiasm on the opening night of the Chesnut Street Theatre. The first audience to view a performance there was appreciative of the efforts of the men who had labored to provide Philadelphia with a well equipped theatre and a respectable professional performing company. No man in the professional theatre can expect to consistently sustain the approval of his audiences. Wignell knew this and worked to maintain,

⁵⁰Wood, op. cit., p. 72.

⁵¹Dunlap, op. cit., p. 135.

for his audiences, the quality of performance that would provide them with pleasure and a sense of satisfaction with attendance at the Chesnut Street Theatre. There appears to be no record Wignell ever experienced public attack on his methods or his personal manner and conduct. He was described as "a most amiable, well mannered man"⁵² who had failings but whose failings "leaned on Virtue's side." Fennell found Wignell capable of over reacting at times, but, "affable and conciliatory in his manners, he obtained the affection of all his associates."⁵³

These observations coupled with the advice he gave to Cooper and Wood when they were the objects of criticism, suggest Wignell expected that he and his company would receive unfavorable commentary and reaction at times, that it was to be met with understanding and not with overt or physical defense, but that time was better spent in study to remedy the ills than responding to criticism or worrying about it.

⁵²Wood, op. cit., p. 92.

⁵³Fennell, op. cit., pp. 366-367.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has emphasized the position of Thomas Wignell in the management of the Chesnut Street Theatre. Another study of this theatre might emphasize the position of Alexander Reinagle and would be useful in the developing library of works on the American Theatre. There was no intention in this work to diminish the contributions of Reinagle. Rather, the concentration was a result of focus and delimitation.

Each manager had numerous responsibilities at the Chesnut Street Theatre. Reinagle, as musical director, supervised the production of seventy-five operas in the first six seasons, in addition to the development of:

. . . an extraordinary facility in adapting the current English ballad operas to the American stage, often rewriting the accompaniments, composing new overtures, or contriving incidental music.¹

¹Ernst C. Krohn, Alexander Reinagle, Vol. XV of Dictionary of American Biography, ed. by Allen Johnson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 489.

It is little wonder musical historians find his most artful compositions among those he wrote previous to his years of active participation in the theatre. Evidence of his experience with the City Concerts and at the theatre during Wignell's two trips to England convince us he was a capable administrator.

Wignell was the theatre's recruiter and more intimately associated with the actors in the company and the problems of production. He never gave up acting entirely but, as the personnel improved and administrative tasks became more demanding, he gave up some of his roles and concentrated on the management of the theatre. In the late years, he was able to trust numerous responsibilities to Warren and Wood, the young men he had groomed as assistant manager and treasurer, respectively. Despite Reinagle's continuous tenure with the Chesnut Street Theatre, Wignell was referred to by many of his contemporaries in newsprint and personal accounts as "the" manager of the New Theatre and it is safe to place most of the accolades or criticisms on him.

Before attempting to assess Wignell's abilities it is worthwhile to summarize the areas of responsibility in which he was most influential.

At the Chesnut Street Theatre, the every day administrative tasks of payrolls and receipts, ordering supplies and arranging schedules, rehearsals and

performances, were only part of labors of larger significance. For example, it was essential that Wignell be cognizant at all times of the need to build an ever increasing audience. The accomplishment of this task depended on the establishment of a performance level that would insure the return of patrons who were regular in attendance and who might be depended upon for word-of-mouth advertising.

Recruiting, like audience building, was an active and continuous process in the seventeen-nineties. In fact, recruiting was intimately connected with the growth of audiences. Audiences in the seventeen-nineties clamored for new performers from England. Recruiting was only one of the employee relations that demanded Wignell's perpetual attention. Continuous employment was the surest way to hold almost all but the really featured players. The necessity to attempt to provide continuous salaries was a constant pressure the managers experienced. It has been demonstrated in Chapter V that, despite steady efforts put forth by the managers, salaries could not be paid consistently in 1797, 1798, and 1799.

The good will and confidence of the company was no less important than the support of the subscribers. Possibilities of running afoul of investors or the property owner were myriad. Having established vested interests in the playhouse and its offerings, the investors were apt

to be supportive when the quality of performance was good or when their dividends were paid. Should both of these, and particularly the latter falter, the managers could expect trouble in the form of criticism or law suits.

The managers had to be on cordial terms with the press. The newspapers could provide influential encouragement or condemnation. Despite strong feeling against the theatre on the part of many Philadelphians, the newspapers were capable of objectivity and they proved this over some years. As representative voices of the community, the members of the press could have mounted opposition to playing that would have aroused the citizens in protest. The hope of managers must have been that while the Quakers and other opponents could not be won over completely they might be pacified or wooed into private criticism by an absence of vitriolic newspaper commentary.

These tasks of management were complicated by events that could, in some cases, be controlled and, in other cases, were outside a manager's sphere of influence. The uncontrollable events included bouts with nature, e.g., plague, illness and flood.

Thomas Wignell, as measured against the tasks he faced and the conditions that made these tasks difficult must be adjudged an effective manager. The continuous and orderly growth of audiences at the New Theatre from

the time of its opening is significant in measuring his strength as a manager. After 1799 he could devote his full energies to directing the affairs of the theatre. He had assembled a company that no longer depended on him to perform. He had trained Warren and Wood to help him. He could depend on Warren to supervise the company when it toured for seasons outside Philadelphia. He was not beleaguered by the yellow fever that had made the earlier years of his management so frustrating. He had less and less contact with Reinagle as the conductor spent most of his life in Baltimore after the turn of the nineteenth century. In effect, he was free to concentrate on problems such as audience building.

