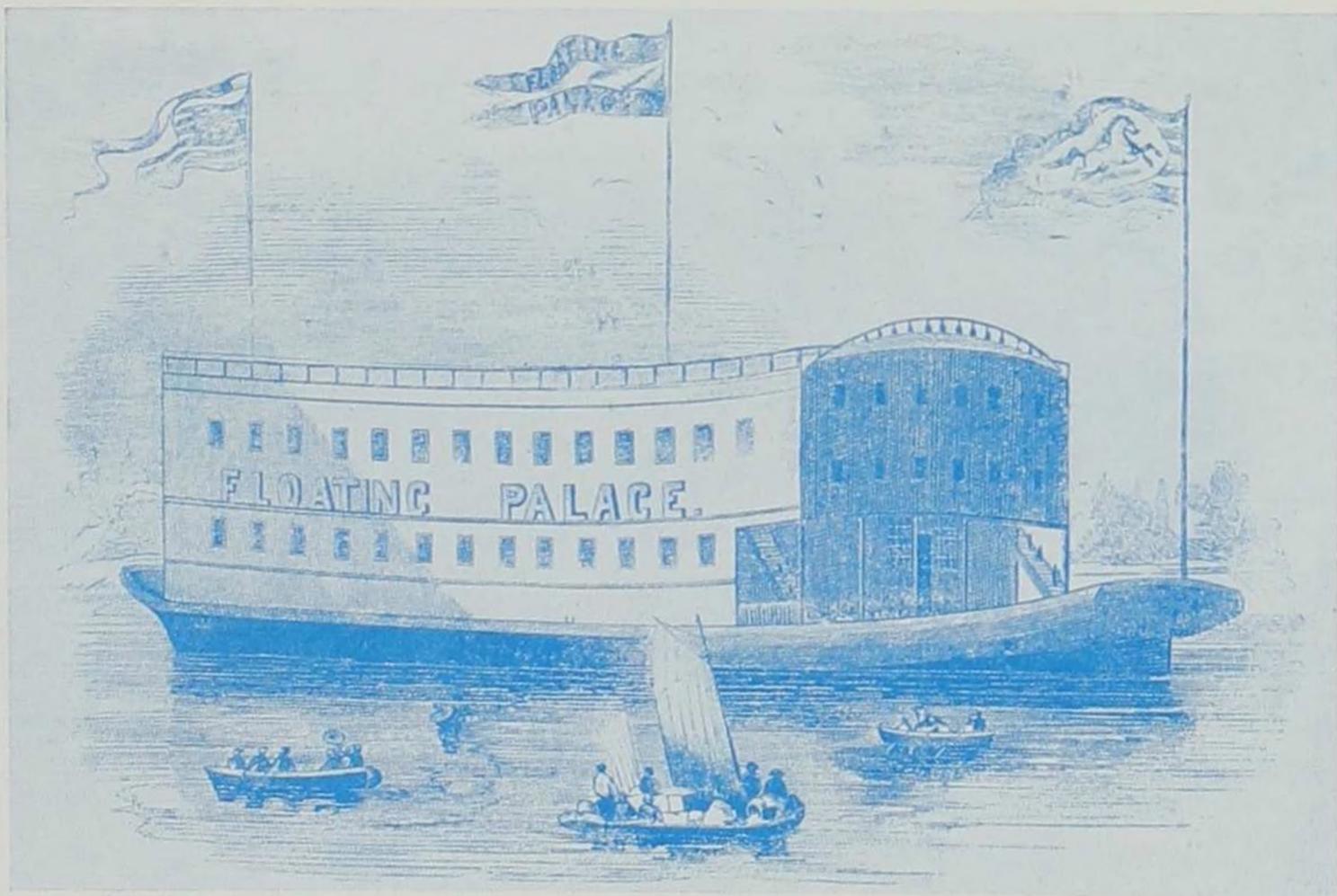
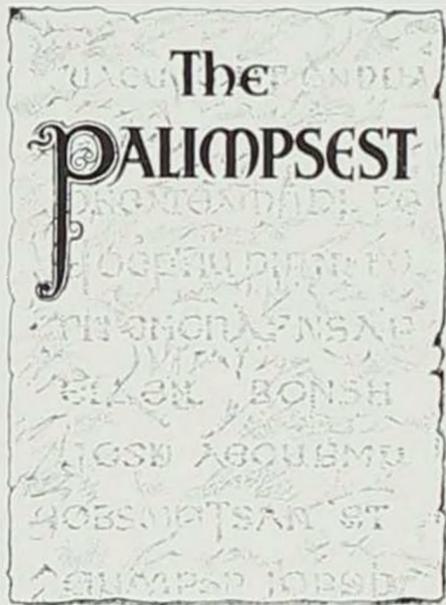


The
PALIMPSEST



Published Monthly by
The State Historical Society of Iowa
Iowa City Iowa

JANUARY 1950



The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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Front — Showboat *Floating Palace* at Davenport in 1852-53.

Inside Back — Theater Advertisements in *Davenport Gazette*.

Back — *Top*: Davenport street scene around 1860.

Bottom: LeClaire Hall Building.

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT
IOWA CITY IOWA UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

PRICE — 15 cents per copy; \$1.50 per year; free to Members

MEMBERSHIP — By application. Annual Dues \$3.00

ADDRESS — The State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXI

ISSUED IN JANUARY 1950

No. 1

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Drama on the Iowa Frontier

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The beginning of the drama on the Upper Mississippi frontier is but a chapter in the larger history of the development of the American theater in the Mississippi Valley. Only a few theatrical histories of western towns have appeared and the relationships of the early traveling companies and of their circuits have been only sketchily outlined by historians.

The first plays west of the Alleghanies were performed in New Orleans by a company of French actors in 1791. The French dominated the Crescent City theater until 1817, when Noah Ludlow and his company of American actors arrived down river from the north. The theater in New Orleans was largely an isolated phenomenon; it did not nourish the country to the north, but was to be nourished itself by players who came down the Mississippi.

For the source of the drama in the Upper Mis-

Mississippi Valley, we must turn to Kentucky, where amateur theatricals were known before the close of the eighteenth century, with performances by Transylvania University students in Lexington early in 1799. The first professional company apparently did not appear in Lexington until 1810. During the next decade, professional players began to appear at almost every settlement of consequence along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers as well as on many of their tributaries. Clearly the easiest route was to follow the flow of the rivers to the south, and this was the path taken by the earliest companies in the Middle West.

