

The Early German Theater in Minnesota

HERMANN E. ROTHFUSS

Characteristic of the Germans in America, commented a writer in the *Minnesota Volksblatt* of St. Paul in 1869, is the fact that "hardly have they erected their houses in the forest or on the shores of a river, when a few singers will band together and soon the old folksongs will be heard in the new country. And quite naturally a 'hall' is soon discovered to be necessary, — and it is built, even though it may be left unplastered for a time. The next step is even more ambitious: A German theatrical performance is given. Thus the Germans feel more and more at home in this country."¹

Even before Minnesota became a state, German theaters had been established in St. Paul and St. Anthony. Before long German amateur stages were to be found along the Minnesota shore of the Mississippi from Winona northwards, on the St. Croix, in the valley of the Minnesota, in inland communities of southeastern Minnesota, and even on Lake Superior. Roughly speaking, they were located in a triangular area with a base line extending from Winona to the big bend of the Minnesota River at Mankato and westward to New Ulm, and with sides formed by the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, which meet at the Twin Cities. Records of German stages at one time or another during the first twenty-five years of Minnesota statehood are available for the following communities: Winona, Wabasha, Red Wing, Hastings, Stillwater, St. Paul, Minneapolis-St. Anthony, Osseo, Shakopee, Chaska, Carver, Waconia, Young America, New Rome in Sibley County, St. Peter, New Ulm, Mankato, Waseca, Owatonna, Rochester, Faribault, Perham, and Duluth. It is likely that performances were given also at Read's Landing and St. Cloud.

St. Paul was the first Minnesota city to offer theatrical entertainment for its German settlers. There the first Germans to settle permanently seem to have arrived in 1849. Three years later enough had arrived in St. Paul to make possible the founding of a German organization. This club, the German Reading Society, was probably the first on Minnesota soil founded exclusively for and by people of German speech. By 1857 the German stage came into being.

¹ *Minnesota Volksblatt* (St. Paul), December 10, 1869. All newspapers used in the preparation of this article are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The year 1857 was a difficult one for Minnesota. Financial panic brought desolation to the nation as a whole and to Minnesota in particular. Among its results was the closing of all professional stages in St. Paul. The People's Theater was the last to bolt its doors.² Paradoxically enough the failure of the English-language stages redounded to the benefit of the German undertaking. Not only did some German-born employees of the closed theaters find it necessary to look for another source of income in a German theater, but the closing put at the disposal of the Germans the equipment of the old People's Theater. Thus the German drama made its debut on Minnesota soil on November 14, 1857, at a time when there was no English-language stage in St. Paul.

Irvine Hall was the scene of the first performance. It was small, but suitably arranged and decorated. The attendance testifies to the strength of the German group in St. Paul, for more than four hundred people were present. The hall was so well filled that many latecomers could not be admitted. The ladies, often surrounded by their children, seated themselves on the front benches; many of the men were forced to stand in the rear of the hall or along the wall. The offerings of the evening were two comedies, *Einer muss heiraten* ("One Must Marry") and *Der Sprung durchs Fenster* ("The Jump through the Window"). Nothing more ambitious could be expected, for practically all performers were simon-pure amateurs and most had never before been on a stage. These circumstances were fully appreciated by the critic of the *Deutsche Zeitung* who, while gently criticizing some features of this memorable performance, expressed satisfaction that "expectations were surpassed by far."³

The seed planted during the bitter winter of 1857 grew into a plant that flourished, sometimes more, sometimes less, for over eighty years, and it died only when the state's legitimate English-language stages also gave up their struggle. Although German plays were given in Irvine Hall off and on for twelve years, the German stage soon acquired a permanent home of its own. The amateur thespians of 1857 joined the German Reading Society, and in 1859 this organization built a hall of its own expressly designed for theatrical performances. It was located on Exchange Street, immediately adjoining the lot on which Governor Alexander Ramsey later built the house which is still a St. Paul landmark. Unfortunately, the hall was far from the center of the city, and its remoteness always interfered with the financial success of the undertaking.

² William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:363 (St. Paul, 1921); Frank Whiting, "History of the Theater in St. Paul," 1:92. The latter is a doctoral dissertation prepared at the University of Minnesota in 1941; the Minnesota Historical Society has a copy on microfilm.

³ *Minnesota Deutsche Zeitung* (St. Paul), November 21, 1857.

The building was called the Athenäum, "because Athens was the seat of art and science, and consequently the Athenäum is a hall in which science and the arts are honored and fostered."⁴ It served as the center of German social and theatrical life in St. Paul till it was destroyed by fire almost twenty-seven years later.

