

The Julien Theater

For three-quarters of a century Julien Theater occupied the corner of Fifth and Locust streets in Dubuque where the United States Post Office is now located. Built in 1856 by a local firm of attorneys (Platt Smith, J. M. McKinlay, and B. W. Poor), it was an imposing three-story brick structure a hundred feet long and fifty feet wide. It cost \$17,000. The first and second stories were designed and leased as offices, while the third floor was intended for a theater. So far as available records indicate, this was the first place in Dubuque to be used exclusively as a theater. Though the building was patriotically christened the Washington Block, the first theatrical manager called his playhouse the Julien Theater and, as time passed, that name became popularly attached to the building itself. So it remained from 1857 until 1870 when the domain of Thespis was converted into a Masonic Temple.

The curtain of the Julien Theater was first raised in the heyday of Victorian standards of civilization, when red plush was the symbol of elegance. James Buchanan was President of the United States; the spirit of rebellion was rising in the South; Dubuque had a population of about

16,000; gin and bitters were prominently advertised in the newspapers; and mustache cups, paper collars, and daguerreotypes were in vogue.

The playgoer of 1857 entered the Julien Theater by mounting a flight of wooden stairs, attached to the south wall of the building in the form of an inverted V, which led to the second-floor hall. An inner stairway, at right angles to the outer one, then ascended to the theater on the third floor.

The size of the auditorium proper was approximately fifty by seventy-five feet, the remaining twenty-five feet of length at the north end being occupied by the stage, dressing rooms, and property space. The height of the ceiling was a mere twenty feet. On one occasion a critic condemned the inadequate ventilation in vehement terms. "The smells of Cairo with returns from all the Wards was womanly in comparison", he wrote. "Talk about smells! Phew! The performance was excellent, but people generally being engaged in holding their noses or in gasping for breath, they did not enjoy it as much as they otherwise would."

A theatrical venture in a frontier town before the Civil War was a risky undertaking. The lessees could never afford to pay much rent and the owners consequently did not outdo themselves in

the matter of interior decoration. The walls of the Julien were unostentatiously painted and the furnishings were plain. People were not fastidious. What they wanted was a decent quota of thrills and tears — a bit of make-believe in a life filled with crude reality.

The main floor, generally called the dress circle or parquette, was nothing more than a cleared space occupied by movable chairs which were anything but comfortable. Directly in front of the stage, and on the main floor level, was a simple enclosure for the orchestra. The box seats, much like the box seats in a baseball grandstand, occupied a horseshoe space encircling the main floor and terminating in private boxes at either end. They were raised above the main floor level and separated from it by a railing. Seating accommodations were similar to those on the main floor.

In the rear of the auditorium, and built uncomfortably close to the ceiling, was the gallery where the seats were the cheapest. It was from this locality that the hisses and disturbances were most pronounced, and here too the air became fouler than anywhere else in the house. The entire seating capacity was about four hundred.

Stage conditions were as crude as those which prevailed for the spectators. The proscenium arch was constructed along simple lines and frescoed

with the motto "We Will Endeavor". The stage apron jutted forth rather prominently for the especial convenience of the low comedian or burnt-cork artist who needed to get close to the audience in order that his intimate "cracks" might register properly. The backstage portion was uncomfortable, cramped, ill-lighted, and poorly equipped. Scenery and stage properties were neglected, for the lessees were continually changing and the theater was not in use much of the time. The fluttery gas jets were wholly inadequate for theatrical lighting and the use of limelight had not yet been discovered. Practically all facial expression of the actors was lost beyond the first few rows. This may have been one reason for the popularity of exaggerated impersonation for, as far as the technique of acting was concerned, sensational histrionics and lurid melodrama were the order of the day. Even Shakespeare was distorted.

The doors of the theater were usually opened at half past seven and, there being no reserved seats as a rule, the public began to arrive early. The curtain was due to rise at eight o'clock but it never did. Prices for the performance varied from twenty-five cents for gallery seats to five dollars for private boxes. Main floor seats were usually fifty cents, box seats fifty or seventy-five cents.

