

# The Early German Theater in Minnesota

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[CONCLUDED HEREWITH *is the narrative which appeared under the same title in the June, 1951, issue of this magazine. In the earlier installment the author traced the story of theatrical activity among the German pioneers of St. Paul. The section which follows deals with German dramatic performances in the frontier communities of St. Anthony, Minneapolis, and New Ulm. Ed.*]

The history of the German stage in St. Anthony and Minneapolis is closely connected with that of St. Paul, although there was a good deal of indigenous activity. German theatrical life was not as pronounced in the two cities at the Falls of St. Anthony as in St. Paul, chiefly because the proportion of German residents was much smaller. Furthermore, the history of the German theater there is harder to trace, since during its first ten years no German-language newspaper existed. But by 1866 no fewer than thirty-six plays had been given in the hall of the St. Anthony Turnverein alone.<sup>11</sup>

When the first German-speaking settlers arrived at the Falls of St. Anthony is uncertain, though Frederick W. Traves, a native of Oldenburg, is said to have settled on a claim on the site of East Minneapolis after his discharge from the United States Army in 1846. By 1856 a sizeable number of Germans must have lived in St. Anthony, for a list of members of the Fremont Club includes twenty German names. During the winter of 1856-57 the St. Anthony Turnverein was organized, and probably it was in the hall of this society, on March 2, 1859, that the first German theatrical performance in St. Anthony and Minneapolis was staged.<sup>12</sup> This was *Der reisende Student* ("The Traveling Student"), directed by Dr. A. Orthmann.

Thus German drama gained a foothold at the head of navigation on the Mississippi. It is not clear whether the amateur players considered themselves a branch of the Turnverein in the beginning, but a year later the group definitely was called "the theater section of the Turnverein,"

<sup>11</sup> *Volksblatt*, September 1, 1866.

<sup>12</sup> Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 793 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14); Frank O'Brien, *Minnesota Pioneer Sketches*, 252 (Minneapolis, 1904).

thus inaugurating a relationship that was to last several decades. The relationship, incidentally, was typical among German-Americans. Wherever there was a Turner society there was likely to be an amateur theater. In St. Paul things had been different only because the theater there had come into being before a Turner Hall was built. In St. Anthony and Minneapolis three German amateur theaters were active at the same time—groups associated with the Turnverein organizations of Minneapolis and St. Anthony and, perhaps most important, with the Harmonia Singing Society of Minneapolis.

Until after the Civil War, however, St. Anthony actors had the field pretty much to themselves. In June, 1859, they went to St. Paul for a guest performance—the first instance of an interchange which played no inconsiderable role in the history of the German stages of Minnesota. There were frequent visits by the St. Paul ensemble in Minneapolis, and vice versa; the New Ulm casts went to the Twin Cities; and every so often one or the other performed in some neighboring community. Noteworthy too was the transfer of amateurs from one city to another. A single individual might play at one time in New Ulm, and at another in Minneapolis or St. Paul.

The tendency of actors and ensembles to favor neighboring cities with their productions had good results during the Civil War. Theatrical activities in St. Anthony seemed to slow down considerably after the outbreak of the war, but as the pace of German stage offerings in St. Paul accelerated, St. Anthony felt the effect. Dardenne and Steidle alternated between the two cities, giving their opening play in St. Anthony during the closing days of July, 1861. Steidle, who remained after Dardenne left, gave classical performances in St. Anthony, including scenes from Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*. He also inaugurated German performances in Minneapolis proper, offering a comedy, *Dr. Robin*, in Woodman's Hall on July 21, 1862. The hall does not seem to have been a very safe one. Dr. Orthmann expressed the opinion in his review that the applause would have been greater if the public had not been afraid that "the old building might be too dangerously shaken."<sup>13</sup>

Steidle's Minneapolis performances were the first indication that the center of German theatrical activity was to shift from the left to the right bank of the river—from St. Anthony to Minneapolis. In February, 1861, the Harmonia Singing Society was founded in Minneapolis by a group of Germans whose aim was "education in general, promotion of sociability and social entertainment in particular." Within a few years the society built its own hall, dedicating it on December 4, 1864. This building, "one

<sup>13</sup> *Staatszeitung* (St. Paul), August 12, 1862.

of the most attractive halls in the state; one for which the Germans in Minneapolis cannot be praised highly enough," was destined to become the main home of the German stage in Minneapolis and St. Anthony for more than twenty years.<sup>14</sup> The Harmonia never experienced the financial trouble by which the St. Paul Athenäum was constantly beset. When eventually the hall was sold, after having been the center of German social and theatrical activity for two decades, the society realized a handsome profit.

