

Odai Johnson

THE LEEWARD ISLANDS COMPANY

So much for Us, the Pageants of an Hour
Who fret and strut, and then are heard no more.
—1 September 1772

It is a chilling irony that the lines of the prologue, which appear above, spoken on the opening night of a prosperous season for the American Company in Annapolis, unwittingly served as the epitaph on the last night of the Leeward Islands Company, whose playhouse on St. Croix was destroyed in the early hours of that very day, and they, themselves, heard no more. The two events remind us that, though David Douglass ultimately established his supremacy on the colonial American circuit, his American Company was by no means the only professional company that toured the Anglophone colonies. Indeed, throughout the eighteenth century, smaller, competing troupes performed a large provincial circuit that extended from Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the north, to the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean. What follows is the story of one rival company and their untimely demise, a history presently unknown and as yet untold by scholars of colonial American and Caribbean theatre.

THE PERFECT STORM

It began with a storm.

On the evening of the 31st of August 1772, an exceptionally violent hurricane hit the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean, the small but lucrative cane- and rum-producing colonies of St. Croix, St. Thomas, Antigua, Nevis, Anguilla, Montserrat, and Tortola. In a season of storms, this one was particularly brutal, both for its force and its odd trajectory that hit, stalled, recycled itself, and struck again. We have several accounts of the hurricane, from the first rains on 27 August to the demolition of whole towns by the early morning of 1 September. All accounts describe the storm as the most catastrophic in living memory.¹ The ultimate death count was and remains unknown. What scant news there was trickled out in a woeful tale of lost ships, lost cargoes of slaves, flattened townships, untold property damage, despair for the lives of a trail of

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injured, and the aftermath of ruin: homelessness, brackish water, and disease. One account of the hurricane as it hit the town of Christiansted, St. Croix, was written by a young and promising counting clerk—the seventeen-year-old Alexander Hamilton—to his father, and later published in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*:

Dear Sir: I take up my pen just to give you an imperfect account of one of the most dreadful Hurricanes that memory or any records whatever can trace, which happened here on the 31st ultimo at night. It began about dusk, at North, and raged very violently till ten o'clock. Then ensued a sudden and unexpected interval, which lasted about an hour. Meanwhile the wind was shifting round to the South West point, from whence it returned with redoubled fury and continued so till near three o'clock in the morning. Good God! What horror and destruction—it is impossible for me to describe—or you to form any idea of it. It seemed as if a total dissolution of nature was taking place. The roaring of the sea and wind—fiery meteors flying about in the air—the portentous glare of almost perpetual lightning—the crash of the falling houses—and the ear-piercing shrieks of the distressed, were sufficient to strike astonishment into Angels. A great part of the buildings throughout the island are leveled to the ground—almost all the rest very much shattered—several persons killed and numbers utterly ruined—whole families running about the streets, unknowing where to find a place of shelter. . . .²

Other narratives of the great storm were carried in colonial American newspapers, as sloops and scows limped back to the ports of Boston, New York, and Charleston, bearing testimonies to its force. The *New-York Mercury* of 12 October 1772 reported the storm “the most violent Hurricane that has ever been known here [St. Croix] or perhaps on any island in the memory of man.” In Fredericksted, it continued, “but three houses [were] left standing.” Other accounts from St. Croix concur: “On the 31st August came on the most dreadful Hurricane known here in the memory of Man.” An account from St. Eustastius reported:

On the 31st we had a violent gale of wind here, such a one as the oldest man amongst these islands has never seen the like. Our houses are leveled with the ground, all our vessels drove out, many known to be lost . . . Capt. Moore's schooner of your island [St. Croix] is lost and Moore with all his crew are drowned.³

The royal Governor of St. Croix declared his island in a state of emergency, what we would today call a disaster area. Drinking water was rationed, field hospitals were set up, and looting laws and curfews were aggressively enforced. Surviving residents met to clear the rubble and consider “the melancholy situation of this island from the late Hurricane.” Among the more poignant details of the storm was the description of the collapse of His Majesty's Hospital in Antigua and of the many sick who were buried in the ruin.⁴