The personal comfort of the audience was a minor consideration. Heat, which was piped from the city steam works, sometimes never arrived. Under such circumstances it was not uncommon for people to sit through an entire performance clad in the full strength of their outer apparel. Some removed their hats, others kept them on. There was no rule either way.

Noise was another concomitant of the theater in those days. Friends loudly greeted each other the length and breadth of the hall if they felt so inclined. Children seemed to be habitually unmanageable. Order and quiet were, of course, unknown in the gallery at any time.

In point of popularity melodrama far outshone any other form of theatrical entertainment during the fourteen hectic years of the life of the Julien. Perhaps it was because every-day affairs were comparatively dull that people were grateful for all the glamour the theater could give them. The Julien witnessed the performance of most of the popular melodramas of its day — plays replete with thrills and chills, horror and passion.

If frequency of performance and the praise of the critics be indicative of popular favor it can safely be stated that the glamorous melodramas of plot and passion (with a romantic historical background) rode the crest of the wave of popularity.

Most of them contained the very essence of nineteenth century romanticism and were ideal for "weepsy" audiences. Next in popular demand were historical dramas which portrayed some aspect of the national scene, the West and the Civil War being the chief topics on which these were based.

The *Jibbenainosay* or *Nick of the Woods*, the acme of thrilling and altogether improbable melodrama, was illustrative of the type of thing most enjoyed by the audiences of that day. The main character was a half-crazed white man whose revenge upon the Indian destroyers of his family was rendered possible by his ability to assume impenetrable disguises of every description. In the Dubuque production, Charles Fyffe, as the *Jibbenainosay*, assumed no less than six disguises. The play contained every conceivable melodramatic device for inducing the desired chill in the spectator's spine, including Indians creeping in ambush, pioneers braving storms and Indian attacks, the split-second arrivals of the *Jibbenainosay* (each time in a new disguise) to prevent the villains from accomplishing their dastardly plans, burnings at the stake, precipitation down a raging cataract in a canoe of fire, and the final revenge and death of the *Jibbenainosay*. A performance of this play had to be repeated one or more times.

Strangely enough, Shakespeare followed close upon the melodramas in general favor and frequency of performance. Of his thirty-seven plays, the most popular with Julien patrons were *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and *Richard III*. Where were the comedies?

Of all these it was *Richard III* which seems to have won the hearts of Julien audiences most completely. One performance of this great historical drama on Thanksgiving night of 1857 was particularly memorable. On that evening the public was invited to witness a "varieties" program, which included tragedy, drama, and pantomime at "panic prices"—fifteen, twenty-five, and fifty cents. "The theatre was opened with an overflowing house." The sensation of the evening was the appearance of a "new aspirant to histrionic fame in petite Susan Carney, a little child of five years of age, who assumed on this occasion the part of the Duke of York. So charmingly did she render the part that she brought the entire house down. This little child, we are informed, is a little fatherless creature, whose mother, a poor washerwoman, is one of the veriest poor in our city, and is not able to provide her a home."

The fashion in comedies emphasized the *risqué* element, especially on the theme of marriage. A few of them were so shocking to mid-western audiences that when Jane English brought her French Ravel Troupe from New York and Boston to present *Three Fast Men* the critic felt prompted to warn his readers that "no one should insult a lady by asking her to attend."

Comic afterpieces and "curtain raisers" carried this element of the *risqué* still further. The most popular and oft-repeated of them were of the type of *A Kiss in the Dark* and *The Married Rake*. A local favorite was *The Dubuque Policeman*, in which Charles Dillon, the comedian, starred.

During the fourteen years while the Julien harbored the muse, many of the actors who graced its boards became popular favorites with the people. The team of George W. Jamison and Mrs. Annie Senter were lauded as "two highly cultured artists." As did most of the other favorites of the time, they excelled in tragedy and melodrama. Mr. and Mrs. J. A. Leonard also became prime favorites.