In 1818 the William Turner Company came down the Ohio to Cairo where, instead of continuing south, they turned north to St. Louis. They were the first traveling actors to appear in that city, arriving just three years after the earliest amateur performances there. Only a few straggling settlements were established between the mouth of the Missouri and what is now Keokuk prior to 1833, hence play companies did not ascend the river above St. Louis. Although permanent settlement of the Black Hawk Purchase began on June 1, 1833, the professional circuit between St. Louis and Iowa seems not to have been inaugurated until the fifties. Actually, the first professional company in Iowa came overland from Chicago by way of Galena in 1838, and did not come upstream from St. Louis.

Amateur players preceded the professional players in the Upper Mississippi Valley. In 1834 the soldiers of the First Regiment at Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien presented several play productions. Two of these, *Who Wants a Guinea?* and *Don Quixote in England*, were seen by Charles Fenno Hoffman, a New York editor and poet who was traveling in the West. Hoffman wrote that such plays by the soldiers were not unusual. The men had fixed up a barrack room as a theater. There was painted scenery, "cleverly done," and the seats were arranged on a graduated elevation, with the audience divided into three sections: the officers and their families, soldiers, and civilians (with a few Indians and a Negro servant or two). Hoffman was agreeably surprised "at the degree of skill and judgment with which the soldiers played, considering they were but amateurs."

About two weeks later, when Hoffman was in Galena, Illinois, some sixty miles to the south, he enjoyed another play, the melodrama of *The Woodman's Hut* which was given in an improvised theater in the upper part of an unfinished house. The audience was enthusiastic and threw half dollars "like peas upon the stage . . . at the little girl's dancing between the acts." The conditions under which the piece was given must have been primitive indeed. Even the stage was unfinished.

Farther north, the Thespian Players at Fort Snelling during the 1830's presented plays "every fortnight or so during the winter months." The soldiers at Fort Armstrong, established on Rock Island in 1816 opposite present-day Davenport, may conceivably have put on theatrical performances to while away the tedium of army life, but no record of them is extant.

The first amateur play in Iowa was given by the Iowa Thespian Association at Dubuque on February 26, 1838. The group presented William Dunlap's *The Glory of Columbia* in the Shakespeare House, located on the second floor of the Shakespeare Coffee House and Free Admission News Room. It was repeated the following Saturday night with an added attraction for the afterpiece — the farce, *Gretna Green*.

The second season of the Dubuque Thespians was made noteworthy by the visit of the Joseph Jefferson-Alexander McKenzie Company, "the first troupe of professional actors with a metropolitan reputation to visit the newly created Territory of Iowa." This group had come on a barnstorming trip by the lake route to open a new theater in Chicago — a town of some two thousand people. The troupe consisted of fifteen persons, including Joseph Jefferson III, then a boy of ten, who was later to become famous in his role of Rip van Winkle.

The company had had a short run in Galena

before traveling to Dubuque in sleighs on the frozen Mississippi. On the way, the ice suddenly broke beneath them. The passengers fortunately escaped without injury, but the baggage, scenery, stage properties, costumes, green curtain, and drop — all “broke through the ice and tumbled into the Mississippi.” The accident occurred above a low-lying sandbar so that the baggage and properties were retrieved, but only “after a six hours’ bath in the river.” As a result of this mishap the opening in Dubuque was delayed for a week while the scenery was repainted and the wardrobe put in order.

During their eleven-day run at the Shakespeare House they presented the popular comedies, *Honeymoon*, *How to Rule a Wife*, and *The Waterman*; and the classics, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Rob Roy*, *McGregor*, and John Howard Payne’s *Charles II*, on which Washington Irving had collaborated. Years later Joseph Jefferson III recounted in his *Autobiography* that after the Dubuque run, the company traveled down river “to the different towns just springing up in the West — Burlington, Quincy, Peoria, Pekin, and Springfield.”

Unhappily Davenport is not mentioned, but as the largest settlement (population about three hundred) on the river between Dubuque and Burlington, it (or Rock Island) would have served as a possible stopping place. South of Davenport,

theatrical activity was more prominent than in the north. Burlington had a theater going "full blast" in 1840, while St. Louis, as we have noted, had amateur theatricals in 1815, the first professional players in 1818, and a regular theater by 1837.

To the east of Davenport, Chicago saw its first professional production in 1837, when the Harry Isherwood and Alexander McKenzie Company opened in October of that year "at the old Sauganash Hotel" converted into a theater. This is the same McKenzie who later joined with Joseph Jefferson II, his brother-in-law, to form the troupe that played in Dubuque and in "nearly all the principal towns of Illinois" before 1840.

What of the theatrical activity in Davenport during the forties? Although no announcement of a dramatic performance, amateur or professional, has been found, there is some reason to believe that Davenport may have seen its first plays before 1850. The records of the town council which have been preserved suggest the early presence of theatrical troupes. Thus, on November 5, 1840, a town trustee moved that theatrical performances should no longer be exempt from taxation as before. Again, the presence of players may have incited the *Davenport Gazette* in January, 1842, to denounce theater and grog shop alike, the first for its "demoralizing pageantry" and the second for its "corrupting influence." In June of this same year the council again passed an ordinance "rela-

tive to licensing shows, exhibitions etc." On July 20, 1844, the mayor was granted full license authority in permitting "persons to exhibit sleight-of-hand, shows, and Theatrical exhibitions." He was free to tax or not to tax as he saw fit. Three years later, in 1847, such matters were again discussed and another ordinance "relative to exhibitions etc., was presented, read, and adopted."

One must realize, of course, that such ordinances are not clear proof of the presence of professional players; Detroit approved regulations on theatrical performances in 1825, but apparently the first professional players did not appear until 1827. However, the specific reference to the taxation of "Theatrical performances" in 1840 is encouraging to the historian, even though he must wait until the following decade for the formal opening of his history of the theater.

The American Theater

The first known regularly advertised dramatic performance in Davenport, *The Drunkard, or the Fallen Saved*, was given on April 14, 1852. This play may not have been new to the audience since the company that presented it, the F. L. Robinson group, had already appeared in Davenport the year before, on September 9 and 10, 1851. Unfortunately the programs of these two days are not known.

