

At the Opera House

During the late seventies and early eighties, many of the larger cities in Iowa built new opera houses — partly by popular donations and partly by selling stock. Each was invariably pointed to with pride as the most modern and pretentious building of its kind west of the Mississippi. Where no opera house had been erected, a large second-story hall over stores was used for drama, lectures, political speeches, public gatherings, and occasionally, but only occasionally, for opera.

The new opera houses in Iowa were much alike and followed models of an earlier period of play-house construction. On the main floor the parquet sloped back to an elevated dress circle which curved in horseshoe fashion to the boxes on either side of the proscenium arch. Sometimes a row of enclosed boxes for stockholders separated the parquet from the dress circle. Iron posts cast in ornate Corinthian style held up the enormous balcony and interfered seriously with the view of half of the dress-circle audience. High up toward the lofty ceiling the gallery or “nigger heaven” paralleled the horseshoe curve of the balcony. Folding seats in the parquet and dress circle were upholstered in red or green plush while those in the balcony and gallery were plain and noisy.

The walls of these show houses of the eighties were garishly decorated by fresco artists from Chicago. The faces of the boxes, the railing of both balcony and gallery, and sometimes the proscenium arch were adorned with ornate gilt scrollwork on a background of red or blue. A dome of gas jets in crystal globes made a dazzling sunburst of beauty when lighted, before the curtain was rung up and between acts, by ushers with tapers on long fish poles. Old-timers can still visualize the familiar "art work" on the drop curtain of their local opera house. Overhanging the pastoral scene in the center were rich blue or red curtains caught and draped back in gorgeous folds by painted gold ropes with enormous tassels. Below and on either side of the painting were rectangles in which the druggist, the grocer, and other merchants advertised their wares.

To-day many of these wonder palaces of the eighties are still in use, their garish beauty tarnished and the name changed perhaps from opera house to theater. In the same place where their parents and grandparents saw Helena Modjeska, Lillie Langtry, Fanny Janauschek, Dion Boucicault, William E. Sheridan, Thomas W. Keene, Frederick Warde, J. K. Emmet, Joseph Jefferson, Lawrence Barrett, Sol Smith Russell, and a host of other players in beloved melodrama, ranting tragedy, or peculiar comedy the audience of to-day witnesses the silent performance of favorite cinema stars or views a Broadway production two or three seasons old.

A glance through the already crumbling files of the newspapers of the eighties or a collection of opera-house programs which some library has had the foresight to preserve, reveals an amazing wealth of details about the players and the plays that delighted Iowa audiences forty years ago. Take for example the theatrical season of 1884-1885. Although business conditions were uncertain, money was scarce, and the standard wage was a dollar a day, there was, nevertheless, a long list of attractions playing in Iowa that season, and most of them prospered. With few exceptions travelling companies made a comprehensive tour of the State. They visited the river cities of Dubuque, Clinton, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk; swung inland to Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Fort Dodge, Marshalltown, Des Moines, and Ottumwa; and then played in Council Bluffs and Sioux City on the Missouri River. Nor were smaller places en route overlooked. The older residents of many towns, now almost totally bereft of travelling productions, recall vividly the visits of the stars of yesterday.

In the larger cities seventy-five cents or one dollar admitted the well-to-do to boxes, parquet, and dress circle. There sat the elite of Iowa — men with sideburns like Chester A. Arthur's, or walrus mustaches like Grover Cleveland's, or full beards trimmed like James G. Blaine's, and a few, but only a few, smooth-shaven. They wore clothes of the prevailing style —

long skirted coats, and trousers from which the crease had been carefully removed, straight stiff collars and wide four-in-hand ties. The women affected bangs, and wore funny little bonnets, tight waists, voluminous skirts, and enormous bustles. In the balcony above sat those who would pay no more than fifty cents to see a show, while the gallery held a motley crowd of loud-voiced, peanut-munching, feet-stamping lovers of Thespis who demanded full value for the twenty-five cents they had paid at the box office.

