

THE PRINCESS THEATER OF DES MOINES

*By Raymond S. Hill**

The electric sign over the marquee now reads MOOSE instead of PRINCESS, but to hundreds of loyal theatergoers of yesterday the building will always be the home of the "Incomparable Princess Players." Born in the day of the horseless carriage, the Princess rapidly established itself as a center of recreational and cultural activity. Many residents of Des Moines and its surrounding territory still recall with pleasure the days when such now famous players as Fay Bainter, Conrad Nagel, and Ralph Bellamy trod the local boards. For them the weekly visit to the Princess was looked forward to eagerly.

The story of the Princess Theater is the story of its first managers, Benjamin F. Elbert and John A. Getchell. For fourteen years the marquee proclamation, "Elbert and Getchell present the Incomparable Princess Players," was a guarantee of top-notch entertainment. The foresight and initiative of these two men established the group; their good taste, business acumen, and energy made it one of the nation's leading stock organizations, a position it maintained throughout the entire period of their managership.

Though himself a banker's son, Benjamin F. "Kip" Elbert left the business end of the concern to his partner and took upon himself the handling of the purely theatrical aspects such as the selection of plays, players, and backstage personnel. This he felt qualified to do. He had pioneered in the theater business shortly after his graduation from Princeton by opening Omaha's first motion picture house. He and John A. "Jack" Getchell were about thirty when they went into partnership as co-owners of a penny arcade at Sixth and Mulberry streets in downtown Des Moines.¹ Getchell was the grandson of Henry F. Getchell who emigrated to Des Moines from Maine in 1861 and founded the city's first lumberyard, an enterprise which shortly expanded to a chain of yards covering the state. The Getchells were a civic-conscious family; John's father, Charles Henry Getchell, was

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¹ Interview with B. F. Elbert, Des Moines, Iowa, Nov. 20, 1948.

one of the founders of the Des Moines Public Library.² John undoubtedly inherited this sense of civic pride, and it played an important role in many decisions made about the building and operation of the Princess.

The penny arcade proved to be a profitable enterprise — so profitable, in fact, that Getchell's daughter years later remembered her father telling that the day's receipts were counted each evening simply by weighing the pennies in buckets. Caught up by the lure of the entertainment world, the two young men, in 1905, undertook a new venture. On the site where the penny arcade had stood, they opened the Nickeldome, the first theater in Iowa and the fifth in the entire country devoted exclusively to the showing of motion pictures. This also reaped a healthy profit, and they soon invested further in the entertainment business with the opening of the Unique, a vaudeville theater.³

The Princess actually grew out of an experiment conducted at the Nickeldome during the 1906-1907 season. The partners hired a small group of actors to serve as a miniature stock company, presenting one-act plays as added attractions to the films. So successful was this endeavor that the young promoters began toying with the idea of founding a full-fledged resident stock company.⁴ The local theater situation was looked into, and the two decided that Des Moines was ripe for such a project. No building then available suited their purpose, so, in 1908, an arrangement was made with Oscar Lofquist whereby the latter was to erect a theater to specifications prescribed by Elbert and Getchell.

Before an architect was commissioned, Elbert spent several months touring the country and inspecting the better theaters. Not only did he look over the buildings themselves, but he also carried on extensive interviews with owners and builders in order to learn at first hand every advantage possible in construction, and also to ascertain where improvements in construction could be effected.

Fourth Street between Locust and Walnut was the site chosen for the new theater because all interurban lines and many of the local street car lines passed there, thus making it readily accessible to the majority of the community and the surrounding territory as well. The first brick was set

² Johnson Brigham, *Des Moines . . . Together with the History of Polk County, Iowa . . .* (2 vols., Chicago, 1911), 2:159.

³ Edgar Rubey Harlan, *A Narrative History of the People of Iowa . . .* (5 vols., Chicago, 1931), 3:407.

⁴ Interview with B. F. Elbert, Des Moines, Nov. 20, 1948.

in place on July 20, 1909.⁵ For three months a force of nearly a hundred men worked to complete the edifice before the scheduled November opening. As the date approached, some doubts began to form as to whether or not the building would be ready on time. When the morning of the premiere dawned much remained to be done, but Elbert and Getchell resolved to open as announced. Extra workmen were put on the job, and the greater part of the work was completed.

About eight o'clock, on November 1, 1909, the crowds began to gather, and at eight-thirty the curtain rose on the first act of Channing Pollock's *Clothes*. It was a gala event, and the play and players were warmly received by a capacity audience whose enthusiasm was not the least bit cooled by the fact that the heating plant had not as yet been installed, that benches had been substituted for the seats which had failed to arrive in time, and that many other seats remained unfastened to the floor.⁶

The press the following day was unanimous in its praise of the theater, the players, the play, the managers, and everyone concerned with the new undertaking. The *News* devoted a part of its editorial page to the event, predicting "a generous patronage" for the Princess, and the *Capital* and the *Tribune* added their praises. The civic-conscious *Register and Leader* was pleasantly surprised, "because out here in the provinces we have fallen into the habit of not expecting to have too much for us when we wish to be entertained and it rather takes our breath away when we are graciously given more than we thought we could ask." But the local papers were not alone in praising the new company. In its first November issue, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* wrote of the Princess group: "The company . . . is one of the strongest ever recruited."⁷

That the company's maiden efforts surpassed in quality the work of established groups is indicated by a letter received by *The Princess Bulletin* from D. Stewart Hampton of Philadelphia, who wrote: "I saw your production of 'Clothes' and it was wonderful. I also saw a stock company in Philadelphia play 'Clothes' but nothing like the Princess."⁸ The success of the players' first production becomes even more noteworthy when one

⁵ *The Princess Bulletin*, Nov. 1, 1909.