The "meritorious actor", J. A. J. Neafie, ranked still higher in the lists of popularity and was pre-eminent as a Shakespearean actor of great ability. A local critic praised him thus: "In *Hamlet* we recognized the same talented artist that we have

had the pleasure of witnessing on many former occasions at the East." Of his acting in *Othello* it was remarked that "Mr. Neafie's personation of that cunning villain, Iago, was an artistic representation, superior to anything that has ever been done with that character on the Julien Boards."

Other popular tragedians were A. McFarland, R. S. Meldrum, Charles Plunkett, D. H. Harkins, and Charles Barron. Among the host of comedians, the favorites were Charles Lovett, Yankee Locke, Charles Dillon, and Welsh Edwards. Some of these actors were well-known in New York and all of them were familiar to audiences scattered over the middle west. Several toured extensively and successfully for many years.

Among the female devotees of Thespis many were admired but few achieved the acclaim which came to Miss Susan Denin. In her performance of *Lucretia Borgia*, she "was the personification of concentrated passion", declared a critic. Her achievement in *Camille* a few nights later was even more sublime. "Indeed so faithfully did she depict the agony, grief, contrition, and remorse of Camille Gauthier on the dying bed, that many persons in the audience were affected to tears." In a still later production, *Angel of Midnight*, Miss Denin performed the superhuman feat of "personating the four principal characters."

The life of a touring actor was strenuous. Travelling conditions were unpleasant and uncertain. Hotel accommodations were often of the crudest sort. The manager of the troupe, who was frequently the leading actor as well, generally leased the theater for a stated length of time, varying from one night to a month. Bookings were precarious and sporadic. Rehearsals were hurried and makeshift, since none of the companies had permanent homes and all seem to have carried extensive repertoires.

The regular stock company of the theater often remained unchanged for a long time. Only new leading actors and actresses were engaged and they in turn rehearsed the supporting cast. Some actors, connected with no particular company, travelled independently and hired themselves out to any group with which they happened to make connections. The result was that a company rarely contained the same members for more than a few engagements.

What was by no means an unusual event in the life of an itinerant actor was reported by the *Dubuque Express and Herald* in 1857: "Lost His Wardrobe. Charley Lovett, a typo-comedian, engaged to play in the stock of the Julien, had the misfortune to lose his entire wardrobe in the fire of yesterday morning's train's baggage car.

This loss falls heavily on Charley and we sympathize with him in his misfortune. May he have the good fortune soon, to again replenish." When an actor was thus stranded his fellow actors often came to his assistance, or perhaps a number of admiring townsmen would take up a collection or otherwise assist him.

Besides these external difficulties there were many annoyances for the actor to combat within the theater. Aside from backstage conditions, there was the audience to reckon with. The attitude of the people out in front was far from considerate — sometimes downright hostile. Practical jokers were continually perpetrating their mischief. One such incident occurred during the sojourn of the Kenkel troupe from New York in 1861. "Somebody turned off the gas in the theater on Thursday evening before the performance was over, leaving the audience in the dark and causing some harsh words to be used by the actors."

One of the few bright spots in the lives of the better class of actors was the benefit. When an actor had completed his run and had pleased his public he was tendered a benefit or "bumper" by his admirers among the citizenry or by the manager of the company. The benefit consisted of a certain share of the evening's receipts. The larger

an actor's following the more substantial his share was likely to be. Aside from its financial value, the benefit was always a mark of highest respect and admiration for the actor. Popular managers and lessees also had benefits tendered them by grateful citizens.

