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Pamela Morris Adams
University of South Carolina - Columbia

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THE AUDIENCE IN CHARLESTON'S THEATRES, 1790-1860

by

Pamela Morris Adams

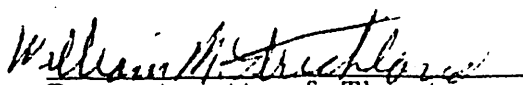
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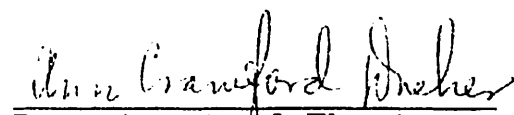
Vanderbilt University, 1970

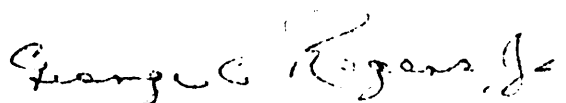
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From the perspective of the 20th century, Charleston, South Carolina, seems an unlikely beginning for American theatre, but Charleston of previous centuries had the location and economy to attract theatrical activity. More importantly, Charleston had a population that was consistently receptive to theatre. Eola Willis' The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century, with Social Settings of the Time demonstrates that a number of American theatrical firsts occurred in Charleston, such as the first performance by a professional actor, the first opera, and the first American prologues.

Prior to the Revolutionary War, Charleston had a total of six theatrical seasons of varying lengths over a forty year period. At least three playhouses were built, though little is known about them, and both the companies of Lewis Hallam and David Douglass spent time in Charleston. These were popular English traveling companies that are generally credited with the introduction of theatre to the colonies. The season of 1773-1774 has been called "the most brilliant in the colonial period."¹ Seventy-seven different plays were presented, including the first American productions of Julius Caesar and She Stoops to Conquer. Oliver Goldsmith's play had premiered in London only a few months prior to its premiere in Charleston. The outbreak of the Revolutionary War ended theatre throughout the colonies. The English actors and managers who had initiated theatrical activities before the war spent the war in the West Indies awaiting the end of the hostilities.

After the war, it took some time for theatre to re-establish itself. Newly-formed state government and city councils within states were concerned with establishing "domestic tranquility," so all theatrical activities became suspect. Theatre had long been regarded by many as not

conducive to moral or proper behavior. Censorship and banning were not uncommon in many parts of the country. The newly incorporated city of Charleston was not immune from these antitheatrical feelings of the time, and despite its past encouragement of theatre, passed an ordinance in 1783 "to restrain the exhibition of theatrical entertainments within the city."² By requiring such entertainment to be approved by the City Council, the political powers hoped to keep theatre out of Charleston. However, the effectiveness of the ordinance was limited, for within two years, Dennis Ryan and his American Company of Comedians arrived in Charleston in hopes of establishing a theatrical season in Charleston to supplement their season in Baltimore.³ Ryan's company arrived in 1785 to find Charleston no longer had any playhouses. Although it is unclear what happened to the pre-Revolutionary theatres, most likely they were destroyed in the city-wide fire of 1782. Ryan sought and was granted permission to present The Roman Father, in a large room over the City Exchange. He dedicated the performance to George Washington. The first production was presented March 28, 1785; in the following four weeks a total of nineteen plays were presented. Theatre had returned to Charleston, and because of the audiences' support, Charleston became again the theatrical center of the South for the next seventy-five years.

Dennis Ryan's hopes of a circuit between Baltimore and Charleston ended with his death and the disbanding of his troupe. Other managers were soon looking to Charleston, however. In 1786 John Henry and Lewis Hallam, Jr., having already established activities in New York, petitioned the State Legislature in Columbia for permission to build a new theatre in Charleston.⁴ Although the legislature denied the request, Charleston's City Council was willing to grant licenses for theatrical entertainment.⁵

Notwithstanding the problems of government approval, James Verling Godman and Mr. Kidd, whose first name is unknown, decide to bring the-
atre back to Charleston. Godwin and Kidd had been members of Ryan's
troupe, but had left Charleston for Savannah in 1785. For a year Godwin
and Kidd had been teaching dancing and had been presenting some theatrical
events in Savannah. Seeing Charleston as a better prospect, Godwin raised
funds and built a new theatre outside Charleston's city limits, located
to the north of the city in a suburb called Louisberg. He apparently
sought neither permission from the state nor a license from the city.⁶

Harmony Hall, as the new theatre was named, proved a novelty, but
not a success. Godwin and Kidd were able to collect only a few actors
and so they were severely limited in the kinds of material that they
could present. Moreover, the location of Harmony Hall proved unsatis-
factory, for it was inconvenient for the audiences. Although Godwin
did offered the enticement of "a benefit every nine months"⁷ to attract
actors, he failed to establish a solid troupe. He did, however, estab-
lish the benefit as a standard part of Charleston's theatre. In Char-
leston as elsewhere, benefits were intended to bolster the meager sal-
aries of company members by designating a given performance as a benefit.
On his or her benefit night, a company member received the profits from
the door receipts. The manager would often declare the closing night
of a season as his benefit. In addition to the financial rewards, bene-
fits came to be prized as indicators of a performer's popularity.⁸
And finally, by setting aside some benefit nights for charity, a theatre
troupe hoped to gain respect in the community.

Despite whatever rewards were gained through the practice of bene-
fits, Godwin and Kidd failed during the fall of 1786 and spring of 1787

to entice a consistent audience to Harmony Hall. And in the meantime, the State Legislature in Columbia again reflected the state's, if not the city's, position on professional players. The Vagrancy Act, which was passed on March 28, 1787, classified all actors, beggars, peddlers, and fortune tellers as persons against whom vagrancy charges could be brought. If found guilty, courts could sentence offenders to service for up to a year.⁹ The Charleston troupe of Godwin and Kidd disbanded.

For a time Charleston was left with an empty theatre and only such private cultural activities as its citizens might offer one another. The Vagrancy Act effectively stopped any growth in theatre until 1791, when it was repealed.

At the repeal of the Vagrancy Act, Hallam and Henry again announced their intention of building a theatre in Charleston, but two managers already located in Virginia arrived first. John Bignall and Thomas West obtained permission for a new theatre from the City Council in 1792, and began to raise money through public subscriptions. But costs for the theatre ran well beyond the original estimates and additional investors had to be found.¹⁰ Although the theatre as originally planned was to be quite elaborate, evidence suggests that, as built, it was, in fact, quite plain. Modeled after the new opera house of London, the ✓ Charleston Theatre was located on Savage's Green facing Broad Street with the pit entrance off Middleton Street.¹¹ West and Bignall already had an acting troupe that in size and ability were ready to present a variety of productions. They opened on February 11, 1793, with the comic opera, The Highland Reel, and a farce, The Adventures of a Shawl. On February 25, they presented the first American comedy produced by professional actors, Royal Tyler's The Contrast.¹² Soon they were regularly

performing on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. A benefit was given for the Orphan House early in May 1793, and the season closed May 31 after a run of four months. A hundred plays had been presented in some 50 performances.

Despite this rather strong beginning for West, Bignall, and the Charleston Theatre, stability had not been achieved in Charleston's theatre scene. Although the city itself was experiencing both growth and prosperity during the 1790's, the theatre was experiencing growing pains. The major source of these growing pains came though the arrival of French actors and singers among the French colonists who had been driven from Santo Domingo by the slave uprisings of 1789. These colonists were well-educated and skilled French descendents who brought to Charleston an important cultural influence. In order to earn their own living and to benefit other French refugees, the French actors and singers sought the use of the Charleston Theatre during those months West and Bignall were not in Charleston. By February 1794, the French troupe was in the processes of building its own theatre. Located on Lot 40 on Church Street, the new French theatre, completed in April 1794, was being built on the same site as Douglass' theatre of 1774.¹³ Although the leasee and owner of the building was John Sollee, the license "to exhibit theatrical entertainments"¹⁴ was issued to Alexander Placide Bussart and Mons. Val, first name unknown. Val had been a member of the French troupe since it first appeared in Charleston, but Placide had just arrived from New York. Placide had been very successful in Europe, Santo Domingo, and the northern theatrical centers of America before coming to Charleston in the spring of 1794. He was noted for his rope dancing and his composing and staging of pantomimes. His wife, who came from an English theatre

family, was described as a good leading actress and singer. Placide was by far the most notable theatrical professional to settle in Charleston by the late 1790's.¹⁵

With the opening of the French Theatre in 1794, Charleston audiences were treated to serious competition between two determined troupes.¹⁶ Although the French troupe performed in French, they provided English synopses of new offerings. Both theatres tried to outdo the other in spectacle and pantomimes. Then actors began to defect from one troupe to join the other, and the language distinction became less clear. As both troupes presented plays in English and French, the names of the theatres themselves changed. The French theatre came to be called the City Theatre or the Church Street Theatre while the Charleston Theatre was sometimes referred to as the Broad Street Theatre.

