

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 *Liebhabertheater-*

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 *Liebhabertheaterverein* 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.