The Robinson Company boasted all the adjuncts of the usual professional organization of the time. There was a special director of the drama, a prompter, a property maker, two scenic artists, and a traveling agent, along with a leader for the brass band, another for the orchestra, plus the actors themselves — in all, about thirty persons.

Fayette Lodawick "Yankee" Robinson, the proprietor of the troupe, must have been fairly well known in Davenport. In 1848 or 1849 he had settled in Rock Island, just across the river, and there "made a tent with his own hands . . . and started the Robinson Athenaeum, playing *The Drunkard*, and like pieces, and as each tent was worn out, its successor would be much larger."

On the occasion of the 1851 visit, when *The Drunkard* may well have been given, a tent-pavilion seventy by forty feet was used, with elevated seats for one thousand spectators. To have provided so many seats, even granting the almost certain exaggeration, indicates that Robinson expected ample support from Davenport and the surrounding territory, for the entire population of Davenport was scarcely over twice that. During the pauses of the play and preceding the usual afterpiece, the brass band and the orchestra "discoursed sweet music at intervals." Such were the tangible beginnings of the drama in Davenport.

One very real reason why the beginnings of the drama were so sketchy in Davenport was the lack of a suitable place for the performances. In the early days all public entertainments had to be given in the hotel dining rooms, church assembly halls, schoolrooms, in the courthouse, or in temporarily erected outdoor pavilions. In the forties some entertainments had to be turned away for want of adequate playing space. Even at the close of this decade, in 1848, a traveling harpist intent on giving a recital could find no room for his program and had to leave town without performing. If a single artist could not be accommodated, the opportunities for play-giving were indeed slight. The plight of the harpist prompted the editor of the *Gazette* to state that the greatest need of the

community was "a large room devoted exclusively to concerts, lectures," and other entertainment. The need was finally met in the early part of 1853 when Le Claire Hall became available for theatricals, lectures, and concerts.

This hall was in the last of a row of buildings erected by Antoine Le Claire along the north side of Second Street between Main and Brady streets. The new building had four floors, and the hall proper was on the third floor. For some time to come this was the most imposing building in town. "People used to stroll along the board walk, after a hearty meal of venison washed down with madeira, and gaze with awe upon the structure."

Not a great deal is known about the physical proportions, seating capacity, or stage dimensions of this room. Only the measurements in broad outline are known. The full length from wall to wall—which would include the stage—was sixty-seven feet, three inches. The width was thirty-nine feet, six inches, with an additional side chamber apparently used for dressing rooms. The ceiling was fifteen feet high, supported with two pillars. No stage dimensions survive, and one might even suspect the absence of a stage platform; but there probably was one, for in 1858 a "new stage" was built with "an elegant proscenium." At this time, too, a gallery was added, which, in a room only fifteen feet high, must have cramped those underneath and those in the gal-

lery. The problem of ventilation must also have been a serious one, since a good share of the audience would be pipe-smokers and tobacco-chewers.

The opening of the hall in 1853 was greeted with much enthusiasm which soon faded when it was discovered the acoustics were very bad except when the place was "compactly filled." The editor of one of the local papers suggested that "carpeting or matting should be placed upon the floor to deaden the noise made by those relentless beings who cannot sit still ten successive minutes . . . every little noise reverberates until it becomes painful to follow the speaker in his discourse." These faults must have been remedied, for in later years the hall underwent several renovations, and there was no further criticism in the press.

A newspaper item of July 21, 1853, speaks of the hall as having "just been finished," but it was in use three months before that for a vocal and instrumental concert, and, on May 14, 1853, a dramatic troupe under the name of the National Theater opened for a run in the new structure. Only the first program is extant, but plays were given for at least eight days. The announcement of the engagement has been preserved in the German language newspaper, *Der Demokrat*. The advertisement is in German for the benefit of the readers, but this was an English-speaking company. Translated it read:

The National Theater

Organized for the production of the moral drama.
The above-named troupe, under the direction of Mr. G. J. Adams, respectfully announces to the public of Davenport and vicinity that commencing Saturday, May 14, a number of performances will be given at the
New Le Claire Hall

Beginning with the patriotic drama

William Tell

To be followed by the comical farce of

The Swiss Cabin

Every night, songs by Mrs. Adams, Mr. Nixon, and
Mr. Adams.

Change of program every evening.

Admission twenty-five cents. Read the handbills.

The performances were doubtless satisfactory, for the editor of *Der Demokrat* stated that he had "reveled with delight" in the plays. Of course, they were not the equal of the theaters of Europe, he went on to say, but one could scarcely expect that in the *hinterwald*. Two years later, in 1855, the Germans in the community were to try their own skill on the stage.

Following the run of the National Theater, about ten other English-speaking companies were to visit Davenport in the years before the Civil War, averaging slightly more than one company each year. The next after 1853 was a troupe under the direction of a Mr. Wyman which performed at the close of 1854. Nothing is known

of the plays or the length of the engagement in Davenport.

Wyman was followed in 1855 by Sallie St. Clair's St. Louis Varieties troupe which opened at Le Claire Hall October 2. Originally the run was announced for only one week, but the reception was so good that it was extended for another week, with performances every evening except Sunday. Perhaps the new gas street lamps installed just two months before as a gift of Antoine Le Claire tempted more people out of doors after dark than the players originally had anticipated.

Not all of the members of the company are known, and of them only Miss St. Clair's professional background is on record. She was born in England and came to this country as an infant with her parents. Her first stage appearance was at the Park Theater in New York as a child danseuse, and her first speaking part was taken in Philadelphia in 1846.

At the time of her initial Davenport appearance, Sallie St. Clair was twenty-four years old and was noted for her grace and personal charm. In later years she was one of the principals of the famous Montplaisir Troupe. She died in 1867 in Buffalo, New York. Her company gave twenty-six different pieces in Davenport, with Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons* and James R. Planche's *Loan of a Lover* receiving two presenta-

tions each. Most of the plays now seem of relatively little significance; other than *The Lady of Lyons*, only Payne's *Charles II* and August von Kotzebue's *The Stranger* are of some note.

