Creative Interpretation of an Archival Object (Prompt written by Kesi Augustine)

- Choose an archival object (a document, monument, or artwork within a National Park, gallery, or museum; an original document located in an archive – a photograph, a letter, a title page, etc.) Your object must directly relate to a theme and/or to an author that we have discussed in American Literature I. You may choose to revise and to expand your work for exercise #2.
- Describe and interpret this object. By means of informed close reading, you also must actively relate the sources of your annotated bibliography to your interpretation of your object. How do your sources help us to understand your object? And, how does your object help us to understand (or to complicate) your theme or your understanding of an American author?
- Your interpretation must result in an original, stand-alone product: a mini-documentary, a podcast, an article or an interactive blog for a specific venue of vigorous quality (*The Nation*, *The New York Times,* etc.), a work of fiction, or a film/play script. You must include at least **X** number of sources. Your interpretation should represent your perspective.

American Lit Final Project – Author's Note + Transcript

5/10/2015

After writing my second assignment on a single page playbill, I became highly interested in pursuing the topic further when I was given the opportunity to do so for my final project. Furthermore, I decided to pursue it through a podcast, with a variety of pictures, because I thought that this journalistic approach would intrigue a wider audience, just as the playbill soon grew in different audiences for different kinds of performances.

Thus, my primary source is called 'For the benefit of the poor', and it has no author in its citation, nor on the poster itself. This was the launching point into which I attempted to set up a 'base camp', so to speak, of how this reflected the shifting of public spheres as the identity of American Theater was set up. I aimed to show listeners how the concept of the American theater changed drastically to what it is now today. In drawing together my sources, I chose varied yet solid viewpoints that helped me further emphasize the slow building of the American theater scene up until present day.

One of my secondary sources is a book called "Portrait of a Playhouse", and it is a leap ahead in time to the late 1900's. I found another playbill inside, and I was surprised to see that it

was displayed in a similar fashion to the playbill that was two hundred years before it. It was also a large poster, except it lacked names—giving anonymity to the actors, but included drawings of figures. It was also noted that this playbill was not for a benefit performance like my primary source, but instead for a burlesque. As the target audience shifted, so did the wording of the posters, as well as eye-catching insignias or pictures.

I then reached out to Julia Jarcho, who is another one of my 'secondary sources'. She is an extremely talented dramatist, in addition to being a professor here at NYU. Her educational background in the modern American theater helped my podcast show why and how theater is still fully functional today, despite the availability of amazing computer graphics, which can sometimes make stage makeup look like child's play. She emphasized on what draws people to the live-action of a theater, and even gave some of her personal preferences. Her professional background in this aspect of American identity further helped me formulate the public sphere's own identity as American, starting from the 'roots'. She mentioned that people at a young age start in theater, such as a part in the school play. The average, modern American child grows up with a vague impression of live theater, which helps the child grow into an adult that appreciates the art.

I also reached out to someone on the opposite end of the spectrum, Erica Hsia, a junior and a student on the pre-medical track at NYU, has only had any theater-related experience once she started school in New York. I felt like she would be a strong source because she was almost like a controlled experiment, albeit unintentional. Her only viewpoint being American, and particularly, New York theater, she was able to give me a bit of insight into what she expected from a playbill, and how she treated it. Even through her physically-limited (because she has not seen any theatrical productions outside of New York City) exposure to theaters and the

subsequent knowledge of playbills that comes from it, she was able to describe the average amount of information she would receive as an audience member, and her opinion on how to treat it.

Furthermore, for my final source, I also decided to reach out to Blair Simmons, one of Professor Jacho's students. She is in Gallatin, and has decided to add a background of dramatic writing into her customized major. She gave great insight into how the audience is invested into the theater, particularly on how things potentially 'going wrong' can keep an audience on edge, and thus more engaged than a simple movie. Additionally, Blair helped me see deeper into what an audience thinks as they try to 'take away' something after the performance. Furthermore, she gives criticism on 'uptown theater' that Julia defined for me in her interview, as well as shedding expectations for any type of theater.

Through these several sources, my podcast answers this theme of an ever-shifting public sphere through the eyes of both modern day individuals, as well as older works that have been well-preserved.