⁶ *Des Moines Tribune*, Feb. 19, 1933.

⁷ *Des Moines Daily News*, Nov. 2, 1909; *Des Moines Register and Leader*, Nov. 2, 1909; *Des Moines Capital*, Nov. 2, 6, 1909; *Des Moines Tribune*, Nov. 2, 1909.

⁸ *The Princess Bulletin*, Nov. 15, 1909.

recalls that, because of the unfinished state of the building, not a single dress rehearsal was possible.

The simplicity of *The Princess Bulletin* was a marked surprise to the playgoer accustomed to the advertisement-cluttered programs of the other theaters of the day. The *Bulletin* was originally a four-page, 8 x 11 inch publication, completely devoid of advertising matter other than a plain paragraph which pointed out that the furniture used on the stage was provided by the Chase and West Store. The first page usually carried a picture of some member of the company or staff with an accompanying biographical sketch. Page two featured the masthead, house notes, a diagram showing exits, and a column of news about the players called "Gossip of the Princess Green Room." On page three could be found the "Queries and Answers" column, letters to the management, and miscellaneous filler material. Page four always devoted itself to the program proper plus a paragraph or two describing the next week's show and an announcement of the entertainment fare to be found at other Elbert and Getchell theaters.

Each issue of the *Bulletin* prominently stated: "The Princess caters to those who appreciate the highest type of plays presented in the best manner in a playhouse worthy of the name and at prices that are within the reach of all." Elbert and Getchell made every effort to adhere to these purposes. Elbert attempted to see all important New York productions, or at least to familiarize himself with available play material through reading. Many factors were taken into consideration before final decisions were made, and on occasion even the final selections were changed, as in the case of *The Clansman* which was announced as part of the 1910-1911 schedule of plays. So many and so violent were the letters of objection received by the management that the play was withdrawn and a less controversial one substituted.⁹

The public's pleasure was the prime factor considered in play selection, and every precaution was taken to offend no one. The fact that attendance at the Princess became in so many cases a family affair to some extent proves the theater's success in adhering to this policy. According to Elbert, the making of money was not always a determining factor in selection. He lays claim to having deliberately put on some "high brow" shows as "prestige builders" even though he knew they would be losers at the box office. As examples he cites Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and a drama-

⁹ Des Moines Register and Leader, Feb. 19, 1911.

tization of Thomas Hardy's *Jess of the D'Urbervilles*. However, the fact that *The Taming of the Shrew* was the only Shakespearean work ever offered by the Princess indicates that the classics were deliberately avoided as poor box office despite their "prestige building" power.

The "prices within the reach of all" clause in the statement of policy was most faithfully adhered to. The scale of prices for evening performances and Sunday and holiday matinees was: fifteen, twenty-five, thirty-five, fifty, and seventy-five cents. Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday matinee prices were twenty-five, thirty-five, and fifty cents. Throughout their managership, despite the fact that operating costs increased tremendously, Elbert and Getchell kept the top box office price down to the surprisingly low figure of only one dollar, part of which was government tax.

The theater building itself, built at a cost of \$75,000, was a superior structure both in beauty and utility.¹⁰ The front was of glazed white terra cotta, a material selected because of its immunity to dirt. Though forty years have passed, the facade still retains the cool beauty of its marble whiteness. A canopy of glass set in an ornamental frame of verdigris copper projected over the white glass entrance to the lobby.

The interior of the theater, which seated 1,700, featured a number of innovations. For instance, instead of the orchestra boxes being placed on the floor level as was usually done, they were set eight feet above, thus not only giving the occupants a better view of the stage, but also affording uninterrupted vision to the seat holders on the extreme right and left of the orchestra floor. Another novelty was the use of wicker chairs in the boxes instead of the customary stuffy and garishly tinted upholstered chairs. The two steel pillars used to give the balcony additional support were the only uprights in the entire auditorium of the theater and were so arranged as not to interrupt the view of those sitting in their proximity.

The disastrous Iroquois Theater fire in Chicago some five years earlier had made the public extremely safety conscious, and every effort was made to make the Princess safe in this respect. The only wood used in the backstage structure was the three-inch stage floor. The walls were of brick, while the fly galleries, paint bridge, and gridiron were of heavy steel. The electrical switchboard was set in a brick and steel chamber above the stage, while the roof over the stage was of concrete with an extra large vent. The floor underneath the entire theater was of concrete. The asbestos curtain

¹⁰ *The Princess Bulletin*, Nov. 1, 1909; Brigham, *Des Moines . . .*, 1:412.

could be lowered in less than ten seconds. Nineteen exits, opening on all four sides of the theater, were provided.

The system of heating and ventilation was another important innovation. The furnace and boiler were situated in an enclosed room with walls of brick, floor and ceiling of concrete, and door of steel. Large fans pumped the outdoor air into the room through which steam coils passed. The air was heated and sent into the auditorium through vent ducts. In summer the same ventilating plant was utilized to make the Princess one of the first air-conditioned theaters. A huge supply of ice replaced the steam coils, and the outdoor air was thus cooled before being sent into the auditorium.

The comfort of the company was insured by the sixteen good-sized dressing rooms located in the basement. In the northwest corner of the basement was the Green Room with a red tiled floor covered with rugs, and with walls decorated with pictures of members of the company. Here much of the rehearsing was done.

