Two Decades of Trouping in Minnesota, 1865–85
Andrew F. Jensen

Traveling troupes made up in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, or Milwaukee by managers who made a business of the theater were operating on a nation-wide scale as early as the 1870’s. They accounted almost entirely for the professional shows produced year after year in Minnesota. Commercial theatrical enterprises, somewhat like those of the present, sent out a host of artists of every kind to entertain a generation with tastes fully as diversified as our own. The dramatic troupe was most common of all; but there also were countless minstrel shows; opera, operetta, and musical extravaganza companies; circuses, large and small; variety and burlesque artists, the predecessors of vaudeville; elaborate tableaux and panoramas; and magicians and sleight-of-hand performers.

Each traveling dramatic troupe had an advance agent who made arrangements for its appearances. He was usually a breezy character, who made himself conspicuous in railroad coaches and hotel lobbies. His citified dress and manners, his boasting about his show, his gossipy chatter, and his democratic ways made easy his comings and goings among people connected with the small-town theater. His work was everywhere essential to the success of the company that followed in his wake.

Upon his arrival in a town, he sought out the manager of the local opera house. The task was not always easy, for the proprietor or manager was often engaged in other business. He might be a
doctor, a businessman, or even a farmer. In the latter case, the agent often had to walk far into the country or hire a carriage to reach him. Then the rent was agreed upon and a contract was drawn up. It certified that the manager had rented a hall for a specified sum per night, including “stage hands, ushers, ticket sellers,” heat, light, janitor service, and matinee privileges.

The rent, usually a fixed amount, varied with the town, the number of seats, the amount of scenery, the dressing rooms, and other facilities. A typical example, the Philharmonic Hall in Winona, which seated seven hundred, had a thirty- by fifty-four-foot stage and full sets of scenery, and rented for fifteen dollars per night or thirty dollars for three nights, exclusive of license. The one big-town theater in the state that rented for a fixed sum was the roomy and well-equipped Duluth Grand Opera House, which brought sixty dollars per night. The only show house in a good town usually rented for a high figure. This was true particularly in north-central
Minnesota and in the Red River region. Brainerd's sole theater, the Sleeper Opera House, which seated seven hundred and fifty people and had good facilities, rented for fifty dollars per night. Erreson's Hall in Crookston, Breen's Opera in Moorhead, the Opera House in St. Cloud, and Peake's Opera in Wadena, each of which seated about five hundred, brought nightly rents of from fifteen to twenty-five dollars.\(^2\) Rentals for the larger houses in the Twin Cities, Stillwater, Hastings, and Red Wing were on a share basis. A few theaters, notably Brown's Theater Comique of Minneapolis, were rented on a percentage basis. The Comique could be obtained for forty per cent of a night's box-office receipts, or thirty-five per cent of the receipts for three nights.

The agent had to protect his company by insisting that the hall be well lighted and well heated. Kerosene and oil lamps provided the only illumination in the 1860's. In many places this mode of lighting continued to be used until about 1900, when electricity came into general use. At their best, early methods of lighting were poor. Gas, which gave a more intense light than oil, came into use in the larger cities for illumination and footlights. Electric lights were provided in the Grand Opera House of Minneapolis when it opened in 1883.\(^3\)

Cities like Minneapolis and St. Paul had short theater seasons, lasting generally only from May to October, not so much because their own theaters lacked good heating plants, as because show houses in neighboring towns and cities had poor heating facilities. A company that stayed in a Minnesota city throughout the winter without making side trips into the state would soon exhaust its limited repertoire and could not earn enough to make its stay profitable. After 1874, however, a few combinations and artists made winter trips, especially in southern Minnesota, but their performances were not so well attended as in the summer months. Changeable weather often tempted managers to economize on coal or wood. When the Andrews Opera Troupe arrived in a small Minnesota town one cold

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\(^2\) Names of theaters, seating capacities, stage sizes, rents charged, and similar statistical items given in the present article are derived from *Harry Miner's Dramatic Directory for the Season 1885-86*, 137-142 (New York, 1885).

