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Author: Gary F. Fisher

Source: *Midlands Historical Review*, Vol. 1 (2017)

Published: 07/11/2017

URL: [http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/book-review-johnson-and-burling-the-colonial-american-stage-1665-1774-a-documentary-calendar /](http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/book-review-johnson-and-burling-the-colonial-american-stage-1665-1774-a-documentary-calendar/)

Book Review:
Johnson & Burling's *The Colonial American Stage, 1665-1774: A Documentary Calendar*

GARY F. FISHER

There are perhaps fewer pleasanter discoveries in scholarship than when one finds that a particularly arduous task that is fundamental to one's own research has already been completed. Especially when said task has been completed with a greater degree of meticulousness and proficiency than would have been possible under one's own efforts. This is exactly the breed of revelation that Johnson and Burling offer in the form of *The Colonial American Stage, 1665 – 1774: A Documentary Calendar*.

Johnson and Burling frame their work as a response to the failings of contemporary scholarship on the subject of the colonial American stage, which they criticise as relying too heavily on individual anecdotes for evidence and allowing 'the assumptions of one historian [to become] the facts of another.'¹ Their text seeks to produce a single sourcebook of all extant materials relating to theatrical culture in the American colonies, re-examine previously published evidence and claims, and provide information from sources that were previously unavailable or unknown to researchers.² A set of objectives which, in this author's judgement, they complete with distinction. This is a text to which those writing henceforth on the subject of colonial American theatre will be indebted and those writing heretofore will be covetous.

The text is divided into two main sections. After a brief preface explaining the purpose and academic context of this work and a series of maps that ensure the reader is familiar with the geography of the American colonies, the first seventy pages are composed of a discussion of what the sources compiled within their calendar reveal about the theatrical culture of the American colonies. The remaining four hundred or so pages contain the actual documentary calendar of theatrical activity.

The first section begins by outlining the theatrical companies that were active in North America during this period and the professional training and lifestyles that travelling actors of differing degrees of professionalism might possess. Secondly, the nature of the presentation

¹O. Johnson & W.J. Burling, *The Colonial American Stage, 1665 – 1774: A Documentary Calendar* (Madison, NJ., 2002), p. 11.

² Johnson & Burling, *The Colonial American Stage*, p. 9.

of plays is discussed. Johnson and Burling use the advertisements, reviews, and private records of companies to deduce what form the scenery, costumes, and music that were used in productions regularly took. They also examine the size of the lots upon which theatres were placed, financial records concerning the number of tickets sold, and the varieties of seating that were advertised in order to calculate the size and seating structure of various theatres concerning which no other evidence survives. Finally, they present the repertoires of plays different companies performed.

Following this discussion Johnson and Burling examine the opposition that early theatrical troupes faced whilst attempting to ply their trade in the Americas. They dissect this resistance into three broad categories: moral (religious opposition to the perceived immorality of the theatre), legislative (legal sanctions taken to prevent or limit theatrical activity), and economic (to prevent financial capital being removed from local communities). After which they discuss the steps that theatre companies took to either placate or avoid this opposition. Throughout this section examples from printed sermons, colonial legislation, and newspaper articles are presented to illustrate the precise nature of this opposition. They also closely examine the advertising materials of theatre troupes to show how companies were inventively adapting how they presented their shows (such as emphasising the noble moral sentiments espoused in the plays being performed or advertising that a portion of their profits will be donated to local charities) so as to attempt to assuage these fears.

Following this the economics of colonial theatre are discussed. Johnson and Burling use what few financial records that survive to demonstrate the costs and profitability of professional colonial theatre. They also discuss the alternative methods by which theatre companies attempted to supplement their income, such as offering musical or dance classes. Finally, the authors examine the nature of the audiences who attended such theatrical performances and the cross-section of society that they constituted. After briefly explaining the socio-economic composition of American audiences that attended these performances they move on to discuss the frequency with which violent disturbances broke out amongst American audiences. They argue that, despite a few examples of outbreaks of violence during performances over the course of this period, American audiences were less violent than their contemporary British counterparts and 'were generally docile and predictable.'³ Johnson and Burling illustrate their discussion with quotations from contemporary newspaper articles reporting on such violent outbreaks and discuss the extent to which the propensity for audience violence varied according to region and audience

³ Johnson & Burling, *The Colonial American Stage*, p. 91.

makeup. This topic serves as a colourful and engaging conclusion to Johnson and Burling's discussion of the findings of their calendar.