The fact that Elbert was such a demanding employer accounts in a great measure for the high standard of production and the outstanding reputation maintained by the Princess while he was at the helm.¹¹ It was his custom to spend two months of each year traveling about the country looking for new talent. During this time he visited all the major stock companies and many less well-established groups. He made it a practice to see a performer twice before making any decisions concerning him; in this way he could ascertain whether an actor maintained a high standard of acting throughout the run of a play. To assure himself that the presence of a prospective employer was not causing the actor to put on a better show than was his usual wont, Elbert endeavored to keep his presence in the theater unknown to both actors and managers.

Sincerity was an absolute essential before an actor would even be considered for the Princess. Elbert demanded that each characterization ring true and that an actor remain in character at all times while on stage. "Mugging" and playing to the audience were cardinal sins as far as he was concerned. It was his belief that each performance should be the best the actor was capable of giving. Under no circumstances was a Princess player permitted merely to walk through a play as so often happened in even the better-known stock organizations of the day. To keep his policies

¹¹ Information on his system of selecting players was given the author by B. F. Elbert in a personal interview on Nov. 20, 1948.

always in the players' minds, Elbert had Hamlet's advice to the players painted on the Green Room wall.

A good personal reputation was another major prerequisite to membership in the Princess company. A study of pictures of members of the company reveals a remarkable collection of extremely conservative poses in a period when sensational poses were the rule rather than the exception among theater personalities. From the number of married couples employed during the first season, one is led to suspect that Elbert went out of his way to insure the respectability of the company by this means.

The star system was purposely avoided. The accent was placed upon a high quality of over-all production rather than upon the exploitation of a single individual. Elbert himself did the casting. In his own words, "A director can't be trusted to do the casting. He is bound to play favorites." Though the standard practice of stock casting was in general adhered to, Elbert often assigned the second woman to play the lead if the part suited her better than it did the leading woman, and he acted similarly with other members of the company. In most companies the director served as actor, too, but the Princess director was permitted to act in only the last production of the season. This gave him his full time to devote to direction alone.

Elbert at first found it difficult to persuade players of the caliber he desired to risk their careers with an infant company, but he refused to compromise his standards, and within a few years even well-established actors were eager to associate themselves with the Princess. The company for the opening season consisted of sixteen people, an unusually large number, as most stock companies usually consisted of ten or less permanent members.¹² Even more remarkable than the size of the original company was the amazing amount of background and experience of its members.

Frederic Sullivan, the director, a native of England, had come to the United States when only eleven years of age. He had had wide experience in cities throughout the country before coming to the Princess. The first leading lady was Elfreda Lasche, a Milwaukee girl whose first theatrical experience had been with the Tannhauser Stock Company of that city. She had played in Boston, Toronto, and Worcester, Massachusetts, before Elbert signed her up. Leading man Harry Ingram came to the Princess with some ten years of stage experience behind him. Emma Salvatore, the second woman in the cast, was the wife of the company's principal come-

¹² *Ibid.*

dian, Thomas Reynolds. The second man, William Townshend, had supported Mary Shaw in *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabbler* and Alberta Gallatin in a Shakespearean repertory, in addition to doing stock work in various eastern cities. A mother-son team also was part of the Princess company: character woman Eleanor Carey and her son, Carey Livingston, who became the company juvenile. Character man Aldrich Bowker had over five hundred different roles to his credit before joining the Princess Players. Much was made of the Philadelphia society background in publicity released on ingenue Margaret Lawrence, whose experience prior to signing with the Princess consisted of but twenty weeks at Keith's in Portland, Maine. The wife of Director Sullivan, Katherine Webb, often took over small roles, and Mrs. William Townshend played occasional roles under the name Edith Gordon. Juvenile comedian Walter Poulter, assistant dramatic director Richard Somerville, general business manager Bruce Elmore, and character man Mr. Sambrook completed the company. Two replacements occurred during the first season: Margaret Lawrence, who left to meet a previously arranged summer stock engagement, was replaced by Bertha Van Norman; and W. H. Townshend, who also left to fulfill another engagement, was replaced by Mr. Randall.¹³

The Princess orchestra was an added attractive feature. Elbert was convinced that an orchestra was essential to any theater, as it could create an atmosphere and mood impossible to obtain by any other means. The six-piece orchestra which provided this atmosphere during the first season remained invisible to the audience, hidden by a netting of artificial autumn leaves over the orchestra pit. The six members of this initial musical group were Professor Michael Angelo Abbotti, violinist and director; Mae McCarty, pianist; Claude E. Pickett, clarinet; J. H. Grill, cornet; J. E. Martin, trombone; and C. E. Shaw, bass.¹⁴ No effort appears to have been made to relate the musical program to the particular play being offered; variety seems to have been the major distinguishing characteristic. A single day's program was likely to include such diverse types as Chopin, Sousa, Mendelssohn, and Joe Howard.

The first Princess season was indeed a remarkable one. The theater's success was immediately apparent. The drama-hungry citizens of Des

¹³ *The Princess Bulletin* from Nov. 8, 1909, through April 18, 1910, gives brief sketches of each of these players.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Nov. 15, 1909.

Moines found the capably produced efforts of their own resident company a far more satisfactory diet than that of the often second-rate companies which played the local road show houses, and the Princess soon became an integral part of the community's social and cultural life. No one quarrelled when, five weeks after the opening, advertisements for the first time referred to the "Incomparable Princess Players," a trade name which lived for fifteen consecutive seasons.