The competition between the two theatres continued over many seasons. After the death of John Bignall in August 1794, West continued to manage the Charleston Theatre. But the competition, while providing the audience with an abundance of theatre, was costly. West suffered financial losses but gained the services of Placide and Val who gave up managing to return to acting and dancing. Sollee, the leasee of the City Theatre, became the licenced manager but he also lost money. However, according to many it was a "brilliant period" in which theatre had never been better.¹⁷ The audiences were treated to a tantalizing array of theatre, but apparently were not numerous enough to provide a profit for both companies. But both managers continued to search for ways to make money. West opened a second theatre in Richmond, Va., and Sollee took his troupe touring in the Northeast.

But by June 1796, West closed the Charleston Theatre and left Char-

leston for good. Sollee was able to hire a number of West's company and in January 1797 opened with his new company at the City Theatre. As the old French and English troupes were now intermingled, the theatre on Church Street became known more frequently as the City Theatre. It is noted that among Sollee's troupe were Mr. and Mrs. Charles Whitlock. Mrs. Whitlock was the sister of John Philip Kemble and Sarah Kemble Siddons, leaders of the London stage, and much interest was generated by her appearances in Charleston. But despite the Whitlocks and the new combined troupe, Sollee still faced many problems even without the competition of the Charleston Theatre. He was able, however, to rent the Charleston Theatre when the shareholders could find no company to replace West's troupe. Sollee alternated the use of the two theatres apparently on predictions of attendance. The Charleston Theatre could accommodate a larger audience and was considered more comfortable than the smaller, cramped City Theatre.¹⁸ But two theatres and a larger company proved more than Sollee could handle.

Finally, in the spring of 1798, Sollee decided to quit the theatre business altogether. Placide along with two actors, John Brown Williamson and Edward Jones, took over the City Theatre and the Whitlocks and a fellow actor named Edgar attempted a few productions at the Charleston Theatre. Both theatres closed for the summer and, when the fall season of 1798 opened, Placide had emerged as the reigning authority.¹⁹

Abandoning the City Theatre, which never reopened as a theatre, Placide leased the Charleston Theatre in 1800.²⁰ His management marks the beginning of a stable period in Charleston's theatre history. As the nineteenth century opened, to have both a Fall and Winter season became normal for the theatre.²⁰ As well it became normal to expect a

number of years under a single management and to expect a fairly stable resident company which occasionally toured . After Placide established a strong touring circuit between Charleston and Savannah, he encouraged local dramatists aiming "to stimulate interest and keep the city abreast of theatricals."²¹ He continued the practice of benefits both for his actors and for charity. The star touring system was initiated by Placide when he secured the limited engagement of Thomas Abthorpe Cooper, a noted English tragedian. Cooper first appeared in Charleston in April 1806, and he returned often as a favorite visiting star.²² Placide added Richmond and Augusta to his touring circuit during the season of 1811-1812.

In 1811 a Richmond theatre fire, in which 76 people died, raised concern about the safety of attending theatre throughout the country, and religious fanatics claimed that the fire demonstrated God's opposition to theatregoing. Placide's company, on tour in Richmond, suffered severe losses in the fire, both in terms of company members who were killed and scenery and costumes that were destroyed.²³ Placide escaped the fire and returned to Charleston where he had the Charleston Theatre renovated to assure the public that it was safe to attend. But financial problems and the outbreak of the War of 1812 closed the theatre, and Placide himself died shortly thereafter.

The Richmond theatre fire, the War of 1812 and Placide's death all caused a break in Charleston's theatrical history. There was no theatre in Charleston for the next two seasons, 1813-1814 and 1814-1815.

When the Charleston Theatre reopened in the fall of 1815, Joseph G. Holman was named manager and "several of our old favorites"²⁴ were welcomed back to the stock company. Holman had a good background in theatre and he used his popular players to best advantage by finding

new plays and adding them to the repertory. His sister, Mrs. Charles Gilfert, and Thomas Hilson, a popular actor from the North, were leaders of his company.²⁵ Holman's second season, 1816-1817, was marred by a public dispute with a new company member, James H. Caldwell, but was very profitable.²⁶ Once again theatre had made a strong reopening in Charleston.

Holman died the summer of 1817 and his brother-in-law, Charles Gilfert, assumed the management of the theatre. As the orchestra leader under Holman, Gilfert was familiar with the workings of the theatre, and so ↓ the eight seasons under his leadership were also ones of growth and stability. He brought a number of stars to the Charleston Theatre and at the same time encouraged local dramatists.

Although Gilfert was unsuccessful in persuading Edmund Keen to visit Charleston, he did bring T.A. Cooper, Benjamin Incledon, Henry Wallack, Vincent de Camp and Janius Brutus Booth in for special engagements. Booth was a favorite from the start and returned often to Charleston. A presidential visit by James Monroe highlighted the spring of 1819, when the theatre was reported to house 1800 patrons.²⁷

When business slowed in Charleston, Gilfert toured Savannah. He found Savannah more profitable than Charleston for much of 1822-1823. He felt that Charleston needed a new theatre but could raise no interest in this project. The proprietors of the Charleston Theatre did undertake a renovation of the theatre, and Gilfert opened his Fall and Winter season of 1823-1824 with renewed efforts to obtain a first rate company and to bring in more stars.²⁸ His efforts were continued in the following season and received consistent praise from the Courier drama critic, S.C. Carpenter.²⁹ But once again, financial problems forced a manager

to lose interest in Charleston. Gilfert closed the season in the spring of 1825 and did not return.³⁰ Charleston was to miss sorely this enthusiastic manager.

No new manager was found until February 1826, when Joe Cowell leased the theatre. Cowell was an actor unknown to Charleston, and, if it had not been for the appearance of Edmund Kean in April, his reign as manager would have gone almost unnoticed. But Kean was noticed and his coming to Charleston caused great consternation. Kean's behavior in Boston had gotten vegetables thrown at him and he was hissed off the stage. He had refused to play to small houses and reportedly had made uncompromising statements about America. Charlestonians felt that his appearance in Charleston would cause trouble.³¹ But Kean's opening performance of Richard III won Charleston's audiences as it had wherever he performed. His arrival on stage was greeted by "applause...and it had a talismatic effect on him - those eyes of his of magical brightness, flashed lightning; and his bosom heaved and his whole soul seemed stirred and ready for a mighty effort!.... The welcome given him was long and warm."³² This account by Dr. John B. Irving is just one of several that give a vivid impression of Kean and his Charleston debut. He was never to return to Charleston, but he was apparently never forgotten.

For the next few years, a series of local managers tried their hands at running the theatre. Although the repertory remained interesting and the stock company strong, the profits were neither. Dr. John Dyatt, a local druggist, opened a season from December 1826 to May 1827. He was followed by Dr. John B. Irving who, despite bringing in a number of stars, was unable to make the theatre show a profit. Irving is notable now only because of the informative reminiscences he published in a series

of newspaper articles.³³ John Jay Adams tried managing for two brief periods in 1828 and 1829, even touring Savannah and Augusta with his troupe. But in December 1829, he turned the theatre over to three others. Thomas Faulkner, a member of the troupe, Irving, and another local, Charles L. Green, formed a partnership. But the theatre was by now facing competition from all sorts of non-theatrical forms of entertainment, and three managers seemed to generate three times the problems with cast members.

Faulkner alone opened the season of 1830-1831 with more success. Edwin Forrest made his first appearance in Charleston in February 1831 and T.A. Cooper returned and again proved a favorite. But when the season closed, Faulkner relinquished the management.