\(^3\) *Daily Minnesota Tribune* (Minneapolis), April 3, 1883.
THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE, MINNEAPOLIS

[From Grand Army of the Republic, Official Guide and Souvenir, 82 (Minneapolis, 1884).]
spring day, its members insisted upon heat for the evening's perfor­

The price of a show license was added to the rent specified in a theater contract. License fees, often a welcome source of revenue, ranged from one to ten dollars, but three to five dollars was the customary fee. In some towns the fee depended upon the character and size of the company, but often a fixed rate was imposed upon all types of attractions. Circuses paid much larger fees, and more than one city raised its circus fee to exhorbitant heights to its own disadvantage. Because Owatonna charged seventy-five dollars for a circus fee, Cole's Circus passed up that city in 1878 in favor of Faribault, where those who went to see the performance spent three thousand dollars on circus day. It was estimated that Owatonna residents alone spent six hundred dollars in Faribault.

The advance agent made contracts for hauling, for carriages, for an orchestra if one were needed, and for hotel accommodations, as well as for the theater. He also had to advertise his show, giving handbills and posters to the bill poster, who was attached to the local theater. Three or four cents was the customary charge for posting a bill. As many as five thousand bills could be posted in Minneapolis; most towns could accommodate several hundred. Melo­dramas and minstrels were advertised by crude, sensational bills, with liberal displays of color and action, much like those used by the modern circus. If some advance publicity had appeared in newspapers, fewer bills were needed. Edwin Booth, Lawrence Barrett, Mary Anderson, and other great artists of the period used only a few simple bills and newspaper announcements, which attracted full houses.

The advance agent also called upon the editor of the local newspaper. After he had presented a fancy calling card, he would show a handful of newspaper clippings and reviews praising his troupe, and he would tell how his company had "laid 'em cold" or had them "hanging on their chairs" in some near-by town or village. The

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* St. Paul Pioneer Press, June 20, 1930.
* People's Press (Owatonna), May 25, 1878.
editor expected and received a number of “comps” in return for a comment on the show in the local column and a review of the play. This practice no doubt accounts for many of the laudatory and uncritical reviews bestowed on poor performances.8

Some editors were sufficiently avaricious to want a hat full of passes for themselves and their friends. In small communities the mayor, aldermen, local politicians, and hangers-on often expected and were favored with free passes. These persons, known as deadheads, were a nuisance that the advance agent for some struggling show would gladly have escaped if he could. The favorable impression he wanted to create for his company sometimes went for naught. A bitterness which must have characterized agent and trouper alike is reflected in the words of an old agent who declared that “with a house half filled with dead heads and one-third of the benches empty” the players “must in the face of most discouraging circumstances appear as entertainers, or meet with the severest denunciations of the pygmy press and the most galling criticism from the ungrateful army of dead heads.” 9

Judged by present-day practices, attractions were scheduled in a haphazard fashion even in the larger centers. Troupes playing the large cities on prearranged dates would fill in their weeks by making contracts for one- and two-night stands in smaller centers en route. Companies appearing in places smaller than the Twin Cities played wherever their advance agents could get dates. Often the agent found that a local theater had already booked other shows on the days most convenient for his company. In the next town the situation might be the same. Sometimes his company did not know where its next performance would be given. Mix-ups, confusion, shifting of dates, and quick adjustments were common. Sometimes an engagement was skipped, sometimes a company fell behind schedule and its play was postponed, and sometimes the company got ahead of the advance agent with nothing to do. Occasionally a town had three shows in one week, and not another for two weeks.

8A newspaper sometimes published a brief synopsis of a play, like that of “Lights O’London” in the Tribune for September 23, 1883.
9Jennings, Theatrical and Circus Life, 462.
To New York, theatrical managers from all over the nation, including those from Minneapolis and St. Paul, who made annual trips for the purpose, went to schedule most of the season's showings. Theater managers, actors, and agents met in front of the Morton House on Union Square and transacted business from morning till late at night. They were well known to one another, and if the method was inefficient, it was also personal, and a manager knew what he was getting. The modern system of booking owes its origin in part to L. N. Scott, manager of the St. Paul Grand Opera House. In 1883 he and a Minneapolis manager, J. F. Conklin, were in New York making arrangements for future shows. A theatrical agent, H. S. Taylor, suggested to Scott the idea of employing an
agent to represent a number of cities in New York and there arrange bookings for them. When Scott handed Taylor a hundred-dollar bill, he became the first manager in the nation to contribute to the new booking scheme. Ten other managers, including Conklin, each subscribed a hundred dollars, enabling Taylor to open a booking office in New York. It was in Scott’s office, in 1888, that Abraham Erlanger and Marc Klaw, two theatrical advance agents, met and formed their famous partnership. According to Scott, they sat in a corner of his office for some time speaking in low tones. Finally Erlanger told Scott that he and Klaw had decided to buy Taylor’s booking agency for fifteen hundred dollars. These two events of the 1880’s revolutionized the method of booking throughout the nation and helped to pave the way for subsequent theater trusts.⁸