The success of that first season was due to a combination of factors. The novelty of a new playhouse and of a resident company undoubtedly contributed much, but the fact that good business persisted suggests that other reasons were more important. Among major contributors were the variety and merit of the plays offered. The reader perusing the list of twenty-seven plays presented cannot but be impressed. The number of them which, forty years later, still strikes a responsive chord in the mind of anyone at all versed in American theater history is truly amazing. The names of but a portion of the dramatists represented form a most impressive roll — William Vaughn Moody, Henry Miller, Charles Klein, Charles H. Hoyt, David Belasco, J. Hartley Manners, William G. De Mille, H. A. Du Souchet, Augustus Thomas, William Gillette, Brandon Thomas, Paul Armstrong, Denman Thompson, and Channing Pollock.

A new play was presented each of the twenty-seven weeks of the season, Channing Pollock's society satire, *Clothes*, leading the way. Farce proved most popular with seven representatives: *Mrs. Temple's Telegram*, *Glittering Gloria*, *A Bachelor's Honeymoon*, *Charley's Aunt*, *A Contented Woman*, and the two William Collier vehicle pieces, *The Man From Mexico* and *Mr. Smooth*. Next in popularity was romantic costume drama represented by five productions: *Heartsease*, *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall*, *Alice of Old Vincennes*, and the two Belasco hits, *The Warrens of Virginia* and *Rose of the Rancho*. *The Great Divide* and *Zira* were the only two serious dramatic works, but melodrama claimed four varied representatives in *Salomy Jane*, *The Spoilers*, *Raffles*, and *Sherlock Holmes*. The comedies were: *The Other Girl*, *Brown of Harvard*, a college comedy; *When We Were 21*, *The Marriage of Kitty*, a translation from the French; and *The Road to Yesterday*, a fantasy. Two rural dramas, Denman Thompson's *Our New Minister* and the Nat Goodwin vehicle, *An American Citizen*, complete the record.

The letters received by the management indicate the high esteem with

which the plays, players, and playhouse were regarded. Many of these letters were printed in the weekly *Bulletin*. All the correspondence was not friendly, however. An amusing example of a letter of criticism and the theater's efforts to offend no one appeared in the December 13, 1909, *Bulletin*. A patron wrote that she could not "consistently attend your theater since seeing 'The Man From Mexico' because of the amount of liquor used by Mr. Ingram during the performance." She had been told, she added, that it was not "real" liquor and asked for reassurance. The *Bulletin* assured her that "'Prop' whiskey is very much like 'hot air,' it doesn't do anybody any harm," and suggested that she call at the stage door some evening and sample the ginger ale which Mr. Ingram used so freely.¹⁵

The use of local talent to supplement the permanent personnel was an early practice which gave the Princess some of the aspects of a community theater. For the production of Rida Johnson Young's *Brown of Harvard* the quartette of the Drake Glee Club provided college atmosphere, while in *Alice of Old Vincennes* Drake students and soldiers from Fort Des Moines appeared as members of the Continental Army.¹⁶

The Princess was not Des Moines's sole source of entertainment, however. Eight other local theaters were presenting live entertainment—the Majestic, Unique, Star, and Lyric featured vaudeville; and the Auditorium, Grand, Empire, and Foster's presented road shows of varying degrees of merit. During the week that the Princess Players opened with *Pollock's Clothes*, the Des Moines public had opportunities to see *Going Some* by Rex Beach and Paul Armstrong at the Auditorium, Sue Marshall in *The Cowboy Girl* at the Grand, the Dainty Duchess Burlesquers at the Empire, and the Cohan and Harris Minstrels at Foster's. During the course of that 1909-1910 season they were to have further opportunities to witness such outstanding road attractions as Dustin Farnum in *Cameo Kirby*, Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland*, Max Figman in *The Man on the Box*, Trixie Friganza, and many others. In addition to all this, there were the offerings of the four motion picture houses. Despite competition, however, the Princess flourished, and in March of 1910 the *New York Dramatic News* wrote:

Des Moines, Iowa, has been able to retain a stock company at

¹⁵ For several letters from patrons, see *ibid.*, Nov. 29, Dec. 13, 20, 1909; Jan. 24, Feb. 7, 1910.

¹⁶ *Des Moines Register and Leader*, Feb. 7, Mar. 30, 1910.

the Princess Theatre for many weeks with a healthy increase in patronage, and some of the best stock plays on view. This is more than can be said of several cities larger in population than Des Moines, for there are several important centers where the stock companies have been on the verge of starvation.¹⁷

The most important event of the second season was the arrival of the new director, Priestly Morrison, who was to remain with the Princess Players for six years, and to become a vital, moving force. Mr. Morrison must share with Elbert and Getchell much of the credit for the high national reputation of the Princess.

Dramatic highlight of the 1910-1911 season was the first Princess presentation of David Belasco's epic western, *The Girl of the Golden West*. So popular did the play prove that it won the distinction of being the first Princess production and, in fact, the first theatrical attraction in Des Moines to be held over for a second week. *The Girl of the Golden West* was to be revived season after season.

The first four seasons were all critical and financial successes, but the fifth season must go into the records as one of Elbert and Getchell's rare failures. Misled by the degree of popularity enjoyed by three musical comedies of the previous Princess season, the managers decided to present an entire season of operetta and musical comedy. It was a risky undertaking. Seventeen principals were hired, a chorus of sixteen girls and eight men was maintained, and the orchestra was increased to twelve pieces. Even with an advance in prices, the overhead was too much to enable the project to function at a profit and the experiment perished after only eight weeks of life. The increased salary roster, more expensive royalties, and higher costume costs were all contributing factors to the rapid demise of the endeavor. Elbert estimates that year's losses as close to \$20,000.