Another actor, who had just gained status as a traveling star, Vincent DeCamp, was appointed manager. He managed the Charleston Theatre during spring 1832 and again in the fall and winter of 1832-1833. But he was unable to "awaken the dormant public"³⁴ even with such stars as James Hackett, Charles Kean, Josephine Clifton, and James Wallack. The proprietors of the Charleston Theatre could find no new manager and so they sold the theatre to the newly-organized Medical College of the State of South Carolina for \$12,000.³⁵

From the sale of the Charleston Theatre in 1834 until the building of the "new" building in 1837, theatre fell upon hard times in Charleston. Unlike 1790's where each small start was followed by a better season or the period around 1812 where theatre simply was not attempted, the years 1834-1837 were the low ebb of Charleston's ante-bellum theatre.³⁶ A make-shift theatre was organized on Queen Street, and Seyle's Long Room was converted into Seyle's "Theatre." Still virtually nothing of

importance took place. Often the theatre managers ran circuses or other forms of entertainment and a few stars appeared such as Tyrone Power, T.A. Cooper, and his daughter, Priscilla.

Theatre was all but ended in Charleston when in 1837 a group of businessmen organized "The Charleston New Theatre Company." Built on a lot on the west side of Meeting Street between Market and Horlbeck Alley, "nothing in the South at the time could have been compared favorably with the New Charleston."³⁷ William Abbott, a London actor, was named manager, and great preparations were made for the opening in December 1837. Abbott was quite knowledgeable and set out to bring some of the best touring stars of the period to open the new theatre. Ellen Tree, T.A. Cooper, Priscilla Cooper, Josephine Clifton, John M. Vandenhoff, Charles K. Mason, James Hackett and J. B. Booth all appeared during the winter of 1837-1838. The season was cut short by a city-wide fire in April, but the theatre was saved. The next three seasons under Abbott's leadership vastly improved the theatrical scene in Charleston. A regular opera season was added to the theatre season, and the stars continued to come.

Abbott left Charleston in 1841, and W.H. Latham, a former stock player, assumed control. Latham was more interested in opera than theatre and his season of 1841-1842 did not reflect the tastes of Charlestonians according to an editorial in the Courier that spring.³⁸

But yet another great manager was found. William C. Forbes had had experience in New York and Philadelphia before coming to Charleston in 1842. He had financial interests in Savannah's and Augusta's theatres and therefore was able to attract several important stars to tour this strong circuit.³⁹ He was responsible for the first appearance of

William Charles Macready in January 1844, a star who was apparently as taken with Charleston as it was with him.⁴⁰ Forbes is credited with bringing several leading players to Charleston, providing excellent stock companies, enlarging the orchestra for opera work and refurbishing the theatre. An actor himself, Forbes was a favorite in tragic roles. When he closed his fifth season at the New Charleston Theatre in March 1847, the theatre was ten years old and had been under his care for five years. Forbes left Charleston and went on to other theatres in the North: perhaps the problems ahead were already clear to him.

During the next six years, the theatre had six different managers. The original group of investors sold out to a group called "friends of the Drama", who hoped to restore the theatre to the prestige Forbes had given it.⁴¹ They met with little success. In January 1850, F.C. Adams and his acting manager, H.V. Lovell, attempted to revive the drama. They were given encouragement in the local press,⁴² but apparently were hard pressed to show a profit. J.B. Booth returned in February 1850 with his young son, Edwin, who would capture Charleston on his own in a few years. Charlotte Cushman, the "greatest actress produced on the America stage,"⁴³ appeared in April 1850, but even with such a steady stream of stars, Adams could not make a success out of managing.

The final decade prior to the Civil War was a full of excitement and political agitation for the city, but not for the theatre. Seven more managers attempted to run the theatre and Charleston remained the theatrical leader in the South. But the prosperity was stagnant for Charleston had nothing new to show the world. Stars such as Jenny Lind, Julia Dean, Anna Cora Mowatt, J. Lester Wallack, and Edwin Booth, were sandwiched between innumerable opera companies, ballet companies, trained

dog acts and magicians. And yet by today's standards, the repertory was vast and varied. The last three managers, John Stoman, John Sloan, and G.F. Marchant, have to be commended for keeping the theatre as strong as it was.⁴⁴ The political situation yearly grew more desperate, and in 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. War in the harbour was certainly more compelling than war on the stage. Marchant tried to keep the theatre going, though he had no company and had to rely solely on traveling acts. The audiences had all but stopped coming, and in December 1861 the New Charleston Theatre was destroyed by fire. Charleston's leadership in the South was ending; her leadership in American theatre was over. ↙

This overview of Charleston's theatrical activities is offered to suggest the amount of theatre available to and supported by Charleston's audiences from 1785 till 1860. The painstaking job of compiling day-by-day records of this period has been completed. As already noted Willis' The Charleston Stage in the XVIII, With Social Settings of the Time sets forth much of Charleston's early theatrical history. Julia Curtis has more fully explored the material presented by Willis in her dissertation, "The Early Charleston Stages: 1703-1798." William S. Hoole's The Antebellum Charleston Theatre focuses upon the individual managers, companies, stars, and local actors who offered so much during the nineteenth century.

But in all of this history, very little attention has been paid to the audience who for over a hundred years continued to support the theatre in Charleston. Although it is difficult to provide concrete descriptions of any audience, data exist to permit some conclusions about the demography, taste, and behavior of audiences. Demographic information is available through the national censuses which were made every

ten years beginning in 1790. An audience's taste can be explored through the study of repertory, and the behavior of the audiences is often reported in newspaper accounts and contemporary writings.

As Jerry Bailor points out in his dissertation, "The Late Eighteenth-Century Theatrical Public of London, England," historical studies of theatre audiences provide significant contributions to the understanding of theatre art known in any given historical period.⁴⁵ Having gained the respect of theatre historians, more audience studies are being undertaken. Two such well-received studies are John Lough's Paris Theatre Audiences In The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries and Harry William Pedicord's The Theatrical Public in the Time of Garrick. Lough divides his study chronologically with the works of major playwrights being highlighted. Pedicord divides his study into sections on the physical theatre, the economic aspects of playgoing, the quality of spectators and the quality of the repertoire as measured by box office success. This study which is broad in terms of the time period to be studied will follow Lough's chronological divisions as Charleston's theatre history seems to fall into three categories.

The first period is one of growth in Charleston's theatrical history and ends with Placide's death in 1812. The second period is highlighted by the touring stars and comes to a close with the closing of the "old" Charleston Theatre in 1834. The New Charleston Theatre, its hayday under William Forbes' management and then the long decline leading up to the Civil War, will mark the third period to be discussed. Within these three periods, demography, taste and behavior of the audiences will be explored.

The history of American theatre is being compiled through regional studies. Although the stage of Charleston has received careful and thorough study, we have to date only that framework of facts on which to base our understanding. The goal of this study will be to fill out that framework with information about the audiences that provided the necessary support to place Charleston in the annals of American theatre history.

CHAPTER TWO

The investigation of the initial period of theatrical growth in the newly-incorporated city of Charleston is frustrated by a lack of abundant material to study. But between 1790 and 1812 two theatres were built. An invigorating competition developed between two culturally different troupes. The Charleston Theatre was managed by Thomas West and John Bignall and the City Theatre was managed by John Sollee. But these two troupes eventually merged and Alexander Placide the first manager with an extensive professional theatre background took control. Stephen Cullen Carpenter the first drama critic intent on improving the dramatic offerings was consistently writing criticism and reviews. An audience existed during this period in such strength as to warrant this professional theatrical growth. In order to describe this audience from 1790 to 1812, it is necessary to look closely at the physical theatres they attended, to study the repertory that they saw, and to note how they were described in the newspapers. Lastly demographic information from the censuses of 1790, 1800, and 1810 will be examined.

The first theatre to be built in the newly-incorporated city of Charleston was the Charleston Theatre of 1793. The theatre was built on a triangular corner lot of Broad and Middleton (now New) streets.¹ Although the location of the theatre is quite certain, much debate has been raised concerning the exact nature of the theatre.² For many years, historians believed that the Charleston Theatre was the most magnificent playhouse built in America up to that time.³ But the most recent research contradicts this notion. Julia Curtis' article on the architecture and appearance of the Charleston Theatre clearly demonstrates that the theatre was merely a serviceable brick structure of no imposing architecture or appearance.⁴ Thomas Wade West and John Bignall, the two theatre mana-

gers who built the Charleston Theatre, certainly hoped for and promised an outstanding theatre. Numerous articles in the Charleston newspapers⁵ and the New York Magazine⁶ promised a theatre modeled after the lavish opera house in London.