Little is known about these early performances or of the audience reaction. Dramatic criticism was almost unknown to newspaper commentators. Basically and briefly, the criticism that does survive revolves upon the single standard of good and bad in the light of current attitudes of morality. The 1853 announcement of the National Theater suggests a great deal in this regard, stating that it was "organized for the production of the moral drama." In general, the theater was more often suspect than otherwise. It was at times condemned for its "demoralizing pageantry," at other times (but rarely) praised for its "great propriety." Occasionally the actors were criticized for leading immoral lives; again one will encounter nothing but praise for an actress because "in private life she is a lady." Sometimes the condemnation of the theater had nothing to do with the plays or with the actors, but was provoked because the manager skipped town without paying the printing bill. Obviously such criticism does not tell us much about the skill of the performances themselves.

In September, 1856, Sallie St. Clair again appeared in Davenport with a group from the north — Hough and Myers' Company from Dubuque

and St. Paul. The Hough and Myers' Company consisted of at least twenty-two persons; it had a long run — from September 2 to October 18, 1856. The performances were greeted with enthusiasm, members of the audience often rising to their feet and cheering wildly. And what they cheered was for their own good, for the plays were "of a chaste and high character . . . well calculated to afford information and amusement to all." As usual, the familiar *Lady of Lyons* and *The Stranger* reappeared (each twice), along with George L. Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Payne's sentimental *Therese, the Orphan of Geneva*, and his *Clari, Maid of Milan*, the latter containing the persistent survival, "Home, Sweet Home."

The Hough and Myers' Company introduced certain theatrical "firsts" to Davenport. So far as we know, this group gave the first regular performance of a Shakespeare play in Davenport, *Romeo and Juliet*, October 8, 1856, although scenes from Shakespeare had been given by the Smith Circus Company three months earlier. And they introduced the "traveling star" system, bringing actors and actresses of some repute from elsewhere to play with the company for varying periods. Among these were Mr. T. B. Douglas of the St. Louis theater, Mr. and Mrs. Lenox from New York, C. J. Smith, the Misses Kate and Susan Denin of Chicago, and Samuel Ryan. Lenox,

Smith, and the Denin sisters were of sufficient professional training and competence to be remembered years later by historians of the American theater.

The performances of the company aroused much favorable comment. They made people feel that Davenport with its population of six thousand was really becoming a metropolis. Perhaps no one wished to recall now the bitter complaints of only the year before about "the multitudinous throngs of dogs and swine" running loose in the streets. For that matter, that was the same year they had heard Emerson, and Emerson had heard them, too — in the dining room of the Le Claire House. "They talk 'quarter sections.' 'I will take a quarter section of that pie.'"

But that was last year, and these were times of rapid change. For the present, people thought the success of Hough and Myers indicated that Davenport could support a theater profitably three months each year. The managers, too, were optimistic; they planned a semi-annual visit to the town. With all this theatrical ebullience in the air, the members of the town council were ready to make the most of it; they decided to make adequate tax provision for any later performances. A single play was to be taxed ten dollars; a one-month run, fifty dollars; six months, one hundred and fifty dollars; and for one year, two hundred dollars. In setting such a high tax rate, they prob-

ably scared away more than one traveling company.

Sallie St. Clair was back in Davenport for the third time early in 1857, again with the group named Sallie St. Clair's St. Louis Varieties. Several members of Hough and Myers' Company were with her. The repertory was not unlike the preceding engagements, but we may note *The Taming of the Shrew*, given as *Katherine and Petruchio*; Sheridan's *School for Scandal*; and *Camille, or the Fate of a Coquette*. Four performances of *Camille* were to be given in Davenport before the Civil War, and they never failed to provoke raised eyebrows, for the piece was "of very questionable morality."

The name of Miss St. Clair runs like a golden thread through this early tapestry. She was to appear once more as a guest star with Hough's Lyceum in its long run from March 17 to about June 24, 1857. Hough employed a good many guest stars for this season. Other than Sallie, Susan Denin would have been a familiar person to the playgoers. But most of them were new to Davenport, and some were of considerable professional eminence. The visiting stars were: William McFarland and Mrs. McFarland, Miss S. Woodberry, G. W. Jamison, Mrs. Anna Senter, C. B. Mulholland, G. E. "Yankee" and Mrs. Locke, W. D. Lacey, C. W. Couldock and his daughter Eliza Couldock. Jamison, Senter, Mul-

holland, Locke, and Couldock were recognized leading actors of the day. Jamison had long been associated with Edwin Forrest and was engaged in Davenport "at enormous expense." That Couldock would even condescend to visit such a small place (and for a week's engagement) was considered a "compliment." The local press praised him as "the best player who ever visited Davenport professionally beyond all comparison."

Hough's Lyceum was notable for other reasons. Six of Shakespeare's plays were given: *Macbeth*, *Taming a Shrew* [sic], *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III*. But the audience was interested in more mundane matters, too; they were proud as Punch of the new drop curtain now for the first time placarded with advertisements of enterprising merchants. This was something of which few other cities could boast, said the *Gazette*, and indicated that Davenport was "up with the times, if not a little ahead." But the *Gazette* was cautious to remind its readers that newspaper advertising reached a much larger group than "Mr. Hough's respectable audience." All of the evidence suggests that Hough's company was well liked and beyond moral reproach, but one cannot say this of some of the later troupes that played in Davenport.

J. C. Gallanar and John Weaver's National Theater opened in Le Claire Hall in September, 1857, for a run of possibly two weeks. A local

store took note of the forthcoming opening and suggested the purchase of opera glasses, a note of elegance. But the Gallanar and Weaver Company scarcely merited close scrutiny; it was shaky financially and morally. Before opening, the managers petitioned the town council for permission to play without paying the usual license fee, but the council took no action. Once the performances were under way, the *Gazette* deplored the general "tone and character" of the troupe. When Le Claire Hall was redecorated early in the following year, after the Gallanar-Weaver engagement had closed, the *Gazette* announced smugly that henceforth the hall would not be used "for theatrical or any other low purpose." Thus the earlier excellences of Hough's companies were quickly forgotten, and they were to be further submerged by the town's experiences with two later troupes.

Farren's Varieties opened September 18, 1858, in the German Theater, but very soon moved to Le Claire Hall in spite of the *Gazette* prophecy. The plays given followed the usual mid-century pattern. Farren got into a squabble with the *Gazette* which illustrates an interesting theater-press relationship of credit to neither side. Farren had given complimentary tickets to the press, but later refused to pay his printing bills. The incensed editor of the *Gazette* wrote a withering editorial headed "Theatrical Ingratitude" in which he

stated "the notorious fact that every theatrical company . . . went away without paying us our bills in full."