When it was announced that the Princess would reopen its doors August 23, 1914, with a return to its original policy of dramatic stock, the offices of Elbert and Getchell were besieged with commendatory communications lauding their intentions. Any doubts which the previous season's failure might have fostered in the partners' minds soon vanished before this flood of good wishes, and they did all within their power to merit the confidence the Princess' loyal public had voiced.

The first *Bulletin* of the new season boasted:

Realizing the high standard established by former Princess com-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Mar. 25, 1910.

panies, Elbert and Getchell were determined that the precedent, in the personnel of the company and in the quality of the productions, should be closely adhered to this year. As a result they have secured what is undoubtedly the best stock organization in America, superior to any that has ever been seen at the Princess — and that is saying much.

This was no idle boast; no expense had been spared to bring together the best company possible, and the resulting season was one to be remembered.

To old-timers this 1914-1915 season is the year Fay Bainter joined the company. No other leading lady won so much fanatic adulation as did Miss Bainter during her two-year association with the Princess Players. Even today, the names of Fay Bainter and the Princess Theater are inseparable in the minds of many who remember the theater in its heyday. Though only nineteen years old when she joined the company, she had already made a name for herself in theatrical circles as the lead in the musical, *The Rose of Panama*, and as leading woman on tour with Mrs. Fiske. In order to secure her services, the management had offered her the fabulous salary of three hundred dollars a week, thus making her the highest-paid leading lady in American stock.¹⁸

Two then unknown players whose names adorned the 1914-1915 programs have since won fame on both stage and screen. Charles D. Brown, the general business manager, is today one of Hollywood's busiest character actors, and Conrad Nagel, a Des Moines high school youngster then making his stage debut in bit roles, is now a well-known figure on stage, screen, radio, and television.

Musical comedy was conspicuous by its absence during this season. Only *Mam'zelle*, which had already proved itself during previous performances, was present to represent the musical comedy genre. In an interview, Elbert confessed that though *Mam'zelle* was extremely popular with audiences, that was not the principal reason for its inclusion in the schedule with such frequent regularity. He explained that it was a loosely strung together story of backstage life which furnished plenty of opportunity to interpolate any music, dance, or novelty numbers the director might wish to use. The play was a standard part of most stock actors' repertoires, and its backstage setting was nothing but makeshift scenery. It was, therefore, a simple matter to put the show together in a short time without too much

¹⁸ *The Princess Bulletin*, Aug. 23, 1914.

effort and still give an audience its money's worth. This is the reason *Mam'zelle* repeatedly appeared on Christmas billings. It provided theatergoers with a tuneful, holiday show and at the same time gave the actors a little pre-holiday leisure. Another factor which doubtless played a part was that the Christmas holidays and Holy Week were the year's two worst box office periods. A performance of *Mam'zelle* required little in production cost and was therefore an ideal show for a slack season. Elbert later revealed his solution for the Holy Week box office lull. Since it was the Gentile faction of the audience which stayed away from the theater at that time of the year, he encouraged the attendance of the Jewish portion of the patronage by presenting plays which would definitely appeal to them. Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* was the most recurrent choice.

The 1914-1915 season fully reinstated the Princess after its failure of the year before. Des Moines had taken Miss Bainter to its heart, and the announcement that she would return the next year brought many letters of rejoicing from the vast clientele of Princess regulars. The season was a triumph for the management, the theater, the company, and the staff, but chiefly it was a personal triumph for the winsome young leading lady.

Six weeks before the end of the 1915-1916 season the news was published that Miss Bainter would not return the following year. The announcement brought forth numerous letters of regret, and the turnout for her farewell performance was a tribute to the young star's popularity, a popularity equalled neither by her predecessors nor her successors.

To replace the seemingly irreplaceable Miss Bainter, the management obtained the services of Florence Rittenhouse, who had made a reputation for herself on tour as leading lady to Norman Hackett in *Satan Sanderson*; with the Wadsworth Theater in New York City; the Lester Lonergan Players at Lynn, Massachusetts; in Washington, D. C.; and at the Academy of Music in Baltimore.¹⁹ In the 1917-1918 season Miss Rittenhouse was succeeded by Alice Clements, and then by Isabel Randolph, who is well known today as Mrs. Uppington on the Fibber McGee and Molly radio show.

The fall of 1918 was for the Princess, as for everyone else, a trying period. Several members of the company fell victims to the flu epidemic which was at that time sweeping the nation. From October 9 through 27 all theaters and other places of public gatherings were closed by order of the city as a precautionary measure to keep the disease from spreading.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, August 20, 1916.

The Princess reopened October 28, but two months later, on December 15, the *Bulletin* announced: "This week marks the close of the tenth season at the Princess Theatre. Elbert and Getchell deeply regret that such drastic measures are necessary, but rather than cut expenses and lower the standard of the Princess they prefer to temporarily discontinue until conditions have changed."²⁰

The leading lady who opened the eleventh season had enjoyed the distinction of creating the principal feminine roles in three of George Bernard Shaw's plays. She was Ernita Lascelles, whose performance in *Jacob and Esau* had so impressed Shaw that he gave her the privilege of doing his *Fanny's First Play*, *Androcles and the Lion*, and *The Philanderers*. Her term with the Princess was only her second contact with stock, and she was not the type of leading lady to which Princess patrons were accustomed. She was too dowdy to suit their tastes, and her very British personality prevented her from attaining the degree of popularity which was usually the lot of Princess stars. She left the company in October. Two years later she won fame in the role of Eve in Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*.