One of the few buildings on St. Croix that did survive was Daniel Thibou's printing office in Christiansted. Within nine days Thibou returned to publishing the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, the first newspaper of the Leeward Islands. There were few Caribbean newspapers outside Jamaica, and preserved issues of those presses are rare. We are very fortunate, then, to have a substantial press run of the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, the paper that printed young Hamilton's letter, because—and here is the destination of this calamitous prologue—a company of actors on St. Croix advertised a play for the evening of the great storm: "By Permission, at the Theatre in Bass-End, By the Leeward Islands Company of Comedians, *Douglas* and *Catherine and Petruchio*, the doors will be open Half after Five, and begin Half after Six o'clock."⁵ That evening was to be the debut, on the Bass-End stage at least, of Frederick Spencer, the only actor singled out in the press notice. It was a debut destined never to happen. About curtain time a troubling wind from the north began and persisted with unabated violence. One hopes the play, at some point, was given up, since the playhouse did not survive the storm. An account, later published in a Boston paper, confirmed the destruction of that part of the island: "Bass-End is a heap of confusion."⁶ Though the St. Croix newspaper continued for several years more, no further notice by the company is advertised again, on St. Croix or any other island. For all we know, the company perished in the storm, among the many casualties of this deadly and unchristened hurricane, nor is there any further reference to the Bass-End theatre being rebuilt or reopened. I think it would be safe to assume the playhouse was among the "heap of confusion" left in the wake of the great storm that ended the islands flush times.

The one name preserved in the *Gazette* advertisement for the evening provides a clue to the company's identity: Frederick Spencer was a small but recognized name in the calendar of colonial American theatre. He was a minor actor who joined William Verling's Virginia Company sometime late in 1768 or early in 1769. Verling's company—the only serious competition David Douglass and the American Company ever endured—retitled itself the New American Company when it traveled from Virginia to Annapolis, and Spencer performed with the company through the spring of 1769, after which, troubled by debts, the company cautiously ducked out of sight, and Spencer drops from the record.⁷ The identity of the remainder of this unknown company can be traced through the pages of the *Gazette* prior to the great storm.⁸

Exciting as it is to find evidence of a new and previously unknown company playing a profitable circuit that included an established playhouse on this small island, the Bass-End theatre at Christiansted was not the only playhouse on St. Croix. A second theatre, the West-End theatre in Fredericksted, across the island, was also destroyed by the storm of 31 August 1772. It was empty on that fateful night, but not empty twenty-two months earlier, when a rivalry played out between two competing companies: the Leeward Islands Company and the West-End Company. In the fall and winter of 1770, this small but vibrant island was awash in actors, boasting more theatrical activity per

capita than any colonial American city. More important, the actors were known from the American circuit: some had traveled over with Lewis Hallam Sr. on the inaugural tour in 1752; some had played with David Douglass; and some were remnants of Verling's Virginia Company. There is evidence that they had been playing on the island for many years, in a minor, independent circuit, one notch removed from the major stops of the provincial American touring circuit.

Moreover, accounts of the disastrous hurricane offer evidence of yet another company also playing the Leeward Islands the evening of 31 August 1772. The great storm that ravaged St. Croix also struck the islands of St. Christopher, Montserrat, and Antigua. An account of the storm in Antigua (printed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*) was carried by ship from the island to Philadelphia. It describes the devastation of the town of St. John in Antigua, including the lately rented Freemason lodge:

Sep[t.] 2. On Monday morning late, about one o'clock, arose here, the most terrible hurricane of wind and rain that ever was known in the memory of the oldest man living. . . . The wind found entrance into the Free Mason's lodge, which is let to a company of Comedians, who had obtained his Excellency's permission to play here, and destroyed all their scenery, &c., so that it will take them up to a fortnight before they can put it in status quo, and open it.⁹

Who were all these players? Where did they come from? Were the windblown Antigua players the same rivals of the Leeward Islands Company in 1770, or were they yet another company? Were these, as well, refugees from the colonial American circuit, familiars of David Douglass and Lewis Hallam Jr.? Were they from the Jamaican theatre in Kingston, and, if so, what company? Who they were *not* is clearer than who they were. They were not the American Company, whose abundant roster of actors are accounted for at the time, in Annapolis, preparing to open their fall season 1 September 1772, the day after the storm.

The colonial chapters of both seminal studies of Jamaican theatre—Errol Hill's and Richardson Wright's—offer solid work about early actors in Jamaica, but there is little scholarship concerning eighteenth-century Anglophone theatre and the players of the larger Caribbean circuit, though it extended from Barbados in the south to the Bahamas in the north and represents a nearly unbroken hundred-year history.¹⁰ The *Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre* offers an island-by-island overview, but the focus of that history is largely non-European, and colonial companies are thus of less interest to the editors than the later emergence of native Caribbean drama. Of players in the Leeward Islands, for example, the *Cambridge Guide* notes only: "A Leeward Islands company of comedians is reported to have performed *King Lear*, *Richard II* [recte III] and other popular plays of the day at Christiansted, Danish West Indies, in 1771."¹¹ Many theatrical companies assayed the Caribbean islands,