The traveling companies of the period may be classified not only by the type of show they presented, but also by their performance, by their size, by the amount of scenery and properties carried, and by the size of the towns they played. The least skilled of the professional troupers were members of small companies with three to five performers who, in a small wagon or buggy, wandered into parts of the state that could not be reached by railroads. Usually they played in small crossroads settlements or tiny villages, where their shows were patronized by handfuls of uncritical but amusement-hungry farmers. The small minstrel show, the “Uncle Tom” show, the tent show, some small dramatic companies, and the medicine show comprised for the most part the least competent of the professional players. The medicine show was the only entertainment enjoyed by some communities, although it did visit larger centers. The Hamlin Wizard Oil troupes, each consisting of a few well-dressed young men who played and sang in the light of a naphtha oil lamp, were known the length and breadth of the state. One that visited Stillwater in the autumn of 1869 was made up of five manly young fellows. They drew up on the corner of Main and Chestnut in an elegant wagon drawn by four spanking bays “gorgeously equipped,” and at intervals in their program advertised their product by dispens-

⁸Minneapolis Journal, June 22, 1924.
ing free applications of Wizard Oil to "painful persons" in the audience.\(^9\)

The tyro seeking a start, the little family troupe, the stranded actor whose manager had vanished with the box-office receipts or whose company had "busted," the chronic misfits and failures whose liking for their work was out of proportion to their histrionic abilities were recruited for these unsophisticated companies. One that appeared in Rochester in the summer of 1869 was described in a local newspaper. "A sort of one horse miniature menagerie dropped suddenly down in this city Monday and pitched tent in the street near Graham's Block," reads the account, which reports that "The show consisted of a wild black man, supplied with a good pair of arms, but minus legs, feet and hands, also a few insignificant, attenuated monkeys, some starved, dilapidated birds, and two or three snakes. The exhibition was enlivened by music ground out by a small boy, on a hand organ." The proprietor claimed the colored monster was a native of Madagascar, but the writer of the news item had his doubts.\(^10\)

A Crookston editor of 1885 unsparingly denounced the New York Lyceum Company for having murdered such favorites as "Joshua Whitcomb" and "The Banker's Daughter."\(^11\) Small and restive audiences spent most of their time gazing at the curtain or listening to the strains of the "Irish Washerwoman" played on a harp and violin by two Italians whose art was less faulty than that of the visiting Thespians. Companies like this were to be found in all sections of the state; sometimes they vied unsuccessfully with better companies in larger places. No advance agent preceded them. Upon arriving in a community, they engaged the schoolhouse or the local hall for one or two nights. Members of such companies peddled their own bills. Often they did not stay at hotels, but slept in their wagons or tents instead. Audiences were small; fifty people comprised a good house; but in isolated regions such shows were often well received. After the performance there would be a dance,

\(^9\) *Stillwater Republican*, October 12, 1869.
\(^10\) *Rochester Post*, August 21, 1869.
\(^11\) *Crookston Times*, October 24, 1885.
for which one of the artists would play the fiddle, and refreshments would be provided by people in the audience.

Members of the small road shows were accustomed to hardships and irregular living. By day or night they could be found traveling in all kinds of weather; often they were overtaken by storms; often their wagons were mired on bad roads and the artists had to stand in ankle-deep mud to release their floundered vehicles. If the actors boarded, it was only at the poorer hotels or rooming houses, where both fare and lodgings were to be endured rather than enjoyed. Stomach disorders, strain, and exposure assailed them. It took a strong constitution to troupe this way.

Salaries in arrears were common; sometimes they never were paid. The manager, or leader, might be exacting or dishonest. Members of troupes, large as well as small, sometimes saw their companies suddenly dissolve when the manager vanished with the receipts, leaving unpaid not only salaries but bills contracted en route. Troupers were objects of a sheriff's vigilance, and local business concerns were wary in giving them credit. The famous Eddie Foy, who once trouped in Minnesota and Wisconsin, said that troupers could recognize the footfalls of a sheriff in a hotel hallway. Once a sheriff attended every performance of his troupe to watch the box-office receipts. In Hokah a wretched minstrel troupe "busted" when its advance agent fled to La Crosse with the receipts. The chief of police there refused to give him up to a hastily formed posse from Hokah that went to the Wisconsin city to collect bills owed by the defunct company. To satisfy these claims, a bass viol and a snaredrum belonging to the company were seized as collateral.\(^\text{12}\)