It might be expected that the exodus of the federal and state governmental officials in 1799 and 1800 would have reduced the size of audiences in Philadelphia. The fact is that the New Theatre enjoyed increasing numbers of patrons and an accompanying steady rise in revenues.

Wignell did not, in his late years, have the responsibility of ownership and its accompanying hardships. His successful efforts were undoubtedly related to his freedom from these hardships.

Wignell's philosophy for performers included the maxim, "the audience is your master." His attempts to please that master are exemplified in his continual search for new talent. Only two years after the theatre

opened in 1794, he sailed again to England to engage performers. His leading performers were the darlings of the public and attest to his judgment of talent. The erratic behavior of a Fennell may have been a source of anguish to Wignell but it must be remembered that Fennell performed fairly often and almost always for the Philadelphia company. It is doubtful any manager of the day could have contained this restless man.

The major difference Wignell had with Cooper was sparked by the hiring of Fennell for a brief engagement. When the young man requested permission to perform in New York, the denial of that permission was a miscalculation of Cooper by Wignell. Wignell may have seen this as a dangerous precedent and avoided it for that reason. It is not to be expected that a manager would allow favors to a young man like Cooper which he would deny to others in the company. Managers almost always have problems of greater moment than do performers. The financial extremities of the company while it played in New York and Philadelphia in 1797 demanded that Wignell make every effort to fill the theatre and Fennell's presence in cast lists was a sure way to do that. Cooper's jealousy had to be a secondary concern. One suspects Wignell might have been wiser to have permitted the young performer to play in New York while Fennell was performing in Philadelphia. However, this observation is made with the advantage of

viewing the situation after the fact and not with the intelligence on which Wignell had to act in January, 1798.

In the case of Mrs. Marshall leaving the company, Wignell was justified in casting her in a second lead. One of the strongest criticisms of the Hallam and Henry company had been that its female performers did not appear often enough or in a variety of roles. Wignell was presenting the best cast he had. It is not known if there were other considerations that influenced Mrs. Marshall's decision to leave the company. She went directly to Charlestown to work for Solee which allows for the possibility that he had been in communication with her about a position with his company and, in that communication, made her an attractive offer.

Wood was the writer who disapproved of the casting of Mrs. Marshall and who thought Wignell's judgment faulty in that matter. However, it is also Wood who described Wignell's ability to mediate differences between performers, to be sensitive to actors who had been roundly criticized, and to realistically inform young performers about the life of the actor. It was Wignell who agreed to train Wood first as a performer and then in the practices of management. Against the names of persons who might have had quarrel with Wignell can be placed those of Mr. and Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Merry, Warren and others who were with Wignell for a number of years through good times and bad.

Newspaper criticism like Hallam and Henry had known from 1789 into 1792 never accrued to Wignell. Throughout his career he received the kindest treatment from the press. This is doubly interesting as critics became more numerous during his tenure in the theatre and more demanding. He had the temerity to attack the press during the time just previous to his bankruptcy in 1799. He became so incensed that he was intent on a stage attack through a piece entitled Retaliation, or A Peg at the Printers. Rather than allowing him to proceed and then attacking him afterwards, the writer for the Philadelphia Gazette published the following.

Good Tommy Wignell, don't attack the printers!
 As well might drunkards be revil'd by vintners!
 Believe me, friend, in spite of all your witticisms,
 They'll bear too hard upon you by their criticisms.
 'Tis they can raise a player and a poet--
 You're wrong, believe me, and they'll let you know it!²

One suspects that Hallam, Henry, or Hodgkinson might not have been treated so kindly. Wignell followed the advice of the critic and avoided an embroilment with him.

A major concern of Wignell's was his demand for a high standard of production and performance.

The main distinction between the colonial theatre and that of the years after the Revolution lies in the quality of the acting. During that later period, thanks especially to the Philadelphia directors, a procession of gifted British players moved to these shores, many of them to remain here permanently. Most of these newcomers had had sound

²February 23, 1799.

training in the provincial theatre of England or even in the leading London houses, and had sometimes played with the great actors of the time . . . a substantial number had risen to eminence before leaving for the New World. In consequence the tone of American acting was raised to such a level that it deserved serious consideration even when compared with the London stage.³

"In talent and organization," Durang valued the Chesnut Street "equal to its English Model."⁴ The attention Wignell gave to supplying talent for his company and the very wise decision to withdraw the great tragedies when he did not have the finest performers show his concern for a superior quality of playing. In Chapter IV it has been pointed out that some performances were wretchedly done but we have also the impression that they were not repeated if their quality could not be improved. The performers he was able to recruit, e.g., Cooper, Mrs. Merry, Mrs. Oldmixon, Fennell, and Mrs. Whitlock provided many very fine performances for American audiences.

Wignell and Reinagle are lauded for their contribution to the artistic development of opera in America, and improvement in various forms of musical presentation in Philadelphia.

³Coad and Mims, op. cit.

⁴Durang, op. cit., p. XIV.

. . . the whole project was based on the idea of giving quality to the dramatic and the operatic departments. Much has been made of this by the historians of this departure, so fruitful for the development of high-class opera in English.
 . . .⁵

Others are of the opinion that

. . . the opening of the New Theatre marked a new epoch in the city's musical life. For one thing, it immensely broadened the opportunities of adequate presentation. Although many concerts continued to take place elsewhere, there was no longer the enforced dependence on taverns and hotels as the only convenient premises in a central position that afforded sufficient facilities for concert-giving. Then, too, the regular maintenance of a theatre orchestra assured enlarged opportunity of steady employment to an increasing number of trained musicians; at the same time, the public could more frequently hear orchestra music rendered in a favourable environment, with its consequent inspiration to a rapidly growing clientele of music-conscious patrons. Likewise, the ballad operas . . . with the rich heritage they embodied, could be heard oftener, and in a place more accessible and far better equipped than the old Southwark Theatre. In short, the New Theatre supplied a potent educational stimulus that made itself felt throughout the community and substantially contributed to Philadelphia's prestige as a musical center. sic⁶

In summary, Thomas Wignell was a credit to his profession and an effective manager. His decisions were often guided by adverse conditions he could not control or vary. In the face of continued obstacles he was a pillar of "perseverance" enduring "vexation, disappointment, treachery, and adversity."⁷ While some said he

⁵Sonneck, op. cit., p. 124.

