

## EARLY MINNEAPOLIS THEATERS<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to general opinion, the first theater in Minneapolis — that is, the first place of amusement with full stage equipment — appears to have been Harrison's Hall. The Pence Opera House, often spoken of as the first theater, came eight years after Harrison's Hall, which was erected in 1864. Prior to that year the nearest approach to a theater had been Harmonia Hall, built in 1859 at First Avenue North and Second Street. Still earlier places of amusement were Central Hall at St. Anthony (1853), Woodman's Hall (1857), Fletcher's Hall, Boardman's Hall, and Woodman's Hall Number 2, all of them merely gathering places with slightly elevated platforms at one end of the room. Harmonia Hall boasted a proscenium, a decided advance among these temples of Thespis, and this proscenium is still standing — a bizarre anachronism in a remodeled building now used for the storage of hides. Generations of strolling players, forgotten plays, the genesis of the present symphony orchestra, amateur players forgetting their lines, the Swiss Bell Ringers, Fay Templeton, stereopticon lectures, "Buffalo Gals" sung in a blackface act — the proscenium with diamond-shaped panels set at decorative intervals has seen them all.

Rival theaters crowded into the neighborhood of the Harmonia and these in turn disappeared. Finally the Harmonia was closed and its name transferred to a new place of amuse-

<sup>1</sup> This article by Mr. Edgar is based upon careful research in contemporary sources of information, especially Minneapolis newspapers. It is intended as a contribution to local history, but it throws light in incidental fashion upon an important aspect of the cultural history of the Middle West. In other words, the changing character of the theater, here portrayed for one locality, affords a clue to those broader social and intellectual changes which the "new history" is today so much interested in tracing. *Ed.* [Copyright, 1928, by Randolph Edgar.]

ment. The seats were removed, the stage pulled down, and all things that had borne the semblance of a theater, with the exception of the proscenium, ceased to exist. In the meantime the short-lived Harrison's Hall at Washington and Nicollet avenues had come and gone, and the building had been turned into offices and dramatic rights surrendered to the newly erected Pence Opera House at Second Street and Hennepin Avenue.<sup>2</sup>

The Pence Opera House was planned as the Pence Music Hall, but with elaborations in its construction the original name was covered with newer signboards indicating the revision. The theater itself, like many theaters of the period, was reached after a climb of two flights of stairs. It contained a balcony — an innovation — and an admirably proportioned proscenium in which were set small stage boxes. It is worthy of remark that the theater's dignity of line was in accordance with the finest playhouses of the period. Indeed, certain theaters of today have reverted to these lines, a notable example being the Ambassadors in London, the proscenium of which is almost a replica of the Pence.

The opening of the Pence Opera House took place on the evening of Friday, June 21, 1867, the offering being a joint concert of the Minneapolis Musical Union with the St. Paul Musical Society. Its opening for dramatic productions was on June 24, 1867, Rachel Johnson appearing in "The Hunchback" by Sheridan Knowles. The first house manager was A. Macfarland, who also managed the Opera House in St. Paul. In 1879 the name of the Pence was changed to "Metropolitan Theatre" and in the following year to "Criterion Theater." It reverted to the name "Pence Opera House" in 1881, and the last performance at the theater was a benefit given for the manager, Edward P. Hilton, on June 12, 1892, in which mem-

<sup>2</sup> During its construction the Pence Opera House was struck by lightning. A Minneapolis minister explained from the pulpit on the following Sunday that this was an act of God's retribution. A few weeks later this clergyman's church was struck by lightning.

bers of the Ida Siddons Variety Company, who had played during the preceding week, took part. Two years later Lester and Williams were announced to appear at the Pence in "Me and Jack" for the week of October 1, 1894, but apparently the engagement was canceled and the theater remained dark.

A dark theater soon falls into decay and when the locked doors of the Pence were opened in 1908 so that the interior might be demolished, the wrecking crew found begrimed draperies and hangings, broken wainscoting, boxes filled with an accumulation of rubbish, and scenery set at strange angles in dim, cobwebbed lights. The curtain, "The Vintage Festival," by Peter Clausen, who for over half a century remained the greatest scenic painter in the Northwest, had been sold and sent to Winnipeg in 1903. Nor did the exterior of the building, which still stands, escape changes, since the street balcony, where bands attracted crowds in the olden days, was removed for the safety of pedestrians. Five years ago the cornice was removed and the building given a new façade.

The Academy of Music — another upstairs theater, but on a larger scale than the Pence — was opened on Tuesday evening, January 2, 1872, with a benefit for the owner, Joseph Hodges, given by the St. Paul Musical Society and the Harmonia Society of Minneapolis. It was located at the corner of Washington and Hennepin avenues and for eleven years housed all of the city's better attractions. The theater burned to the ground on December 25, 1884, one year after the Grand Opera House had taken over the legitimate field.