Little is known of early theatrical performances in Harmonia Hall, but the first of which there is a record was staged on December 10, 1866. After the *Minneapolis Freie Presse* was founded in November, 1869, German theatrical performances in both St. Anthony and Minneapolis were fairly well reported.<sup>15</sup> The newspaper record indicates that like the St. Paul German theater, that of Minneapolis seemed to be on the verge of extinction by 1871. But like the Athenäum, the Minneapolis stage received a new lease on life when Amberg appeared on the scene. Although St. Paul became Amberg's headquarters, the actors, actresses, and singers he brought there played also at the Falls of St. Anthony. In the course of time his own original professional ensemble, supplemented by St. Paul amateurs, appeared at the Harmonia.

But this activity was only a weak reflection of what was happening in St. Paul. The Minneapolis amateurs were scarcely shaken from their apathy. If they did perform, they played farces or, at best, comedies. It took three men from the outside—Mathias Iltis, formerly of Chaska, Charles Bähr, formerly of New Ulm, and Dr. A. D. Hinsch, former editor of the *Volksblatt*—to change matters. All had been members of amateur groups in their earlier places of residence. As actor, stage director, and editor of the *Freie Presse*, Hinsch remained a dominant factor in German theatrical life for many years. At first the newcomers refrained from offering severely classical pieces, aside from an occasional Goethe or Schiller play. Nor did the Minneapolitans hear as many amateur operas as were offered to German opera goers in St. Paul in the late seventies. If a tragedy was produced, it was done by the Harmonia group. The Turnverein stages remained true to the lighter genre. Among the factors that worked against the progress of the German theater of Minneapolis was a restriction against Sunday theatrical performances, which stemmed from a basically puritanical attitude lacking in St. Paul. In the latter city German Sunday performances had become the norm by

<sup>14</sup> *Minneapolis Freie Presse*, February 6, 1875; *Volksblatt*, October 14, 1865.

<sup>15</sup> The *Freie Presse* carried reports of three German theaters in Minneapolis and St. Anthony, as well as of many Scandinavian performances.

1871; in Minneapolis, they were not tolerated until 1884, and then only after some violent explosions. This made a great difference both in active participation and attendance, since both players and audience belonged to groups that worked for a living and could not spare the time for weekday performances, especially in view of the long working hours then prevailing.

Still the period from 1877 to 1883 was not an undistinguished one. Classical plays were given; operas and operettas were performed; and a full ensemble from the outside made its first appearance in Minneapolis. *Faust*, a number of dramas by Schiller, and such Shakespearean plays as *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *The Merchant of Venice* were produced. Hinsch furnished the guiding hand in all these undertakings. Significant, too, was the fact that a number of plays by contemporary German dramatists were shown. From a literary point of view, most of them were unimportant. But their showing demonstrated that Minnesota's German-language theaters had not lost contact with the source of their inspiration, and in 1882 the Chicago ensemble that appeared in St. Paul played new pieces in Minneapolis.

A year later Harmonia Hall ceased to be the home of the German theater. On March 11, 1883, it closed its doors. It could no longer compete with two Turner halls, and with new competition from the Catholic St. Bonifacius-Verein, the East Side Cornet Band, and the Frohsinn Singing Society. Audiences were divided further by a visit from the German Opera Company of Chicago, which played Johann Strauss's operetta, *Der lustige Krieg*.<sup>16</sup>

Then on December 13, 1884, the new Harmonia Hall was dedicated. Unfortunately Dr. Hinsch's suggestion that a theater should be erected jointly by the Harmonia Society, the Turnverein, and the Frohsinn Singing Society was not followed. Instead, the Harmonia Society erected a new hall, spending approximately fifty thousand dollars on the building. One of the few German plays written in Minnesota was produced when the hall was opened—"Dedication to Art" by H. Blume.<sup>17</sup> It seemed that great things could be expected from the stage of the new building. But those who had advised a consolidation of theatrical efforts saw their misgivings realized, since both efforts and attendance were too widely dispersed. The Harmonia, the East Side Dramatic Society (Cäcilienverein), the West Side Turner Hall, and the St. Anthony Turnverein vied with one another for patronage. As a result the large Harmonia

<sup>16</sup> *Freie Presse*, November 19, 1883.

<sup>17</sup> Blume was on the editorial staff of the *Freie Presse*. In 1889 he became an editor of the *Montana Staatszeitung* of Helena, and a promoter of the German stage there.

Hall was usually half empty. Special presentations, like a group of plays in Low German, sometimes drew large audiences.