----------**Podcast Transcript Starts Below**----------

This semester in American Literature, we've talked about what it means to be in a community, how the public sphere paved the way for individualism, and how we came about to today's modern thinking of Literature.

For the last month, I've spent a lot of hours trying to make a two hundred year old playbill accessible to a modern audience.

From American Literature I, at WNYU New York, this is Theater Evolution.

(Intro music)

In this podcast, I will briefly retrace the evolution of the American playbill and bring it to present day.

'Portrait of a Playhouse' is a lengthy book which I will use to extract some important facts of American playhouses as we go from 1753, the date of the primary source, --to the mid 1900's, in which the profiling of a playhouse in Philadelphia is given, and then, I will be giving both the viewpoints of people who have been educated in today's theater scene, and also the viewpoint of the average student who has only had a general exposure to theater.

I will talk about what makes theater alive today, how it evolved from the primordial ooze that was this playbill, and how we as an audience today, differentiate the different species of American theater that has come from this genus.

How has our idea of a public sphere really shifted from the praising of Mary Rowlandson for her courage in the face of Native American Captivity, to the shaming of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's novel for going after her innermost desires, and finally to Emerson by allowing full control of these desires and individual thoughts to roam as he cultivates corn, and pulls himself up by the bootstraps, so to speak.

I've also interviewed a few people to give a modern scope of what we think theater is today. To be fair, I spoke with Julia Jarcho, a distinguished playwright and Dramatic Literature

professor here at NYU. She gives some insight in what really draws people into theater today, despite the amazing special effects and computer graphics might be provided on a movie screen.

I also interviewed Blair Simmons, a senior in the dramatic writing program; a Gallatinian who has included parts of playwriting into her thesis. And she enables me to show you how it feels to be both educated on: both the behind the scenes of theater-MAKING as well as theater-GOING.

Finally, I interviewed Erica Hsia, a California-native who has not been exposed to the theater scene until she arrived at NYU. She is a junior, and has had her fair share of Broadway plays, and she spoke a bit about what it means to be an audience, and what the average attendee expects on a playbill.

Welcome to Theater Evolution.

First, let me describe to you the primary source for Theater Evolution. The item is a playbill from 1753, as previously described. It's dimensions are approximately 31 by 19 centimeters, and it's only a single page long. It was printed in New York City, and says that there will be two plays performed consecutively at the New Theater in Nassau Street on December 20th, 1753.

This playbill was also categorized under "broadside" within the American imprints database, indicating that it was probably a large sheet of paper used to draw large crowds, instead of a private reader like our playbills today.

The seal of Great Britain is the highest thing placed on this large poster, which is a reminder that America was still a colony under British rule during this time period. A time before America was really America. Also, this sign lets the viewer know, whether it was a reader in the mid 1700's, or a scrutinizing scholar in 2015, that England was aware and approved of this activity.

Below the insignia, in a large font, reads "For the benefit of the Poor", which might surprise the viewer to know that this isn't the actual name of the play. On today's average playbill, the name of the work you are seeing is displayed prominently on the first page, along with an easily recognizable symbol or picture. For example, take the Phantom of the Opera, with its mask and the darkness around it, or perhaps Cinderella and her glass slipper. There is no pretty picture on this paper to help potential audience members realize this production.

The actual production isn't named until five lines later, and it's a "Comedy, called Love for Love". Upon some research, I found out that this is one of William Congreve's works. The font size naming Love for Love is actually the same as the very first line, "for the benefit of the poor". The italicization of the first line differentiates it from the actual title, which is entirely capitalized. The capitalization was probably meant to give further emphasis on the importance of what the audience would watch.

The title of the play, without any context, immediately reminds me of the second of the Ten Commandments in the Bible: "Love thy neighbor as you shall love yourself". Although that may not be the exact quote, my Catholic upbringing has taught me that it was the second commandment that God gave to Moses in the Bible, and it demanded that every Christian respect

one another, and each other. After a semester of learning how the Bible was a great source --if not one of the only driving sources, for many colonials to set foot and start a new life on an 'uninhabited land', I immediately drew this conclusion.