⁶Eberlein and Hubbard, op. cit.

⁷Fennell, op. cit.

was "an excellent fellow, whose abundance of heart was unluckily accompanied by a deficiency of head, that kept him always in difficulties,"⁸ another could say that his

. . . enterprise was carried out with a style of success at that early day that should garner the name of Wignell as an heirloom to the theatrical household, to be forever revered by the profession as a memory of one of the first founders, on a durable basis, of the American stage.⁹

Wignell might have been financially successful in the years from 1794 to 1799 had he turned away from the production of opera when he realized its enormous drain on the company's resources. Another man, a Hodgkinson for instance, might have driven Reinagle and his small band of musicians out, thereby keeping the credit columns of his books in constant use. Why Wignell did not do this is not known. He seems to have been inextricably bound to Reinagle through allegiance and friendship as well as partnership. He declared that had he "devoted all his care to the drama, instead of music, he might have been rich instead of bankrupt."¹⁰ Though he understood this, he never made move to abandon the original agreement about the importance of opera in the dramatic fare to be presented on Chesnut Street.

⁸Bernard, op. cit., p. 258.

⁹Durang, op. cit., Chapter XII.

¹⁰Dunlap, op. cit., p. 116.

At the end of his life, Wignell was successful as a manager, director and performer. He had provided the drive and expertise that made Philadelphia the theatrical center of the country and the home of the best performing company in America.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PROPOSALS BY MESSIEURS WIGNELL AND REINAGLE FOR
ERECTING A NEW THEATRE IN PHILADELPHIA

APPENDIX A

PROPOSALS BY MESSIEURS WIGNELL AND REINAGLE FOR ERECTING A NEW THEATRE IN PHILADELPHIA

The new system of government of the United States, having already had the most visible effects, in promoting the general happiness, and in extending and improving the Agriculture, Commerce and Manufactures of the country--it is natural, that the encreasing Wealth and importance of this great City, deduced from these principles and the present residence of the Government should require for its Citizens, and others resident therein that its public places of Amusement should be put on a larger and more suitable scale, than they yet have ever attained to; more especially as the present liberal Spirit of the Legislature appears to be favorable to the advancement of the fine arts, and the promotion of a pure and correct taste therein, Considerations of this kind, together with a sincere wish to elevate the elegant pleasure of the Drama into the highest possible degree of Reputation have induced Messieurs Wignell and Reinagle, to unite in an undertaking for erecting a new Theatre in some Central part of the City, to which they now respectfully solicit that share of the Public Patronage they may be thought to merit--assuring the Friends of the Drama, that their joint efforts and application shall never be wanting to render their plan deserving of Public favor.

In order that the Musical part of the Entertainment may be conducted on the best principles Mr. Reinagle will take care to obtain from Europe the best assistance in that line, over which he will have Superintendance. While Mr. Wignell proposes to embark for Europe, in October next to obtain also such assistance from thence of performers, of scenery, of dresses as may be suited to the extensive nature of his present undertaking; for these objects and all that concerns the international arrangements of the Theatre, Messieurs Wignell and Reinagle will supply the necessary funds--they ask for aid, only in purchasing the ground and in erecting the necessary

building on it, for their present purpose, which they wish in all respects adapted to the conditions of the City and the number likely to partake of this Elegant and Rational Amusement, they propose therefore in order to carry into execution this part of their views, to create a Stock of Sixty shares, supposed enough for the purpose at three hundred dollars each share---Each Subscriber at the periods limited in the subscription to meet and elect Managers, to see the Building conducted on the most suitable plan that can be obtained, and to elect a Treasurer for the Fund to whom each subscriber shall pay and give his Notes payable to the Treasurer on order as follows One hundred Dollars at the time of Subscribing One hundred Dollars on the first day of March and One hundred Dollars on the first day of September 1792. making in all the full Subscription of three hundred dollars and in consideration of the damage and danger that may be sustained by the parties complying from the . . . should there be any the payments made to be forfeited to the joint stock unless the whole be completed in due time. In this stock of three hundred dollars it is proposed to allow Interest of Six Per Centum Per annum from the time of payment and further by way of douceur, one ticket of admission for each share subscribed, not transferable from the person obtaining the share but for one whole and entire season, and then due notice to be given to the Managers of its transfer . . . or . . . of it. The subscriber is offered the legal Interest for his money a douceur (?) in the admisory Ticket, and he will have besides the pleasure of visibly contributing to the advancement of the fine Arts and of Science in this rising Empire.

It is proposed to appropriate the House and Grounds to the Stock holders by way of perfect security for the payment eventually of the sums advanced.

Of the Shares Ten will be redeemed and paid off annually, and these unless applied for to be decided by lot that no partiality may be shewn or offence given on this occasion.

We the Subscribers having taken into consideration the foregoing that the Legislature of the State having given their approbation to the erection of a Theatre (?) the City are desirable One should be built suitable to the accommodations for it and calculated on a plan to give general satisfaction hereby agree to take therein, the Share, or Shares to our names respectively opposed.

Listed here are the names of the subscribers and the numbers of shares each purchased.