built their playhouses, strutted and fretted and, like those caught in the great storm, were heard no more. Occasionally, they left a trace of a record behind. Scattered references to theatricals in Cuba, New Providence, the Bahamas, Montserrat, Tortola, Barbados, Antigua, Grenada, St. Croix, and Jamaica establish the existence of a rich tradition of English actors playing the islands in a far wider circuit than has hitherto been studied. What follows is a profile of the season on St. Croix, brought to a sudden close by the great storm, as captured in the pages of a rare press, a profile revealing three new companies, two new theatres, and an extensive and contended circuit. For a performance historian, major hurricanes are usually hell on a theatre season; but in this case, it was the perfect storm for the record.

THE LEEWARD ISLANDS COMPANY OF COMEDIANS

The company on St. Croix that disastrous night was the Leeward Islands Company, playing on a well-established island circuit. We learn from the files of the *Royal Danish American Gazette* that the company had introduced themselves on the island long before the press arrived to print their bills. When Daniel Thibou began publishing the *Gazette* on 7 July 1770, the first advertisement in the first issue was a playbill. Both the playhouse at Bass-End and the Leeward Island Company were well established in Christiansted, as was the West-End theatre across the island in Fredericksted. Indeed, as early as 1734, Plymouth Town, on the neighboring island of Montserrat, boasted a playhouse that featured a touring company about whom there are scattered performance records in Jamaica and Barbados as well.¹²

Sometime in the 1750s, John Singleton, an actor who traveled with the Hallam Company for their inaugural tour (1752–1755) and who later became a printer in Jamaica, published a poetic account of the Caribbean, *A Description of the West Indies*. Singleton discusses the islands of Antigua, St. Christopher's, Montserrat, St. Croix, St. Martin's, Anguilla, St. Thomas, and Tortola in book 2 of his *Description*. His accounts likely derive from his own travels, suggesting the company toured and performed on those islands. Further evidence corroborates such a claim. William Hallam (who had inherited a stock of company shares from his deceased brother, Lewis) died in August of 1758, and is identified in his will as a resident of the Leeward Island of Tortola, north-northeast of St. Thomas. At the time of his death, William Hallam was co-manager of the company,¹³ and two months later his partner, David Douglass, assumed the management and sailed from the islands to North America with his troupe. Douglass carried with him a character letter from Baron Van Prock, the Lieutenant Governor of the Danish West Indies (in residence at St. Croix), suggesting that his company was known to Van Prock, and that a playhouse—either the old playhouse at Plymouth Town or a new one on neighboring St. Croix—was still operational when Douglass and company played there prior to the summer of 1758. St. Croix or the adjacent Leeward Islands may have seen the American company again sometime between 1764 and 1766, since the core of the troupe—Lewis Hallam Jr., Margaret Cheer, Owen and Mary Morris, Mr.

and Mrs. Allyn, John and Catherine Harman, and the minor actors Mr. Quelsh, Adam Hallam, Miss Crane, and Mr. Barry—played the West Indies for nearly two years while Douglass was on a recruitment trip to London. They are known to have performed in Jamaica and to have played an extended season in Barbados, and one could readily envision layovers on a midway isle, like St. Croix, in that long season in the Caribbean.¹⁴

Historically, we are on a firmer footing when the first newspaper arrives in St. Croix in 1770. From his first issue 9 July 1770 until the close of year, the printer Daniel Thibou could bank on the players' business. Preserved in the pages of his paper is a wealth of information about touring actors, their programs, their disputes, their debts, and their deaths. The inaugural issue reveals the theatrical season was well under way with performances of *The Beaux' Stratagem* and *The Mock Doctor*. We do not know when the Leeward Company arrived or began performing at the Bass-End theatre on Queen Street in Christiansted (I suspect it was sometime in late June or early July), but the conventions of attendance were still being determined on 21 July, when they made an adjustment in the audience. The notice to their white planter, merchant, and military patrons published on that date also reminds us of the plantation economy on these islands:

N.B. No person can be admitted behind the scenes; nor any Negroe whatever in the House—it has been disagreeable to several Ladies; therefore the manager hopes no person will be offended, as it will render the Theatre more comfortable to the Ladies and Gentlemen who honour it with their appearance. Vivant Rex and Regina.¹⁵

The paper was printed twice a week, and new performances were advertised, along with “bills of the day.” The company played at the Bass-End theatre, a playhouse of which we have almost no description. It was on Queen Street and had a single price admission (12 shillings), suggesting the structure probably did not have the traditional box, pit, and gallery. It is never referred to as “the New Theatre,” as were new playhouses raised by subscription on the American continent, and advertisers routinely used the phrase “next door to the playhouse” as a landmark for shoppers.