By 1890 the German stage in both St. Paul and Minneapolis was again in the doldrums. The *Freie Presse*, examining the situation, gave a partial explanation when it declared that "The German theater always was the Achilles heel where our German societies are mortal." The editor went on to explain that "Every attempt at improvement suffers shipwreck just at the moment when the waves seem to have quieted down and success seems to be on hand. . . . Why? Because the Germans have a tendency to gossip, to heap abuse upon their neighbors, and to envy each other."<sup>18</sup>

In New Ulm, the third Minnesota community where the German theater flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was for many years the only source of dramatic entertainment. Thus, while the total number of performances was smaller than in either Minneapolis or St. Paul, the German stage performed a much more important community function. The entire population of New Ulm depended on the German theater for entertainment.

New Ulm had a German theater three years after the city was founded in 1855 by a group of Germans from Chicago. It was, however, a second group of settlers, members of a Turner society who went to New Ulm from Cincinnati in 1856, who established the theater. Though they settled near a Sioux reservation extending along both sides of the Minnesota River, the new arrivals soon developed a characteristic German social life. They immediately founded the New Ulm Turnverein, and by the beginning of 1858, the "amateur theater of the Turner society" opened. On January 17, 1858, three months before Minnesota became a state, the first performance was given. It consisted of two one-act comedies—*Einer muss heiraten*, and *Die Tochter Pharaonis*.

The reviewer who reported on the performance in the newly founded *New Ulm Pionier* was "pleasantly surprised," and he especially expressed his appreciation of the pure German spoken by one of the actresses. He also stated expressly that the New Ulm theater was intended to be an educational institution. Though the reviewer undoubtedly was thinking of moral education, the New Ulm German theater certainly was partly responsible for the fact that such pure German was spoken there by later generations. Thirty years after it was established, the New Ulm stage was almost completely manned by natives of the community.

Adolf Seiter, who probably was stage manager for the first perform-

<sup>18</sup> *Freie Presse*, August 17, 1889.

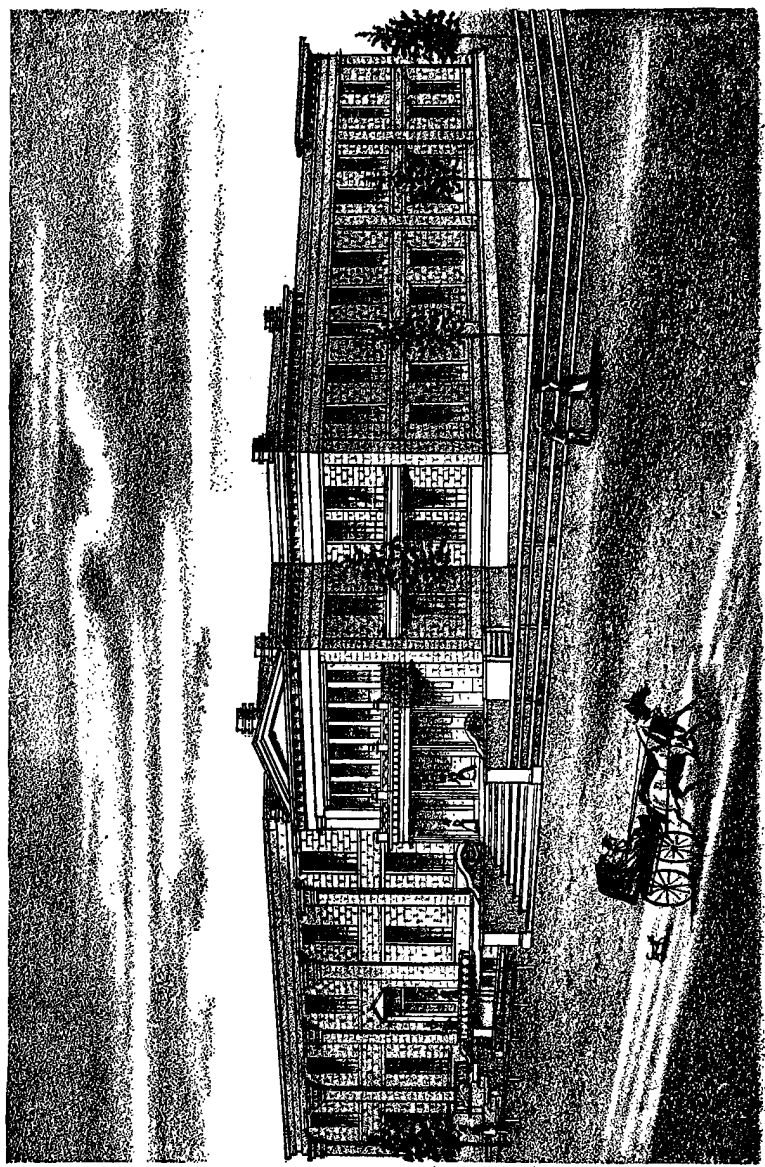
ance, participated in New Ulm plays as actor and stage manager almost to the time of his death in 1887. The initial performance may have been staged in the schoolhouse of the German Land Association, or in a primitive log house that was replaced on Christmas Day, 1858, by the large Turner Hall which was used for stage plays thereafter.