On the back of this same document is the following information followed by names of those who purchased these additional subscriptions.

At a meeting of the Subscribers to Messrs Wignell & Reinagle's proposals for erecting a Theatre, held at the City Tavern the 22 June 1792 in consequence of Three days previous advertisement.

Resolved That Mess Wignell and Reinagle be authorized to open an additional Subscription for forty Shares upon the same terms & Security as the former Sixty Shares--

John Vaughan
Secy Pro. tem

Henry Hill Chairman

APPENDIX B

SURVEY OF THE NEW THEATRE

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SURVEY OF THE NEW THEATRE

Situate on the North Side of Chesnut & on the South Side of Carpenter Streets. Front on Chesnut & Carpenter Streets. 64 "0 feet. Length North & South. 132 "0 feet. and about the height of 3 high stories built of brick with good Substantial walls. The Roof framed in a good Manner with Principal Rafters & beams. Eight large dormar windows in the Roof leading out on d^o Modillion Cornice all around. A Portico of one Story high with 10 Colloums & 2 half pilasters fronting on Chesnut St. The whole of the Inside, divided into A Number of different appartments. with the Stage the boxes. Pit & Gallaries. Scenery & Machinery, Communications from this building into the East & west wings. Doors opening from the west wing into A large open Space on the west. A large. Opening from Sixth St. Communicating with the East wing.

Survey of the East & West wings attached to the Theatre The west wing Is 148"0 feet long by 14"0 feet wide built of brick & four Stories heigh. with a plain open Newel Stairs in D^o The lower Story divided in 3 Rooms. Two Rooms are finished with plain shirting, windows plain finished. & plaister'd. floors narrow boards Second. Third & Fourth Stories. Divided into different appartments with wood partitions. Not plaistered floors plain'd & grov'd.

The East wing. Same dimensions as the West wing Same height Divided into 3 Stories, Lower Story No finishing it being a place for lumber & c

Second & Third Stores. Divided into Different Rooms partiton'd with boards. & not plaister'd floors plain'd & groov'd. An open Stairs. Rough leading from bottom to Top

The whole of these Buildings are Bounded on the South by Chesnut St. On the west by a large vacant lot. On the North by Carpenter St. & on the East by. A four Story brick building fronting on Sixth St. A Hydrant in Chesnut Street near the buildings One D~~OR~~--in Sixth St.
. . . near . . . D~~OR~~

Survey'd Janry. 4.th 1805. Philip Justus

APPENDIX C

RESOLUTIONS AND SUMMARY OF THE MEETING OF SUBSCRIBERS
TO THE NEW THEATRE, JUNE 25, 1795

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RESOLUTIONS AND SUMMARY OF THE MEETING OF SUBSCRIBERS

TO THE NEW THEATRE, JUNE 25, 1795

AT A GENERAL MEETING OF THE SUBSCRIBERS TO THE NEW THEATRE,
HELD (IN PURSUANCE OF PUBLIC NOTICE) AT THE CITY TAVERN,
ON THURSDAY, THE 25TH OF JUNE, 1795.

HENRY HILL, Esq. in the Chair.

RESOLVED unanimously, That the original Subscribers to the New Theatre are of opinion, that for the relief of the Managers, in paying their existing debts, due on account of the Theatre, a subscription for a loan of forty-three thousand six hundred dollars should be opened; the amount to be paid to, and applied by, the Trustees of the loan, which shall, in the first instance, be offered to the original Subscribers; but any sum not subscribed by them, may be offered to such other persons as shall be disposed to patronize the institution.

Resolved, That for securing the re-payment of the said forty-three thousand six hundred dollars, with lawful interest, a mortgage should be given on the Theatres in Philadelphia and Baltimore; and the profits of the Theatre of Philadelphia lodged in the hands of Trustees to be appointed by the Subscribers to the new loan, for the purpose of paying 1st. The interest to the original Subscribers; and 2d. The existing debts of the Theatre, (not including the principal of the debt to the original Subscribers) in equal proportions upon the amount of the respective claims.

Resolved, That the following gentlemen be Trustees for the purposes aforesaid, until the Subscribers to the new loan shall make other provision, viz. Mr. Charles Pettit, Mr. Francis West, and Mr. John Barclay.

Signed, HENRY HILL, Chairman.
Attest, Richard Peters Smith.

A Committee of the Subscribers having communicated to the Meeting a statement of the accounts of the Institution, with corresponding vouchers, the following abstracts are here exhibited for the satisfaction of the Parties interested.

N^o. I.

Abstract of Disbursements for the Theatre in Philadelphia, to wit: 1st. The amount of monies paid, and debts contracted for, the purchase money of the Lot for erecting the building; for providing scenery, machinery, and other apparatus; for the charge of the Performers, while the opening of the Theatre was unfortunately suspended, in consequence of the yellow fever; for the expence of conveying the Company to and from Maryland, and for other necessary disbursements preparatory to the production of an income from the Theatre,		Drs. 100,000
2. For the expence of erecting a Theatre in Baltimore, and furnishing the same,	20,000	
	<u>120,000</u>	

N^o. II.

Abstract of Funds raised in specie for the use of the Theatres in Philadelphia and Baltimore.		
1. By the original Subscription at Philadelphia	30,000	
2. By the Subscription at Baltimore	6,400	
3. By the Notes of sundry Persons discounted at Bank,	19,500	
4. By the Profits of two Seasons at Philadelphia	25,000	
5. By Cash borrowed from sundry Individuals on private loan,	8,426	
6. By Cash from the private resources of the Managers	4,000	
	<u>93,326</u>	

To which may be added original Debts yet remaining unpaid, viz		
Debts due to Tradesmen and others for articles furnished, and work done,	11,829	
Debts due in England for Articles drawn from thence,	3,845	
Remainder of the purchase money of the Lot yet unpaid, but which, in case of need, may be provided for by the sale of part of the said lot,	<u>11,000</u>	
	26,674	
	<u>120,000</u>	

N^o. III.