As built, the theatre measured about 133 ft. by 55 ft. It was typical of the playhouses of that period in that it provided three types of seating areas for the audience, in the traditional box, pit, and gallery arrangement. Such an arrangement provided private seating in the boxes for small groups, open seating in the pit, and crowded seating or standing in the gallery. The Charleston Theatre had two tiers of boxes along the sides and back of the auditorium, as best can be determined.⁷ Five boxes ran along each side of each tier⁸ with a foyer or passageway along the front of the building. Although no exact architectural drawings or rendering exist, an important sketch was discovered by Miss Curtis which allows for these conclusions.⁹ Similarly no actual figures are available on seating capacity. However, according to the Times April 8, 1807, the major portion of the audience was seated in the boxes, sides and back. These boxes could hold about a thousand spectators and another four hundred could be squeezed into the pit and gallery, according to the newspaper. It should be noted that as in other box, pit, and gallery theatres, the boxes were the most expensive seats and it was on these tickets that the managers depended for financial success. The proportion of seats in the boxes strongly argues for an audience with the means to afford these seats. In fact, often the demand for boxes reportedly overwhelmed the number available and then the pit was divided into "boxes." Increased attendance by "ladies" necessitated the seating shift which would indicate a certain social status

for the audience as well as wealth.¹⁰

West and Bignall raised the money for the Charleston Theatre through subscription. From an initial committee soliciting subscribers, they collected 2,500 pounds from about fifty prominent Charleston businessmen and property owners.¹¹ But actual building costs overran the initial investment and more subscribers had to be found before the theatre construction could be finished.¹² These subscribers presumably formed a core of theatregoers which further point to an audience of wealth and status. The theatre finally opened in a much simplified version than originally planned at somewhere near twice the original estimate for costs. In a review of the opening night performance the interior was complimented for its "taste...in the scenery, decorations and embellishments; which, however, they may be exceeded by gaudy glitter, can nowhere be surpassed in neatness and simple elegances."¹³

It is unfortunate, but nevertheless true that even less is known about the second theatre built the following year, 1794, in Charleston. It was the second permanent French theatre to be established in the United States. The success of a group of touring French actors at the Charleston Theatre led the French community of Charleston to raise money and to establish a permanent theatre for the company. The theatre was located at No. 40 Church Street. It is unclear whether a new structure was built or an existing brick structure known as Sollee's Hall was renovated.¹⁴ It was on the west side of Church Street between St. Michael's Alley and Tradd Street.¹⁵ According to advertised ticket prices,¹⁶ its seating arrangement was also box, pit, and gallery, but size and capacity are unknown. What does become clear is that it was a smaller, more cramped house in comparison to the Charleston Theatre. Given any opportunity

a company would move from the French Theatre to the Charleston Theatre in order to accommodate a larger paying audience.¹⁷ Placide, the experienced French manager who gained control of the company of actors at the French Theatre in 1798, abandoned that playhouse altogether in 1800 and it was never used again as a theatre.¹⁸

Further complicating the investigation of the playhouse on Church Street are the various names under which the theatre was operated. Clearly the theatre opened in 1794 as the French Theatre with a company of French actors presumably for a predominately French speaking audience. This troupe performed for some five months in the French Theatre. However, over half of the company quit the troupe and joined with actors at the Charleston Theatre in the fall of 1794. The French Theatre reopened in December of 1794 as the Church Street Theatre under the management of John Sollee and was a primarily English speaking company. This season lasted until the end of February 1795. Again a number of actors changed troupes and when the playhouse reopened in November of 1795, it was called the City Theatre.¹⁹ That the playhouse on Church Street under whatever name was in direct competition with the Charleston Theatre is clear and that both theatres were after virtually the same audience becomes clear after a study of their repertory.

The strongest indication of an audience's taste is found in the repertory they supported. Charleston's repertory has been established through the study of newspaper advertisements. As Hoole points out in an article on the Charleston Theatre, public taste is only indirectly reflected by theatre repertory which ultimately is chosen for financial profit by one man or a group of men. But since financial success was the goal of these privately owned theatre companies, "the play most fre-

quently presented was doubtless the one which put most money in the manager's till, and, at the same time, the one which reflected the standard set by the audiences." Representative repertory analyses are given in the appendices.

In considering the repertory of this period, 1790 to 1812, it is remarkable to note the number of plays introduced. There is very little repetition within a season and season after season brings new repertory. The repertory would suggest attempts to offer as much variety as possible to an audience not particularly rigid in its tastes. Consistent theatre-goers do not usually support a lot of repetition. Certainly during this period of growth more comedy, farce, and musical entertainments were offered than tragedy or serious drama. The suggestions of political divisions of audiences along lines of Federalists and Republicans, at the Charleston Theatre and French Theatre respectively, is only supportable during the first season of competition in 1794. After that season the repertories become interchangeable as actors and managers switch theatres and both theatres strive for the rather small body of playgoers. From the repertory comes the major assumption of a consistent, but small season audience which favored a light and entertaining repertory with only little regard to political thought. It is also noteworthy that Charleston's repertory was generally the same as repertories of the other theatrical centers. But the rapidity by which new plays came from London, New York, and Philadelphia suggest an eagerness on Charleston's part to be in the theatrical mainstream despite location and size.

The audience's awareness of theatrical events and practices is apparent in the existence of a knowledgeable and discriminating drama critic during this period of growth in Charleston's Theatre. Stephen Cullen

Carpenter served as the first drama critic of the Charleston Courier from 1803 to 1806.²³ Although considerable dramatic reviews and comments by anonymous "correspondents" appeared in Charleston newspapers before 1803,²⁴ Carpenter represents the first consistently offered criticisms by a knowledgeable writer. Carpenter dealt with all aspects of the theatrical climate in Charleston such as "the quality of performance, the literary merits of the plays themselves, dramatic principles and the social value of drama."²⁵ Using the pseudonym of "Thespis," Carpenter had a number of goals in writing his criticism. He sought to offer informed dramatic criticism in order to improve the quality of acting, the choice of plays, and public support.²⁶ The exact nature of his influence and the degree to which Carpenter influenced the audience cannot be measured. But his writings strongly suggest an intelligent, thinking audience interested in such discourse.

If the emerging picture of early Charleston audiences depicts the audience as unduly intelligent or wealthy, it is perhaps wise to consider descriptions of audience behavior as found in contemporary newspapers. These references are scattered and varied, but in total present a rather consistent picture. The audience viewed theatre as entertainment and a social necessity. One indicator of the social nature of theatre going is how often productions were postponed or scheduled because of balls, Race Week or other social events.²⁷ Similarly the newspapers often commented on the gregariousness of the audience and the managers attempts to alleviate the resulting acoustical problems.²⁸ Since the repertory presented plays of a light and comic vein with a great deal of visual spectacle, talking and visiting among the audience members seems to be the accepted practice. The seating arrangement in the boxes did not

promote very good sight lines, so in order to see the stage, gentlemen often had to stand in the rear of the boxes. This also led to much socializing.²⁹

Whether slaves or free blacks were admitted to Charleston's theatres of this period is an often raised question. It seems that Charleston's City Council during this period publically proclaimed an ordinance prohibiting blacks in the theatres³⁰ and hand bills and newspaper advertisements were printed with "No admittance for people of colour in any part of the House."³¹ No similar ordinance nor hand bills were found in other theatrical centers. Because this policy is often viewed in light of Charleston's role in the political events leading to the Civil War, the significance to audience composition may have been overlooked. Denying black patrons admission, beginning in 1795, may reflect the role of the French refugees in the audiences of the time. Having escaped from Santo Domingo during slave uprisings, these French refugees may have had a strong voice in the legal elimination of blacks from audiences. Certainly the repertoires of the initial season of the French Theatre and subsequent seasons at both theatres strongly support the notion of a large proportion of French-speaking audience members. Advertisements for both theatres were often in both French and English³² and synopses were printed in English for many productions.³³ At any rate, refusing admission to blacks was often just a question of the delicate balance between economics and community acceptance. John Sollee and Placide were often chided in the newspapers for admitting blacks, but, during economically hard times, these managers admitted anyone who could buy a ticket. Black patrons were routinely banned during seasons when ticket sales were doing well.³⁴

From the audiences' viewpoint, the competition between two companies at two theatres was artistically invigorating. However financially, it was a disaster. Clearly the audiences did not exist in numbers large enough to support two theatres. The repertories were so similar as to be interchangeable, and actors and managers moved freely from one company to the other. Even after 1798 when Placide had emerged as the manager for a large, stable company with no local competition, Charleston's audience only supported two short seasons usually running in the fall and winter.³⁵ Placide soon found touring from Charleston and returning for short seasons to be the most profitable arrangement.

