

A Small-Town Opera House

by J. Leo Sullivan

IT IS NOW just a memory for me, the opera house in that little northeastern Iowa town of my boyhood — a memory that goes back to the very early years of this century, and my days in knickers.

I have heard that it was considered an unsafe structure many years ago. But even in my days there in Lawler, Iowa, it was losing its hold on public interest because of the Princess, the new moving picture theater that introduced me to such pioneers of the silent screen as John Bunny, Flora Finch, Mary Fuller, Florence Labadie, Marguerite Snow, and Pearl White. Both places of entertainment, it may be said, shared in the general decline of small-town life that came about through the growing preference for the automobile, making it desirable to go to a town that could support a more pretentious theater.

The seating capacity of the Lawler opera house was sufficient to serve attendance by its small-town audience. The floor was level, not slanting toward the stage. There was no orchestra pit. Musicians taking part in a performance did so from the stage or from a floor space next to the stage. The walls were without paintings or photographs of interest. The interior seemed designed to center attention on the scene of action, the stage.

To enjoy what the opera house had to offer, one had to ascend to a second floor by way of an enclosed stairs between a barbershop below and, on the other side, an adjoining building, which housed the town's weekly newspaper. The ascent did much to explain the falling-off in attendance after the opening of the street-level Princess. But in my boyhood days, before the lure of the movies, it took a bad case of rheumatism indeed to discourage even the aged from making the ascent to witness what either traveling players or the town's thespians had to offer in the way of entertainment.

The local thespians were mainly students of the town's two schools, the public and the

Catholic. And except for my senior year in high school, my own trodding of the boards was done under the direction of one of the nuns at the Catholic school.

Nuns can display a thoroughness all their own. And in those days, when everyone was more thorough in tilling a smaller intellectual acreage, the nuns were thorough indeed. They had three cardinal rules about acting: you memorized your lines perfectly; you spoke in a distinct voice; and you positively never turned your back on the audience. If this did not always make for a professional performance, it got things done in no uncertain manner.

The big event of the school year at the opera house was, of course, the June graduation. And it was the greatest challenge to the nuns in the matter of casting. To leave out any member of the class was unheard of. So the problem was often solved by selecting something of spectacular proportions that not only called for a cast giving every graduate something to do or say, but also meant recruiting from other classes — though this in turn might invite the criticism of favoritism.

It was not always a drama that was selected. There was, for example, a production that remains in my recollection as typical of what was given in those years. On opening night, the opera house was touched with the fragrance of the late spring flowers that bordered the front of the stage. Early arrivals found two nuns giving last touches to things floral. They would later disappear to the temporary cloister of backstage. The other nuns would come presently and occupy seats in a front row. After our pastor and assistant priest had arrived and had taken places reserved for them opposite the nuns, things would begin.

When the curtain, bearing a garden scene broken by blocked advertisements of the town's merchants, rose that evening, there was a short but generously applauded display of the school's musical talent. After that, a descent of



Local productions in opera houses called upon the simple elements of color and costume, tissue paper and symmetry, to create the magic of theater. Here, nine dancers with balloons from a Cedar County production.

the curtain, and then a clearly audible preparation of the stage for the evening's *pièce de résistance*.

When the curtain rose again it was to reveal an impressive group of high school girls, dressed in pale blues and pinks that added soft contrast to the riot of color from the blooms at the front of the stage. They stood in ascending rows on a structure that had been moved onto the stage in sections. Each of them held a barrel hoop, the kind I sometimes rolled down hills and along the town's side streets. The girls in blue held hoops wound with pink tissue paper; those in pink, hoops wound with blue. And until the signal for action was given by a nun offstage, they stood with what I can remember only as a graceful rigidity.

From the upright piano on the floor near the stage came the sound of music to accompany the pantomime. Then there began a rhythmic movement on the stage, signalled by the tapping of a little bell held by the nun offstage. At each succeeding tap there was a uniform change in the position of the hoops — now framing the heads of the girls, now on the left, now on the right, now above the head.

ANOTHER MEMORABLE PERFORMANCE, a spectacular, was a play titled *The Daughter of Pontius Pilate*. (By some, that name was pronounced "Punchus Pilut" in the rehearsal, until the nun directing succeeded in communicating her intense dislike of the mispronunciation—as I well remember, being a Roman in the cast.)