The season of 1883-1884 in Iowa had been interesting in many respects. For example, in the late spring of 1884 the renowned Mme. Modjeska visited Iowa with Maurice Barrymore in a repertoire of Shakespearean plays. The Polish star was particularly attractive as Viola in *Twelfth Night*. More than one critic paid tribute to the charming appearance she made wearing flesh-colored tights, a doublet of green velvet with gold embroidery, a gold cap, and jeweled gaiters.

During the same time that Modjeska was in Iowa a group of young actors from St. Louis, advertised as Dickson's Sketch Club, were seeking theatrical fame and fortune in two plays, *Editha's Burglar* and a comedy called *Combustion*. Augustus Thomas tells in his delightful book, *The Print of My Remembrance*, of their experiences in Muscatine, where the theater was "a second-story room, built over some stores on the main street." The stage was lighted

by kerosene lamps, not in the best of condition. The players had reached the most dramatic part of the burglar sketch when the janitor "rose from the front row of kitchen chairs and said with irresistible authority, 'Wait a minute! Wait a minute!'" The actors stopped. "There was no laugh in the audience, no protest," while the man climbed upon the platform, pulled his kitchen chair after him, adjusted the lamp above the center of the stage, climbed down, and brusely ordered the players to "Go on!" The order was obeyed, but with difficulty, amidst the smothered snickers of the rest of the company in the wings.

The new theatrical season in Iowa began in August, 1884, and extended until late in June, 1885. During the early fall, about the time the Presidential campaign began to get under way, the Madison Square Theatre Company of New York City played to large audiences in a gripping melodrama, *The Rajah*. Their favorable reception during the previous season in *Esmeralda* and in *Hazel Kirke* assured them of well-filled houses for their new play. Another fall offering was *The Devil's Auction* which likewise played to large audiences. It was "a spectacular performance of doubtful merit" which based its main appeal on "a lot of females" displayed "to some advantage and to the particular delight of the gallery gods."

Frederick Warde, the eminent tragedian, found the Iowans in the autumn of 1884 less responsive to

his classic performance in *Damon and Pythias* than they were to *Humpty Dumpty* and the Miniature Circus of George H. Adams — a situation which persisted despite the reproaches of local dramatic critics who saw in this manifestation a perversion of theatrical taste.

One of the outstanding events in Iowa theatrical circles during October, 1884, was the visit of the gifted Irish playwright and actor, Dion Boucicault, as Conn, "the good-natured, patriotic dare-devil, the soul of every fair, the life of every funeral, and the first fiddler at all parties", in *The Shaughraun*. Large and appreciative audiences acclaimed the truly admirable performances of Boucicault and his company.

In October also the beloved Joseph Jefferson came as Caleb Plummer in Dickens's famous Christmas story, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and as Mr. Gollightly in a laughable comedy, *Lend Me Five Shillings*. A Keokuk reviewer in speaking of Mr. Jefferson's skill as a comedian wrote, "There is in his performances an indescribable art and finish that no other possesses. There is no descent to grotesque movements or coarse buffoonery wherewith to force laughter, for it must and does follow his artistic comedy creations."

Melodrama reached almost unequalled heights in *The World* with J. Z. Little as the principal character. Advertised as a "wonderful, spectacular drama" it more than fulfilled its advance promises

with the great raft scene which covered "ten thousand feet of canvas" and occupied the entire stage from wall to wall "with its surging waves and terrible realism". Not less gripping were the scenes depicting the sinking ship, the lunatic asylum, the revolving wall, and the magnificent panorama of moonlight on the lake.

Scarcely less dramatic than the theatrical productions were the political rallies in the fall of 1884 at the opera houses in which spellbinders of both parties endeavored to promote the candidacy of Grover Cleveland or James G. Blaine. Evidences of a revolt against Blaine, even in Republican Iowa, were disclosed in these meetings, then almost as popular as melodrama. And on the night in November, 1884, when news of Cleveland's victory flashed from the telegraph wires, the Republicans, long nurtured on victories, saw only grim tragedy in their defeat.