A final consideration of the audiences from 1790 to 1812 is found in examining the demographics of Charleston as revealed by the federally mandated censuses of 1790, 1800, and 1810. The notion of history from census returns is not a new one,³⁶ but nevertheless has proved frustrating for this time period. Other than total population figures, no useful information was discovered. In terms of total white population Charleston District grew from 11,801 to 14,374 to 16,011.³⁷ The district encompassed areas now in Charleston, Colleton, Dorchester, and Berkely counties, which distorts any clear cut understanding of the population immediate to the theatres' location. It is interesting to note that the census of 1790 indicated a greater white than black population in St. Phillip's and St. Michael's parishes. These parishes comprised the city of Charleston; all other areas in the district had a higher percentage of black than white population.³⁸ But since no actual attendance figures exist for the theatre at this time, it becomes impossible to draw any conclusion about the possible percentages of the population who attended theatre during this time period.

In conclusion, the audiences of the Charleston and French Theatres from 1793 to 1812 can be seen as a small, but supportive audience for the growth of regular theatrical production. The repertories argue strongly for a "same" group attendance because of their lack of repetition. Knowledgeable wealthy, and social, the audience was not large enough to support two theatres, but was able to establish one strong theatre company later under Placide's management.

Chapter Three

The second period of audience investigation is from 1815 to 1833. Since the War of 1812 and Placide's death that same year, the Charleston Theatre had remained closed until the fall of 1815. During the next eighteen years, the "old" Charleston Theatre, as it came to be called, valiantly attempted to serve Charleston's theatrical public. But that public seems to have shifted its interests and loyalties. In order to trace this shift, the repertories, audiences' behavior, and demographics of 1815 to 1833 will be discussed.

Generally the theatrical history of this period is one of traveling stars and financial problems. Two managers, Joseph Holman and Charles Gilfert, were considered outstanding. Holman directed the theatre for two seasons, 1815 to 1817. At Holman's retirement, his brother-in-law and former orchestra leader, Charles Gilfert, assumed the management of the Charleston Theatre. Gilfert managed for eight seasons until 1825. After these two managers, a variety of local and professional managers tried with very little financial success to keep the theatre going. In all there were seven managers over the next eight seasons. But while all these managers failed to find a consistent, supportive audience, they succeeded in offering special engagements of thirty-six traveling stars or companies, in maintaining a varied repertory, and in employing a strong stock company.

The reopening of the Charleston Theatre was well-heralded in the local newspapers.¹ Minor alterations and repairs had been made in the theatre which was now twenty-two years old. However the physical condition of the Charleston Theatre remained a concern throughout this period. Under Holman and Gilfert a number of renovations were made to the theatre, but these renovations were mainly cosmetic in nature. In 1822, Gilfert

tried to raise interest in building a new theatre, but no patrons of the art nor businessmen came forward.²

An unknown writer did strongly suggest that Charleston could not support two theatres.³ This writer also argued for theatre as a proper entertainment for the public that ought to be governed by state legislation. He mentions the need for compromise between the proprietors of the theatre and Gilfert, for the good of the theatrical public. "The individual interest in a theatre, must of itself be unimportant. The pecuniary advantage derived, cannot be an object even to a mercenary mind. Like a society of arts, it [the theatre] should ever be serving its end, when it promotes the rational and refined pleasures of the community in which it exists."⁴ Nevertheless, theatre in Charleston as in the rest of the country, was a commercial venture and such reasoning, though it may have swayed Gilfert in not persuing the backing for a new theatre, did not move more interest in theatre attendance. In fact the Charleston community, which was deemed not supportive of two theatres, was supportive of other entertainments. Advertisements abound throughout this period for circuses, panoramas, animal acts and other amusements, indicating a growing audience for paratheatrical entertainment and a diminishing legitimate theatre audience.⁵

Even the return of the drama critic, Stephen Cullen Carpenter, provided only a short revival in theatrical interest.⁶ Carpenter's series of articles on the theatre throughout the season of 1824-1825 only partially succeeded in rallying the Charleston audience. His articles again were knowledgeable theatrical criticisms but apparently failed to arouse larger audience attendance. Gilfert retired as manager at the end of the season and left Charleston. No other drama critic appeared after

Carpenter stopped writing and the "old" Charleston Theatre lived out the end of its theatrical days in very meager fashion.⁷

The repertory of 1815 to 1833 is not radically different than that of the earlier period of 1790 to 1812. . . . Generally, the seasons averaged seventy performances down from an average of eighty performances per season from 1790 to 1812. But during this period, very short seasons of less than forty performances were often followed by very long seasons of ninety or more performances as a new manager or managers would attempt to arouse audience interest. The repertory remained light and entertaining, though fewer new plays were added as the season went on. Repetition of new pieces increased though only slightly more so than in the earlier period. The most notable change in the repertory was the increase in the production of Shakespearean plays. This increase is most probably the result of traveling stars rather than refined audience taste. The touring star or "special engagement" was a growing phenomenon during this period. More and more actors who had received a measure of critical acclaim were finding it profitable to travel to theatrical centers and to perform there with the local resident companies. The local companies hired these stars as a way of increasing attendance. The stars found Shakespeare's plays were ideal vehicles to showcase their talents, and pieces such as Richard III, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello were often repeated within a season by different traveling stars. In the article "Shakespeare on the Ante-Bellum Charleston Stages," William Hoole suggest "the player and not the play was 'the thing.'" ⁸

If the repertory does not sharply indicate a shift in audience make up, descriptions of behavior are markedly different than in the previous period. In part this may only be a reflection of the greater amount of

material available for study in newspapers and personal reminiscences. One of the most interesting sources for audience behavior and theatrical activities is Dr. John Irving's writings about Charleston theatres. In two series of reminiscences, Irving covers a vast amount of theatrical history. The first series was entitled "The Theatre as It is and as It was" and was published in the Courier in twenty-three installments from December 1857 through January 1859. A second series was published in eleven installments in March and April of 1870 as "Early Days of the Drama in Charleston."⁹ Although these articles were written some years after the events they describe, they are, nevertheless, the most extensive writings on theatre in Charleston written during the nineteenth century. Irving wrote that he was able "to speak of the Theatre here, 'for' nearly fifty years from personal recollection; in which time I have known every actor and manager - many of them intimately - their life and conversation, and style of acting quite familiar to me."¹⁰

Irving's comments are primarily focused on the actors who played Charleston from about 1806 to 1860; however, he does describe the audience on many occasions. Generally, the audiences were "an intelligent community" such as the one that welcomed "Miss Lydia Kelly [1828] - a superb woman, and charming actress... Her reception was such, as at once to convince her that her talents and attractive graces would meet with all the support and encouragement to which they were entitled from an intelligent community."¹¹ On the other hand, his descriptions of audience behavior suggests more rowdiness among audience members than the social visitings that took place during the earlier period discussed. "[T]he audience was tearing up the benches, demolishing the chandelier, and doing a great many other things, denoting an intent bent on mischief"¹² is how

Irving describes the audience in their reaction to a dispute between a manager, Holman, and one of his players, James Caldwell, in 1817.

The change in the audience's behavior may be a result of fewer women attending the theatre. The notion that fewer women were attending the theatre comes from several sources. When the Charleston Theatre reopened in 1815, one of the first announcements about the theatre dealt with the issue of seating for ladies. "Among the alterations made in the theatre, due care has been taken to secure ladies of Charleston from the possibility of being improperly associated; avenues completely distinct have therefore been made to lead to the separate divisions of the Boxes...the first Boxes, together with the Pit, are appropriated to the reception of Ladies of respectability exclusively."¹³ The announcement seems to be reassuring the ladies that it will be proper to attend theatre as specific measures have been taken to assure their safety and "proper association." So it is this public assurance of respectability which itself seems to argue that between 1815 and 1833, respectable Charleston ladies shunned the Charleston Theatre.