Abstract of the existing Debts of the Theatre in Philadelphia, which are the objects of the present provision; the original Subscription of thirty thousand Dollars being supposed to be satisfactorily provided for by the former Mortgage and Stipulation.

1. To the amount of outstanding Accounts for Tradesman's Bills	11,829
2. To the amount of Notes discounted at the Bank	19,500
3. To the amount of Cash borrowed of . Individuals on private loan	8,426
4. To the amount of a balance of the Debts contracted in England for the Theatre	<u>3,845</u>
Drs.	<u>43,600</u>

N^o. IV.

Abstract specifying the Security proposed for reimbursing, in five or six years, a Loan to be raised in order to discharge the pressing Debts of the Theatre. N^o. III.

1. A Mortgage on the Theatres in Philadelphia and Baltimore.
2. An assignment of the Profits of the Theatre at Philadelphia, computed at twelve thousand Dollars each Season, to such Trustees as the Lenders shall appoint.

APPENDIX D

EXCERPTS FROM THE RESOLUTIONS AND ARTICLES
OF THE PROPRIETORS OF THE NEW THEATRE,
PHILADELPHIA, 1799

APPENDIX D

EXCERPTS FROM THE RESOLUTIONS AND ARTICLES
OF THE PROPRIETORS OF THE NEW THEATRE,
PHILADELPHIA, 1799

1st. THAT the property of this Association consists of a certain Lot of Ground, situate on the North side of Chesnut street, and West side of sixth street, in the City of Philadelphia, and upon part of which said Lot, the Building called the New-Theatre is erected; which Lot with the Buildings were purchased at a public sale, held by Jonathan Penrose, Esq. High Sheriff of the County of Philadelphia, on the second day of May by George Plumstead for the use of this Association. . . .

3d. THAT this association shall be called The Proprietors of the New Theatre, and its concerns, shall be managed and conducted by five persons, members thereof, to be called AGENTS, under and subject to the several rules and regulations herein mentioned.

4th. THAT on the Tuesday in in this present year and upon the 2d Tuesday of May in every year, during the continuation of this association, there shall be elected, by ballot, from among the members thereof, Five Agents to serve as such for the term of one year, and until new Agents are chosen and confirmed, except as to the first election, in which case the Agents are to continue until the second Tuesday of May next and the Agents so chosen and confirmed shall make choice of one of their number as a President, and shall have power to appoint a person to be Secretary and Treasurer. . . .

6th. THAT it shall be the duty of the Agents generally, to superintend the interests of the association, to sell and dispose of any of the vacant lots belonging to the Association, which the persons entitled to the major part of shares in the same shall, under their hands, from time to time authorize and direct: and to lease out for any term, not exceeding five years, the Building called the New-Theatre,

to such person or persons and for such rents and upon such conditions as they may see fit. But the Agents shall not reserve or exercise any controul in the Theatrical management of dramatic entertainments, or in the employment of performers. And no such lease shall be granted for the said Building, called the New Theatre, unless part of the consideration thereof be, that each of the shares or the one ninety-eighth part interest in this association, shall be entitled to one ticket of free admission into the Theatre on every play night, But no such tickets of free admission shall be transferable more than once in one season, nor shall the said Theatre ever, during the continuance of this Association, be let for any other purpose than for Dramatic exhibitions, without the unanimous consent of the Share-holders, except in case such exhibitions may be prohibited by lawful authority.

7th. THAT when the said Agents or the major part of them, shall agree for the sale, or for the leasing of any of the property belonging to this Association, they shall cause to be prepared, at the expence of the purchaser or of the lessee a deed of conveyance or a lease, and cause the same to be executed by the Trustees, or a major part of them.

8th. THAT it shall be the duty of the Secretary and Treasurer to keep fair minutes of the proceedings of the Agents and of the several meetings of the Share-holders: He shall receive all monies payable to the Association either for property sold or for rent of the New-Theatre and within thirty days after he shall have received the same, shall, after deducting the necessary expences of the Trustees and of the Agents pay the same to and amongst the said Share-holders in proportion to their respective shares; and the said Secretary and Treasurer shall be allowed one and an half per cent for all rents by him received. . . .

10. THAT the secretary shall keep a book for transferring of Shares, in which the person transferring the same, shall subscribe his or her name to a memorandum thereof, and shall render up the certificate before issued for such share: and the assignee shall receive from the Secretary a new Certificate in his or her own name of the same form, and bearing the same number as the original, signed and witnessed as before directed.

And the said new Certificate shall entitle the Assignee to aproportionable part of all such monies as shall be collected by the Treasurer during the time he or she is possessed of the share so transferred. . . . But no person receiving a transfer of a share, shall, for that reason, be entitled to a ticket of free admission into the

Theatre for that season, if the ticket belonging to such share shall have been transferred in the season when such transfer is so made: and the Secretary shall give immediate notice to the managers of the Theatre of every transfer so made. And in case of a loss of such certificate the same shall be supplied by the Agents in such manner as they shall prescribe.

11. THAT the ticket of free admission, may by any of the owners thereof, be transferred once in a season, by an indorsement on the Certificate thereof, witnessed by the Secretary, and an entry or memorandum thereof, made in a Book, by him to be kept for that purpose; and notice shall be immediately given by the Secretary to the managers of the Theatre of such transfer: and the Secretary shall receive from the assignee of such share One Dollar, and for the transfer of a ticket for the season Fifty Cents, for his trouble. . . .