If the players were fortunate enough to escape financial troubles, they were certain at times to encounter cool, if not hostile, receptions in places where they were regarded as loafers and vagabonds at best, and as cheats and horse thieves at worst. Sometimes a visiting troupe was found to be responsible for a missing horse or a shell game operator, as well as for an objectionable performance. An

\(^{12}\) Eddie Foy and Alvin F. Harlan, *Clowning through Life*, 75 (New York, 1928); *Winona Weekly Republican*, February 2, 1876.
aggregation styling itself Pomeroy’s Minstrels appeared in Brainerd in June, 1881, and there presented a drab transparent show which drew the ire of the city’s editor, who asserted that the day was past when any kind of a troupe could play a new town. The fact that the show drew audiences of only eleven to seventeen people indicates that the criticism probably was justified.\textsuperscript{18}

As towns and cities increased in size, their theater facilities improved, they attracted more and better troupes, and audiences were larger. Comparison between offerings was possible, and while people were not over-critical, they were not so easily pleased as they had been earlier. It took better companies than those heretofore described to satisfy audiences in larger places. Usually such companies consisted of from six to twenty artists; they were accompanied by managers and preceded by advance agents. They traveled by train or boat, seldom playing far from the main routes of travel, and carried their own scenery and properties to supplement those of the average theater. The players were experienced, and while some specialization prevailed, many of them were versatile enough to sing and play an instrument as well as to act. Mollie Williams played five different characters when “A Day in Paris” was given in St. Paul in 1867. The typical opera company had a repertoire of plays as well as operas. Artists appearing in conjunction with a panorama often sang and danced jigs in addition to acting.

Most of the larger theatrical companies organized in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee, and sent out by managers who resided in those centers, went westward from Chicago along the central routes of rail travel to the Pacific coast, then one of the best fields for the theater. Consequently more shows were to be seen in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska than in Minnesota, which was not bounded on the north or west by populous states nor, until the 1880’s, linked by rail with the West. It thus constituted a sort of theatrical frontier. Troupes went to Minnesota, played where they could, and returned to the South or East, since there were no large centers

\textsuperscript{18}Brainerd Tribune, June 11, 1881. At Owatonna, according to the Owatonna Plaindealer of February 22, 1866, the ladies in an audience walked out of the hall because a Tom Thumb performer was obscene.
The Manager takes pleasure in announcing an engagement for a limited number of nights with the celebrated

COMEDIANNE AND VOCALIST,
MISS MOLLIE WILLIAMS

And the EMINENT COMEDIAN,
FELIX A. VINCENT!

Who will make their first appearance in St. Paul on
MONDAY EVENING, MAY 13th, 1867,

When will be presented the beautiful Comedy, entitled,

Kitty O'Sheal!

Kitty O'Sheal, with Song and Dance, Miss Mollie Williams.

The whole to conclude with the celebrated Proven Farce, entitled,

A DAY IN PARIS

Miss Mollie Williams

SCALE OF PRICES

Dress Circle and Parquette, 75 cents.
Balcony or Family Circle, 50 cents.
Secured Seats in Balcony or Family Circle, 75 cents.
Secured Seats in Dress Circle and Parquette without extra charge.
Lower Private Boxes, $6.00.
Upper Private Boxes, $5.00.

Seats secured during the day at Managers' Music Store.

Saturday Afternoon, Grand Melville Matinee.

Operatic GEMS,

Highland Fling, Miss Emma Salisbury.

An Early St. Paul Playbill
north or west of the state to attract them. With the westward ex-
tension of the Northern Pacific Railroad, Minnesota became a link
in a larger field of theatrical activity. Troupes on their way to the
west coast played throughout the state, and some even made side
trips into Canada, the Dakotas, and even farther, returning to Min-
nesota before starting for the West.

The larger traveling troupes, although more important numeri-
cally than artistically, were of an astonishing diversity. They included,
in addition to the dramatic troupe and the ever-present minstrels,
numerous opera, operetta, and comic opera companies, burlesque
shows, variety and musical extravaganza troupes, artists who ap-
peared in tableaux and panoramas often presented on an elaborate
scale, magicians and sleight-of-hand artists, hosts of circuses and
other tent shows, and "Uncle Tom" and Wild West shows.