Similarly, although traveling stars were a major attraction of the period, mention is pointedly made that only one woman attended Edmund Kean's opening performance in Charleston.¹⁴ By 1826 and Kean's Charleston tour, Charleston's theatre audiences were already known for their opinionated behavior. Kean, though highly regarded as an actor, had met with strong American rejection because of his anti-American behavior off stage and on during his American tour. The Courier warned theatregoers who were hostile to Kean to "absent themselves from his performances" so that "public peace and tranquility as well as the property of the innocent owners of the theatre" might be spared.¹⁵ Kean's opening performance was a sell-

out, with some twelve hundred patrons present, but the wife of the district attorney was the only woman there. The manager of the theatre at this time was Joe Cowell and it is from his reminiscences that we learn the identity of the one lady and a suggestion that her presence alone saved the evening from disruption.¹⁶ Irving suggests that Kean's great performance kept the audience in line.¹⁷ But the impression is clear that the presence of women in the Charleston Theatre audience had dwindled, signalling or perhaps causing the decline of a consistent theatregoing audience.

It is impossible to say for certain if decline in female patrons was the result of or the cause of the poor behavior of mostly male audiences. While formerly advertisements for the theatre had dealt with elaborate descriptions of scenery and play synopses, advertisements for this period are often full of rules and regulations regarding theatre policy and proper behavior. Specifically, advertisements reminded patrons that tickets were only good for the date issued;¹⁸ that "checks" were not transferable;¹⁹ that postponement of performances will never take place, in consequence of weather, or any other cause;²⁰ that gentlemen are not to walk on the seats and officers are appointed to preserve the decorum in the theatre;²¹ and no smoking is allowed in the theatre.²² The papers also reveal complaints about people standing in the Pit.²³ In all the picture of the audience that emerges from these advertisements is of an audience not accustomed to theatregoing; an audience more involved in camaraderie than theatrical entertainment.

Also noteworthy in describing the audiences are the accounts of visiting dignitaries who came to the Charleston Theatre both to see productions and to be honored. President James Monroe visited Charleston in 1819²⁴

and General LaFayette in 1825.²⁵ Both occasions were grand festivities with elaborate decorations, orations, and balls. Attendance in the theatre for the presidential visit is said to have been in excess of eighteen hundred, but there is serious doubt as to whether that figure could possible be accurate.²⁶ But the decorations and special presentations for these visiting dignitaries were often left up in the theatre and advertised later as available for audience viewing, suggesting again that the audience's interests were not primarily in theatrical entertainment.

Two national censuses were taken during this period and although the difficulty in interpreting those censuses is still apparent, it is interesting to note two studies concerning the censuses of 1820 and 1830. In 1826, the noted architect, Robert Mills, published his Statistics of South Carolina.²⁷ While reporting the census figures for Charleston as 24,780 in the city and 37,471 including the suburbs,²⁸ Mills suggest that "this...is much under the mark; for the census of 1820 was taken in the summer, when, at the lowest computation, from 1500 to 2000 inhabitants were absent from Charleston (principally at the north,) who were not included in the above enumeration."²⁹ Mills put the population at 27,000 in the city proper; 40,000 including the suburbs. Mills includes a description of the Charleston Theatre that unfortunately is very general and does not add greatly to our understanding of the physical building.³⁰ But he does make two observation about Charleston which may throw light on the nature of her audiences. In speaking on the state of the arts and literature, Mills say "Charleston has not yet acquired that degree of taste, leisure, and wealth, which would enable it sufficiently to reward the exertions of the artist, depending altogether on his profession for support."³¹ And in listing the customs and amusements of Charleston,

Mills makes no reference to the theatre.³²

The census of 1830 has been analyzed in a study of economics and politics during Charleston's Nullification Crisis written by Jane and William Pease.³³ This analysis is interesting in two ways. First "keepers of public houses and entertainers" are an occupation that appears in the analysis and secondly, the article clearly supports the notion that the "nullification drama" is perhaps more compelling than what could be found in the theatre, a notion which foreshadows the future problems theatre will face in Charleston during the next three decades.

Since no exact attendance figures are available for the Charleston Theatre we might assume fewer people were actually going to the theatre as fewer productions were being offered and there had been no increase in the size of the theatre. On the other hand, more people may have been seeing some theatre as there is no indication that the theatre was being supported by the same audience throughout a season. Again, there is no clear suggestion of audience to be drawn from the demographics. The Peases' article does indicate a stagnant economy and a growing young population of male workers "who owned no land, who left no probate record, and who probably worked as cartmen, teamsters, sailors, watchmen, and day laborers,"³⁴ ideal candidates for the type of audience suggested by advertisements and descriptions of behavior.

In all the period from 1815 to 1833 is one in which manager after manager attempts to find the right combination of plays and stars to be rewarded by a consistent audience, but all are generally unsuccessful. From the advertisements and descriptions comes the notion of less attendance by women, more attendance by men, but no one group of consistent theatregoers. If the theatre audience of 1793 to 1812 could be seen as

a small but supportive group of social and civil importance, the theatre audience of 1815 to 1833 seems more heterogeneous, whose interest is more focused on personalities than on plays. In the spring of 1833, the Charleston Theatre was sold to the newly organized Medical College of the State of South Carolina³⁴ and another period of Charleston theatrical history was ended.

Chapter Four

The last period for audience consideration is the longest and most diverse in Charleston's antebellum theatrical history. In many ways theatre audiences from 1833 to 1860 saw the best and the worst theatre ever presented in Charleston. More people probably attended theatre during this period than anytime prior, and those audiences were probably the most diverse and demanding audiences to date. But even if the Civil War had not interrupted Charleston's theatrical history, a certain shift in public acceptance and perception of theatre altered that history and Charleston's leadership in American theatre history would have ended at any rate. The audiences of 1833 to 1860 had new physical theatres to attend, more variety in repertories, and different patterns of behavior than in the two earlier periods discussed. As with the other two periods repertories, behavior, and demographics will be discussed.

With the closing of the "old" Charleston Theatre and general lack of support by the public, one would expect to find no theatrical entertainment for sometime in Charleston. However, in less than twenty-four hours after the closing of the Charleston Theatre, actors from the "old" Charleston Theatre had found two new managers interested in continuing the season. As there were no other theatres in Charleston, a new playing space had to be found. Situated on the corner of Queen and Friend (now Legare) streets was a wooden barn-like structure which the new managers, Hart and Hardy, were able to convert into a theatre overnight.¹ Little is known about the Queen Street Theatre, as it was named. In his reminiscences Dr. Irving reports that the theatre was an old circus building where a temporary stage was erected. He continues by praising Charlestonians for converting a circus into a theatre, whereas Londoners had recently been criticized for allowing the Drury Lane Theatre be used as

as a circus.² Actually managers Hart and Hardy offered Charleston both theatre and circus at the Queen Street Theatre by maintaining a stock company and associating two circus companies with the theatre.

Along with the stock company and circuses, the Queen Street Theatre continued to bring touring stars to Charleston. Tyrone Power, "Jim Crow" Rice, "Yankee" Hill, T.A. Cooper and his daughter Priscilla, and James Hackett all had special engagements at the Queen. Apparently, though, neither the actors nor the audiences found the Queen Street Theatre very comfortable. Power called the theatre a "barn"³ and "patrons, accustomed to comfortable seats in a well-lighted, spaciouly arranged building with excellent stage accommodations, were not enthusiastic over a 'make-shift barn' better suited for circus than the presentation of legitimate plays."⁴ The Queen Street Theatre did manager to present three short seasons of theatrical entertainment.

Another theatre space was created in 1836; however, it was only open a few weeks. Several members of the Queen Street Theatre became unhappy with Hart and Hardy's management and under the leadership of T. Preston opened a second theatre in Seyle's Long Room on Meeting Street. The Queen Street Theatre continued their season, but the competition between the two companies was apparently not successful. The Seyle Theatre only produced twelve performances before the two companies re-united and continued the season of 1835-1836 at the Queen Street Theatre, under the new management of W.M. Lanning.⁵ Although the Seyle Theatre was described as offering patrons "pleasure combined with comfort,"⁶ the re-united company choose to use the Queen Street Theatre as it was larger and could hold more theatregoers.