Relief from the tenseness of the campaign was afforded by the incomparable Hanlons, Edward and Frederick, in their Parisian absurdity, *Le Voyage en Suisse*, and by the return of the ever-popular Maggie Mitchell to Iowa in a repertoire of plays including *Fanchon the Cricket*, *Little Barefoot*, *Pearl of Savoy*, *Mignon*, and *The Little Savage*. She had an extensive following in Iowa and the dramatic reviewers showered her with fulsome praise. At some of her performances every seat was sold and camp chairs were placed in the aisles to accommo-

date her admirers. She was described as "charming, vivacious, and piquant" with a "rippling laugh, charming naïveté, delightful abandon, and sprightliness." There was an "effectiveness and impressiveness to her dramatic portrayals" that never failed "to exercise a tearful or joyful influence upon the audience", and the total absence of immorality or suggestiveness in the parts she played made her acting "as pure and undefiled as the silvery water of the babbling brook".

Grau's English Opera Company sang *The Little Duke* and *The Queen's Lace Handkerchief* throughout Iowa in November, but met with indifferent success. Other late fall attractions were the inimitable Pat Rooney with his New York Star Combination of twenty-five selected artists, including a full band and orchestra, I. W. Baird's Mammoth Minstrels and Zouave Cadets, and the clever Fay Templeton with her opera company in *The Mascotte*, *The Coquette*, and *Girofle-Girofla*.

January found Joseph Murphy, the Irish comedian, in Iowa playing successfully in *Kerry Gow*, "a realistic picture of life and love in the Emerald Isle." How the audience forty years ago enjoyed the scene in which a dove, flying out from its cote, hovered symbolically over the lovers in the garden! In another scene thin steel shoes were fitted on Snowball, a blooded race-horse, in full view of all. And how the gallery gods whistled, yelled, and stamped their approval when Snowball won the race

and thwarted the diabolical machinations of Valentine Hay, the villain!

Lecturers of national reputation also appeared in Iowa opera houses. Mark Twain and George W. Cable reached Iowa in January, 1885, on their joint lecture tour throughout the United States. They appeared first in Keokuk, the former home of the Clemens family, on January 14th, and the following evening at the Grand Opera House in Burlington. At the latter place, notwithstanding a heavy snow-storm, prayer meetings, and other local attractions, a large audience paid seventy-five cents or a dollar to be entertained by Mark Twain's wit and by Cable's humor and pathos. Cable presented his part of the program first and when Clemens finally appeared, his unruly hair like a halo about his head and his woebegone expression of countenance wholly lugubrious, he was welcomed by prolonged applause. First he essayed to explain his delayed appearance. He said he had stopped all day with his mother at Keokuk. She was eighty-two years old and the only mother he ever had. He thought he could trust the St. Louis train, but he had learned that his trust was betrayed. It started from Keokuk an hour late and kept getting an hour later. On the way something had broken, and a dispute arose among the trainmen as to what had happened. It took forty minutes to decide the dispute and five minutes to repair the damage. Finally, his left hand sought his pantaloon pocket and stayed there, he leaned back against the

reading desk, and began in his slow nasal drawl to tell about his quarrel with the German language. Then he recited the "King Sollerman" chapter from *Huckleberry Finn* and concluded with a ghost story which brought a gale of laughter when the declaimer, at the end of the harrowing tale, jumped straight up and shouted "boo", and the ladies screamed in terror. At Davenport, Cable stirred the enthusiasm of the house by his readings and songs, while Clemens received a tremendous welcome when he came on the stage with a "funny little jog trot" and began his humorous conceits with an expression of "placid and child-like innocence".