These organizations may be described as second-class companies.
With a few exceptions, they produced the best and only shows en-
joyed by Twin City audiences before the late 1870's. In other Minne-
sota cities, they were the best companies to appear even as late as
1885. Some of the companies that played in St. Paul and Minne-
apolis between 1867 and 1872 may be mentioned. A. MacFarland,
a manager who had leases on Twin City and Duluth theaters in
1867, presented such plays as "The Daughter of the Regiment," the
"French Spy," and "Kitty O'Sheal." Leading roles were often
played by Mollie Williams and Felix A. Vincent. Rachel Johnson
of the same company played in "East Lynne," "The Hunchback,"
"The Honey Moon," and "Ingomar." Most of St. Paul's drama in
1868 was presented by Charles Plunkett, manager and lessee of the
Grand Opera House for the season. He was complimented for pay-
ing his bills and presenting drama with some degree of regularity,
if not for the artistic merits of his plays.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1869 the St. Paul opera house was leased to Mr. and Mrs. A.
O. Miller and their large troupe from Detroit. Among the plays they

\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{St. Paul Daily Press} announced and reviewed productions staged by both
MacFarland and Plunkett. See especially notices of performances given on March 22,
April 26, May 4, 13, 14, June 4, 8, 11, 24, and December 27, 1867; and on
March 9, April 2, and June 3, 1868.
produced were "East Lynne," "Hamlet," "The Three Guardsmen," and "Limerick Boy." Their performances were considered better than the "wretched burlesques which have heretofore been inflicted upon the public as theatrical performances." MacFarland and Plunkett by comparison were described as bunglers and flunkies. Furthermore, the Millers' performers were respectable, not obscene or vulgar in speech or action, nor sots, as was so often the case with troupers. After the company played "Ten Nights in a Barroom," it was reported that during the scene in which Joe Miller bent over the dead body of his little daughter, several "old soakers were seen mopping their faces vigorously." Miller gave such a vivid delineation of delirium tremens that the audience experienced a shudder of horror.\(^5\)

Among other dramatic companies and troupes appearing in St. Paul before 1872 were Mrs. James A. Oates' Burlesque and Opera Troupe of eighteen artists, who presented more drama than opera; Josie Booth's Star Company, which "busted" with the result that some of its members reappeared as far away as Duluth; the Worrell Sisters, whose Burlesque and Opera Bouffe Company won the hearts of many ladies and received many benefit performances; J. A. Lord's Dramatic Company; Kate Fisher; William Lingard; Alice Dunning; the Langrishe Comedy Company, which gave "Rip Van Winkle," "Shoddy, or the Streets of New York," and other favorites; and the McKee Rankin Company, in "Rosedale" and "The Long Strike." Duprez and Benedict's Original and Metropolitan Minstrel and Burlesque Opera Troupe and Emerson and Manning's Minstrels were the best of numerous early minstrel organizations to visit Minnesota. The former group, together with Ole Bull, drew receipts exceeding three thousand dollars in St. Paul in one week in April, 1869.\(^6\) Early opera companies included Brignoli's Italian Opera Troupe from the New York Academy of Music, Sand's Burlesque Opera Troupe, the Parlor Opera Troupe, and the Grand Fabri Mulders Italian Opera Combination. The large Irish element in St. Paul gave good support to the theater. Visiting

\(^{5}\) Press, June 15, 17, 18, 20, 23, 1869.
\(^{6}\) Press, April 29, 30, 1869.
theatrical companies often gave there one or more plays depicting Irish life, characters, or patriots. Dion Boucicault’s “Colleen Bawn” and “Shaughraun” and domestic dramas showing the Irish in New York were acclaimed. “Robert Emmett” always drew a good house on St. Patrick’s Day.

As late as 1885 most of the companies visiting the Twin Cities were second-class, although the great stars of the day had been making regular appearances there for several years. Even the better companies varied greatly in quality. At their worst they were in a class with Burnham’s Novelty and Dramatic Company, which disbanded in Minneapolis in March, 1882, after four drunken actors wrecked the show. Some companies included stars such as John Dillon, a really excellent comedian, whose presentations were often marred by poor support, and Emma Abbott, who did much to advance English opera. Her company was always welcomed. If it had a fault, it was overly ambitious. It failed in a performance of “Rigoletto” in Minneapolis not so much because its members lacked talent, as because the company lacked sufficient scenery and an adequate orchestra.