Another type of theatrical performance had sprung into existence during the seventies — namely, the "variety show," forerunner of modern vaudeville, which was to remain part of the phenomena of Washington Avenue and its districts. The first Minneapolis theater to play variety was the Standard, which was built in 1878 at 124 Washington Avenue North, managed by the notorious Captain W. W. Brown for three years, and closed in 1881. Brown having transferred his inter-

est to the Theatre Comique, which in 1874 had been built at 219-223 Marquette Avenue, the type of performance moved likewise. From August, 1881, until March, 1897, Brown's theater remained open, to the edification of lumberjacks. Rivals in the same field and a withdrawal of the Comique's bar license finally closed its portals, and the building was taken over by the Salvation Army. Yet, like the lady in Hardy's poem, the Theatre Comique was not always bad. It was first known as the Curtis Building; the stones for the foundation were supposed to have been picked up from the Mississippi River bed. A store occupied the ground floor, offices were on the second floor, and the third floor was given over to a hall. This hall apparently was used by a business college for a short time, but during the period when the Central High School was being built the pupils of high standing were instructed here as well, the overflow going to the first Washington School, which afterward burned.

Following its tenure as a place of learning, George Scott leased the building and transformed the third floor into a small theater, which he ran for three months. A dog show held the boards for a brief period and then after an interval of darkness Chambers Brothers reopened the theater in 1877. Two years later Edward S. Johnson became manager and the name "Theatre Comique" was bestowed upon it during his régime. Captain Brown, as stated, came into possession of the theater in 1881. In justice to him it must be recorded that occasionally some rather good things were presented at the Comique. A survey of newspaper files of the eighties shows that the Comique's playbills included Joaquin Miller's "Danites," Edward R. Lang's comedy "Scheming," "Burr Oakes" given by David Higgins, and Alice Oates in "Robin Hood," an extravaganza predating the comic opera of that name. Brown rebuilt the theater several times, enlarging the stage, increasing the seating capacity, and finally doing away with the third floor and replacing it with a balcony. After making a fortune

from the theater and losing it by other investments, Brown let the Comique become a rat-infested dive with secret stairways, wine rooms, and subcellars. The Salvation Army tenure, which began in 1895, was brought to a sudden close on July 23, 1901, when the building burned to the ground. A year preceding this fire Brown resumed his theatrical career at the second Harmonia Hall, which had been built at 210 South Third Street in 1887. He renamed the place "Standard Theatre." The experiment, however, lasted but a year, since this somewhat unique type of theater was becoming obsolete.

In passing, three other theaters resembling the Comique may be mentioned — Orchestrion Hall, the Casino Music Hall, and the Park Theatre. The last-named place of amusement — for thus it was classified in the city directory — is the last chronologically. As late as 1902 it was reached through a covered alleyway at the corner of Nicollet Avenue and First Street. The Casino Music Hall at 220 Washington Avenue South was opened in 1892 and closed by the police in 1895. Of longer duration, Orchestrion Hall at 210 Washington Avenue South opened its doors in 1889 and kept them open, except during an interval of damage from fire, for sixteen years. About 1890 it was rebuilt and named the "Jumbo Theatre"; in 1894 it was renamed "Central Garden." On the night of May 3, 1894, its interior was demolished in a fire which started in the adjoining Reed Building. In the same year it was rebuilt as the "New Jumbo," and two years later it was called the "Columbia Theatre." Captain Brown took a hand in its management when he abandoned the Comique, albeit the place was owned by a rival, and in 1903 the theater again took an alias, — this time a final one, — the "Empire Theatre." The theater was notable as the first place in Minneapolis where motion pictures were shown. These pictures, which lasted twenty minutes at the close of the regular performance, were brought over from the old Orpheum Music Hall in St. Paul, where they had been shown earlier in the evening. The records

of these theaters, the Comique, Standard, Casino, Empire, and Park, are exceedingly bad even in retrospect. There is a Neapolitan stabbing affair closely associated with one of the Washington Avenue shows, and a patron of the drama at the Comique had his neck broken by falling from a proscenium box to the stage. A stage hand removed the body and the performance was resumed.