Early season playbills (7 July to 1 October 1770) list a few familiar names: a Mr. Hill, William Verling, Patrick and Margaret Malone, George Hughes, and J. Frederich Linck (a dancer and Harlequin). Later playbills include the names of Samuel Darby and his wife, Charles and Mrs. Parker, Mrs. Giffard, Mr. Harris, Mr. White, Sarah Taylor, and a Miss Guy, raising the number of identified actors to fifteen—a large company by colonial standards. In addition, local amateurs were also named in the bills, marking their first appearances.

Many of the Leeward Island players had histories on the American continent worth rehearsing; some had histories worth evading. It seems all the

disgruntled who dropped out of Douglass's American Company found solace in an island ensemble of their own. William Verling, Patrick and Margaret Malone, Samuel Darby and his wife, Charles and Mrs. Parker, and George Hughes all played with and left Douglass at some point in their careers and later transferred their talents to Verling and his company. Verling's company, under several names, played in America and the islands for five years, and left many a debt and lawsuit behind them.¹⁶

William Verling had been recruited by Douglass for the winter season of 1765–1766 in Charleston when his own company was delayed in the islands. Verling thus learned early of a lucrative market for theatre on the islands and which of them had playhouses. Verling left Douglass in the spring of 1766, at the close of the Charleston season. He is known to have performed George Alexander Steven's *Lecture on Heads* in Williamsburg in January of 1767 (a text he pirated from Douglass) and, shortly afterward, he assembled a troupe of his own. His Virginia Company debuted sometime prior to January 1768. Three couples and two men later named in casts lists on St. Croix can be identified as part of Verling's Company in 1768 and 1769. Charles and Mrs. Parker joined Verling's Virginia Company in 1768, where they were introduced in the bills as "from the theatre in Jamaica."¹⁷ Apparently, the company was not to their taste, since they abandoned Verling after one season for Douglass's better-financed American Company. That arrangement was even less to their taste, since the Parkers played with Douglass but six weeks in 1769 before returning to Verling. When they left Douglass, they took with them Samuel Darby and his wife, who played with Douglass briefly in 1769. A third couple, Patrick Malone and his wife Margaret, had first traveled to the colonies with Lewis Hallam Sr. for the inaugural tour of 1752–1755. They, too, joined Douglass briefly, before seeking better lines with Verling's company. James Verling Godwin and Frederick Spencer (later robbed of his island debut on the night of the hurricane) rounded out the troupe, which Verling retitled the Annapolis Company, then the New American Company. They played a season in Annapolis extending through June of 1769, after which they drop from the colonial record.

Hugh Rankin assumed that "an accumulation of debts led to the disbanding of the New American [Annapolis] Company." Indeed, the actors and their manager were sorely troubled by debts and suits of recovery at the close of each of their seasons, yet, despite their many legal entanglements, they did not disband, but betook themselves to the promising islands, perhaps as early as the summer of 1769. The core of the company—Verling, the Parkers, the Malones, and the Darbys—was present when the *Royal Danish American Gazette* commenced publishing in July 1770. To their names are added a Mrs. Giffard, the wife of Henry Giffard (the son of the manager at Lincoln's Inn Fields), an actress in the little-known American Company of a Mr. Hill, who had played in North Carolina in 1768 before moving to Nova Scotia, where, with her husband Henry, she is last recorded performing in Halifax in December of 1768. When she next appears in the record, she is without her husband and acting for Mr. Hill

in St. Croix. How she got there and in what company is not recorded, but she knew William Verling, since her husband Henry stood as witness when Verling married Elizabeth Conner in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1767.¹⁸

Here they all were, the disgruntled and the dropouts from the American Company, debt-ridden and on the dodge, all assembled into one ensemble of temperamental actors. Here they alighted, in St. Croix, and undertook a season that included some large Shakespearean tragedies: *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, *Romeo and Juliet*, with processions, as well as harlequinades, comic dances, and hornpipes for the entre'actes.¹⁹ The Leeward Islands Company advertised performances for Mondays and Thursdays in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, perhaps posting bills of the day in between.