In order that Farren's company might be a "glorious exception," the *Gazette* sued for payment. Farren was not caught napping; he at once sued the *Gazette* for non-payment of the complimentary tickets which the staff had accepted so avidly. The case was brought before Justice Blood who decided in favor of the *Gazette*. In the brotherhood of journalism, the newspaper then warned other "members of the Press hereafter to receive no presents of tickets . . . or they will find them brought in as an 'offset' against their regular bills, in case of difficulty." Farren had been "guilty of . . . littleness and dishonorable conduct . . . and not entitled to the patronage of a respectable community."

Consequently, when William Henderson's Company appeared one month later, November, 1858, they encountered a good bit of opposition. Henderson had wanted to come in August, but the high license fee deterred him. At that time the council had turned down his request for a 50 per cent reduction in the fee, five dollars per night instead of ten dollars. On his appearance in November, however, the license fee was reduced to ten dollars per week; but perhaps remembering Farren, the town clerk ordered that the money had to be paid in advance. Still the council was

generous and apparently anticipated a long run, for if Henderson lasted long enough to pay one hundred dollars into the treasury, he was free to continue thereafter until the first of April without further tax. But Henderson's hopes were shattered by the memories of the Farren episode. Wary of newspaper tactics and costs, Henderson placed no advertisements in the papers. As a result the record of his run is incomplete; only three programs have survived indirectly. But we can be pretty certain that his stay was brief, and that there were no complimentary tickets.

The last professional English-speaking dramatic company to appear in Davenport before the Civil War did much to redeem the theater in the eyes of the community. This was McVicker's Company from Chicago. They opened June 14, 1859, at the German Theater. A license had been taken out for eighteen nights of performances, but for some unknown reason the company remained only twelve nights, though the theater was crowded to excess each night, with seats placed in the aisle and around the edges of the hall. McVicker had no qualms about advertising and announced the performances in both the English and German papers. One or two old favorites were repeated: *The Lady of Lyons*, *Ingomar the Barbarian*, *Lucretia Borgia*, and *The Robbers*, and Shakespeare was represented with *Macbeth*. Most of the plays were new to Davenport and

included such a recent piece as Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* which had had its first New York performance only eight months before. The critical notices in the newspapers were highly complimentary; this was the finest company in the West, which was essentially true, and the best that Davenport had ever seen. Even when the actors overstepped the bounds of good taste with occasional interpolated stage vulgarities, the newspapers in great good humor (the bills must have been paid) overlooked them in view of the "excellent acting and the great fun." McVicker's Company at any rate was a thumping success. Before the troupe left town, a band marched down Second Street to the Le Claire House and there serenaded the players, giving them a royal send-off.

An account of the drama in early Davenport would not be complete without brief comment on the two showboats which visited the town before the Civil War: the *Banjo* and the *Floating Palace*, the latter with the towing steamboat *James Raymond*. The *Banjo* made five visits from 1856-1858; and the *Floating Palace* appeared twice with one-day engagements in 1852 and 1853. The *Banjo* advertised its seating capacity as 800 while the *Floating Palace* claimed its seating capacity was 1,800 — 1,000 in the gallery and 800 in the dress and family circle. Unfortunately we know almost nothing of the entertainment they

presented. Both boats were equipped in every way for the production of legitimate drama, and their players were prepared to put on "any play" from *Hamlet* to *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. But in Davenport the performances apparently consisted of circus displays and minstrel shows. The early showboat was closer in spirit to the circus than it was to the theater.

The records of the English-speaking theater in Davenport before the Civil War are not extensive. But the twelve known visits by ten different professional companies during this time indicate a commendable interest in the stage. The performances were praised and condemned, but on the whole their contribution to life in a pioneer village was a happy one.

The German Theater

In the earliest days there were few Germans in Davenport, but by the close of the forties they began to arrive in great numbers; by the middle fifties perhaps 25 per cent of the population was German-born. Most of these became American citizens, but Davenport residents were always conscious of the two great divisions in their society, one called the "Americans" (which included indiscriminately all non-Germans), the other the "Germans." This distinction, unfair as it now appears to us, continued throughout the years before the Civil War.

The Germans who settled in Davenport after the Revolution of 1848 were made up chiefly of highly educated, cultivated persons who were more suited to the drawing room than to the crudities of pioneer living. The newcomers to Davenport were certainly of a superior class in origin, though many of them of necessity had to follow occupations of a humble level. The best evidence of their high cultural interests is the large number of societies and organizations which they formed devoted to the gentler arts of living: reading circles, several choral groups, a band and an orchestra, a *Turnverein* (with a wide range of activi-

ties), a German newspaper, a German Free School, and Lutheran and Congregational Churches. All of these were established and active during the fifties. Together they had a common means of expression and found a mutual interest in the activities of the *Deutsches Liebhabertheaterverein* — the German Amateur Theater Group. The *Verein* used the best talents of all in the realm of the drama, literature, music, painting, sculpture, and even gymnastics.

The German theater in Davenport differed in many ways from the American theater; the most notable distinction was that the German theater was entirely an amateur group, whereas the plays in English were given almost exclusively by professional companies. The Germans played for the sheer joy of playing, and not to earn a living from the stage. If one looks over the early membership lists of the *Verein* and the casts of characters of the plays, and then thumbs through the early directories of the town, he will find that these people were decorators, picture framers, clerks, saloon keepers, newspaper workers, housewives, and others who held relatively humdrum jobs in the workaday world. But their interest in the theater was so keen that supporters were never lacking for the German productions.

There were no off-seasons as there were with the American stage. From the beginning of the German activity, plays were given regularly dur-

ing the winter months, and very shortly thereafter during the summer months as well. In the late fifties scarcely a month passed without a German dramatic performance of some sort. This enthusiasm plus the amateur participation of so many of the local Germans gave the performances a freshness and informality which one finds lacking in the American theater, characteristics which later drew the admiration and support of the non-Germans as well. Never does one come upon a German advertisement that went unpaid, and no actor or actress was ever condemned for leading an immoral life or for stage vulgarities.

Another contribution of the Germans to the local stage was the production of plays on Sunday. This was never done by the traveling companies, and it was to cause considerable friction with the non-Germans who believed this was not quite the proper thing to do.

Although the record of the American stage in Davenport has many gaps, the account of the German plays is almost intact. But the record does have one confusing element; at times, the same play given on different occasions may have been advertised with three variant titles. Most of these duplications have been identified, however, and we can tell a good bit about what kinds of plays were popular.