The presentation was a memorable one because of a little drama connected with the fact of its being given at that particular time. It was during the influenza epidemic of 1918. The girl selected for the title role fell victim a day or so before the scheduled performance. I remember what an atmosphere of concern surrounded the school on the morning it became evident she would have to be replaced, and the hurried consultation to choose a girl who could "learn all those lines" in a very short time. The one selected came through successfully in the performance, borne up by the forgivable vanity of a girl who knows she is the heroine of the hour, and by the promptings of a nun who was so fearful that the girl might not remember and deliver every word that, ready to prompt, she

stood so near the scene of action that the audience on the opposite side sometimes saw the white of a hand or a bit of the black of a habit.

My senior year in high school was spent in the public, not the Catholic, school. Because it was felt that we Catholics could not support an accredited high school of our own, at the same time supporting the already accredited public school, it was decided to discontinue our own, and all would attend the public. So it was that as a senior at the public high school I had my chance at a role in the graduation play. I also had a chance to delight in the knowledge that I knew "the theater" better than any of my schoolmates, thanks to my experience as a stagehand. For during that year at the school I was employed as the janitor at a bank; and as the opera house was under the same ownership as the bank, my janitor duties included occasional employment at the opera house as well.

One thing in particular stands out in my memory of that graduation play. In my role I was called upon to impersonate at times a character wearing a beard. Since the beard had to be donned and removed repeatedly, I was provided with one that could be suspended from the ears. The play was given with such success before our own local audience in Lawler, that it was decided to give it again in two neighboring towns, Protivin and Waucoma. By the time of the Waucoma performance I had become too sure of myself. After one exit I quite thoughtlessly hung my beard on a convenient nail I had caught sight of on the back side of the set. When it came time for my next entrance I suddenly realized, to my consternation, that I had forgotten where I had left it.

When I recovered myself I was able to convey to an actor on the stage that I was not ready to enter on cue, that I had to be given time to find my beard. He was equal to the occasion. With a presence of mind that was unusual in one who was young and inexperienced in things theatrical, he took advantage of the action of the play at that point, which had to do with a disagreement between us, and he ad-libbed lines about our disagreement until I could recall where I had left my beard, and was able to make my entrance.

Another form of entertainment that dates



A company of typically well-dressed actors poses in their finery at a Cedar Falls depot, circa 1900.

the opera house of my boyhood was what was called a declamatory contest, in which the participating students of the public high school competed for first place in an oratorical, dramatic, or humorous recitation. That I, with something of a local reputation as a lad of almost serious mien, chose a humorous recitation as my bid for top honors, is due to the fact that I liked to imitate the accent of the Irish, which I heard all about me. And the additional fact that I won, I must attribute in great part to having chosen an impersonation of a fat Irish maidservant who had gone on a diet, and the presence of an equally rotund Irishwoman in the audience who good-naturedly found my efforts so much to her liking that her laughter infected the rest of the audience — and, presumably, the judges.

AS JANITOR and stagehand at the opera house, I experienced a particular pleasure in mingling with the traveling players and other entertainers who made appearances there. Plays given by traveling companies were usually confined to Saturday nights. And it was just too bad if I neglected to get a needed haircut at least by supper time (dinner time to city dwellers). For as soon as farmers got to town after their day's work, the barbershop began to fill so quickly



A "womanless wedding" stage production, by the Thimbles Society of the Congregational Church, Strawberry Point.

that I would not dare face the reasonable displeasure of a barber who had something better to do than give a haircut to a lad who could have come at a less busy time. At the grocery store and dry goods store, the drugstore and restaurant, clerks were hurrying about even more busily than they did for the regular Saturday night trade. There was excitement everywhere for the new show that was to be given over at the opera house.

One such production by traveling players, and one that most thoroughly acquainted me with the resources called upon to produce light and sound effects, was a melodramatic production titled *The Broken Rosary*. The title was taken from the climactic moment in the last act, the moment at which a marriage frowned upon by Heaven is interrupted by a sudden storm and a shaft of lightning that breaks the rosary held in the hand of the bride-to-be.