The Julien also housed many non-theatrical entertainments the most common being lectures, panoramas, minstrel shows, magicians, acrobats, local talent, and novelty entertainments of every sort. Lecture subjects were almost as varied as the types of entertainment. Miss Hullet, "a very young, very pretty, active-looking brunette, with a very full mischievous black eye, and a mouth full of pearly teeth," spoke on "Spiritualism". Miss Helen M. Dresser criticized "Mormonism", castigated Brigham Young, and told of her "Journey, Escape and Residence in Salt Lake City." Bayard Taylor, traveller, lecturer and man of letters, spoke on "The American People, Socially and Politically". Artemus Ward, another famous speaker and humorist, delivered "one of his racy lectures" on an unknown subject. Thomas F. Meagher, the celebrated Irish patriot and orator, lectured on "Royalty and Republicanism" and on "Daniel O'Connell". Professor Blaney, who talked for an hour and a half on "Coal", was "greeted with warm attention and applause."

Theodore Tilton, editor of the New York *Independent* delivered a political speech. "The Gorilla" was the subject of a lecture by P. B. Du Chaillu, the African explorer. Edward S. Franks gave "free popular lectures on the Anatomy and Physiology of the Human Eye and the Use and Abuse of Spectacles". There were also innumerable travel talks, political discourses, and the like.

But probably the most important event in the lecture field was the appearance of Ralph Waldo Emerson, famous essayist and philosopher, in January, 1866. Emerson was generally known to Dubuquers by reputation and, although referred to as somewhat unorthodox in his beliefs and doctrines, he was greeted with a capacity house at the scheduled time on the evening of January 24th. Whether his transcendentalism was acceptable or not, his audience went away highly satisfied. His subject was *Social Aims in America* and the Young Men's Library Association, under whose auspices he had appeared, paid him seventy-five dollars.

Among the panoramas, some of the most interesting to be exhibited at the Julien were: Bullard's "Panorama of New York City"; a panorama of an Arctic expedition in connection with which there were exhibited a collection of relics and a "real live Esquimaux dog — 'Myouk' "; and

several panoramas of the Civil War. Merrill's "Great Magic Lantern Exhibition of Dissolving Views" showed "scenes in the Holy Land, the Smugglers' Cave, Ships in Motion, Natural Curiosities, Vesuvius in Eruption," and various places in Europe and America. This dissolving process permitted one picture to gradually and imperceptibly fade into the other so that in one instance a prairie fire was extinguished by Niagara Falls. To cap the evening's entertainment "The Drunkard's Progress" was presented in "ten humorous and comic scenes that would make an anchorite laugh."

Williams's "Panorama of the Bible" was one of the high spots of the year 1862. Constructed on a long strip of canvas containing four thousand square yards, mounted on rollers placed in a vertical position on either side of the stage, the huge scroll was wound from one roller to the other, revealing a continuity of Old Testament scenes from Chaos to the Babylonian Captivity. Among the more spectacular pictures were the Garden of Eden, the Flood, Rameses's Court, and the City of Babylon. "The artist has so perfectly delineated what he attempted that one can feel the soft balmy air of evening and see the dew on the flowers, and hear the notes of the evening birds," insisted a reporter. School children attended the

matinees *en masse* and the panorama had a successful run of over two weeks.

In regard to musical events the history of the Julien supports the opinion that Dubuque has favored that art. Even in those days it had its civic music groups and its popular musical organizations such as the Freeberthysers' Band and the Germania Band. Perhaps the city's most noted musicians were Charles and Annie Lascelles. Brilliant and versatile musicians, they promoted many musical events and gave many successful concerts. Later they made frequent tours of the Mississippi Valley.

Representative musical events in the history of the Julien were: a grand concert by Mrs. L. L. Deming, vocalist, poet, and cantatrice; a scientific musical concert by Signor Ferrello, "the Italian Ole Bull"; a concert by Miss E. T. Greenfield who sang "with much feeling and spirit" everything from "La Catatumba" to "Comin' Thro' the Rye"; the recital of Herr Reichel, "the great basso of the Grand Operas of Berlin and Leipsic"; the farewell tour of Anna Bishop, the cantatrice; the Peak Family of Bell Ringers and the Swiss Bell Ringers; a concert by the Hutchinson Family which included "new and popular songs of love, hope and happiness, patriotism, freedom and fraternity"; and innumerable other recitals and

concerts by local and miscellaneous artists, groups, and organizations.