Although most of the offerings staged in New Ulm before 1862 were light comedies and farces, the local players did not appear exclusively in comedies. They gave some serious dramas, including selections that were outstanding for a frontier stage. For instance, on August 28, 1859, Schiller's *Wallenstein's Lager* was played as a feature of a centenary program honoring the German poet. Paradoxically, the celebration was held on Goethe's one-hundred-and-tenth birthday, because the summer date was considered more auspicious for a Minnesota festival than Schiller's actual birthday in November.

With the outbreak of the Civil War many New Ulmers joined the Union forces, and the theater practically came to a halt. In the spring and early summer of 1862, however, a number of plays were performed in the newly enlarged Turner Hall. But within a few months that home of the frontier German theater, two churches, and many other New Ulm buildings were turned into dust and ashes when the Sioux attacked the town. This catastrophe, of course, did not mark the end of New Ulm. A literary rebirth began eighteen months later, with a repetition of the earlier sequence—first a paper, then a theater, and finally a permanent home for the latter. The *Pionier*, to be sure, was gone forever, but in its place, and literally out of its ruins, rose the *New Ulm Post*.

Things rapidly returned to normal, and in the fall of 1864 it was announced that the theater would reopen. Theodor Steidle, who mysteriously departed from St. Paul a few months earlier, now appeared in New Ulm. Acting as his own stage painter, carpenter, and property man, he succeeded in transforming Gross's Hall into a place suitable for theatrical performances. When he opened on October 9 with *Ingomar, der Sohn der Wildnis* ("Ingomar, the Barbarian") he scored a great success. Since residents of New Ulm and its vicinity had just been paid for damages suffered in the Sioux Outbreak, they had more money at their disposal than they had had for many a day. Five hundred people are said to have attended Steidle's first performance, and many were turned away.<sup>19</sup> Encouraged by his initial success, the producer even presented some classical dramas. He undoubtedly hoped to become the permanent professional manager of the New Ulm amateur stage. But before two years had passed, he left for Mankato, where he pioneered another German stage.

<sup>19</sup> *New Ulm Post*, October 14, 21, 1864.



THE TURNER HALL AT NEW ULM

[From A. T. Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 72 (Chicago, 1874).]

His departure was followed by a dearth of stage entertainment in New Ulm. Nothing beyond mere farces was offered for several years. The lack of a guiding hand may well have been responsible, though various factors were likely to cause fluctuations in the theater. Beginning in 1869, however, traveling actors began to appear in New Ulm, and the situation changed for the better. The first troupe to perform in the city had some difficulty getting there, as the railroad did not reach New Ulm until February, 1872, and to get there travelers had to journey overland from St. Peter. As late as March 10, 1870, the *Volksblatt* facetiously declared that "according to regulations, stage drivers between St. Peter and New Ulm had the right to tip over three times."

Nevertheless, New Ulm was not infrequently host to traveling actors, actresses, and ensembles. Among those who played there were Madame Anna Grünewald, Mr. and Mrs. August Schön, Amberg and his troupers, Emil Lasswitz, and Madame Methua-Scheller. The Schöns came in the summer of 1870, but after giving some performances, Schön became dangerously ill. His wife, true to the motto of her profession, carried on with the valiant help of the theater section. The first actor to reach New Ulm after the coming of the railroad also was pursued by ill luck. In one performance some soldiers of Company E of the Second Minnesota Infantry, volunteered to take part in a military scene. They did their duty fully, if not wisely. One of the soldiers attacked the player in a skirmish scene in such a realistic fashion that he ran his bayonet completely through the unfortunate actor's calf. To its report of the incident, the *Post* added the following gratuitous lines:

Pretension never should completely real be;  
Where stabbing rules, there poetry will flee.

The high spot of the visit of the most distinguished star of all, Madame Methua-Scheller, was a performance of Donizetti's opera, *The Daughter of the Regiment*. It was given during a Turner convention which was attended by more than three thousand people. The actress, whose beautiful voice had been highly praised, sang the title role of Marie, while a group of New Ulm amateurs supported her.<sup>20</sup> Her husband was commissioned to paint new scenery and other decorations in Turner Hall in preparation for her performances.