In 1919-1920 the Princess returned to a normal season's length, but increased operating costs necessitated boosting the top ticket price from eighty cents to a dollar and the low from fifteen to twenty-five cents. Discouraged by the continuing rise in operating costs and decline in box office receipts because of the encroachment of the motion picture, Elbert and Getchell temporarily retired from the Princess scene. They turned the management over to an outside firm, the Adams Theaters Company, whose first move was to raise ticket prices to a top of \$1.35.

Several veteran members of the Princess staff remained on, but without the guiding hands of Elbert and Getchell the Princess failed to maintain all its former quality and popularity. The personal touch of men devoted to the theater and the community was replaced by the impersonal relationship of chain ownership. At the close of the season the entire troupe moved to the Burtis Theater in Davenport to repeat some of the productions given earlier at the Princess. The endeavor met with little success, however.

The thirteenth season, 1921-1922, proved unlucky indeed for the Princess. Stagehand and streetcar worker strikes prevented the customary State Fair Week opening.²¹ Labor negotiations continued throughout the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1918.

²¹ Interview with B. F. Elbert, Des Moines, Nov. 20, 1948.

fall months, but no settlement could be reached. These troubles, coupled with the only mediocre success of the twelfth season, led the Adams Theaters Company to abandon their lease on the Princess property. Local demand induced Elbert and Getchell to take up the reins once more.

This season was not up to the usual Elbert and Getchell high standards, but there were many factors to excuse such a failure. The decision to resume management of the Princess was made rather late in the year, leaving little time for the assembling of a company, and the careful planning which went into former seasons was of necessity neglected. The mere fact that the local team was back at the reins was the important thing, however, and the next season would see them again back in championship stride.

In December, 1922, the *Register and Leader* carried this foreboding item of news: "Several stock companies in the middle west are closing every week and *Variety* estimates [that there are] 400 or 500 actors and actresses in Chicago following the layoff of stock actors. Meanwhile our own Princess Playhouse anticipates no such necessity though they are not playing to normal business."²²

One wonders how bad business was, especially when subsequent Princess advertisements kept reassuring the public (or more probably the management itself): "Every day our crowds are growing bigger and bigger." It must be stressed that the decline in business was no fault of the Princess or its management. The same high standards were maintained, but it was impossible to meet the competition offered by motion picture houses whose top prices ranged from twenty to thirty cents.

In commemoration of the Princess' thirteenth birthday in 1922, the *Register and Leader* featured the following eulogy by Gideon D. Seymour:

After a season or so of mediocrity under other managements the Princess Players have come back again to the standards which made them famous.

There have been two or three presentations at the Princess this year which the writer enjoyed much more than when they were offered by the original companies on the road. A stock company which can meet this exacting standard is indeed a deserving one.

That is why the celebration of the Princess Players' anniversary will be observed this week not in perfunctory fashion but as in recognition of an institution which is a distinct community asset, for which Des Moines is famous throughout the whole the-

²² Des Moines *Register and Leader*, Dec. 24, 1922.

atrical field. That a good stock company, made up of actors who make Des Moines their home, is much preferred to an itinerant troupe is too evident to require proof.²³

Two days after the last performance of the season, a fire of unknown origin swept the interior of the building. Theatrical superstition blamed the whistling of a visitor to the dressing rooms on the night of the final performance for the disaster.²⁴

Having completely rebuilt the burned-out interior, Elbert and Getchell started their last season as Princess managers on November 4, 1923. No longer was a forty-week season possible. The movies had made further encroachments on the box office, operating costs had risen still more, and Elbert and Getchell had seen the writing on the wall. The moderate returns of the 1923-1924 season convinced them that stock was a thing of the past, and they relinquished their Princess lease. For fourteen years they had been the motivating force behind one of the most successful and well-known theatrical enterprises in the entire nation, and it was no fault of theirs which brought about the institution's final failure. As it was, the Princess had survived longer than many other similar organizations. Even after Elbert and Getchell left the scene, the theater continued for four more years to house stock companies, but the three groups which followed were not of the same class as the "Incomparable Princess Players." It had been the strict and understanding management of Elbert and Getchell which had put the company on the top and kept it there. Their retirement rang the death knell for one of Des Moines's most loved and honored institutions.

Left with an empty theater on his hands, owner Oscar Lofquist booked in the itinerant stock group known as the Gordinier Players for the 1924-1925 season, and prices were lowered to ten to seventy-five cents for evenings and ten to fifty cents for matinees. The undistinguished season ran from September 7 through December 13, at which time the entire troupe moved on to Duluth, Minnesota. Accustomed to the high standards established by Elbert and Getchell, the Des Moines theatergoing public failed to lend much support to this group of outsiders.

Through the aid of Elbert and Getchell, owner Lofquist the next season booked in a group headed by Morgan Wallace, a well-known English actor. Under his supervision, the theater improved but in no way approached its

²³ *Ibid.*, Oct. 29, 1922.

²⁴ *Des Moines Tribune*, Feb. 19, 1923.

former glory, although the group enjoyed a comparatively prosperous run of thirty-three weeks. Most interesting event of the season was the premiere performance of *The Divine Sinner*, a drama written by Minnie Z. Jaffa in collaboration with Morgan Wallace himself. However, the other plays on the schedule were standard stock fare.