Few operatic troupes played in smaller and more remote communities, and some of the better second-class dramatic companies did not visit inland cities west of the Mississippi. Minstrel shows and circuses, however, were to be seen throughout the state. Before 1868, Marble’s Dramatic Troupe, which had twenty-one members, played for six consecutive nights in Owatonna, then a city of two thousand. Although this was a big company, it was typical of a large number which catered specially to cities of from two to ten thousand. Among minstrels playing in cities of the same size were Jake Hamilton’s Contrabands, Robinson’s, Blaisdell and Cartwright’s, Heywood’s, Elwood’s Female Minstrels, and the New Orleans Minstrels. Some of the larger opera companies, like Abbott’s and Payson’s English company, played in Stillwater and other larger river towns. There were also miscellaneous companies offering entertainments to satisfy the varied tastes of the day. It was a poor show town that did not enjoy several attractions each year.

Tribune, March 15, 1882.
PENCE OPERA HOUSE.

SECOND NIGHT
OF THE
ENGAGEMENT
OF
THE
PEOPLE'S FAVORITE!

The Beautiful and Talented Actress, MISS

SUSAN DENIN!

Who will appear in Knowle's beautiful Love Act Play of the

HUNCHBACK

Thursday Evening, April 9th, 1868,

Will be presented James Shielk's Favorite Great Play, in five acts, entitled the

HUNCHBACK!

Julia: MISS SUSAN DENIN
Master Walter: MR. CHARLES PLUNKETT
Sir Thomas Clifford: MR. GEO. BURT
Marlow: MR. W. DUNCAN
Patience: MR. G. B. BEACH
William: MR. C. PLUNKETT, Jr.
Sally: MR. W. RUSSELL
Herbert: MR. M. WAKELING
Herbert Will: MR. JONES
Tom: MR. WINTER
Stephen: MISS MELISSA DENIN
Squire: MR. COOPER
Helena: MRS. CHAS. PLUNKETT

COMIC SONG, - ELIZA LOGAN BURT
OVERTURE, - ORCHESTRA.

The whole to conclude with the New Farce of

Or, LOVE, LAW AND MISCHIEF.

Wormwood, the Hunchback: MR. GEO. BURT
Captain, a Lawyer: MR. W. RUSSELL
Charles, the young son: MR. G. B. BEACH
Mrs. Croft, a Miller: MRS. GEO. BURT
Sarah, a maid of all work: MRS. CLARA BURT

NEW NOVELTIES IN PREPARATION, WITH

MISS DENIN
IN THE LEADING ROLES.

Admission 50 Cts. Reserved Seats 75 Cts.
Doors open at 7 o'clock. Curtain rises at 8 o'clock.
The traveling troupe was not the only theater of the time. There were a number of Minnesota organizations which might be described as stock companies. Best known was the "permanent" theater established by John Murray in the Pence Opera House of Minneapolis early in September, 1878. The venture was regarded with skepticism. Night after night barely enough money was taken in to pay the gas bills. Interest, however, increased after a time, the audiences became larger, and soon Minneapolis began to patronize the theater and the company began to show a profit. Before the season was half over, on February 9, the ladies of Minneapolis turned out a thousand strong and tendered a memorable benefit to Miss Grace Cartland, the leading lady, who seems to have won the city with her acting.\(^{18}\) Other stars in the company were Frederic Bryton, the leading man, Clara Baker, and John Murray, the manager of the company and the husband of Miss Cartland. Ten other players, a stage manager, a director of amusement, a scenic artist named Peter Clausen, an orchestra, a property man, and a machinist completed the company. It had a large repertoire and the plays changed almost every night. Four or five performances were given each week. The company's first season, which ended early in May, 1879, was followed by a tour of several Minnesota cities. Its second Minneapolis season, in the winter of 1879–80, was for some reason its last, despite its success. In 1883, when the Murrays returned to Minneapolis for a short stay, the newspapers recalled the days of their company and stated that few actors had ever made so many friends in Minneapolis. It was succeeded in the season of 1881–82 by the MacAllister Company.