In light of this idea, I was also able to read the small phrase that was hidden between two parentheses: "Being the last Time of performing till the Holidays". This seems to tug at the heartstrings of potential patrons and audience members, and also the mention of the holiday season jogged my memory of the Salvation Army. In New York City, the Salvation Army famously (or infamously, depending on one's stance on the organization) sets up a donation box near high-traffic areas, usually bottlenecked with tourists. The volunteer will typically ring a bell or call for donations, and the person donating will have the opportunity to proudly step up and insert their amount into the allocated slot.

Interestingly, I have only seen this sort of activity from the Salvation Army during the holidays, and not during any other time of the year. The Christmas season is perhaps what evokes many to give money to charity, or perhaps this is the season that the organization is likely to gather the highest amount. The Salvation Army's bell-ringing charity evocation is similar to the line set forth by the playbill. It is hardly like today's playbills, which do not have to coerce an audience, since the audience member receives the bill after purchasing tickets and arriving at the show; this playbill (in a large poster-sized form) has to draw attention before any purchases are made.

I also noticed that in its citation. This play was categorized as a "benefit performance". Many of these types of plays were performed in the years between 1750 and 1780. Playbills for benefit performances were typically a single page, like this playbill, and were focused on helping

a particular section of society. This general population would be “the poor”, “public charity”, and “widows and children of soldiers”.

Additionally, many of these playbills were for the Southwark Theater in Philadelphia, but there are actually two playbills in the database that were published for the Nassau Street Theater. The other playbill listed for the same theater is titled “*for the benefit of Mrs. Upton*”, and it is the earliest known playbill, only a year older than my primary source.

It is now clear that “For the benefit of the poor” must have been following a trend, many benefit performances followed after the play for Mrs. Upton. The rise in number of playbills after the 1750’s is a clear reflection of the success that “Mrs. Upton” had with *her* benefit performance.

Now, let’s talk money. After browsing a few other benefit performance playbills, I realized that charity performances were typically priced higher than that of regular performances. However, in the consumer’s perspective, it may have been a good idea to attend such an event because, despite the higher price, the proceedings have gone towards a greater cause than actors’ pockets.

Perhaps in an organizer’s attempt to make viewers feel as if they are “getting their money’s worth” in entertainment, these benefit performances were often accompanied by a *ballad farce*; better known as a comic opera.

This is evident in a majority of these broadsides, many of which advertise two different plays. In this particular poster, Congreve’s “Love for Love” was followed with “Flora, or Hob in the Well”, which is a little-known comic opera.

Both Congreve's "Love for Love" and "Flora" are about—yes you probably guessed it, a man pining for a fair maiden that he cannot have. However, in a progressive move, the women grab their own destinies instead of being ensnared in an unhappy marriage. Rather than just being a stereotype, they are very influential in moving the plot.

Also, in these small comedies, the list of characters and the actors that play them are miniscule in comparison to the aforementioned larger title of 'FOR THE BENEFIT'.

Unlike today's playbills, these early American broadsides do not seem to take much time on the actors performing in them.

As a seemingly positive twist on this advertisement, despite the tiny print in which the names and characters of the actors were published, I can also clearly see the names of several women playing the same gender as their characters.

Despite the fact that many early theaters did not allow women to play roles and used male actors throughout, the earliest parts of American theater seemed to be more progressive in this way as well.

However, despite any gender barriers that may have been previously placed, all of the actors do not have a first name, and are only referred to as "Mr.__" or "Mrs./Miss.__".

Visually, this seems to set everyone on an equal level, with only the indication of gender being any testament to what kind of role they are playing.

However, it is clear that there is a separation between the two genders—the male characters are listed first, although not in alphabetical order, which made me question if the characters were arranged in the order of their appearances.

If they are indeed listed by order of their appearance, it is similar to what is done today—and it is intriguing to see how the tradition has lasted. After the male characters have been listed, there is a small skip before the queue of female characters, which are considerably fewer in number and lower in placement on the playbill. How sad.

Now, listener, I'd like to jump two hundred years, and take you to the mid 1970's, where all thoughts of charity is thrown away, as well as the performer's clothes. Away go benefit performances, but more emphasis is placed on the "live". I found a publicity flyer for "Farewell to the Troc", published in 1978. It has a drawing of a lovely woman, half, if not fully, naked. There are several women drawn on the poster, actually, most in risqué or whimsical poses. You get the point.