Theatregoers, however, had not attended the Queen Street Theatre in such numbers to convince the former managers nor any new managers to continue to run the Queen. During the season of 1836-1837, the Ravel Family rented the Queen Street Theatre along with Plamer's Pavilion Circus. The Ravels were famous for their "astonishing exhibitions of gymnastics"⁷ having been introduced to Charleston in 1834 by Hart and Hardy. One play was presented during the spring of 1837 but it is unclear who the actors were for the three performances of the farce, Vol-au-Vent.⁸ As William Hoole suggests "the low tide in theatricals had been reached" in Charleston.⁹

As early as 1835 a group of local businessmen had bought a lot on Meeting Street and formed "The Charleston New Theatre Company",¹⁰ hoping to reestablish a profitable theatre in Charleston. The result of their efforts was the New Charleston Theatre which opened December 15, 1837. The New Charleston was the most outstanding theatre in the South and its design and construction have been well documented.¹¹ A great deal of care was taken to provide patrons with comfort and convenience.

The Parquet or Pit is connected with the dress circle of Boxes, and is divided off into nicely cushioned seats, after the plan of the French Theatre-this is a decided improvement, and will add to much to the comfort and accommodation of the audience, as all the seats are numbered, and can be taken, that we should not be surprised to find this part of the Theatre, nightly the resort of the elite and fashion of the city.¹²

The French Theatre mentioned here is apparently a reference to current theatre practice in France and not a reference to the French Theatre of Charleston in 1794.

The new theatre and two outstanding managers did restore theatre to Charleston. William Abbott and William C. Forbes managed the theatre

for nine of the next ten seasons. Abbott was manager from 1837 to 1841, followed by a single season under W.H. Lathan's management. Forbes directed the New Charleston from 1842 to 1847. They restored drama to the Charleston stage, brought in the most impressive arrays of internationally known players, and once again made Charleston known as a theatrical center. The short season under Lathan was primarily noted for the amount of opera and musical entertainment offered, but was financially unsuccessful.¹³

But the success of the New Charleston may have brought complacency and when Forbes relinquished the theatre's management in 1847, theatre in Charleston started on a downward trend that ended with the permanent loss of Charleston's preeminence in American theatre history. For the next six years, six managers attempted to run the theatre. Unhappy with their investment, the proprietors of the New Charleston sold the theatre to a group of interested businessmen who claimed they "would carry on the show."¹⁴ But they soon found it more profitable to rent the theatre to traveling shows than to maintain a first rate company with good managers. Gas lighting was installed in the summer of 1848 and more renters were found sandwiched between a mediocre stock company and traveling stars.¹⁵ By the spring of 1849 a circus was running full time in the lot behind the theatre, causing the theatre to be "nothing more than a circus side-show."¹⁶ On stage were the Bedouin Arabs, Herr Alexander, a magician, and the Heron family of actors, dancers, and gymnasts.

But still stars came to Charleston. William Charles Macready, Edwin Booth, Charlotte Cushman all played the New Charleston. Perhaps most noteworthy was Jenny Lind's engagement at the New Charleston in December of 1850. Miss Lind captured the hearts of Charleston as she had wherever she appeared and her visit inspired an original play.¹⁷ "Variety is the

order of the day at the theatre. Novelty succeeds novelty in rapid succession", reported the Courier.¹⁸

New managers continually tried and succeeded in keeping the theatre open, but as the Succession Movement grew, theatrical interests paled in the light of growing political interest. Audiences could still be found to keep the theatre open and stars kept coming, but "too many were the pressures and excitements of real life...for Charlestonians to be much interested in the mimic scene."¹⁹ South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20, 1860. No regular stock company was employed at the New Charleston after April of 1860 and though the theatre was rented during part of 1860 and 1861, Charleston's days of theatrical leadership were over.

The repertory for this period 1833-1860 is far more varied than any other period. Generally, more performances were given, averaging about 105 performances a season during the twenty-six seasons from 1833 to 1860. More repetition within seasons is found, often with a play being repeated several times in a row. This would suggest a theatre audience of new members over the run of particular play. More tragedies and serious dramas are found in the repertory, but like the rising number of Shakespearean productions, indicate more star appearances than a change in audience taste. Productions of Shakespeare rose, with one-fourth of the repertory being by the Bard; interestingly nearly one half of the traveling stars' repertory was Shakespearean.²⁰

The amount of repertory other than legitimate drama is almost a fourth of the repertory. During the four-and-a-half years after the "old" Charleston closed and before the New Charleston opened, almost half of the repertory was paratheatrical entertainment such as acrobats, animal acts,

and circuses. Generally fewer new plays were added to the repertories. Opera presentations had grown. Often the operas were presented by special opera troupes such as the Sequin Opera Company which toured Charleston in 1841 and 1842, and Anna Bishop's Opera Company which came in 1847. However popular opera was to some segments of the audience, at least one manager, W.H. Lathan, was chided by the Courier for being too opera-minded to suit the general public's taste.²¹

In checking the repertories as advertised in the newspapers, the growth of other forms of entertainment is quite noticeable. Advertisements for animal exhibits, panoramas, giants, and carnival-type "freaks" not only abound, but they are larger and more eye-catching. The theatre advertisement generally get smaller and less noticeable throughout the period. Unlike the earlier periods in Charleston, there is no clear indication from the repertory of audience make up. The variety and extreme diversity of the period would suggest a very diverse and nightly changing audience. Repetition and longer engagements by stars and special companies would also suggest a large audience of infrequent theatregoers. That stars attracted more attendance than the stock companies seems to be reflected in fewer performances by the stock companies alone.

A noticeable shift in behavior is the rising amount of direct criticism over the existence of theatre in Charleston which in this period is unprecedented. While religious criticism of theatre has been widespread in other part of the country,²² Charleston had heard little from religious leaders condemning theatre. But with the building of the New Charleston, a number of such criticisms surfaced. The Southern Baptist reported "a new theatre is about to be erected in this city...what a pity."²³ More seriously, the Reverend Doctor Thomas Smyth felt compelled to de-

liver two discourses on the dangers of the theatregoing and these discourses were later published for further distribution.²⁴ The Courier refrained from entering the fray but added the following:

It is not our intention to enter into any vindication of dramatic exhibitions. Whatever some may think, we are sure that notwithstanding

"Sunt bona, sunt mediocris, sunt maia pluria," or as we should say in plain American, in these utilitarian days, notwithstanding its abuses, many of good taste, as well as of the patriotic, and the lovers of good order, will always be found to advocate the stage.²⁵

Other champions of the theatre were heard from such as "Otway" who replied to Rev. Smyth's charges.²⁶ But perhaps religious objections caused sporadic theatre attendance by most Charlestonians during this last period of Charleston's ante-bellum theatre history.

Audience behavior is again found described in Dr. Irving's writings. Generally the audiences from 1833 to 1860 are described in such glowing terms as "the beautiful, the good, the intellectual, and the dignified."²⁷ Nevertheless, Irving felt called upon to make these observations at the conclusion of his first series of reminiscences written and published in 1859.

o If audiences hope to have the players respectable, they must be respectable themselves. As "the company" is, before the scenes, so will "the Company" be, behind the scenes. The proprieties ought to be observed in both places. When auditors are ill bred, how can it be expected that actors will be polite-I mean studious to please by elegance of manners and a showing of mental cultivation?

I do not speak this as if there had been, of late, some offences against good breeding in our Theatre-any Boweryisms have been imported from New York, which do not properly belong to our latitude.

Now, these things are so unlike a Charleston audience, or what a Charleston audience used to be in other days, that I am sure, for our good name, and for the good of the Theatre, they will not be permitted to take root here, should they make their appearance; however, all I can say is, at once "reform it altogether." But

how? it may be asked. I answer, nothing more easy. Whenever a person offends, immediately stop the performances on the stage, and do not begin then again until the unbred person, who will prove to be no Carolinian, "no native and to the manner born," is removed from his seat, by a proper officer appointed for the purpose. One such example made, and we will hear no more of rowdyism or Boweryisms, or whatever else it may be called, in our Theatre....²⁸

Although Irving claims that no "rowdyism" exists currently in Charleston theatre audiences, the length and nature of these comments would suggest otherwise.