The Minneapolis of the eighties was a city of strong frontier contrasts in which a determined minority battled with an indifferent, often vicious, element for the betterment of the city. Thus it was that at least one splendid hotel, one first-class newspaper, and one of the finest theaters in the west were created in a manner suggestive of Bagdad. That these properties dissolved in the decade to follow, emphasizes an Aladdin's touch. The Grand Opera House, forming a part of the Syndicate Block in 1883, is still referred to by New York managers as an ideal playhouse. Under the management of J. F. Conklin, it opened on April 2, 1883, with the Amherst Glee Club. Four years later it was redecorated by Mr. John S. Bradstreet, who twenty-two years afterward was to decorate the Minneapolis Shubert Theatre. The Grand Opera House closed on October 5, 1895, with Hoyt's "A Contented Woman" and its bookings were transferred to the Metropolitan Opera House, which had opened the preceding year as the New People's Theater. In 1897 the Grand Opera House was completely demolished and a retail shop erected on the site.

Competition with the Grand Opera House of Moorish interior created the exceedingly attractive East Indian playhouse near Seventh Street which was first known as the "Hennepin Avenue Theater." It opened on September 19, 1887, with Booth and Barrett in "Julius Caesar," and in May, 1889, it was renamed "Harris' Theatre." It was managed for a period by George H. Broadhurst, the playwright who later wrote "The Man of the Hour" and "Paid in Full." In 1890 the name was changed to "Lyceum Theater" and in 1908 to "Lyric Theatre." Its last dramatic offering was "The Beg-

gar's Opera" on February 9, 1922. The following year the building was torn down and the name of the theater transferred across the street to a "movie" previously known as the "Blue Mouse." Location was largely responsible for the Hennepin-Harris-Lyceum-Lyric's lack of popularity. It was almost necessary to carry a lantern to find the theater during twenty years of its existence, and by the time Minneapolis had grown until its rialto included the property, the whole building was falling to pieces.

Reverting to the period which ushered in the Grand and Hennepin Avenue playhouses, several halls and museums may be mentioned in order to keep the record of early theaters complete. The latter often contained at least one fully equipped stage — sometimes two, as in the case of Kohl and Middleton's Palace Museum on Washington and Marquette. Such places as the Exposition Hall built in 1886 and Century Hall at Fourth Street and Marquette were used almost entirely for concerts. A museum was built in 1884 at 513-515 Hennepin Avenue and managed by B. F. Williams; two years later another museum, at 214-216 Hennepin Avenue, was owned by Sackett and Wiggins, who were likewise the first proprietors of the Palace Museum; and a nameless museum on lower Nicollet Avenue at a later period featured "Jo-Jo, the Dog-Faced Boy" before admiring throngs. During the summer of 1885 the first stock company presenting light opera in the city was seen at the Alcazar Opera House (Leland Rink) at Marquette and Sixth Street South. Market Hall, near Bridge Square, sheltered for a season the first stock company offering the spoken drama.

That melodrama should thrive in a generation that lacked the motion picture was inevitable. "Nelly, the Beautiful Cloak Model," "Saved from the Sea," and the like were sure of large and appreciative audiences at the People's Theatre, which opened on October 31, 1887, at 20 Washington Avenue North. It was owned by Lambert Hayes and its first manager was W. E. Sterling of Buffalo, New York. On February 1,

1889, Kohl and Middleton leased the theater, and in July, 1889, it was taken over by Jacob Litt, who renamed it the "Bijou Opera House." A gas jet behind the scenes was responsible for the fire which burned the building to the ground on December 28, 1890. A second Bijou Opera House was built on the same site the following year, and during the interval Bijou attractions were housed at the Lyceum Theater. Melodrama having died out, the Bijou was adapted to motion pictures, although a stock company in comparatively recent years brought an uptown crowd to the theater for one season while it was temporarily called the Bainbridge.

The first manager of the People's Theatre, W. E. Sterling, returned to Minneapolis in 1894 to open the New People's Theater, built by Lac Stafford at 322 Marquette Avenue.<sup>3</sup> It was opened on March 24, 1894, with the People's Players in "Nancy & Co.," preceded by a curtain-raiser, "A Bed of Roses." On December 16, 1894, the theater was acquired by Jacob Litt, who renamed it the "Metropolitan Opera House." Except for "The New Boy" and one or two other road attractions, it was used for lectures and amateur performances, which alternated with periods of darkness. The theater then passed into the hands of L. N. Scott, the second manager of the Grand Opera House, and with the closing of the latter playhouse the season's bookings were switched to the Metropolitan. Since its monopoly of first-class attractions has lasted thirty-three years, it is not uninteresting to note that the Metropolitan under the Scott régime opened with a Sunday matinée, a performance by the Chicago Marine Band, and that on the following evening "Trilby," the first of the dramatic bookings transferred from the Grand, was presented.

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MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

<sup>3</sup> Another People's Theatre, which was used only for motion pictures and had no stage equipment, was opened at 2100 Washington Avenue North in 1908 and operated until 1914.



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