Lovers of melodrama — and who was not — found perfect satisfaction in witnessing Bartley Campbell's production, *The Galley Slave*, which "played Iowa" in January, 1885. The scenes were laid in France, England, and Italy; while the struggle between Sydney Norcott, a poor but honest American, and Antoine, a dusky Italian villain, for the heart and hand of Cicely Blaine, a beautiful American heiress, afforded thoroughly satisfying situations. When the last scene drew to a close, and Sydney, with the villain thwarted and Cicely in his arms, exclaimed just as the curtain fell, "Back, Cicely, to life, liberty, and love", a peal of deafening applause revealed the contentment "out in front".

Contemporaneous with the visit of *The Galley Slave* to Iowa another "great, realistic, spectacular" melodrama, *The Romany Rye*, was also proving pop-

ular in the State. This drama depicted the seven human passions — love, fear, jealousy, hope, revenge, hate, and remorse, and its action, enhanced by a revolving stage which made lightning-like changes possible, won appreciation and applause. A somber scene such as “Black Croft Cellar” dissolved into a view of the “Gypsy Camp on the Bank of the Thames”. The storm scene at the end of the play showing the “Wreck of the Saratoga”, avowed local critics, was one of “startling realism”.

Probably, however, the tour of Mme. Fanny Janauschek, the great Polish star, during the late winter and early spring of 1885 was the outstanding event of the season. Interest in her coming was aroused in part by the following press notice published extensively throughout the State: “Janish deserves to have her name handed down to history, if only for one thing . . . and that thing is her hug. It is sublime; the most comprehensive, all-pervading thing in the way of an embrace that has ever been perpetrated on the stage. . . . It does not matter who it is that Janish is hugging (I mean on the stage of course), be it her father, her lover, her husband, her lady friend, or whoever it may be, she envelopes them all as the darkness envelopes the earth. There is no prevarication about it; no escape from it — any more than there is from the embrace of a boa-constrictor. It covers the case as completely as a congressional record. It is soul-absorbing, ubiquitous, all enfolding—but there! Webster’s

dictionary has not got words to describe it, and it ought to be sent to the New Orleans Exposition."

Janaushek travelled through Iowa in a Mann Boudoir car constructed for her special use and bearing her own name in gold letters. It contained a drawing room, dining room, kitchen, bath room, and bedrooms opening off a hallway along one side of the car. The interior was finished in blue with abundant gold decorations. Panels of embossed leather, mirrors, thick carpets, furniture richly upholstered in French tapestry, and etched plate-glass windows made a luxurious travelling residence for the star, her manager, and their staff.

The talented actress played the double rôle of Leben, an old blind woman, and Circe Encore, a French singing actress, in the four-act drama, *My Life*. Later in the season she enacted with great success the title rôle in *Mary Stuart*, the unhappy Queen of Scots. Numerous curtain calls wherever Janaushek played were a sincere tribute to the force of her own acting, and of the strong support given by her company.

Madame Adelaide Ristori, the gifted Italian actress, visited Iowa, too, during March, 1885, and convinced her audiences that her title of "queen of the stage" was deserved. She appeared in the title rôle of the five-act historical drama, *Elizabeth, Queen of England*, and fulsome praise rewarded her efforts. Said the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, "Ristori's Elizabeth is what all dramatic representations pre-

tend to be : a realizing and vivifying of the character presented''.

April brought the ever popular J. K. Emmet to Iowa in his new play, *The Strange Marriage of Fritz*. Several new songs were introduced by the actor-singer, including *Love is a Flower*, *One Naughty Baby*, *Yust Look on Dot Face*, *Call the Cows In*, and *Star of Love*.

Undoubtedly one of the extraordinary events of the season was the appearance of Mapleson's Grand Opera Company in Gounod's *Faust* at the Grand Opera House in Burlington on April 2, 1885. Due to the persistent efforts of R. M. Washburn, the manager of the local opera house, Colonel J. H. Mapleson agreed to stop at Burlington for one night en route from San Francisco to Chicago. Inasmuch as this was the only performance given by his company between San Francisco and Chicago, Burlington felt proud of its achievement.