Karl Schurz, who was in Minnesota during the political campaign of 1859, was the first man to speak at the Athenäum, but the formal dedication of the stage took place on Christmas Day of 1859. At least during the winter, performances, including operas and classical tragedies, followed each other rather regularly at weekly intervals, but the approach of the Civil War tended to reduce theatrical activity. Although the English-language theaters in St. Paul succumbed, the German stage actually took a new lease on life. Mr. and Mrs. Johann Dardenne and Theodor Steidle, the first traveling professional German actors to visit Minnesota, arrived in July, 1861, and immediately set out to revive the languishing stage. Members of the local amateur group acted as their supporting personnel, and the winter of 1861-62 saw more theatrical activity than any previous season. Governor Alexander Ramsey, who spent his youth with the German-speaking family of his Pennsylvania-German mother, attended frequently, and even residents of St. Paul who did not know German often were seen in the audience.⁵ Even though the Dardennes left St. Paul early in 1862, Steidle continued his labors. Perhaps more than any other, he deserves the title of German theatrical pioneer of Minnesota. He was in the first group of German professional actors to play in St. Paul and St. Anthony, and the first to inaugurate German plays in Minneapolis. He reopened the New Ulm theater after the Sioux Outbreak, gave the first performances in St. Peter, played German and English dramas in Mankato, and finally appeared on the stage of Philharmonic Hall in Winona. But even he, with his prodigious talents and energies, could not counteract the influence of the Civil War and its drain upon manpower. In addition he had to combat a baneful factor which again and again retarded the development of amateur theaters—the unwillingness of women to appear on the stage. A discouraged man, Steidle departed from St. Paul early in 1864.

It took years before the Athenäum stage again reached a state of rela-

⁴The committee entrusted with the promotion of the building included Gustav Leue, Henning von Minden, Karl Koch, Peter Gabrielson, and H. Memmler, all of whom served with distinction in the Civil War. Koch, who was one of the founders of the St. Paul Turnverein, died while in the service and was buried with military honors from the Athenäum.

⁵Mentions of the German theater are to be found in Ramsey's diary, September 9, November 11, 18, December 9, 26, 1861, and January 1, February 24, October 6, 1862. Typewritten copies of the diaries are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

tive artistic achievement and prosperity. Its record from the final years of the Civil War to 1871 was checkered, not to say disappointing. By and large the St. Paul German theater tried to remain on an amateur basis, though professional actors appeared from time to time. There was even a promising period when one professional actress made an energetic attempt to establish a regular schedule of performances. But personal feuds, as well as political, religious, and economic dissension among St. Paul Germans, interfered with the prosperity of the Athenäum theater. On several occasions, as in 1861, there was danger of complete suspension. But timely and unexpected help usually came from the outside, and the stage began to flourish. The change was entirely due to one man of energy and imagination whose field was the theater. This was Gustav Amberg, modestly introduced as "Director Amberg of Detroit," but later recognized as one of the most important figures of the German-American theater. His success during his two years at the Athenäum gave evidence of the ambition, energy, and resourcefulness which characterized his later activity in New York.⁶ He believed in variety, presenting farces, comedies, serious drama, and children's plays. Amberg brought professional German actors to St. Paul for series of performances; the first, E. Lasswitz, played dramas by Goethe, Schiller, and Molière.

Interest in the St. Paul German theater seems to have been especially marked in the winter of 1872-73. Both offerings and attendance were noteworthy, and it is questionable whether the level of this season was ever again attained. For a time the erection of a large modern home for the German stage was contemplated, but Amberg was not discouraged when the plan did not materialize. He engaged George Seibert's Great Western Band to play before the opening of performances and during intermissions; he called professionals to St. Paul from other cities; and he was fortunate in finding a group of excellent St. Paul amateurs who were willing to play for him. Among them were such men as Otto Dreher and Karl Ahrendt, long shining stars in the St. Paul amateur heaven.⁷ The high spot of his managerial career in St. Paul was probably reached when Madame Maria Methua-Scheller played in the Athenäum. She was at home both in German and English, proving her versatility in the role of Desdemona in an astonishing polyglot performance of *Othello* in the New York Winter Garden in 1867. On that occasion Edwin Booth

⁶ Later Amberg founded a theater in New York, where he attracted many European stars and staged the first American performance of Ibsen's *Doll's House*. After the turn of the century he was connected with the Schuberts' theater chain.