A small paragraph at the top mentions that the well-known burlesque, named "Trocadero Burlesque Theater" or "The Theodore Roosevelt Opera Company" is closing after, quote, "a long career of entertaining undergraduates and gentlemen admirers of exotic danse". Yes, you heard me right, one of the aliases to this burlesque is called The Theodore Roosevelt Opera Company, as in the president who the teddy bear is named after.

Clearly, the theater grew in audience members, as well as audience interactions. From having a simple "Mrs blank" or "Mr Blank" on the playbill, to having absolutely no names of actresses, but rather a few pictures, I believe this is when the actual magic of the theater started to grow immensely. Julia Jarcho, professor of the Dramatic Literature at the English department, gives her opinion on what makes people go see what they see….

JULIA JARCHO: Yeah, what makes people go see what they go see… I mean, I think it's like anything else where, if you know… enthusiasm is infectious so you wanna go see things that

other people are excited about, because you also get excited about it. You know, I think it would be a mistake to say there's a kind of experience that live theater ALWAYS offers; that nothing else can offer. You know, I tend to be very suspicious of formulas like that, because also experience itself is also a variable. You can have such drastically different experiences on different days, but… uhm, you know, I do think another thing about theater is that when you're watching it, you're watching people make it, right? Which is different from film, let's say, where you're watching a thing that people made, and you know, depending on your interest, you might be more or less aware of that fact about it. But every time you go to the theater, you're watching a group of people collaboratively make a thing.

Julia also defined the two major and completely opposite 'theater scenes' that are prevalent in New York City. One is the uptown, which you, listener, are probably most familiar with, and one is the downtown, which you might be less familiar with. Let's take a look at what Julia says…

JULIA: There really are fairly separate theatrical worlds, one of which is a 'downtown' or 'experimental' theater world, and the other is sometimes called 'uptown', which is also called commercial theater, but sort of off-broadway, with a higher production values, and a larger audience, although not necessarily always a demographically more diverse audience, but a lot larger, sort of upper-middle-class audience…higher ticket prices, and which tends to sort of stay closer to realist norms in the work that it presents? So, people often object to this way of describing the New York Theater scene, because it is reductive, and it does sort of purport this binary, and make it sound like there's a war between two kinds of theater, uhm, and it's true, of course there are crossovers, particularly when it comes to like, designers for example. Designers that I work with also work on very different kinds of shows, that's how they earn their living,

uhm, certainly there are performers who work in both worlds. But to me, it seems like a true fact that uh, about the way that things pan out.

On the topic of the American theater, and how people tend to shun experimental theater, even if there is a definite shifting of public sphere, Julia says that people are only warming up slowly to the idea, and to new thoughts within many branches of theater.

*JULIA JARCHO: And I think it's also true that people have been somehow become convinced that things that are challenging and strange can't also be **fun**? Or you know, those things get sort of, divided up into different categories. But, you know, when I think about the theater that I go to and the people that I work with, and my friends, we have SO much fun at the theater. I laugh so much when I go see weird shows, and I enjoy myself way more in that context than when I go see more uhm, conventional dramatic work. Not all the time, but often, so, you know I think uhm…There's a playwright called Mac Wellman whom I admire a lot, and I've written about, and studied with, and he, uhm, he says that people understand way more than they admit they understand? And I think in a certain way, people are afraid of acknowledging that they can relate to really deeply strange things, because what that might say about them or something like that.*

Julia also spoke with me about what's in it for the split sides of theater, and how it feels to be on the other side of the curtain, being the one calling the shots. In actuality, she painted a picture that didn't make it seem as if she had much control at all, even as the playwright.

*JULIA JARCHO: But, in the event, it's not me, it's the actors, and I never know what they're going to do, right? Or like, what the audience is going to do. I've had people stand up and walk out, I've had …I once had someone walk out like, **across** the stage, to get to the exit,*

and I mean, you just, or other kinds of things…Noises that they'll make. The kinds of plays that I write are, I think they're funny, I mean, we think they're funny, but they're not sort of like not real, strong punchline humor? So what that means is that every night, the laughs will come at different places, like we never know what people will laugh at, and that's really really satisfying to me. I love this idea that, that you can create something that is sort of open in that way. And that it can continually be changing, that's very exciting. Also, you know, given how much of our experience feels 'pre-formed', having to deal with that kind of open-ness, again it's now always pleasant. Like its, sometimes really awful, you know, and sometimes I'll be watching a show and I'll be sitting next to someone who's like loudly unscrewing their water bottle the whole time, and I just like, I really would like to kill them! If I could press a button and eliminate them from the face of the earth, I would do it but um, but I think there's a sort of way of having to contend with that, feels exciting, like it feels invigorating.