One of the members of the Wallace company was Ralph Bellamy, who gained considerable local popularity as leading man. When Wallace decided against undertaking another season, Bellamy took over the Princess lease. The Ralph Bellamy Players debuted September 12, 1926, with Austin Strong's World War romance, *Seventh Heaven*. The thirty-six week season which ensued was an impressive one. Bellamy, with his father, Rexford, as house and business manager, proved to be an ambitious producer; the season included such outstanding attractions as *What Price Glory*, the musical *Irene*, *Rip Van Winkle*, and Molnar's *Liliom*. This was the theater's most successful season in several years, but attendance was no longer the weekly family ritual it had been in the day of the Princess' heyday. Motion pictures and, by this time, radio had weaned the Des Moines public away from the Princess habit. With so many other forms of entertainment so readily and so inexpensively available, it was necessary for the management to resort to numerous devices such as special club rates to lure the customers in and to insure a profit.

In September, 1927, the Princess changed ownership. Oscar Lofquist, who had built the theater eighteen years before, sold it to Edwin W. Pascoe.²⁵ Bellamy, however, still held the lease on it, and on September 10 began his second season with Myron C. Fagan's *The Little Spitfire*. He managed to keep the enterprise alive with a fair degree of success for thirty-two weeks, but the stock company was an outmoded institution. The production of Barry Connors' *Applesauce* in April was the rather undistinguished swan song for an extremely distinguished institution.

Several attempts at revival were made in the years that followed, but none met with any marked degree of success. A semi-professional group calling themselves the Guild Players made a stand of a few weeks during the summer of 1928. In October of 1930, the building, unoccupied for two years, was put up for public auction and sold to the Bankers Life Company of Des Moines for \$44,538.²⁶ In 1931 Edward H. Ziegel of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Sept. 30, 1927.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1930.

Kansas City tried to revive the Princess with a musical stock company, but the theater was dark once more after a disastrous five-week run.²⁷ On February 28, 1932, still another attempt at revival was made by Jack Paige. His project fell through after about two and a half months. In December, E. R. Fitzgerald of Boston leased the theater for a production of *Another Language*, and later the same month Miss Beverly Bane made a guest appearance with the Kendall Community Players in Noel Coward's *Hay Fever*. It was hoped at that time to do other productions there, but the plan was abandoned. Two months later, on the night of February 18, 1933, fire for a second time swept through the interior of the building. Ironically enough, the last public attraction which had graced the once distinguished theater had been a boxing and wrestling exhibition.²⁸

On April 13, 1934, the *Tribune* announced the acquisition of the property under a one-year lease by the Reverend Cline Halsey, pastor of the Calvary Tabernacle. Church members cleared out the debris, turned the Green Room into a choir room, built tiers of seats for seventy or eighty choir members on the stage, and held their first service on April 22. After the church relinquished its lease, the building again remained vacant for several years until purchased and remodeled by the Moose Lodge as the local clubrooms. This is the position the building holds in the community today. On the outside it looks much as it did when it opened forty years ago, but inside there is little to remind one of the glamor and glory that it knew as the home of the "Incomparable Princess Players."

A score of years has failed to wipe the Princess from the scene, however. Though no longer the center of local dramatic life, its influence is still felt in Des Moines's contemporary theatrical activities, and its memory lives on in the minds of thousands of once regular patrons. An institution which is vividly and happily remembered a score of years after its demise must certainly have been a potent force while it lived.

Des Moines was not alone in recognizing the theater's worth. It was widely lauded as one of the top stock organizations in the entire country. Bertrand D. Wilton of New York wrote, in 1912:

I think Des Moines should realize the distinction that is the city's by reason of having so excellent a stock company as is maintained at the Princess. I travel all over the country continu-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 11, 1931.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Feb. 19, 1933.

ously and have seen all the leading stock organizations in the various cities. The Princess Company ranks at the very top, without question, and I was especially surprised to find such a company in a city of Des Moines's size. The theatre and company should be a credit to New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chicago, San Francisco or Los Angeles. I bespeak for management and the players every success and wish to express my thanks for a most pleasant evening.²⁹

Professional theater people, too, were liberal with their praise. In October, 1911, a distinguished actor attended the Princess:

One of the interested visitors at the Princess last week was Frank Bacon, who plays the part of "Sam Graham," the lovable old druggist in "The Fortune Hunter." Mr. Bacon has several close friends among the Princess Players and is an enthusiastic admirer of the company. After witnessing the Tuesday matinee performance of "Barbara Frietchie," he declared that in all his stage experience, which covers a quarter of a century, he has never seen stock productions which equal those at the Princess, either for elaborate attention to detail or for careful preparation and faithful presentation. In view of his long connection with the Alcazar Company of San Francisco, which ranks as one of the greatest stock organizations in America, his statement is worthy of note.³⁰

In discussing his theatrical debut at the Princess, the now famous stage and screen actor, Conrad Nagel, writes: "I first entered the theatre in 1915 in the Princess Theatre in Des Moines, Iowa. At that time it was recognized as one of the outstanding stock companies of the entire country, and is still referred to by some of the old timers as the best of them all."³¹

Miss Fay Bainter, also well known on stage and screen, has further laurels to place upon the Princess' memory. She writes:

When I opened at the Princess Theater, August, 1914, it was considered one of, if not *the* finest stock companies in the country. Its management was the best.

It would be impossible to tell you how important the 2 years — 80 weeks, 40 weeks a season — were to me. I was 19, a very young woman to have the responsibility of leading lady and Mr.

²⁹ *The Princess Bulletin*, Nov. 3, 1912.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Oct. 22, 1911.