13th. THAT before any person or persons to whom the Theatre may be let for Dramatic exhibitions shall receive the lease from the Agents, he or they shall subscribe an acknowledgement, that these articles of Association have been exhibited to him or them, and that he or they approve and consent to all matters therein respecting the tickets of free admission and the transferring thereof.

14th. THAT at every meeting of the share-holders, every share shall be entitled to one Vote except otherwise directed by these articles, and any number of members met, whose shares shall amount to twenty-five shall be a sufficient number to proceed to any business, except that of altering these articles of Association, the ordering the sale of any property, and the election of Managers.

And the proceedings of such meeting or of a majority thereof shall be binding and conclusive upon every member of this Association in the same manner and to as full effect, as if they were personally present and consenting. PROVIDED always that such meeting be advertised in, at least, two of the daily news-papers in the city of Philadelphia for five days next preceding such meeting. And no person shall vote at any Election for Agents (except the first) who has not held his or her share or shares, for at least six months next before such Election. . . .

15th . . . And in no case shall any amendment be made so as to make valid a sale of the New Theatre before the dissolution of this association without the unanimous consent of the shareholders, except in the case only of the prohibition of dramatic entertainments as mentioned in the sixteenth article.

16th. THAT no sale of the building called the New Theatre shall take place before the first day of July in the year 1819, nor shall this Association be dissolved until the monies arising from such sale, when made, shall be divided amongst the shareholders: But if it shall so happen, that before the first day of July 1819, Theatrical exhibitions be prohibited by lawful authority, then with the consent of persons holding fifty shares, made in writing under their hand, the said Building shall be sold by the Agents and when the monies arising from such sale are divided amongst the share-holders, this Association shall be dissolved.

17th. In all elections the subscribers shall be allowed to vote by proxy, provided the said proxies be shareholders in this association. Witness, our hands and seals: at Philadelphia, this day of Anno Domini 1799.

APPENDIX E

PROLOGUE SPOKEN AT THE FIRST PERFORMANCE
IN WASHINGTON, AUGUST, 1800

APPENDIX E

PROLOGUE SPOKEN AT THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

IN WASHINGTON, AUGUST, 1800

Thank Heaven; ten tedious, anxious years are past,
And here together we meet at last,
The Grecian states, ambitious to destroy,
Took the same time to level cloud-capt Troy.
Their hero, by subverting sought his praise,
Our Patriot's noble glory was to raise.
Let other nations look to Greece and Rome,
Columbia's bright examples are at home;
Whate'er is great or good we find in one--
All virtues joined to form a Washington.
Heaven partial seemed, occasions to dispense,
Pleased to unfold his great preeminence,
Exulting thought! Why thus appear distress?
But ah! you feel the most, who knew him best.
Mourn not but, thankful that his life was spared
So long, enjoy the blessings that he prepared.
As planetary systems roll on high,
Ruled by the Almighty's law of harmony,
These states in ceaseless unity shall roll,
Swayed by the plans of his inspired soul.
To-night we'll make you weep by mimic play,
For tears are tribute with delight must pay;
Expand your tuckers, ye sigh-swelling Fair;
Unfurl your fans, your handkerchiefs prepare;
Catch the soft moments, ye enamoured beaus,
Arrest the tear drop trembling as it flows,
Sweet sensibility the sour endears,
And beauty sheds a lustre most in tears.
This Grand Hotel, for epicures designed,
Now makes provision only for the mind;
For you each night, two courses nice we cater,
And for your wants, the "Prompter" calls not "Waiter";
A bad exchange you'll say--solids for air;
Who's he that whispers? It is city Fair.
Sir, you're a poet, and delight forsooth,
Rather to deal in fiction than in truth.
Those ruddy cheeks evince the air is fine.
And those fat sides show on the best you dine.

Well faith, we've formed a tolerable stage;
 Here's room for comic glee or tragic rage;
 But there pointing to pit and box the city populates
 so quick,
 I fear you've stowed yourselves away too thick.
 Ladies, you smile, as if the crowding pleased,
 Sure your fine frames tremble to be squeezed.
 Tho' now our corps too thin appears,
 This central spot must draw forth volunteers;
 If power's their wish, to monarchies we raise them--
 If fame--'twere ample sure for you to praise them,
 If death and glory--here they may be slain,
 And what is better, "rise to fight again."
 Their country's service to a generous mind,
 That first incentive, true they cannot find,
 And yet we act no despicable part,
 Who gladden life and meleorate the heart.
 The floods of late, which drowned you many a horse,
 Have caused to us a much severer loss--
 Our groves, our temples gone beyond repair,
 The gorgeous palaces it did not spare;
 The storm has swept our canvas almost bare.
 For this deficiency we will soon atone--
 Would you could build as fast with brick and stone.
 At first behold us with indulgent eye,
 As soon with zest we'll every want supply,
 Thus to this city all things will acquire,
 That fancy can suggest, or heart desire,
 The guillotine, the sword, the cannon's roar,
 Drive arts and science to this peaceful shore;
 If various tongues from building could disable,
 Your houses would of course be stopped like Babel;
 Dutch, Irish, Germans, French, all hither flee,
 To enjoy the sweets of liberty.
 With your permission--Hark! I'm called away--
 That bell cut short the best I had to say.
 Accept the will, I pray you, for the deed,
 For on this--on all occasions we must plead
 By your indulgence only we succeed.