The story that emerges from the cast lists of the first half of the season is complicated and rewarding. What appears to have happened is that the very large Leeward Island Company of Comedians was not a single company, but two separate companies that merged for the season in St. Croix. They were first managed by Mr. Hill, a semipermanent resident of the island who appears to have held the lease on the Bass-End Playhouse, and then by William Verling, when he arrived with his company.²⁰ Hill's company included George Hughes and Mrs. Giffard for his leads, Patrick and Margaret Malone for his second line, and J. Frederick Linck as dancer and Harlequin. These were too few actors to manage a regular season, even supplemented with local amateurs like John Kirwan and John Gray. By merging the two companies, under his management, William Verling could offer Hill and Sarah Taylor as leads, Charles Parker and his wife, Samuel Darby and his wife, Mr. Harris, Mr. White, and Miss Guy. The combined companies took Hill's name, the Leeward Islands Company of Comedians, and offered a strong season from July until October 1770.

"A PLAGUE ON BOTH YOUR HOUSES": THE WEST-END COMPANY

The union of the companies was severed by dissent over benefits, which began 27 September 1770, for "the benefit of the Church, the Hospital, and the Poor."²¹ The evening's bill was *The Orphan* and *The Mock Doctor*, and Mr. Hill, identified as "manager of the theatre," spoke the prologue drafted for the occasion. Actor benefits followed this performance, the first on Thursday, 1 October 1770, for George Hughes, the leading actor for Hill, but subsequent performances were abruptly canceled when Verling carried the lion's share of actors away from Mr. Hill, opened his own season at the West-End in Fredericksted, and initiated a battle between the two, now competing, companies. The production of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Flora; or, Hob in the Well*, advertised for 4 October, was postponed when Hill could no longer fill the roles.

Several items in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, whose publication was delayed from Wednesday to Friday that week (a delay Thibou blamed on Hill), give evidence of a rift within Hill's company. One reader ("C. D.") demanded:

Sir: please inform the Publick what was the reason of *Romeo and Juliet* not being performed last night, agreeable to the advertisement published in your Wednesday's paper: as you ought to be an intelligent person, your compliance with the above request (if possible) will not only oblige your constant reader, but the Publick in general, who have been shamefully abused.

Thibou responded: "The author of the above, we expect, will be informed by Mr. Hill, the manager of the theatre, as we are entirely ignorant of the cause that prevented the play being performed according the advertisement," and followed with a puff for Verling: "We hear from Fredericksted, that the company of Comedians there meet with uncommon success; that last week they performed thrice, to polite and crowded audiences; and that they received universal approbation."²²

Verling's new company in Fredericksted was called the West-End Company, and the names appearing in the bills—Verling, the Parkers, the Darbys, Miss Guy, Mr. Harris, Mr. White, and Sarah Taylor—indicate that those who left Hill were the same actors who arrived in Verling's company. This left Hill with Patrick and Margaret Malone, Mrs. Giffard, the dancer J. Frederick Linck, and George Hughes. Hill also retained the services of local residents John Gray, Edward Bullock, and John Kirwan, while Verling supplemented his corps with Jonathan Goodman and Thomas Jones.

Though Thibou's *Gazette* informs us that Verling's West-End Company had begun playing immediately—three times by Friday, 5 October 1770—there is little reason to suppose a small market like St. Croix could sustain either two companies or such a schedule, despite the flurry of front-page bills and notices in the two-page *Gazette*.²³ As November wore on, actors from the Leeward Island Company began to appear with Verling's West-End Company: J. Frederick Linck, for example, and Patrick Malone, who added his talents to Mrs. Parker's benefit at the West-End theatre. At the other playhouse, a benefit for Mrs. Giffard was announced and canceled three times (citing "indisposition," but more likely poor support) and for John Gray once. Notices by Leeward Islands Company actors began to appear in the paper calling in their debts and advertising their imminent departure. The final blow to Hill's struggling company was the death of Patrick Malone, who expired sometime between 19 and 24 November. Members of the West-End Company lent their talent to a benefit production for the widow Malone, advertised for 3 December and, again, 5 December (whether postponed or poorly attended the paper does not say).²⁴

After the death of Malone, it seems the two companies cobbled together a peace accord to support their mutual benefits. *The Beggar's Opera*, produced at Bass-End theatre on 11 December for the benefit of the Leeward company, featured both Verling and Hill (playing Peachum and Macheath), Parker (in the role of Lockit), and Mrs. Giffard (as Polly). Two days later, Hill joined Verling

for another West-End production, *Richard III*, but the two companies also continued to perform independently and, occasionally, competing benefits were offered for the same night. J. Frederick Linck, who had bolted the Leeward Islands Company but returned there for his benefit (*The London Merchant*), found his evening scuttled when Verling's West-End Company mounted the popular *The Beggar's Opera*. By this time, both companies were mopping the sops for an audience, as this appendage to an advertisement for the West-End Company suggests:

