

The Grand Opera House

Living next door to Burlington's Grand Opera House for over fifty years meant for me close association with one of the finest playhouses in the world. The Grand was a beautiful theater, with an imposing facade and an ornate interior. Acoustically it was perfect. And what, do you ask, was the Grand Opera House?

During the 1870's and 1880's many of the larger cities in Iowa were sponsoring the building of opera houses. Burlington was among these. On March 25, 1881, the Burlington Opera House Company bought the lots on North Third Street where the famous Old Zion Methodist Church had once stood, and began the erection of the Grand Opera House. "The Grand", regarded by many as one of the finest theater buildings in the Middle West, was completed in 1881, and the formal opening was held on January 6, 1882. The performers on this occasion were members of the Emma Abbott Grand English Opera Company. My parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas G. Harper, served meals for Emma Abbott.

For many years following its gala opening, the Grand attracted some of the foremost entertainers

of the day in dramas, lectures, concerts, and operas. Patrons from all parts of Iowa came to Burlington by excursion boat or train to see and hear such famous entertainers as Adelina Patti, Joseph Jefferson, Mark Twain, Iowa's Lillian Russell, Della Fox, and Jeff de Angelis.

In 1929 the Grand's name was changed to The Rialto, and by this time movies were being shown in the old theater. But time took toll of the old building, and a court order authorizing the razing of the building was issued in September, 1940. A parking lot for the Elks Lodge now occupies the site.

But I remember how we used to sit in the parquet, leaning far back in our comfortable red plush seats and gazing up at the brilliantly lighted chandeliers and the society folk, beautifully dressed, gracing their boxes which were paid for by the season. No one thought of attending the theater and sitting in the parquet without white gloves and best gown.

During intermission, the gentlemen would hie themselves to the opera house exchange, a block south of the theater, where Mr. Wohlwend quenched their thirst, while Mr. Rhys and Mr. Nash played the piano and violin, until a buzzer sounded, warning that the entr'acte was over. Meanwhile the ladies of the audience might fre-

quent the lovely powder room which was in charge of a uniformed colored girl or partake of ices, iced water, and candy served by a corps of ushers. And gum-selling boys walked up and down the aisles displaying their wares. I remember one in particular who used to sing a little song about Black Joe Cream Gum.

Manager Frank Chamberlain himself walked up and down the aisles, smiling, and greeting every person as his guest, making each feel welcome. Such was the personality of the manager — warm-hearted and gracious at all times — a far cry from today's theater managers who seldom are seen, much less heard, to extend a welcome either warm or cold. Frank Semple, Melvin Scovill, George Peck, Ralph Holmes, Martin Bruhl, and Oscar Jacobs followed Mr. Chamberlain, each carrying on his tradition of welcoming theater-goers. Martin Bruhl was himself a pianist of note, having played with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for some fifteen years, under the direction of Walter Damrosch. Gone, indeed, are these warm-hearted men who extolled the theater by making themselves friends in the community.

I remember, too, Mr. and Mrs. Koepff, the caretakers of the theater, who kept it clean and shining. Saturday mornings, when they had the doors open cleaning, I liked to slip in to watch a

rehearsal in progress for the gala Saturday matinee. (Saturday night was never a show night, but the matinee was an event of social and financial importance.) Frank Foote, Bert Fowler, and Frank Foehlinger were the friendly doormen who took tickets, and I always tried to be the first one in. The supervisor of the stage hands and of house personnel was Fred Croft, Mr. Chamberlain's right-hand man.

But the man who worked longest and hardest and loved the Grand more deeply than anyone else was Johnny Agnew — never was there a finer fellow than Johnny, God rest his soul! He was of Irish descent — red-cheeked, blue-eyed, ever whistling merrily as he cleaned the paste barrels and made paste for the city's bill posting. Then there was gruff, cross Glory Dunham, who was really tender underneath. He was always willing to "make up" our faces when we were in amateur shows and, upon request, he would take us through the dressing rooms in the crypt or the fascinating prop room. Well do I remember when Glory would call a group of us youngsters backstage to hold hands with him while he grasped one of Johnny Agnew's. Then Johnny would pull the electric switch, and the shock which went through each of us nearly knocked us off our feet, but oh! it was exciting!

The theater orchestra was under the direction of J. Henri Fischer, whose two, four, or ten piece group played regularly for theater productions. I remember how Mr. Fischer's orchestra often practiced in the theater on summer evenings, after the show season was over, and many times their beautiful music lulled me to sleep.

I remember the old stock companies — Spooners, Holdens, Flints, Jack Bessey, and Hickman-Bessey. Some productions were more popular than others. Hoyt's shows nearly always drew crowds, but Shakespearian plays rarely played to packed houses. Father took me to see every one of the latter, however, so I grew to enjoy them.

