



Winter 12-29-1995

## IWU Theatre Professor Authors New Book Probing Unique Aspect of American Revolution

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### Recommended Citation

Aaron, Bob, "IWU Theatre Professor Authors New Book Probing Unique Aspect of American Revolution" (1995). *News and Events*. 6011.  
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/6011>

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December 29, 1995

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**Theatre in America During the Revolution**

**IWU Theatre Professor Authors New Book  
Probing Unique Aspect of American Revolution**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Bob Hope and the USO weren't around to entertain the troops when George Washington and the Continental Army were battling England during the Revolutionary War.

However, a vibrant and sometimes bawdy theatre provided colonial troops, redcoats, and civilians with a respite from the era's political and military turmoil.

A new book by Jared Brown, professor and director of the School of Theatre Arts at Illinois Wesleyan University, is the first in which all known theatrical performances--by British officers stationed in America, by American officers, and by professional actors--are thoroughly and accurately chronicled.

*Theatre in America During the Revolution*, published last month by Cambridge University Press, describes and analyzes many significant plays written in America between 1773 and 1784, which took the American revolution as their subject. The book also spotlights the impact of theatre on colonial and British war efforts.

"The American Revolution," Brown said, "is clearly an occasion when theatre greatly influenced the course of war. Plays dealing with the revolution were propaganda--not creative or artistic."

Depending on the side a playwright was taking, Brown added, "characters were totally heroic or totally stupid or villainous. It was all black and white--no gray areas. This isn't good dramatic literature because the characters are one-dimensional. As propaganda, though, it's powerful stuff."

Brown also points out many plays were scurrilous. The British, for example, would insult George Washington, referring to the general as farting and not able to hold his water. American playwrights took similar shots at British characters.

Brown's research has unearthed interesting anecdotes, offering insights into the era. For example, during the Boston premiere of *The Blockade* by British Gen. John Burgoyne--a play depicting "brave" British troops and a "terrified" colonial military force--a British soldier entered the theatre, shouting that Bunker's Hill was under attack and the King's troops might lose.

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"This wasn't part of the play," Brown explained, "and the actors and audience panicked and left" the theatre.

*Blockheads*, a play written from the colonists' perspective, dealt with the incident that occurred during *The Blockade*, depicting the British scurrying from battle at the first sign of an attack.

Some British officers, Brown said, performed in so many plays they had almost no other duties, reflecting London's sometime apathetic attitude toward the colonial war, especially after early victories. This policy, Brown said, triggered criticism by Tory stalwarts, who thought the war wasn't being prosecuted vigorously enough.

Brown was surprised by the number and scope of plays produced by colonists and the British during the revolution. The British, for example, might stage 20-30 productions just during one New York season. An American company in Maryland produced upwards of 70 plays annually. In addition to plays with revolutionary war themes, Shakespeare and other 18th-century plays were popular.

Theatre played a prominent role in the colonists' war effort. While the Continental Army battled a tough winter at Valley Forge, Gen. Washington ordered a building converted to a theatre to help boost his troops' morale--a bold move since Congress outlawed plays during the war. Congress' action was an outgrowth of Puritan attitudes, a fear that theatre productions would be a war distraction, and an economic policy that sought to cut off colonists' financial support for British productions.

Before the war, Brown observed, theatre was viewed as "morally dangerous," especially by Puritans. However, the theatre's patriotic support of the revolution helped transform it and provide a foundation for its growth after independence was won.

Brown's role as a teacher spurred him to write the book. He couldn't find adequate sources for students to use for research papers in various theatre history courses. Only one book, a 19th-century effort by historian George O. Seilhamer, has attempted to chronicle all period theatre performances. However, Brown points out, this work is riddled with errors.

Brown's fascination with theatre during the American Revolution goes back 20 years. He conducted research--studying primary and secondary sources--at the British Library in London, New York Historical Society, Maryland Historical Society, Library of Congress, and elsewhere. He also received documents from the University of Iowa and the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Over the years, he has written several articles on theatre during the American Revolution.

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*Theatre in America During the Revolution* includes nine chapters, a foreword, prologue, epilogue, Appendix, Notes, and a bibliography. Various chapters deal with the approaching revolution, British and American military theatre, and American professional theatre. Anne Barker, a senior theatre and English major from Ingleside, Ill., prepared the book's index.

Brown, a New York City native, is the author of *The Fabulous Lunts: A Biography of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne* (1986), depicting the lives of the husband-wife acting team that dominated American theatre for more than three decades, and *Zero Mostel: A Biography* (1989), which chronicles the life of the Tony Award-winning actor best known for his role in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, who was blacklisted as a communist during the McCarthy era of the 1940s and 1950s. Brown also has written about a half-dozen plays.

He joined IWU in 1989 as professor of theatre and director of the School of Theatre Arts. Brown was a faculty member at Western Illinois University from 1965 to 1989.

As a youngster, Brown acted on national radio programs, working on shows such as *Lux Radio Theatre*, *The Life of Riley*, and *Lassie*.

Brown is writing five articles for *American National Biography*, a multi-volume reference published by Oxford University Press. He intends to start writing a play or novel next year.

*Theatre in America During the Revolution* is a 229-page, hardcover edition, priced at \$54.95.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls 1,850 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. A \$25 million Center for Natural Science Learning and Research was dedicated on Oct. 7. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 161 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *101 of the Best Values in America's Colleges and Universities* calls IWU "undoubtedly one of the finest small colleges in the country," adding, "Illinois Wesleyan has surged to national prominence on the basis of its reputation as a school with a rock-solid academic program."