Early on the morning of April 2nd a special train composed of two baggage cars, two coaches, one Hannibal and St. Joe sleeper, one Pullman sleeper, and three Mann Boudoir cars rolled into the C. B. & Q. depot at Burlington, bearing the members of Mapleson's Italian grand opera troupe. The Mann Boudoir car, "Adelina Patti", housed Mme. Patti, her husband, and their servants. All day long the train was a center of interest and hundreds of Burlington citizens came to the railroad yards to see it. Interest centered in the two cars which housed

the chorus where: "The blackeyed, frowsy haired children of Italy were engaged in various occupations. Some were chattering and gesticulating violently, some were sleeping, others were mending their clothes of many colors, but the most of them were cooking and eating, and the odors that filled the air would have disgraced a third rate boarding house. Macaroni, garlic, onions, lentils, carrots, turnips and 'yarbs' were in various stages of preparation. Bottles of olive oil and flasks of sour wine were ready for service. The worse a dish smelt the more appetizing it was — to the Italians.

"In another car could be heard broken strains of music and trills and snatches of song. One buxom, dark-eyed daughter of Vesuvius was blowing clouds of incense into the air from a cigarette held daintily between her even, dazzling teeth. She said in broken English that she 'like a cigarella'— and she looked like it".

The large audience which greeted the world-famed artists that night listened to the opera with breathless interest. The principals were at their best, while the chorus of soldiers, maidens, and citizens blended voices of richness and power. "During the third act the entrance of Mme. Patti to the lower proscenium box on the right of the stage was the signal for prolonged applause. Every eye in the house was turned to catch a view of the greatest prima donna in the world". She stayed for only one act but she joined heartily in the liberal applause of

the audience in appreciation of the efforts of those on the stage.

Late in April W. E. Sheridan and Louise Davenport appeared in Iowa for a short time in the classic drama, *Louis XI*. All the meanness, cunning, hypocrisy, and deceit of the king were brought out in clear relief by Sheridan. Later in the play he depicted the driveling, decrepit, aging Louis whose "cruel scowl and wicked leer froze the blood" with pitiless realism. In the death scene at the close Sheridan made Louis die in a way highly appreciated by audience and critics.

From Iowa City the company went to Waterloo for a single performance and then returned to Cedar Rapids where they were scheduled to present *Louis XI* and *King Lear*. At the latter city, however, the illness of Mrs. Sheridan, Louise Davenport, caused a cancellation of the booking, and the company ended its Iowa tour.

Toward the end of the season, Thomas W. Keene, the tragedian, visited Iowa in a repertoire of Shakespearean plays. In *Richard III* the spirited combat between Keene as Richard and his rival, Richmond, never failed to arouse the gallery. All in all, however, Iowa critics did not wax enthusiastic over his productions. While they spoke of Keene himself in terms of praise, their remarks about his supporting cast were rather disparaging.

Early in June Mrs. Belva Lockwood, a talented lecturer, lawyer, and twice a candidate for the

Presidency, lectured at various opera houses in Iowa on "Social and Political Life in Washington". In the course of her two-hour lecture she described the capital city and told of the work of government clerks. President Cleveland's inaugural ball was mentioned, and particular stress was placed upon the low-waisted, long-skirted styles worn by the women on that brilliant occasion. She related how one member of Tammany who was present said to another, "Pat, just look at that lady, faith, and they have been stepping on the girl's dress until they have almost pulled it off". Her descriptions of prominent men and her intimate pictures of political life were received by attentive and delighted audiences.

With the waning of June the theatrical season of 1884-1885 came to an end. Many other productions aside from those mentioned — minstrel shows, opera companies, burlesque troupes, melodramas, and comedies — had come to Iowa. An old autograph album kept by one of the Iowa opera-house managers during this season reveals alongside the faded signatures of actors already mentioned the names of Gus Williams, Laura Dainty, Mattie Vickers, John T. Raymond, and many others. The stars of yesteryear were willing to go on tour through the hinterland off Broadway, and as a consequence there was an abundance of the best attractions of the period playing in Iowa during the decade of the eighties.

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