⁷ Dreher was connected with the St. Paul German amateur theater from its establishment in 1857 to his death in 1886, except for the Civil War years, when he served with the Third Minnesota. Ahrendt later became a professional actor, playing important roles with Edwin Booth.

played Iago in English; Bogumil Dawison, a famous German actor on a visit from Germany, rendered Othello in German; and Madame Methua-Scheller spoke English to Booth and German to Dawison. No wonder a full house greeted her when she made her first St. Paul appearance, supported by Karl Ahrendt. Even today there is occasion for pride in the fact that an actress who had played with Booth and an actor who was destined to play with him should appear together on a St. Paul German amateur stage. The *Volksblatt* boldly claimed world renown for the local company.⁸

Within a few months, however, the Athenäum Theater took a decided downward swing. Dreher went into politics; Ahrendt departed for Baltimore; and—most serious of all—Amberg severed his connection with the Athenäum and took over the Grand Opera House. The German stage was again an orphan. It did not perish, however; in fact in 1876 the Athenäum was completely renovated. But in each of the three years after Amberg's departure only half the number of performances given in 1873 were staged. The period between 1876 and 1881 was even less eventful. Its only redeeming feature was supplied by the German singing societies, which indulged in some operatic activity. During the entire year 1881 only six stage plays were given. Again the Athenäum had reached a point where the demise of its stage seemed highly probable, and this in spite of the fact that the number of Germans in Minnesota was constantly on the increase, and twenty-two German societies were active in St. Paul.⁹ It may well be that the very increase in the number of organizations caused a division of effort and injured the theater.

Happily, however, the unfavorable trend was decisively reversed in the nick of time. The German Society, successor to the German Reading Society, organized a new theater section, and the result was the performance of thirty-six plays in 1882, as compared with six in 1881. Nor did the amateurs concentrate on insignificant pieces. Among the dramas presented were Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Hamlet*, Goethe's *Faust*, Schiller's *Räuber* and *Don Carlos*, and a German version of Joseph Jefferson's dramatization of *Rip van Winkle*. A number of relatively new German plays were given also, as were two performances of Lortzing's opera *Der Waffenschmied*.

Fortunate as this revival was, it was overshadowed by the visit of a complete ensemble from a professional German stage. Its members were professional German actors playing a regular schedule in Chicago and Milwaukee. They were warmly received, moving a Chicago German

⁸ *Volksblatt*, July 24, 1873.

⁹ *Volkszeitung* (St. Paul), March 29, April 11, 1880.

paper to say that the rusticated theater lovers of St. Paul had been enthusiastic about the offerings of their guests. To this remark the *Volkszeitung* replied that the audience had indeed been enthusiastic, "a thing that Chicagoans could no longer be," but that the Twin Cities were by no means rusticated.¹⁰ The Chicagoans' visit proved to be of long-standing importance to the Minnesota group, however, for local players were stimulated to new efforts by seeing professionals, and some of the Chicago players either stayed in St. Paul or returned for additional performances later. St. Paul thereafter enjoyed regular visits from the Milwaukee professional group—a good ensemble by any standard.

In 1886 the time seemed ripe for the organization of a professional German theater in St. Paul. The impetus was provided by a fire that destroyed the Athenäum on May 3, 1886, a few hours after a performance. It found a home in Turner Hall on Sixth Street, the logical place for German drama. The stage of this hall was immediately enlarged. On September 12, 1886, twenty-nine years after the first German amateur performance had been given in St. Paul, the new professional German theater opened its doors to the public.

The task of making a success of the new undertaking was entrusted to Friedrich Strampfer, variously described as a famous Viennese actor and as a manager of theaters in Vienna and Budapest. A list of actors and actresses engaged was soon published, and the season began under the best auspices, with performances every Sunday. Before long, however, indications that the new stage was in difficulties appeared. One after another the professionals departed, to be replaced by amateurs. Counter attractions competing for the customer's dollar included club events, German opera given by professional companies, and Fanny Janauschek's ensemble, which performed a number of German plays in English. In addition an amateur company directed by Jean Wormser opened a competing theater on the west bank of the river, giving regularly scheduled performances there and even playing in St. Paul proper. In April Strampfer gave up and departed. St. Paul, not always charitable even toward amateur theaters, had not proved a fertile field for a German professional ensemble. Henceforth amateurs, occasionally directed by professionals and stimulated by visits from traveling ensembles, had the field to themselves. This was true even after a new Turner Hall on Franklin Street was dedicated in February, 1889. Its existence was short. Three years later this hall, like the Athenäum, was destroyed by fire.

¹⁰ *Volkszeitung*, June 8, 1882.

[To be concluded]



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).