N.B. The Ladies and Gentlemen who please to favour us with their Company at the above entertainments may assure themselves they will not be altered but performed to whatever audience shall appear at the Theatre.²⁵

Debts continued to mount for actors at both houses. Miss Guy's benefit was prefaced with the note "to her relief under a burthensome expense of a lawsuit," while to the announcement of Verling's second benefit was appended "... in order to pay his Debts."²⁶ By the first of the year (1771), the actors from both companies had announced departures and were boarding boats. A few, however, remained behind. J. Frederick Linck opened a dancing school in a new house built on Queen Street, and John Gay began advertising as a gun- and locksmith. The Leeward Islands Company manager, Mr. Hill, remained on the island and advertised two productions for 15 and 28 January 1771, with "gentlemen [acting] for their own amusement" filling out a cast that featured Hill and Mrs. Giffard.²⁷ With this, the season's theatricals on St. Croix sputtered to a close.²⁸

There is a large gap in the press run of the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, with no preserved issues between May 1771 and July 1772. I suspect Verling and his company returned in the fall of 1771 (Westergaard thinks so), as they did the following year and perhaps had prior to the establishment of the *Gazette*.²⁹ When the company returned in 1772, a few new names appear. Frederick Spencer had played with Verling's Virginia Company in 1769 and had now been promoted to leading roles. James Verling Godwin had worked with Verling and Spencer in the Virginia Company in 1768–1769.³⁰ When the press run resumed on 3 August 1772, the *Gazette* regularly featured ads for the company. From this we learn *Douglas* was offered for the night of 31 August 1772 when the deadly hurricane hit.

The storm destroyed both theatres on St. Croix and neither was rebuilt. The *Gazette* records no further performances on the island through the close of 1775.³¹ After that fateful night, Verling and his company utterly drop from the record. Only two names of Verling's Leeward Islands Company appear on any subsequent Caribbean island or colonial American playbill: Charles Parker, who had not returned for the eventful 1772 tour of the islands, and James Godwin, who had.³² I have found no further record of William Verling or his wife, Elizabeth Conner, nor of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Darby, Frederick Spencer, Jonathan Godman, Miss Guy, Mr. Harris, Thomas Jones, nor Mr. White.³³

AT THE FREEMASON'S LODGE, ANTIGUA

The patient reader will recall the account of the storm on the island of Antigua announcing to Philadelphia readers the destruction of the Freemason's Lodge, lately rented to a company of players. Whose company that was remains a complete mystery. It may have been that of Mr. Hill, who, recasting his leads in the absence of Patrick Malone, Mrs. Malone, and Mrs. Giffard, had left St. Croix. George Hughes was Hill's tragedian, and Hughes survived to join the American Company in 1773, remaining with them for many years. No names are recorded of that Antigua troupe, and the brief moment of visibility offered by the storm admits nothing further to confirm the identity of the company, save that they played with permission, they rented from the Freemasons, and they carried their own scenery, which bespeaks a company of some stature. Neither have I found further evidence of touring actors in the Caribbean after the great storm, until David Douglass brought his American Company back to Jamaica in the early months of 1775. "So much for Us, the Pageants of an Hour / Who fret and strut, and then are heard no more."



The appearance, and ultimate disappearance, of the Leeward Islands Company reminds us that the high-profile tours of Lewis Hallam and David Douglass have obscured the less documented but equally important histories of many minor companies, professional and amateur, who assembled, played, toured, disbanded, reformed, and maintained the material and ideologic possibility of theatre in the lean islands and small communities of the eighteenth-century colonial landscape. Brief, oblique, and elusive references litter the calendar, alerting us to an even wider range of performances than those that have been recorded.³⁴ In the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, for example, there is an antitheatrical pamphlet on which is written a tantalizing line: "stuck up at Richmond close to the playbill for that date"—4 June 1774. Apparently, a company was playing in Richmond, Virginia, posting playbills, and attracting opponents. We have no other record of this company, nor do we know who its members were. Apart from the American company of David Douglass, which had finished its season in Charleston on 19 May and had broken up for the summer, we have no record of any other company playing anywhere in the American colonies in the spring and early summer of 1774.³⁵ Were these players a new company or the storm-tossed and island-weary flotsam of St. Croix, drifting back to terra firma, where old debts and new opportunities were waiting?