There were the gay musical comedies — "Piff, Paff, Pouf", with Eddie Foy; Joe Howard singing his own songs; and Eva Tanguay who had so many curtain calls singing and dancing "He's a Dandy, Is My Sambo". She fell into the stage hand's arms after each curtain call, but she was never too tired to give encores. Louis Granat, the whistler, was a favorite, too. Some of the old time plays that we saw are not often mentioned today: "Honey Moon", "Dolly Varden", "Prince of Pilsen", and "Black Crook". Better known melodramas were "Way Down East", "East Lynne", "Uncle Tom's Cabin", and "Uncle Josh Spruceby".

Many of these troupes, with gay minstrel bands, gave pre-performance parades on the streets, finishing in front of the theater, and playing a few more pieces to draw the people in. Not all the "characters" were on the stage, however, for Burlington in those days had many "panhandlers" who hung around the gallery doors, hoping some kind person would give them the necessary dime or quarter for admission. Many times my father and I offered the wherewithal.

For me the highlight of the show season was being asked to supply youngsters for a schoolyard scene in "Lover's Lane" season after season. I gathered together my closest friends, Helen and Fay Reynolds, Albert and Carl Kleppisch, and with the two boys in the troupe we had a grand time. When we met the actor in charge on the stage after school for the first time, he told us to sing "Old Dog Tray" and was bowled over when none of us knew it. Needless to say, we learned it during rehearsal, and I have not forgotten it to this day. We also sang and played "All Around the Mulberry Bush". We did have fun, being on the stage one whole act, and the troupe youngsters were polite and friendly. Later, my daughter and three other Burlington girls were bridesmaids in "Abie's Irish Rose" at its first showing in Burlington.

Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore", one of the foremost light operas of the day, was presented by Madame Theresa Stenger when voices such as those of Milton Blaul, Louis Dwight, Hazel Heimbeck, Myrtle Funck Voigt, Frank Gould, Marguerite von Behren, and Catherine Hassell were young and gay. The same opera, equally well presented by youngsters, was directed by Maude Leipsiger Jacobs. Chorus work in both cases was outstanding, even as the chorus of "Oklahoma" is notable today, for quality of voice, singing technique, and timing in direction.

Oh, to hear once more the noise of the gallery gods as they clambered down the fire escape when the show was over, whistling and singing the popular tunes at the top of their voices, if the play were a musical. And the "gallery gods" were real judges! Just about the best in the world for they never missed a performance at the top price of 25 cents.

We Harpers received "comps" as often as we paid for seats, because the stage hands were always borrowing our household articles or one of my numerous cats for props. Sometimes the cats gave an impromptu performance. On one occasion when a woman was in the midst of her program, one of my big tomcats walked nonchalantly onto the stage, sat down, washed his face, and

then walked off. Sometimes Mr. Chamberlain made a point of calling us in, saying: "Come on in and help fill my empty seats."

Show people looked forward to playing Burlington. It was a good town socially and financially, and it could be highbrow or a bit lowbrow as the occasion demanded. At midnight on New Year's Eve, Mr. Chamberlain always gave the troupe playing that day a party on the stage. There was turkey with all the trimmings to eat and beer and champagne to drink. All were guests of the genial manager — actors, orchestra members, ushers, and stage hands. The esteem which show people held for Mr. Chamberlain and the other old-time managers and caretakers of the Grand Opera House made it popular beyond its size.

Traveling companies were not the only performers at the Grand, however. Home talent, too, frequently appeared on the boards of the beautiful stage. High school Shakespearian plays, William Sheetz gay musicals, and Modern Drama League productions played to enthusiastic Burlington audiences.

But now the Grand Opera House has been torn down and an ugly parking lot stands in its place. The friendly neighbor of my childhood is gone, as is the glamor of living close to the troupe-

ers of the theater — troupers of one night stands who gave of their best the hard way. But they, too, have builded well, for today's movie leads are stars only because their background was laid in the legitimate theater.

As I stand at my window and, in retrospect, smell the dank odor of the theater and breathe the pungent air of the stage, the grease paint, and the scenery, I wonder what kind chance kept the playhouse standing, strong and solid, despite the danger of careless smokers and a bomb which exploded in 1910. That was excitement for a small town. Early in the morning, about 1:30 A. M., on September 3, 1910, just after the fall play season had opened at the theater, someone placed a bomb on the stage of the Grand Opera House, and it exploded, causing \$5,000 worth of damages. The culprit was never found, although the theater manager offered a \$500 reward for his apprehension.

We have in our yard the two stone steps from the stage-door entrance — mute evidence of the many noted feet, good and bad, that trod over them throughout the span of sixty years. We also have two of the red velvet chairs from the beautiful old boxes, and twin mirrors from the mysterious and intriguing mirror room. All the rest of the old theater is gone — except the cherished memories of the Grand Opera House.

EDITH HARPER EKDALE