The *Deutsches Liebhabertheaterverein* was organized in November, 1855. The leading names

in the initial group were Henry Becker, president; Bernhard Nathan, secretary; John Monath, treasurer; and Jacob Strasser, director. There were approximately fourteen others, all men, for there were no women in the first organization. About a week after the group had been formed, other persons, including a few women, wished to join; they were admitted on paying a five dollar fee.

With this money and other contributions and voluntary labor, a hall was prepared on Second Street, just west of Ripley Street, for the use of the society. Holzborn's Hall, as it was called, was a modest affair, only sixty by forty feet in dimensions. The decorations were meager, but there was a bit of sparkle in the curtain which was decorated with stars — and certainly with something more striking, too, for it was considered somewhat "indiscreet."

The first performance of the *Verein* was given in Holzborn's Hall on December 10, 1855, opening with a prologue spoken by Henry Becker. This was followed with Wilhelmi's one-act comedy *Einer Muss Heirathen* (One Must Marry), with eight in the cast. There was an afterpiece, *Durch!!! oder Heirathen im Sturm* (By All Means!!! or Marry in a Rush), an adaptation from Genée. At the close of the performance, the chairs were cleared from the floor, and the audience enjoyed a session of dancing which was to be a regular closing feature of the German theater.

This first showing and the few immediately following must have been quite informal. The men smoked their pipes or cigars, the women kept their hats on during the show, and the family dogs were brought along for company. In spite of these inconveniences, which were later eliminated, the opening performance was crowded with spectators; there was not a single square foot of vacant space in the hall. And the air, one can be sure, was blue with smoke.

The following evening *Der Demokrat* described the players as "praiseworthy," even though most of them were inexperienced amateurs. The critic was careful to offend no one, for the German community and the actors were bound by many ties of brotherhood. The editor of *Der Demokrat* himself was a member of the theatrical group and took part in the plays. That he was an unusually tactful man, perhaps by nature and certainly by circumstance, is evident. In this first criticism each player was given praise for not losing his role and for not striving to outshine the others in the cast. Even the prompter was given a pat on the shoulder for being so very inconspicuous. The "little faults" that the critic did touch upon were prefaced with the remark that he did not comment on them in the spirit of fault-finding, but merely with a sincere desire to be useful to the whole group and to the individual players.

Chivalrously, the women in Wilhelmi's play

were first mentioned; they were considered skillful and well practiced, and they had fully mastered their parts; but one of them might have shown a trifle more emotion for the best effect. As for the men, they conducted themselves "respectably"; but one was possibly a bit too serious, and another possibly too youthful. One of the men in the afterpiece was twitted for an occasional lapse of memory, and another because he sneezed "unesthetically." Several others were encouraged to relax a bit more and not feel so self-conscious on the stage; more confidence was recommended. All subsequent criticism was equally restrained. Rarely, if ever, was *Der Demokrat* concerned with the morality of the plays; high standards were taken for granted, and no deviation would have been contemplated or tolerated.

The first season of the group came to a close in May, 1856, the company having given twenty-eight pieces in some nineteen performances. Although the opening play had been a one-act comedy, at least three five-act plays were performed this year. *Der Demokrat* suggested that five-act productions might better be given later when the players became more skilled and could sustain the emotional demands of such long pieces.

The theater was popular from the start, so that only a month after the opening, new scenery and new costumes could be purchased. At this time the "indiscreet" design on the curtain was re-

placed with a sober-minded street perspective. One performance of the first season had an audience of three hundred and twenty persons, which must have crowded the small hall seriously. Tickets were sold to all who wished them, even though the ticket-holders occasionally exceeded the capacity of the hall. The repertory of the first season was somewhat limited because of the few women in the society. To remedy this, *Der Demokrat* urged more women to join, pointing out that it was a real honor to be a member of the group and to appear on the stage.

In the succeeding years of the German Amateur Theater Group, the winter season opened sometime in October, and closed about the middle of May. In this period approximately twenty-five performances would be given, representing perhaps thirty or thirty-five pieces, the main plays with an occasional afterpiece. But Holzborn's Hall harbored the players only the first year. Three other theater halls were to be used by them in the following years.

In 1856 the *Verein* rented a hall on the second floor of a new building erected by B. H. Lahrmann on the southeast corner of Second and Ripley streets. Although this structure was built three years after Le Claire Hall, it was the first in Davenport built expressly for theatrical purposes. But it had many other uses — the *Turnverein* used it for gymnastics, and dances were regularly held

there. On such occasions the seats had to be cleared away, and when theatrical performances were scheduled the gym apparatus had to be moved out. This took some effort, for the horizontal bar was built on such a solid oak platform that twelve men were needed to move it. Nevertheless, Lahrmann's Hall was far more satisfactory than Holzborn's Hall. The audience capacity was more than doubled, to about eight hundred, including the fifty or seventy-five persons who could use the balcony. Everyone had a good view, for there were no obstructing pillars. The stage was quite commodious, measuring thirty feet in depth and forty feet in width, with an elevation three feet above the audience floor. The prompter's outlet was in the shape of a shell, and the curtain was decorated with a scene of "A Dream in Arcadia." No one thought it indiscreet. Lahrmann's Hall was used by the *Verein* until 1862.

It had always been the hope of the various German societies to have a building of their own. In 1859 plans were made for such a structure; it was to contain a theater as well as a reading room, a turner hall, clubrooms, a saloon, and a billiard room. The estimated cost was thirty thousand dollars. The coming of the Civil War did not interrupt the planning or its realization.

The new structure, on the southwest corner of Third and Scott streets, was opened in November, 1862, and the first play of the *Liebhabetheater-*

verein was given there the next month. The theater hall was considerably larger than Lahrman's; but here, too, the seats were removable — benches fastened on boards and some single wooden chairs for the cheaper seats. The Germans loved dancing as much as the theater; it went on until one in the morning. The Amateur Group used these accommodations until 1872 when the *Verein* disbanded, and a professional company took its place. Fourteen years later this building was razed, and replaced with a new Turner Hall and Grand Opera House which is still standing. The German theater continued until 1910, when it closed permanently.