The thunder, lightning, and rain for the miraculous intervention were quite impressive. The thunder was easily obtained at the hardware store: a sheet of soft metal. When properly held and shaken, the metal gave out a roll that was near enough to the sound of an angry sky. The lightning was simulated by inserting a photographic slide, painted black except for a zig-zag figure in the center, into a

projection machine in the balcony, suddenly allowing a powerful light to penetrate for a moment and at convincing intervals, and casting the reflection onto the backdrop of a dimly lit stage. The falling rain was a triumph of achievement. It brought flattering exclamations when the actors took their curtain calls and there was no evidence of a wetting. A tin container had been placed on a shelf at the side of the stage, out of view of the audience and at a height to ensure pressure for a convincing downpour. Water from the bucket poured through a pipe, perforated on the underside, running across the stage at the front and high enough to be unseen by the audience. The wedding took place on a lawn, and the artificial "grass" at the front of the stage was sufficiently sponge-like to soak up the precipitation.

WHEN THE CULTURE of Chau-tauqua visited the opera house in the winter season (it visited us in a tent during the summer) there was little demand for my services as a stagehand. But I exercised my right to go backstage. And I was properly thrilled whenever a star of the evening engaged me in conversation during an interval when he was not appearing.

One such instance was the appearance of a

Belgian baritone who was also an accordionist, a giant of a man with a wealth of hair, who explained an intermission in his concert by telling his audience that he had to have time to comb his Belgian hares. Another was that of a Catholic priest who gave a lecture on (I remember the title exactly) "The Weeds and Flowers of Modern Literature," and who delighted his audience with his good-natured scorn for heroines with swan-like necks, marble brows, starry eyes, and pearly teeth.

And there was the time when the Edison phonograph manufacturers sought to convince us of the fidelity of their recordings by sending us one of their recording singers, having the stage darkened at times for a test of their phonograph, and letting the audience judge whether it was the singer continuing to sing, or whether it was her voice as recorded on the instrument placed on the stage with her and her piano accompanist. Remembering now the old phonographs, it is hard to believe that anyone could be deceived. But the point is of no consequence here. What is of consequence to me is that I was seated next to an Irish neighbor who had one protest to register against the lovely and capable soprano of the evening. It was this: she had been billed as an Irish soprano; yet she had sung not one "Irish" song!

THE AUTUMN following my high school graduation found me miles away, at a college that boasted things theatrical well beyond anything seen or heard in the opera house of my boyhood town. That college was Columbia College in Dubuque, now known as Loras College. Although college soloists in the field of music essayed classics that generally went far beyond the appreciation of my townspeople, there were no graduation plays on a stage with fragrant flowers in a riot of color.

The change was, unquestionably, an advancement for me. But on one of my visits to Lawler years later, I sought out the custodian of the building, secured the key, and ascended the enclosed stairs to the theater that once held much interest for me, but that now seemed quite deserted and of little interest to anyone.

I sat once again on one of those seats of hard wood, seats fastened together in groups of per-

haps half a dozen, so that they could be moved quickly and easily to a place near the walls, leaving the floor clear for dancing. I filled them again with familiar forms, and envisioned the ladies arising from them gingerly after a performance, in their fear of the consequences to summer dresses after long occupation on a very warm and humid evening.

An upright piano still stood near the stage. It was the electrically operated player piano that did service as musical accompaniment for the movies that had been introduced in competition with the Princess motion picture theater. The owner of the opera house had requested the owner of the Princess to remain closed on those infrequent occasions when the opera house was offering live entertainment. When the owner of the Princess refused to do so, the owner of the opera house began showing motion pictures as well. But not enough of the older citizens especially were willing to continue to ascend those stairs. After the competition had proved profitless, the opera house returned to live performances only, and the piano had been left there in eloquent silence.

It had been a long time since that player piano had poured out "On the Shores of Italy" or "Why Is the Ocean So Near the Shore?" or "He's a Devil in His Own Home Town" — often in conflict with the action or emotion being portrayed on the screen. But memory heard it doing so again. And in the same memory I could see the operator of the projection machine descend from the balcony in an attempt to correct the piano when it failed altogether, or when it went through several of those arbitrary selections on its roll at such headlong speed as to distract those in attendance and create at least a murmur of laughter.

My memorable visit included, of course, a wandering in and out of the dressing rooms. But it was the visit to the stage itself that evoked the most tender memories.

I raised the curtain, covered now with dust and out of date in its blocked advertisements of the town's merchants, and faced an audience I conjured out of those memories. For the moment, all were alive to me still, responding as of old to the unsophisticated representations of life's tragedies and comedies, offered from the stage on which I now stood. □