Throughout the entirety of this first section the authors largely manage to avoid the temptation to enter into a potentially partisan discussion of this calendar's implications for broader questions concerning colonial theatrical culture. Instead they, for the most part, present a clinical discussion of the practices and trends revealed by their calendar.

There are however some exceptions to this. For example, in their discussion of the opposition that theatre troupes faced they claim that the economic criticisms that were voiced throughout this period were 'moral objections masquerading as financial objections' and that economic objection was simply 'a new approach for old enemies; having failed in their appeal on moral grounds, they resorted to economic objections.'⁴ While this claim is not necessarily incorrect, it risks straying into the potential minefield of debate concerning the motivations of colonial opponents of the theatre within which figures such as Peter Davis ply their trade and would no doubt take serious umbrage with such assertions.⁵ This subject is one which would perhaps require an entire monograph in of itself to adequately examine and, by writing off as they do the sincerity of economic objections to theatre within just over half a page, Johnson and Burling gloss over a topic that has been the subject of fierce academic debate.

Yet this example is an isolated one. For the most part the discussion of their calendar that is presented in this section avoids applying these results to broader partisan debates that surround colonial theatrical culture. Instead it is largely an objective discussion of theatrical trends and practices that are identifiable within the calendar. A fact that ensures its utility to all scholars of colonial theatre.

The discussion of their calendar that Johnson and Burling present in their first section is tremendously valuable in of itself. That they compound this discussion by presenting alongside it the documentary calendar from which this information was drawn substantially increases the value of this text as it allows other researchers of colonial theatre to use their findings as an evidential basis for their own research.

The calendar provides a year by year account of theatrical activity not just in the thirteen colonies but throughout all of the northern Americas, including Nova Scotia and the

⁴ Johnson & Burling, *The Colonial American Stage*, p. 78.

⁵ For further discussion of this subject see: P.A. Davis, 'Puritan Mercantilism and the Politics of Anti-Theatrical Legislation in Colonial America' in R. Engle & T.L. Miller, (Eds.) *The American Stage* (New York, 2006), pp. 18 – 29.

Caribbean Islands. In addition to recording performances of plays they also record information concerning legislation enacted against the theatre, newspaper articles and personal diaries discussing various aspects of the theatre, and reviews of performances, and is no doubt the product of dedicated and rigorous processing of the extant corpus of evidence.

When detailing performances Johnson and Burling record information concerning the date, location, and venue of the performance in addition to, where available, the play(s) being performed, the company that were performing, the cast list, the ticket prices, and the original source whence the information is derived. These fields are presented in a consistent structure that renders this potentially irregular and unwieldy information easy to understand and process. The calendar of activity for each year is preceded by a brief prose description of the activity that occurred in that year. These annual descriptors make the calendars of activity immediately more engaging and serve to effectively and understandably contextualise the following data.

The accessibility of the calendar is further augmented by the sophisticated system of indexes the Johnson and Burling provide. Rather than simply providing one possibly unwieldy index recording all possible topics relating to colonial theatre that one might wish to search they instead offer three: a Person index that allows one to identify information pertaining to individuals active in the colonial theatrical scene, a Subject and Place index that allows one to identify information pertaining to activity that occurred in a particular location or related to a particular subject, and a Title and Author index that allows one to identify activity relating to specific plays or playwrights. This is arguably the best way in which this information could have been presented within the format of a printed text to make this information as easily identifiable and accessible as possible.

Yet this leads on to what could possibly be considered the only significant criticism of the overall value of this work. Namely that a printed text is perhaps not the optimal format in which to present this information, especially for individuals hoping to use the information contained within the documentary calendar as part of their own research. The utility of this information would have been greatly enhanced had it been presented in some form of remotely accessible and searchable database. This would allow users to directly search for information relevant to their own investigations and compile their own data concerning performance frequencies and long term trends in theatrical culture.

It would be a mistake however to allow this criticism to draw attention away from the immense academic possibilities that this text provides. In spite of the limitations of their

format Johnson and Burling have done an admirable job in compiling and presenting this information. As a direct result of their efforts future scholarship on the subject of colonial American theatre will no longer have to rely on using individual case studies to make assumptions about American theatrical culture at large but will instead be informed by a solid grounding in reliable evidence concerning theatrical activity. One can only hope that they take it upon themselves to produce further documentary calendars of a similar calibre that detail later periods of American theatrical history.