APPENDIX F

ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT OF WILLIAM WARREN AND
WILLIAM WOOD WITH CHARLOTTE PLACIDE

APPENDIX F

ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT OF WILLIAM WARREN AND
WILLIAM WOOD WITH CHARLOTTE PLACIDE

Made, concluded and entered into this Second day of October in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifteen between William Warren and William B. Wood, Managers and joint Lessees of the NEW-THEATRE in Philadelphia, in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and Managers and joint Proprietors of the Theatre in Baltimore, in the commonwealth of Maryland, of the one part, and Charlotte S. Placide of the other part, witness.

The said C. S. Placide--her executors and administrators, for and in consideration of the sum of One dollar to her in hand paid, at or before the sealing and delivery of these presents, by the said [Warren and Wood], . . . doth hereby for herself her executors and administrators, covenant and agree to and with the said [Warren and Wood] . . . that she the said Charlotte S. Placide shall and will, for and during the term of one year to commence and be computed from the Tenth day of June, last past according to the best and utmost of her skill, judgment, power and ability, Act, Sing, and Perform all such parts and characters, in all or any Tragedies, Comedies, Operas, Masques, Dramatic entertainments, Dances and other theatrical performances whatsoever, which shall be exhibited, represented or performed at the said Theatre, or any other wherein the said [Warren and Wood] shall be interested or concerned, as by the said [Warren and Wood] or the Manager for the time being of such Theatre or Theatres, shall at any time or times during the term aforesaid, be ordered, directed or required, or of which notice shall be given by advertisement in the public newspapers, or by affixing up the play-bills in the usual and accustomed manner. And also, that she the said Charlotte S. Placide shall and will, during the said term, diligently and duly attend all and every the rehearsals or practices of all and every the theatrical pieces or performances wherein [she] shall be directed or required to Act, Sing or Perform. And [she] doth hereby further covenant, promise and agree to pay, or allow to be deducted and retained out of the

payments herein after mentioned, by the same [Warren and Wood], or the Manager for the time being, to and for their own use and benefit, all and every sum and sums of money which at any time or times within the term aforesaid the said Charlotte S. Placide shall or may incur, or be liable to forfeit or pay for neglect or refusal to attend, accept of, study, practice and rehearse, or publicly perform any part or parts, character or characters, as aforesaid, according to the terms and conditions expressed and set forth in the following table, that is to say:

ARTICLE I.

Gentlemen at the time of rehearsal or performance, are not to wear their hats in the greenroom, or talk vociferously, or enter into such altercations there as may tend to dispute or quarrel. The green-room is a place appropriated for the quiet and regular meeting of the company, who are to be called thence, and thence only, by the call-boy, to attend on the stage. The manager is not to be applied to in that place, or any matter of business or with any personal complaint. For a breach of any part of this article, one dollar will be forfeited.

ARTICLE II.

Any person appearing intoxicated on the stage, shall forfeit a week's salary.

ARTICLE III.

For making the stage stand, or not being at the proper entrance after being summoned by the caller, five dollars.

ARTICLE IV.

After due notice, all rehearsals must be attended. The greenroom clock is to regulate the time . . . ten minutes will be allowed for difference of clocks . . . forfeit, half a dollar for absence at every scene--the whole rehearsal at the same rate, or four dollars, at the option of the manager.

A performer absent at the commencement of a scene, is to be forfeited as if absent during the whole of it.

ARTICLE V.

A performer rehearsing from a book or part at the last rehearsal of a new piece, forfeits a night's salary.

ARTICLE VI.

For walking across the stage, or standing on it during rehearsal, (unless the business of the stage requires it) half a dollar shall be forfeited.

ARTICLE VII.

A performer introducing improper jests not in the author, shall forfeit two dollars.

ARTICLE VIII.

A performer opening the stage-door, except required so to do by the business of the representation, forfeits five dollars.

ARTICLE IX.

Any person conversing with the prompter during representation, or talking aloud behind the scenes to the interruption of the performance, to forfeit one dollar.

ARTICLE X.

Every performer concerned in the first act of the play, to be in the green-room dressed for performance at the time of beginning, as expressed in the bills, or to forfeit five dollars. The performers wanted in the second act, to be ready when the first finishes. In like manner with every other act. Those performers who are not in the two last acts of the play, to be ready to begin the farce, or to forfeit five dollars. When a change of dress is necessary, proper time will be allowed.

ARTICLE XI.

All dresses will be regulated and arranged on the morning of the performance by the manager. A performer who makes any alterations in such dresses, or refuses to wear them, shall forfeit a night's salary.

ARTICLE XII.

Any performer who neglects or refuses to give out a play when called upon by the prompter, by order of the manager, forfeits five dollars.

ARTICLE XIII.

A performer not ready in any character (having had the usual time allowed for study, and receiving due notice of its representation) shall forfeit a night's salary.

ARTICLE XIV.

Any performer imperfect, in an old play or opera, after sufficient time allowed, shall forfeit a night's salary; but in a new play, after three rehearsals, the forfeit to be double.

ARTICLE XV.

If the prompter converse with any person during representation, or be guilty of any neglect to the prejudice of the performance, he shall forfeit two dollars.

ARTICLE XVI.

If the prompter be guilty of any neglect in his office, or omit to forfeit where penalties are incurred by non-observance of the rules and regulations of the Theatre, he shall forfeit for each offence or omission a week's salary.

ARTICLE XVII.

Performers not in the bills of the day, are respectfully requested to leave notice where they may be found, in case of a necessity to change the entertainments.

ARTICLE XVIII.

For refusing on a sudden change of play or farce, to represent a character performed by the same person during the season, a week's salary shall be forfeited.

ARTICLE XIX.

A performer refusing a part allotted him by the manager, forfeits a night's salary.

ARTICLE XXI.