Madame Methua-Scheller was the last visiting actress to go to New Ulm for years. After her departure the Turnverein ruled that New Ulm amateurs only were to use its stage.<sup>21</sup> Thus visits by outside players became practically impossible, as no other hall was attractive enough to

<sup>20</sup> *Post*, May 24, 1872; August 22, 1873.

<sup>21</sup> *Post*, August 23, 1873.



make worthwhile the financial risk of a trip to New Ulm. Frequent and lengthy gaps between performances resulted. In the 1870's, however, members of the American-born generation of New Ulm Germans began to appear on its stage. Titus Mareck and Anna Fischer, whose fathers were Forty-eighters, played leading parts in a comedy given on February 8, 1874. They were the forerunners of a group that later took over the New Ulm stage completely. Within a few years Richard Nix and Adolf Seiter, Jr., also began to play, and in 1878 they were joined by some children of members of the Catholic parish of New Ulm, then headed by the Reverend Father Alexander Berghold, a poet and historian. They gave several short plays, the first of a series staged by the Catholic residents of New Ulm both in Turner Hall and in Union Hall.<sup>22</sup>

New German plays also appeared on the New Ulm boards. Among them was *Der Raub der Sabinerinnen*, in which the New Ulm actors achieved the highest triumph of their theater's existence. The New Ulmers were the first in Minnesota to play this comedy, which is still popular in German-speaking countries. After a great success in a completely filled Turner Hall, the players decided to perform it also in the West Side Turner Hall in Minneapolis and in the St. Paul Athenäum. The journey to the Twin Cities was a triumph for the New Ulm theater. "Their community stands first among all the German cities of the country," commented the *Minneapolis Freie Presse*. "This achievement makes us say that we people in cities of 10 to 40,000 Germans ought to exclaim: 'God have mercy on our souls.'" The St. Paul *Volkszeitung* reported that the Athenäum was fuller for the New Ulm company than at any other time during the year.<sup>23</sup> Even the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* published a favorable review.

Barely five months later another New Ulm stage production captured the imagination of theater lovers. This was a tragedy, *Der Student von Ulm*, a play harking back to the medieval history of the South German city for which New Ulm had been named. It had never before been produced in the United States, and it may have been the work of a local writer. And what a box-office success it was! The number of spectators in Turner Hall had never before been so great. All available space was so densely packed that an apple could hardly have fallen to the ground. Perhaps two hundred latecomers regretfully had to return home.<sup>24</sup> This was one of the last occasions on which the old guard of the New Ulm theater appeared on the stage with the younger group. Two generations

<sup>22</sup> *Post*, February 8, 1879.

<sup>23</sup> *Freie Presse*, November 28, 1885; *Volkszeitung*, November 23, 1885.

<sup>24</sup> *Post*, March 26, 1886.

of Seiter, Fischer, and Pfaender still played side by side. A year later Adolf Seiter, Sr., genial host of the Dakotah House, who had promoted the German stage untiringly from its first days, died at the age of sixty-one, and within a few years he was followed by his old friend Richard Fischer, Forty-eighter, Civil War officer, Indian fighter, civic official, and actor.

Shortly before Fischer died, he had the satisfaction of seeing the Milwaukee German ensemble play in New Ulm, where it was received with great enthusiasm. The *Post* expressed the "hope that this visit was not their last one here," adding, "We feel sure that everyone's heart will be filled with joy when the news arrives that the Milwaukeeans are coming again."<sup>25</sup> The wish implied in this statement was abundantly fulfilled in later years.

More than sixteen hundred performances were given on the German-American stage in Minnesota between 1857 and 1890. The latter year, like several earlier ones, marked a low point in its progress. The German stage in Minnesota revived again, however, in the middle 1920's, when the St. Paul theater was as active as ever. Thereafter the curtain fell both for the German amateur and the English professional stage in Minnesota.

<sup>25</sup> *Post*, May 30, June 27, 1890.



The author of the foregoing article, Dr. Hermann E. Rothfuss of Kalamazoo, Michigan, contributes to the *German Quarterly* for March a survey of the "Beginnings of the German-American Stage." There he describes the westward movement of German dramatic productions from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi Valley and Texas. In effect, the author provides an excellent background for his articles on the German theater in Minnesota in this and the June issue of *Minnesota History*, for he concludes with the first German dramas to be produced in St. Paul, New Ulm, and St. Anthony. Dr. Rothfuss also has compiled a list of "German Plays in American Colleges, 1947-50," which appears in the May issue of *Monatshefte*, a publication issued at the University of Wisconsin.



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