ENDNOTES

1. In the next decade, there would be many catastrophic hurricanes, some worse than the storm of 31 August 1772. The hurricane season of 1780, for example, saw three consecutive storms that left a death toll of 22,000 across the Caribbean.

Theatre Survey

2. *Royal Danish American Gazette*, 7 October 1772. On the strength and promise of this letter, the young Hamilton was invited to New York, to King's College, to complete his education. It was a wise investment; he went on to become George Washington's secretary, author of *The Federalist Papers*, and the first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, among his many credentials.

Throughout this essay, I have opted to retain the older spelling "Christiansted" and "Fredericksted" for the cities of St. Croix.

3. *Royal Danish American Gazette*, 9 September 1772.

4. *New-York Mercury*, 12 October 1772.

5. Waldo Lincoln has published a brief list of occasional issues still preserved. See his "Newspapers of the West Indies and Bermuda in the Library of the American Antiquarian Society," in *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 36 (1926): 130–35.

6. *Massachusetts Spy–Boston*, 22 October 1772.

7. Hugh Rankin, *The Theatre in Colonial America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1960), 150–51, itemizes some of the debts and suits brought against Verling's company. Whether Spencer was among the litigants he does not record. The performance information throughout the text is derived from Odai Johnson and William Burling, eds., *The Colonial American Stage, 1665–1774: A Documentary Calendar* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press / Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2001).

8. No major or minor scholar of the colonial American, Jamaican, or Caribbean stage provides any substantive record of this company.

9. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 14 October 1772.

10. Richardson Wright, *Revels in Jamaica* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1937); Errol Hill, *The Jamaican Stage, 1655–1900* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Martin Banham, Errol Hill, and George Woodyard, eds., *The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). There are several postcolonial studies of theatre on the islands, such as Judy S. J. Stone's *Theatre: Studies in West Indian Literature* (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1994), and Ken Corsbie, *Theatre in the Caribbean* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), for younger audiences.

11. Banham et al., 173. The information appears to be derived from Waldemar Westergaard's *The Danish West Indies* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 248. Similarly, Stone (p. 8), following Westergaard, acknowledges two playhouses on St. Croix in 1771, but she does not inquire into their occupants.

12. *American Weekly Mercury*, 17–24 December 1734.

13. A copy of William Hallam's will was found by Robert Myers and Joyce Brodowski and published in their excellent article, "Rewriting the Hallams: Research in 18th Century British and American Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 41.1 (May 2000): 1–22.

14. An exasperated David Douglass returned to Charleston in October of 1765 and published a letter there on 4 November 1765 (preserved as a broadside in the Historical Society of South Carolina), lamenting his company's delay on the islands. They had planned to reconvene in Charleston for the fall of 1765, but instead, letters informed him, they were engaged through the winter. The actors did not return until the summer of 1766. For a summary of the years and the playing seasons, see Johnson and Burling, 239–49.

15. *Royal Danish American Gazette*, 21 July 1770.

16. From the *York County [Virginia] Records, Judgments and Orders: 1768–1770* (n.p.), 74, we learn that when Verling's Virginia Company left Williamsburg in 1768, company actors Charles Parker, George Walker, Richard Ferrell, Thomas Charlton, James Goodwin [Godwin?], and Christopher Bromadge all left suits of debt recovery, while the manager, William Verling, was sued by five separate claimants, and ultimately defaulted ("not an Inhabitant of this county").

17. The company may have been stressed to the point of disbanding when John Henry, a leading actor, left the island to join Douglass. He took with him his wife (the former Miss Storer), her three sisters—all actresses—and her mother. The departure of Henry and the Storer family left a sizable dent in the company playing at Kingston, and the Parkers soon followed Henry. Mrs. Storer (the mother) and Mrs. Henry died in a ship fire en route.

The Leeward Islands Company

18. Rankin, 150–51. “Abstracts from Norfolk Co. Marriage Bonds,” in Edward Wilson James, ed., *Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, 5 vols. (Richmond and Baltimore: n.p., 1895–1906; reprint, Baltimore: Peter Hill, 1951), 4: 56.

19. At no other point in the documented calendar of colonial American performance was Shakespeare represented as frequently as in the fall of 1770 in St. Croix. Two thirds of the Leeward Island Company’s known main pieces were Shakespearean. After the two companies split, the ratio went down to one half of all advertised main pieces (Johnson and Burling, 368–86).

20. Two pieces of evidence suggest his residency. First, there are occasional advertisements taken out in the newspaper by a Thomas Hill, which may be our Mr. Hill, who managed the theatre as a side line. Second, after the Verling company departed the island in early January 1771, Hill remained, wringing out a few last productions throughout that month.