³¹ Letter to author from Conrad Nagel, The Lambs Club, New York, Dec. 31, 1948.

Morrison each week watched and worked with us as if it were a New York opening. Nothing second class was ever permitted — only the best in scenery, acting, and the choice of plays.³²

Mary Ward Crawley made her theatrical debut at the Princess under the name of Mary Holton. Today, a successful New York press agent, she says of the Princess:

During my career as an actress (which I later abandoned to do publicity) I worked with a number of stock companies. The Princess at Des Moines ranked very high. Managed by Elbert and Getchell, and with Priestly Morrison as director, it employed actors of high calibre and put on excellent productions. It was my first professional engagement and I shall always be grateful for the excellent training I received under Mr. Morrison's direction and for the high ideals of my chosen profession that I gained from the management and company. My association with the Princess was important in my development as an actress and as an individual.

The Princess held a high place in the life of the community and I only regret that there are not companies like it today.³³

Stuart Fox, the juvenile during the third Princess season, and now a popular character actor in New York, writes:

How did the Princess rank with other groups? Well, Broadway seemed cold and calculating by comparison. . . . I think artistically the Princess was able under Elbert and Getchell, with Priestly Morrison directing, to produce far better stock than any other in the country.³⁴

One of the best descriptions of the quality of the Princess Theater and Company was given by leading man Robert Hyman, in 1916:

The audiences here are bully and always have been, and they make the actor feel comfortable and that his efforts are appreciated. . . . Now there's a reason for this — people are people the world over, and a mere matter of geography shouldn't affect their dispositions. The answer here is that the Des Moines public believes in the management of the Princess Theatre; they have faith in Messrs. Elbert and Getchell; they know that these gentlemen

³² Letter to author from Fay Bainter, Hotel Astor, New York, undated, received May 30, 1949.

³³ Letter to author from Mary Ward Crawley, New York, May 4, 1949.

³⁴ Letter to author from Stuart Fox, Lambs Club, New York, June 17, 1949.

have always played fair with them — for that reason the player when being introduced here receives a hearty and friendly welcome, and launches into his work with a feeling that he is among friends. . . .

Individual brilliancy is attractive, but it doesn't accomplish much. Our Princess is a fine example of efficient management and departmental cooperation. There is no wrangling, no discord in the theatre. The office force, the mechanical staff, the musicians, the actors, all seem to greet each other with a sort of "go-to-it-boy-I'm-for-you" expression.

Everybody realizes that the management demands their best work — that nothing else will be accepted. This is clearly understood and all go about their work happily. The players all work together to make the points of the play that the author intended, and no individual is permitted to exploit himself to the detriment of the play.

I know of no company where the plays are so faithfully interpreted as they are here at the Princess; where the scenic details are so nearly perfect; where the general dignified tone of the drama so nearly approaches that of the first class producing theatres in New York.³⁵

A roll call of Princess alumni reads like a minor "who's who" of the entertainment world. The top three are, of course, Fay Bainter, Ralph Bellamy, and Conrad Nagel, who have all gained fame and fortune both in Hollywood and New York. However, they form only a small portion of the complete list. Many a motion picture has featured such former Princess players as John Litel, Frank McHugh, Robert Armstrong, Charles Halton, Harry Hayden, Isabel Randolph, the late George Barbier, Selmer Jackson, and Minor Watson (recently co-starred with Ralph Bellamy in the New York production of *State of the Union*). Mary Loane, once a Princess ingenue, a few years ago was playing Vinnie in the New York company of *Life With Father*. These are but a few of the actors who followed their engagements at the Princess with successful careers in Hollywood and New York and on the road.

Actors, however, are not the only distinguished alumni. George D. Watters, for many years house manager of the Princess, later married ingenue Tamzon Mankers and adopted her maiden name as his middle name. Under the name of George Mankers Watters he wrote the hit show *Bur-*

³⁵ *The Princess Bulletin*, Aug. 27, 1916.

lesque which several seasons ago enjoyed a successful revival run of over a year with Bert Lahr in the lead. Watters also served for a long period as manager of the famous Roxy Theater in New York. Charles Tazewell, whose *Little One* and *The Littlest Angel* are becoming traditional parts of American Christmas festivities, was once an extra at the Princess, and Bruce Gould, now co-editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*, served for a short time as press representative for the theater.

Most important, however, is the Princess' contribution to Des Moines itself. In the nineteen years of its existence, the Princess presented 539 different plays representing the writing talents of 399 authors. By carefully choosing the plays and by giving them the best production possible, the management educated Des Moines audiences toward an understanding and appreciation of good theater and drama. The effect of this is still apparent in the vast audiences which are drawn from Des Moines and its surrounding territory to the KRNT Theater, one of the nation's largest, when it features a professional legitimate stage production.

A more direct outgrowth of the Princess is the Kendall Community Playhouse. This well-known and thriving community theater group grew out of the Little Theater Society of Des Moines. Among the early recorded minutes of that organization may be found the information: "The first production was given on November 24, 1919. The program consisted of three one-act plays and the entire production was supervised by Mr. William Mack, director of the Princess Stock Company."³⁶ Also at one of the first meetings, Dan Finch, scenic artist of the Princess, was elected an officer and appointed chairman of the properties department. It seems logical, therefore, to assume that the dramatic interest aroused by the Princess was in part responsible for the founding and continued maintenance of the Des Moines amateur theater movement.

³⁶ Letter to author from Verner Haldene, Director, Kendall Community Playhouse, Des Moines, Jan. 14, 1949.