There were few native Minnesota artists in the 1870's and 1880's. A Winona girl, Ita Welch, achieved distinction in operetta roles on the eastern stage, and members of the Andrews family of St. Peter organized their opera troupe. It consisted of three sons and three daughters of a Methodist pastor living on a Minnesota Valley farm, who became so inspired upon hearing "Pinafore" that they determined in 1882 to play it themselves. They sent for the score,\(^{18}\) *Tribune*, February 4, 1879.
assumed parts, and Alice Andrews, the youngest, accompanied rehearsals on an old parlor melodeon. Such costumes as they could not make at home, they bought. A tenor, experienced in stage mechanics and make-up, was hired, and George Andrews, later the group's leading baritone, went to Minneapolis to study the performances of the Bostonians, then presenting light opera in the Mill City. He picked up information about staging "Girafle-Giraflo" which, with "The Doctor of Alcantara," "Pinafore," and the "Chimes of Normandy," made up the original repertoire of the hopeful troupers. Next the members of a chorus were picked locally, not so much for their ability to act as to sing. Acting could be learned later. Rehearsals were held in the local opera hall and soon the Andrews presented their first professional opera before an admiring audience in St. Peter. A long and successful career followed, the company touring Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and even going as far south as Texas. One of the brothers, Charles, acted as advance agent and business manager, while the others played leading roles. At one time the troupe had seventy-five members; it played on a guarantee basis of two hundred dollars per night; and at the height of their success the Andrews traveled in a private car.\(^{19}\)

The program of the typical dramatic performance generally began about eight o'clock in the evening. If a troupe stayed in a community over Saturday, as it often did, it gave a matinee at a special admission fee. The play of the evening usually was preceded by a few orchestral numbers or vocal solos. If the house demanded an encore from a star, he reappeared and rendered a solo or a dramatic reading. In many theaters the main performance, particularly if it were a melodrama or a tragedy, was followed by a one-act farce.

Actors were sometimes commended and even praised if they spoke their parts without omitting any lines. If there were no hitches, the play was said to have gone off smoothly. Lapses of memory often brought heckling from the "gallery gods." A drunken actor who

\(^{19}\) *Pioneer Press*, June 29, 1930.
failed to appear on time or who bungled his part incurred the hos-
tility of the house and gave a troupe a bad name. Once a drunken
performer appearing in a Minneapolis theater forgot his lines, cursed
the audience, and ran from the stage.20

Despite the tendency to put the theater on a more business-like
basis, personal relations between actors and their admirers contin­
ued. Their relationship is best illustrated by benefit performances,
which were common in the Twin Cities and Stillwater. If a troupe
or its stars had pleased audiences during its stay, a benefit perform­
ance was staged as a token of appreciation. Sometimes two or three
benefits were given during an engagement, one for each player
whose work had captivated the audiences. The benefit was usually
preceded by a letter of appreciation signed by prominent citizens
of the community, requesting a performance and setting a date.
The night set aside found the theater beautifully and often lavishly
decorated. Statues and large vases filled with cut flowers graced the
stage. The balcony rails and walls were draped with colorful rib­
bons, gauze, and evergreens. Portraits of the recipient wreathed in
flowers were set up in prominent places. A special drop curtain
upon which were inscribed words appropriate for the occasion was
sometimes used. Ladies in the audience carried bouquets or wore
corsages. At the Minneapolis benefit honoring Miss Cartland the
audience called for her when the curtain dropped on the second act
of "Masks and Faces." The star appeared from the wings and
seated herself on the stage, where she was showered with bouquets
and gifts. There followed a speech of acceptance and thanks by the
star, who was greeted with a storm of applause.

In the early years of the Minnesota theater the better and larger
organizations played first in St. Paul and then in Minneapolis. As
long as St. Paul retained its position as the best theater city in the
state, such was the practice. Minneapolis, however, continued to
strive for the honor of the first showings until the late 1870’s, when
some troupes began to appear there before going to St. Paul. With
its large population, which generously supported the theater, and

20 Journal, March 28, 1926.
OPERA HOUSE.

Manager: C. FLUNKE T
Stage Manager: GEO. BURB
Musical Director: GEO. GILBERT
Prompter: W. RUSSELL

FAREWELL BENEFIT
OF MILE MARIETTA RAVEL
AND LAST APPEARANCE BUT ONE.

New and Startling Feats on the
TIGHT ROPE
In which she will extinguish 12 Lighted Candles by a Single Shot from a Gun.

The Legendary Drama of the
FLYING DUTCHMAN.
MARIETTA RAVEL as CAPT. VANDERDECKEN.

Friday Evening, March 27th, 1868,
MILE MARIETTA RAVEL in her wonderful performance on the
TIGHT ROPE!
Without the aid of a Balance Pole, which have excited the admiration of the world, added to
which her loveliness of person and feature, bewitching grace of action, have created a
future of excitement seldom paralleled.