Not all of the German plays in Davenport were given in these buildings, however. One of the peculiar contributions of the Germans to the American scene was the presentation of plays in the beer gardens during the summer months. Such settings were not limited to Davenport, but were characteristic of the German theater in Milwaukee, Chicago, Cincinnati, New York, and elsewhere. Davenport had its share of beer gardens, and in at least three of them arrangements were made for dramatic performances.

The first announcement of such garden shows appeared in 1858 with the opening of the Tivoli Theater at Muller and Lahrman's Apollo Gardens on Eighth and Warren streets. The admission charge was modest and typical, only fifteen

cents for adults and five cents for children. The profit was certainly made from the food and drinks. In the following year, 1859, Matthias Weidemann, a member of the Theater Group, opened his beer and dance resort, appropriately called Thalia Gardens, on Ripley Street and the Bluff, with a dance hall used for play giving. Perhaps plays were given there in the first summer, but no record of them exists until 1862.

Both of these gardens were close to the center of Davenport. Another beer garden was opened in 1857 by Heinrich Pieper, a member of the *Verein*, just beyond the town at the Seven Mile House on the Dubuque Road. This was the home of the *Prairie Liebhabertheatergesellschaft* which gave plays in the summer and also in the winter. Their first known performances were given in 1859, but very likely they had started somewhat earlier.

Some of the members of this dramatic society apparently belonged to the regular Davenport *Liebhabertheaterverein* also, but most of them were the "young gentlemen and ladies" residing in the neighborhood. The audiences were made up predominantly of Davenporters, often a hundred or more. In the summer it was an especially popular place of resort. The carriage drive there was not long or tedious, and the rolling countryside was a delight to the eye. One could start from town after lunch, in plenty of time for the

afternoon sports: rifle practice or archery for the men, games for the ladies. Often "bird-shooting" was indulged in, and there was ample eating and drinking, with band music in the background. In the evening a play would be given, nothing heavy, but light and carefree, followed with several hours of dancing. Then back to Davenport in a late evening or early morning drive. Truly a very full day!

No long serious plays were ever given in the garden theaters, but sometimes as many as three short pieces would be presented in one evening. Often they were little more than vaudeville performances within a dramatic framework. But whatever their nature, from an artistic point of view they must have had many faults. Guests were served with food and drink while the show was going on; the conversation, and the noise and confusion of coming and going must have made the play often inaudible. But the average guest was satisfied; his chief interest was to satisfy his stomach in an atmosphere of conviviality, and the plays were not serious enough to merit close attention. They were probably considered the better for their unobtrusiveness.

A Canadian traveler has left us a realistic picture of a typical beer garden in Davenport which he visited on a Sunday afternoon in the early sixties. Unfortunately he did not tell which beer garden he visited. According to the Canadian:

I saw . . . several hundred people swigging lager on benches under the trees whilst listening to the strains of a fine band performing operatic selections. All ages and sexes were there. Six or seven attendant imps of boys ran frantically hither and thither with handfuls of lager mugs. Three sweating bar tenders handed liquor over the counter and scraped the dimes into the drawer. Hans and Mynheer, Frau and Fraulein were all holiday-making and taking lager. Towards evening the performance was to wind up for the day with a dance — and then open again in the evening for an amateur dramatic performance. . . . Things there presented a very odd aspect to me, who then first beheld the unrestrained amenities of German life.

Strange mixture of the sacred and profane! — the operatic selections and the dramatic performance versus dancing and swigging — of lager — and all on a Sunday. But this traveler was not the only one who was amazed at such goings-on. The Americans in Davenport deeply resented such Sunday pleasures of the Germans, whether represented by social indulgence in drink or by the giving of concerts or plays. The Germans never bowed before the American criticism except in one very minor point: the Sunday play performances came to be advertised as "Sacred Concerts." No one was fooled, of course, by the actualities, but the terminology was beyond reproach. Still, the Americans kept up their carping criticism of such activities. Not only the Sunday plays and the open beer gardens were objected to, but the band music on Sunday afternoons and

evenings was equally condemned by press and clergy alike.

The Americans were ashamed of the desecration of the Sabbath, fearing strangers might think Davenport a rowdy place, as did a Massachusetts visitor in 1858. The Germans replied there was no law against Sunday amusements, and they pointed out further that many of the beer garden patrons were actually Americans. On one Sunday, in the late fifties, some 1,500 persons were enjoying themselves at Thalia Gardens, and most of them were not Germans. Such a situation was bound to lead to much friction. Once when a reporter from the *Gazette* dropped in at Thalia Gardens to see what was going on, the proprietor, Weidemann (a "man of matured muscle"), promptly snubbed him. Everyone else was equally "crusty." Accordingly the reporter left "for the American world under the hill" and wrote a sharp piece about his experience in the *Gazette*, which only served to kindle the indignation of Sabbath-keeping Davenporters.

Brawls and rowdyism were not unknown. Late in 1859 a drunkard involved two other persons in a brawl at Weidemann's place and stabbed both of them; one died a few days later. In the ensuing fracas the murderer escaped, leaving an aroused community behind. Knifing had become "altogether too common," and since most of these disturbances occurred on Sunday, the authorities

ordered the gardens, dance halls, saloons, the theater, and all places of public entertainment closed on that day.

The ruling was in force two Sundays, but the second Sunday was considered as boisterous as ever. Within a few days after the regulation had gone into effect, the Germans petitioned the council for their full civic rights and the repeal of the closing order. After a suitable delay, the petition was granted. Thereafter the Americans simply had to adjust themselves to the Sunday diversions. The adjustment was not too difficult, for within three or four years the Americans spoke highly of the German dramatic performances, Sunday or otherwise, and kept discreetly silent about the beer gardens which they themselves helped to support.

By the early sixties the Americans even urged their fellows to attend the German performances. It was true that if a person did not understand German he would miss a great deal, but he would understand enough from the action to piece the whole together. To attend the German theater was not unlike a "cheap trip to Germany . . . and from a little aid from the imagination one can easily fancy himself in Deutschland. . . . When we consider that the [players] are not professional actors and only engage in the enterprise as a sort of pastime for leisure hours, their excellence is the more surprising." By this time the American papers granted that the German Theater had

become "the place of popular amusement in Davenport" for Americans as much as for the Germans. Thus the frictions of the two groups were smoothed by the mutual interest of both in the dramatic arts.