21. *Royal Danish American Gazette*, 26 September 1770.

22. Thibou told readers of the *Royal Danish American Gazette* (dated 3 October 1770, but printed 5 October), “The paper, not being published in due time, the Publick are desired to charge to the account of one Hill, who endeavored by artful insinuations to obstruct the usual intelligence.”

The other items quoted are also from the same issue.

23. The 13 October 1770 issue of the *Royal Danish American Gazette* (issue 29) has not survived. Issue 30 (17 October) advertised the West-End Company’s next three productions, including a benefit for the Danish Church and Hospital. The Leeward Islands Company announced a benefit for Mrs. Giffard, which was postponed.

24. The play chosen for the occasion was, fittingly, *The Mourning Bride*. West-End actors also contributed to an additional benefit for Malone’s funeral expenses.

25. *Royal Danish American Gazette*, 19 December 1770.

26. *Royal Danish American Gazette*, 24 November 1770. From the surviving calendar records of Verling’s 1768 and 1769 season, we can concur with Rankin (150) when he asserts, “each of the actors received two benefits.”

27. *Royal Danish American Gazette*, 12 and 23 January 1771.

28. A few players remained on the island—which may confirm that Hill had a part-time resident company. When, in March of 1771, a Mr. Warwell appeared on St. Croix advertising himself as having sung in most of the major American cities, he found a few interested personnel to flesh out his oratorios. Warwell was touring his one-person version of ballad operas, a familiar act on the American continent, where he had played in Philadelphia and New England. Initially solo, Warwell soon partnered with Mrs. Giffard to present scenes from several plays. This attracted the other part-time actors and, together, they ambitiously mounted *The Beggar’s Opera*. Warwell advised potential spectators, “The rest of the characters will be disposed of to the best advantage.” By mid-April, Warwell had moved on.

29. Westergaard, 248.

30. Rankin (141) suggests James Verling Godwin might be related to the manager William Verling.

31. There was one amateur German-language performance, Ludvig Holberg’s *Henry and Pernille*, at “the new house of Nicholas Cruger,” promised for a 7 December performance date, according to *Royal Danish American Gazette* of 29 November 1775.

32. Parker had rejoined Douglass’s American Company by July of 1772 and remained on the American continent. James Godwin would have a long career on the early American stage after the Revolutionary war.

33. If the Leeward Island Company did perish in the great hurricane, it would not be the first time a company traveled to the islands to expire. Percy Fitzgerald recounts the tale of an unfortunate company of “indifferent players” in 1733, “which found its way even to the island of Jamaica.” Records survive for several of their performances across the islands, and they may have built the playhouse at Plymouth Town. Fitzgerald records they first made a fair fortune but were soon plagued by yellow fever and rum punch and, within months, had buried their lead actors and supplemented their ranks with amateurs. These recruits proved no less immune from disease, until, at last, only a old man, a young boy, and a woman of the original corps survived. Hearing of a

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company playing in Charleston, they set sail for that locale, only to die in a shipwreck. I am summarizing here from Percy Fitzgerald's *Theatrical Anecdotes* (London: n.p., 1874), 124.

34. Examples of such moments would include the following:

(1) a 12 February 1741 note in *Zengar's Journal* informing the readers that in the evening's performance of *The Beaux' Stratagem* the part of Aimwell was "to be perform'd by a Person who never appear'd on any Stage before"—assuming, as George Odell has pointed out, the rest of the cast had appeared often—yet there is no other theatrical reference from New York for many years on either side of this notice;

(2) an advertisement concerning Thomas Vernon, printed in the *New York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy* of 17 October 1743, noting Vernon, who had run away from Jamaica, "for some part of the time acted as a comedian with applause" on the island of Jamaica during ca. 1734–1742, a history that but few other records support;

(3) the oblique note in the *Barbados Gazette* of 30 May 1753: "Lost out of the holster of a saddle, on Monday night last, at the Playhouse, a silver mounted pistol"; and,

(4) the laconic entry in the diary of George Washington for 10 January 1758 of a payment "for the players" at Fort Cumberland.

35. The company's manager, David Douglass, and his wife, the company's leading mature actress, were en route that day to New York. The company's male lead, Lewis Hallam Jr., his cousin Nancy Hallam, Stephen Woolls, John Henry, his wife, Ann (the second Storer sister to become Mrs. Henry), and her sister, Maria Storer (who would become the third), were all en route to London, while their latest protegee, Richard Goodman, remained behind in Charleston. Owen and Mary Morris and Miss Wainwright traveled to Philadelphia.