After which the Marvellously Supernatural Drama, the
FLYING DUTCHMAN!
OR, THE PHANTOM SHIP.
its fine playhouses, Minneapolis was rapidly becoming the best theater city in the state. About the same time nationally famous artists began to appear in Minnesota with greater frequency. The theater of the late 1870's and the 1880's had many great stars. This was due in part to a system under which an actor was able to work on one role, or a few roles, until he had perfected them. Thereafter he appeared exclusively in his special role on annual tours. It is said that neither before nor since the 1880's has the American stage had such finished and distinguished artists.

With the exception of Shakespeare's plays, the dramas of the day, many of which were adapted from British and German pieces, were inferior to the best actors of the period. Joseph Jefferson, with his deep humanity and varied talent, immortalized such roles as "Rip Van Winkle" and became the best-loved actor of his day. "Davy Crockett," a melodrama little better than the average, as played with restrained dignity by Frank Mayo, continued in his repertoire year after year. John McCullough and Lawrence Barrett elevated to a high level such heavy bombast as that displayed in Bulwer's "Richelieu," "Virginius," and "The Gladiator." 21

Among other great artists of the period were Edwin Booth, Fanny Janauschek, Helena Modjeska, Tommaso Salvini, Mary Anderson, Fanny Davenport, Clara Morris, and Ada Rehan, all of whom appeared in Minnesota theaters. After achieving success and reputation on the New York stage, they went on extensive tours throughout the nation. Though they were often members of first-class stock companies, such as Wallack's, Palmer's, and Daly's, the stars nevertheless were usually supported by casts unworthy of their talent when they took to the road. Again and again statements to the effect that the great actor or actress was only fairly well supported appear in reviews. Their appearances, however, were highly appreciated by the fashionable audiences which crowded the theaters of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

There played Booth, the great Shakespearean tragedian, whose intellect, remarkably tragic face, magnetic eloquence, and unusual

21 Oral S. Coad and Edwin Mims, Jr., The American Stage, 206–208, 222, 223, 228 (New Haven, 1929).
Il8 ANDREW F. JENSEN JUNE

grace held spell-bound his audiences. As Shylock, Iago, and Hamlet he was never approached, and many have called him America's foremost actor. Nearly as well known, but falling short of Booth's genius, were Barrett and McCullough, two great actors who also appeared in Shakespeare's tragic roles. Barrett's fine voice and sensitive face won him fame as Cassius. With his rich gifts he played and raised to higher levels than they deserved a number of roles. His sometime colleague, McCullough, though he did not rank with Barrett, exercised his tremendous emotional range to win a lasting name in numerous roles, including Othello and Brutus. The famous Italian, Salvini, who appeared in the Twin Cities in Shakespearean roles, especially Othello, should be mentioned. Well proportioned and possessed of classic features and a glorious voice, he was described by one critic as the greatest actor since Garrick. On the American stage he always spoke his native tongue, even in his appearances with Booth. Janauschek, the great Bohemian actress, used her native language until she had mastered English. She was noted for her portrayals of impressive and powerful roles such as Lady Macbeth and Medea. Another great foreign actress was Modjeska, a refugee from Poland, who acted remarkably well in a wide variety of plays ranging from melodrama to tragedy. All these great figures of the theater appeared sooner or later on the stages of the Twin Cities.22

Jefferson in "Rip Van Winkle" was always well received, as was Denman Thompson in the title role of "Joshua Whitcomb," played in 1880 and the years that followed. These roles, as well as Davy Crockett and Colonel Mulberry Sellers in "There's Millions in It," reflected American types. Thompson will be forever associated with the old Yankee farmer, Joshua Whitcomb, who goes to Boston to visit his wayward boy, Reuben. Stepping upon a stage which represented a street in Boston, Joshua mopped his perspiring brow and said, "I'll be gol durned if I ain't turned around." This brought in-

stant laughter. The piece was popular in Minneapolis in the late 1870's, since many of the city's residents were natives of New England.²³

The river towns of southeastern Minnesota and the larger cities were the only places in Minnesota that could offer adequate theatrical facilities to the great stars in the 1860's and 1870's. By 1885, however, forty-seven of the state's cities and villages, in addition to St. Paul and Minneapolis, had halls or theaters. They ranged in size from a tiny hall seating two hundred people at Wells to a spacious opera house at Stillwater which held more than twelve hundred.²⁴ The best theatrical attractions on the road, as well as second- and third-rate companies, played in the theaters of many of the smaller communities in the decades that followed.

²³ Journal, November 25, 1928.
²⁴ Miner's Dramatic Directory, 137–142.