What kind of plays were given by the Germans in Davenport? Viewed in the long history of the drama, they ranged largely from the mediocre to the insignificant, with a very few notable exceptions. The pieces given by the *Liebhavertheaterverein* are classified in German drama under a wide range of types: the *Lustspiel*, as well as the *Lokallustspiel*, the *Schausspiel*, sometimes the *Volkschausspiel*; the straightforward *Posse*, and the *Posse mit Gesang*, and the *Posse in Versen*, along with the *Zauber Posse Gesang*; there was the *Singspiel*, the *Liederspiel*, and the *Trauerspiel*; the *Charakterbild*, *Lebensbild*, and the *Komische Oper*; there was the brief *Schwank* and its companion type, the *Scherz mit Gesang*; and there was the *Volksmarchen mit Gesang*.

One may simplify these briefly in English terminology: the farce, comedy, serious drama, and the tragedy, along with such special types as the musical comedy, the fairy play or other-world extravaganza, and the dialect play — or variants of these. In most of them music played an important part, either in the piece itself or for incidental or background effects.

In the summer theaters the pieces were usually

little more than elaborated vaudeville performances. If the quality on the whole was not too high, the fault did not lie with the players — they took the best that was available — but with the playwrights. The history of German drama in the first fifty years of the nineteenth century was not one of great accomplishment. Excepting the tragedies of Schiller, which were essentially a carry-over from the eighteenth century, it has been said that not a single stage work of this period is of lasting importance. In tragedy and in the serious drama, the writers followed the patterns set by Schiller, and like all copyists they lacked the genius of the original. In the broad range of comedy, down to the simple *Posse*, August von Kotzebue was the model.

By and large it would not be wholly inaccurate to classify most of the pieces under the general heading of domestic melodrama. It was a middle-class drama based largely on middle-class ethics. The spectators were not highly sophisticated according to our standards and enjoyed most the presentations depicting their own common joys and sorrows. The characters were always either good or bad, with no delicate personality nuances. In the comedy and the less serious drama the attributes of Kotzebue are normally found: the frivolous upper class was contrasted with the worthy members of the middle or lower class — thus all Germans were not always honorable among them-

selves. But when contrasted with foreigners, the German was superior and the foreigner inevitably a fool, no matter what his nationality.

The favorite characters of Kotzebue were often persons, usually young girls, who had deviated from the path of virtue with the expected consequences. The good was always triumphant. The comforts and stability of the domestic circle must be preserved, and the person having an honorable and secure living was lauded. Most of the comedies revolved about the incidents of courtship and marriage in middle-class society.

The more serious drama followed much the same pattern, though the emotional strains were greater. Rarely were significant social problems touched upon. Such a piece as Mosenthal's *Deborah, die edle Judin*, a peasant play concerned with the problem of religious tolerance in the case of a Christian in love with a Jewess, represents a rare treatment of serious matters. One is happy to note that it had three performances in Davenport before the Civil War. But the audience much preferred such representative pieces as von Kleist's *Kathchen von Heilbronn* which is based on the time-tried Griselda theme of the patient wife triumphant; or such an obvious comic piece as Benedix's *Junker Otto, oder wie Mann aus einem Knaben ein Madchen macht* — the domestic tale of a fond father who raised his daughter as a boy, only to have her natural instincts aroused with a

happy love affair, and everyone pleased at the close.

The best tragedies of the period, given several times in Davenport, were unquestionably Schiller's *The Robbers* and *William Tell*. The first was composed in 1781 and the second in 1804, but they were to be played widely for a century afterwards. Because of their great influence on almost all later German tragedy, we might examine their common characteristics: in both the action takes place in a conveniently remote time; much is made of family love and strife, with the strife always based on a misunderstanding; there are elements of noble and ignoble love, although the love between the sexes before marriage is not stressed — the love represented by the family receives the greatest emphasis. There is a considerable amount of physical combat between warring factions, with narrow escapes and close rescues. A great deal is made of the father and son relationship, to the point that these plays are more masculine than feminine in impact.

The broad political problem presented in these plays is that of tyranny versus freedom, with death to tyrants. In keeping with this, the common man is pitted against certain unscrupulous members of the ruling class, though not all the nobility are scamps, true. Both main characters, William Tell and Charles Moor, are outlaws in slightly varying degrees, but outlaws by circum-

stance; the audience soon learns that both men are at heart good and filled with the highest ideals for country, family, and their fellowmen. Generally one senses that the greatest stress is placed on family relationships, above all. Although both pieces are classed as tragedies (and there are no comic elements in either), at the close of the plays most of the problems are resolved, the main characters still alive, and one feels their futures are not without hope. Both pieces are amply sprinkled with songs and musical selections to stir the emotions.

Today we no longer esteem action and sentiment of this sort on the stage, but throughout the nineteenth century these elements could be found in any serious play. We hasten to add that they are still found commonly in popular movies, for these are the qualities of the drama that the great masses can understand, appreciate, and enjoy. Today the theater in America is limited almost entirely to the culturally-wise of our largest metropolitan centers, and its appeal is comparably restricted; but in the last century the theater, German or American, reached a large and relatively uncritical audience.

Certainly the German players of Davenport did all they could to make their offerings attractive and varied. The skills and talents of the *Mannerchor* and of the *Damen Gesangverein* were often called upon, with the choral music worked into

the texture of the piece or given between the settings. The Union Band and the German Orchestra were used in the same way. Even the *Turnverein* was not neglected, for there were occasional gymnastic displays between the scene shifts or living tableaux usually modeled on classical statuary. For further variety, all of the parts of an adult play were sometimes taken by children; and the children often entertained with singing or dancing between the acts. For additional appeal, professional German stars were hired from time to time to play with the amateurs. They came from the German theaters in Cincinnati, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Chicago, Baltimore, and New York. Notably there were the Mahls, the Myers, and the Kenkels, a Mr. Fredeking, a Madame Oberndorfer, and from nearby Dubuque, Schwelke and Richter. All were of some eminence on the German-American stage and added considerably to the lustre of the local players.

As we look back over the story of the German theater in Davenport, we cannot help but be impressed by its vitality and by its variety. Unlike the American performances, the showings never lacked supporters, and the predominantly local players provided a very real tie between the theater and the entire community. For the Germans the theater was a cultural expression of the best they knew and of the best that was available in music, elocution, painting, and in all the other

arts related in the broad scope of the drama. If many of the plays were admittedly mediocre, we must realize that that condition was not local to Davenport; they were the same pieces that were given over and over again wherever the German drama found expression in this country.

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