A search of the demographics from 1833 to 1860, in hope of drawing some useful descriptions of the audiences, once again proves fruitless. No attendance records exist for either the two converted theatre spaces or the New Charleston Theatre. Consequently, although Charleston's population continued to grow as evidenced by the census figures for 1840, 1850 and 1860, no meaningful correlations between theatre attendance and census demographics can be drawn. The censuses of 1850 and 1860 do show changes in church affiliations, which may reflect the growing criticism of theatregoing.

Finally it is perhaps the relative economic prosperity and cultural complacency of Charleston as a whole that allowed the theatre to reach a plateau from which no further growth is recorded. Theatre had become just one of many interests to the Charlestonians and that may have been its downfall. No longer an interest to be passionately supported, theatregoing was supplanted by rising political concerns and the Civil War.

Chapter Five
Conclusion

Dr. George C. Rogers' recent article about Charles Fraser, well known Charleston miniaturist, ties him closely to the Charleston Theatre through his friendship with Thomas Sully, also a successful painter, whose parents were leading theatre performers in Charleston during the 1790s.¹ A sketch-book by Fraser contains a number of theatrical sketches and through them the importance and influence of the theatre to Charleston and these young artists is clearly seen. As Dr. Rogers' article has tried to capture Fraser among his friends, this study has tried to capture the Charleston theatre audiences so as to "glimpse the evanescent patterns of social life."²

Because Charleston was clearly the leader in the theatrical history of the South and well within the mainstream of American theatrical history, the audiences of Charleston's theatre seem to reflect audiences throughout the South and the rest of the country. The analysis of the Charleston audience is hampered as all audience studies are by the extremely transient nature of the group being studied. There remains no question on a census form asking how often one has attended theatre this year and very likely there never will be. But if the existence of an active theatre in a community suggests a level of cultural life, then an attempt to understand who supported that theatre supplies us with a broader understanding of society in past times.

The Charleston theatre audiences developed and supported theatre-going in a location that in itself might not have attracted such growth. And without such leadership from Charleston, it is difficult to see how other areas of the South (particularly Richmond, Savannah, and Augusta), would have had any theatrical history. But theatre found the support it needed in Charleston. However, this support was not always the same

and the shifts reflected in Charleston's theatre audiences indicate patterns that are probably reflected in other areas of the country. It is to Charleston's credit that even in times of economic depression (with the exception of the War of 1812), the theatre remained open. No other area of the South can boast of such continuous theatrical outpouring.

Generally, theatre audiences in Charleston started out very small, but very supportive. These early audiences seemed to be composed of the social leaders of the area and seemed to be equally filled with ladies as well as gentlemen. For at least one season there is the suggestion of political and cultural differences in the audiences of two competing theatres, but these two audiences blended into one during the long leadership of Alexander Placide from 1798 to 1812. Placide's famous theatre tours are responsible for much of Charleston's theatrical influence on other Southern cities. Limited local audiences, in terms of actual numbers, necessitated Southern tours in order for Placide to be financially successful.

A subtle social shift in theatre audiences is noted after the War of 1812. Theatre audiences became more heterogeneous, with representations from more diverse social classes. Whether as a result of this shift or as a cause, fewer women attended the theatre. A parade of different managers found it difficult to be successful financially, but the audiences came in sufficient numbers to encourage new managers to continually offer some theatrical entertainment.

In 1837, the New Charleston Theatre was opened and until its destruction by fire in 1861, was probably the most outstanding playhouse in the South. The audiences at the New Charleston became larger in terms of the actual number who attended and were completely heterogeneous in make

up. Charleston audiences appear very similar to those described by Joseph Roppolo in his article about New Orleans' audiences from 1845 to 1861.³ But these large audiences of ante bellum Charleston no longer seem as interested in theatregoing or it may be that theatregoing was just one of many cultural interests. As William Hoole points out, "There grew a feeling of complacent satisfaction with existing customs, manners, attainments, economic systems, and general life. It was to some degree this feeling of self-sufficiency and, perhaps, of superiority that urged the South to build a separate nation."⁴

In the studies of Charleston's theatrical history, emphasis has been given to all areas of theatre except the audience. This study has attempted to discover some description of those audiences. The findings of this study do not differ in any dramatic way from James Dormon's summary of Southern audiences in his Theatre in the Ante Bellum South,⁵ but it does note the shifts in audiences over the whole period rather than the audiences as they were composed at the end of the ante bellum period. Dormon does not deal with specific audiences as this study did with Charleston audiences. There is no doubt that societies shift and change and perhaps the study of theatre audiences is one tool for measuring these shifts and changes.

Footnotes
Appendices
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FOOTNOTES

Chapter One

¹ James H. Dorman, Theatre in the Ante Bellum South 1815-1861 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p.18.

² Julia Curtis, "The Early Charleston Stage: 1703-1798," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1968, p.120.

³ Ibid., pp.121-2.

⁴ Ibid., p.139.

⁵ Ibid., p.141.

⁶ Eola Willis, The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century. With Social Settings of the Time (Columbia, S.C.: The State Company, 1924), p.104.

⁷ Curtis, "The Early Charleston Stage," p.145.

⁸ Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1977), p.293.

⁹ Curtis, "The Early Charleston Stage," pp.160-1.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.178.

¹¹ William C. Young, Documents of American Theatre History: Famous American Playhouses. 2 vols. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), pp.31-2.

¹² Curtis, "The Early Charleston Stage," p.196.

¹³ This is not the same theatre nor the same site as Harmony Hall as Dorman claims. See Dorman, Theatre in the Ante Bellum South, p.25.

¹⁴ Curtis, "The Early Charleston Stage," p.243.

¹⁵ See Oscar G. Brockett, "The European Career of Alexander Placide," Southern Speech Journal 27 (Summer 1962): 306-13.

¹⁶ Curtis, "The Early Charleston Stage," p.251.

¹⁷ Dorman, Theatre in the Ante Bellum South, p.25.

¹⁸ Curtis, "The Early Charleston Stage," pp.402-6.

- 19 Ibid., pp.410-12.
- 20 William S. Hoole, The Ante-Bellum Charleston Theatre (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1945), p.3.
- 21 Ibid., p.8.
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- 33 See Robinson, "Dr. Irving's Reminiscences," South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine, July 1950, pp.125-31; Oct. 1950, pp.195-215; Jan. 1951, pp.26-33; April 1951, pp.93-106; July 1951, pp.166-79; Oct. 1951, pp.225-32; Jan. 1952, pp.37-47.
- 34 Hoole, The Ante-Bellum Charleston Theatre, p.32.
- 35 Ibid., p.33.
- 36 Ibid., p.37.
- 37 Courier, March 4, 1842.
- 38 Hoole, The Ante-Bellum Charleston Theatre, p.45.
- 39 Ibid., p.47.
- 40 Ibid., pp.51-4.

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REPERTORY ANALYSIS

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The repertories have been analyzed in terms of the number of performances per season, the number of plays and afterpieces, the number of new productions not previously found in repertory, the type of play or afterpiece, the number of Shakespearean plays and the number of star performances.

Appendix A

Representative Season for 1793-1812

Charleston Theatre 1800-1801

Number of performances: 52
Number of plays: 34
Number of afterpieces: 40
Number of new plays: 4
Number of new afterpieces: 0
Types of plays and afterpieces:
 Tragedies/Serious Play - 14
 Comedies - 15
 Farces - 34
 Opera/ Musical Entertainment - 4
 Ballets - 0
 Pantomimes - 2
Number of Shakespearean plays: 4
Number of star performances: 0

Appendix B

Representative Season for 1815-1833

Charleston Theatre 1824-1825

Number of performances: 88
Number of plays: 59
Number of afterpieces: 44
Number of new plays: 7
Number of new afterpieces: 2
Types of plays and afterpieces:
 Tragedies/Serious Plays- 27
 Comedies - 29
 Farces - 39
 Opera/ Musical Entertainmet - 3

Ballets - 0
Pantomimes - 2
Number of Shakespearean plays: 12
Number of star performances: 24

Appendix C

Representative Season for 1833-1860

New Charleston Theatre 1844-1845

Number of performances: 102
Number of plays: 87
Number of afterpieces: 78
Number of new plays: 3
Number of new afterpieces: 3
Types of plays and afterpieces:
 Tragedies/ Serious Plays - 44
 Comedies - 53
 Farces - 67
 Opera/ Musical Entertainment - 9
 Ballets - 0
 Pantomimes - 0
Number of Shakespearean plays: 4
Number of star performances: 29

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