I then spoke with Blair Simmons, the aforementioned Gallatinian who included dramatic literature into her customized thesis, and asked her what draws people to theater.

BLAIR SIMMONS: What draws people to theater…well, theater is different than any other art form that it is in person. Like, I think it's something that's very special and something that's very different than film…I think that you affect the actors just as much as they affect you. And so, you don't have that in film. In film, it's very set. The actors have done what they've done, they've left the set, it's been edited, it's been cultivated and that's it.

And theater really is different every night. Like the show I see is going to be completely different than the exact same show that you see, but we still call them the same show. It's very interesting…I think it's about being invested, and there's also like that weird fear that happens,

when you see live theater, like that "something could possibly go wrong", and there's something really wonderful about that.

I saw this show last night, actually, where there was this couple, and they were fighting in an office, and what had had to happen next was that the phone was going to ring, but while they were fighting on this desk, the phone fell off of the cradle. And so, the phone fell of the cradle and the phone starts ringing, and they both look down at the phone, and it was like this beautiful moment of theatricality, where one of the actors goes "Well, that doesn't make any sense!", and it was hilarious! The whole audience was laughing and it was actually a very serious moment but they made it work, and so that's also something that is very…it keeps me engaged, even if the theater is bad. Like even if it's bad theater, and I don't like it, and I don't wanna be there, there's something about knowing that something could go wrong, that I think is engaging and keeps you on edge.

But again, Blair still knows the feeling of 'getting it', something she defines as something that an audience member unconsciously seeks, no matter the type of theater that they are drawn towards, she says. And she also spoke a bit about this as well.

BLAIR SIMMONS: There's something about knowing what you're getting yourself into that like, feels good. Like, when you're privy to what a piece of art is doing, it is satisfying in like, a recognizable way. So like, people get excited when they like, understand something. So, you know, if you're told before you go to a show that "this is what the show's about, this is what it's doing, it's gonna be weird, just go for it", and then you feel like that while it's happening you that you ***understand****? That's like, pleasant. That's like when you solve a math problem, that's like a nice feeling, and people like that but a lot of people go into experimental theater expecting*

very traditional playwriting, traditional form. They expect to sit down, like, there are all these expectations that are not met. And when that is the case, it's perceived as displeasing, like it's bad, like it's …you're blocked off to it.

When asked on her opinion on performances, and not necessarily linked to theater or plays, but still draw large crowds, Blair had an interesting answer.

BLAIR SIMMONS: Well, obviously film. I think film right now does that the most. My favorite type of performance that draws a lot of audiences is politics, and we also have sports. (laughs) I even think ***religion*** *is kind of like a performance that draws quite a lot of people, uhm, but it's not recognized as such, cause then that would be assuming that it's like, fake in some way.*

So, in this way, she says that the public sphere is now shifting from mere playbills and something produced on-stage, into a more lateral viewpoint, with the globe being the stage, and any universal linkage done for the entertainment of others, as the production. I spoke with Erica Hsia, a junior and a pre-Med student at NYU who has only had a New York theater scene exposure to any sort of performance. I asked her what she expected from a playbill.

ERICA HSIA: The cast, the program, like, maybe little blurbs about like, the cast. (laughs) Um, probably like, ads. That's all I can think of.

INTERVIEWER: Do you spend a lot of time leafing through it, or do you just kind of skip to who's there [cast] and then like…?

ERICA HSIA: Uh, I usually flip through everything.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay, so even the ads, you're like "I acknowledge that this is here"?

ERICA HSIA: Yeah, yeah.

So, there you have it listeners, we've started from about 1750, jumping ahead briefly to recap in the 1970's with its anonymous burlesques, and then to present day and what it means to be both an audience member **and** have to try and digest the information that's thrown out at you not through just the playbill, but also through the different types of theater that has evolved from the very first one, so very very long ago. This has been Theater Evolution, and thank you for listening. See you next time.