A performer singing songs not advertised in the bill of the day; omitting any, or introducing one not in the part allotted, without first having consent of the manager, forfeits a night's salary.

ARTICLE XXII.

Any person standing within the chalk-line during performance shall forfeit fifty cents, second time, after being warned, one dollar, third time the same night, three dollars, and for a 4th offence on the same night, the forfeiture will be a week's salary.

ARTICLE XXIII.

Making an entrance at an improper place at rehearsal, fifty cents--before the public one dollar.

ARTICLE XXIV.

Making a noise on the stage, to the interruption of the rehearsal, one dollar.

ARTICLE XXV.

For going into the wardrobe without consent the manager, five dollars will be forfeited.

ARTICLE XXVI.

No person to draw the curtain or drop-scene aside to look at the audience, under penalty of two dollars, on a 2d offence, the forfeiture to be doubled.

ARTICLE XXVII.

In all plays in which modern clothes are worn, gentlemen are expected to wear powder, shoes and buckles, unless the character particularly requires different dress. This rule to be observed under pain of forfeiting a night's salary.

ARTICLE XXVIII.

A performer restoring what is cut out by the manager, will forfeit a night's salary.

ARTICLE XXIX.

A performer absenting himself from the Theatre of an evening when concerned in the business of the stage, will be forfeited a week's salary, or be held liable to be discharged, at the option of the manager.

ARTICLE XXX.

Any performer, whose absence from his business shall have arisen from imprudent or improper delays, or from intemperance, shall be forfeited for the period of his absence, his full income, and become liable to be discharged.

ARTICLE XXXI.

Performers entitled by their agreement to benefits, shall be bound to give satisfactory security to the managers for the charges of the night.

And further, that she . . . shall not, nor will, at any time during the said term, publicly Act, Sing or Perform, any part or parts, character or characters, in any Tragedy, Comedy, [etc.] without the license or consent in writing of the said [Warren and Wood]. And the said William Warren and William B. Wood . . . shall and will yearly and in every year during the said term of one year well and truly pay or cause to be paid unto the said Charlotte S. Placide the sum of Twenty three Dollars Current Money of the United States of America for each week in which any theatrical performances shall be publicly exhibited at the said Theatres, which said sum . . . shall be paid on the last day of every acting week . . . the said William Warren and William B. Wood . . . first deducting thereout all and every sum and sums of money which she . . . shall incur, or become liable to forfeit and pay, according to the covenant and agreement . . . herein before mentioned. Provided always, that if the season should close before the expiration of any particular week, that the salary shall be due and payable only for such portion of the week as has comprised nights of performance. And further, that the said Charlotte C. Placide shall be entitled to one night's performance in each winter season in every year of the said term of one year, according to the custom of the said Theatre, for her emolument, she first paying or allowing to the Treasurer of the said Theatre, the customary deductions or charges of such performance. And further, that she . . . shall also have, and be entitled to one half nights performance during the summer season of the said term of one year . . . she first paying or allowing the Treasurer of the said Theatre, the charges as above mentioned. And it is hereby mutually agreed by and between the said parties to these presents, that each of them shall and will, six months previous to the expiration of the said term of one year, give to the other . . . notice in writing of her or their intention of determining and putting an end to these presents, and the terms, conditions and agreements heretofore contained. And that on default of such notice, so to be given as aforesaid. The party so intending, will also, at all times from and after the end and expiration of the same term of one year, give to the other of them . . . the like six months notice in writing, of such design or intention. And that from and after the expiration of such notice, and not otherwise, these presents, and every article . . . shall cease, determine, and be utterly void, to all intents and purposes.

And it is further agreed and understood between the parties to these presents, that the covenants aforesaid, shall be considered as mutual and dependant on one another; so that if at any time, the said William Warren and William B. Wood shall, on demand, withhold the payment of the salary aforesaid justly due . . . or shall refuse or neglect to afford to the said Charlotte S. Placide the further compensation above agreed to, that then, and in such case, [she] shall be discharged from the necessity of complying with her engagements as aforesaid. And it is further agreed, that in case of a violation of this agreement, or any part thereof, by the said Charlotte S. Placide in a matter not herein expressly provided for, that then, and in such case, these articles of agreement so far as the said William Warren and William B. Wood are bound thereby, shall become absolutely void and of no effect, and the right of the said Charlotte S. Placide to demand and receive her salary, compensation and profits of her benefits shall absolutely cease and determine, and that the full and perfect compliance with the terms and conditions aforesaid . . . shall be a condition precedent to the vesting of the right of the said Charlotte S. Placide to a part or the whole of her compensation, salary and benefits aforesaid--And that in any action or actions hereafter to be brought against the said William Warren and William B. Wood . . . by the said Charlotte S. Placide . . . on this covenant, it shall and may be lawful for the said William Warren and William B. Wood, to plead the general issue, and give in evidence, the breaches of the said Charlotte S. Placide as a complete and effectual bar to a recovery therein.

And lastly, For the true performance of all and every the covenants, clauses, conditions and agreements herein before contained, they the said William Warren and William B. Wood, for themselves and each of them . . . do hereby bind and oblige themselves and each of them . . . unto the said Charlotte S. Placide . . . in the penal sum of One Thousand Dollars, lawful money of the United States of America, and the said Charlotte S. Placide doth in the like manner bind and oblige herself . . . in the like sum of One Thousand Dollars, lawful money of the United States of America.

In witness whereof, The parties to these presents have hereunto interchangeably set their hands and seals the day and year first above written.

Sealed and Delivered in the presence of	
	Robt Cullen William Wood
each Weeks	Peter Paddren Wm B Wood
performances to	
consist of four nights,	Charlotte S. Placide
or in proportion, more	
or less	

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