Minstrel shows were highly rated by audiences of the time, and the Civil War only served to increase their number and popularity. Certain of the more famous, like Campbell's and Dixie's, appeared almost annually in Dubuque. Numerous entertainments of local or denominational talent — school benefits, church festivals, and Sunday School exercises, as well as political, railroad, and farm meetings, were held at the Julien.

Among the novelty entertainments one of the most sensational presented to the wondering gaze of Julien audiences was the appearance of "the four smallest human beings of mature age ever known on the face of the globe," General Tom Thumb, Mrs. Thumb, Commodore Nutt, and "elfin" Minnie Warren. Their combined weight was one hundred pounds. They rode in a \$2,000 miniature coach drawn by four small ponies, and displayed their wedding presents from the crowned heads of Europe. They had to be held over to accommodate the crowds.

Magicians and acrobats of every description also attracted large followings, chiefly because their ballyhoo was highly sensational and appealing. Thus "Professor" McAllister captured much attention when he appeared as "the world-re-

nowned and pre-eminent ambidexterous Prestidigicomedian, Physicist, and Prestidigitateur from Great Europe and America"; and Hambujer, the wonderful East Indian Magi, created a sensation by "the tragic act of Murdering a Boy and Restoring Him to Life."

But the peak of entertainments of this type was undoubtedly reached in 1860 when Signor Blitz, the Great Russian Wizard, transformed the Julien into a "Temple of Wonders". He was "an inimitable Performer of Sleight-of-Hand Tricks [who] had had the privilege to give a performance before the Court of the present Czar of Russia." He held his audiences spellbound with "Mysterious and Amazing Feats of Ancient Necromancy, Wonderful Delusions and Transformations", and ventriloquism.

The story of the Julien would be deficient without a word on the all-important managers and their affairs. The first lessees of the new Julien were Senter and Callen. Other prominent and well-liked managers during the lifetime of the Julien were W. S. Forest, H. Van Lieu, Hale and Fyffe, A. McFarland, and last but not least, Charles Plunkett who was responsible for a season (in 1866) which was probably the most brilliant ever offered for the delight of Dubuque theatergoers. He was, perhaps, the most popular of all

the Julien managers. Besides having a well-developed sense of "theater" and being an able box-office manager, he did much for the improvement of the house in the way of new seating arrangements and better scenery. He ministered to the well-being of actors and audiences alike.

Financial difficulties were always a big item in the internal troubles of running a theater. Nothing was regular and organized. There were many difficulties with actors, stage hands, and artists. Weather conditions were responsible for many slim houses. The ever-impending danger of fire had to be considered. The People's Theater in Dubuque succumbed to it, and the Julien once came near suffering the same fate. It was on the third day from the end of 1857 that the "Julien came very near being the prey of the fiery element [when] from an accident, the Engineer's office in the second story took fire on that night, and quite a hole was burned in the floor when discovered."

The financial burden was further increased by the panic of 1857 and the crushing hard times which followed. Theaters were among the first to feel its effects. Low, panic prices were the rule for a long time and the disastrous effects of such policies immediately became apparent.

Another great problem with which managers and owners had to contend was the competition

of other theaters. When the Julien opened its doors to the public early in 1857 it became popular almost immediately and remained so until the end of the year when the opening of the new and magnificent People's Theater, located on the corner of Eighth and Bluff streets, dealt it a severe blow. The rival managements were soon striving to outdo each other in every possible way. Furthermore, in the summer season showboats and innumerable travelling circuses drew attendance away from the regular theaters.

When the People's was destroyed by fire in May, 1859, the Julien resumed preëminence and managed to retain theatrical leadership in Dubuque until the New Athenaeum was built on the corner of Fourth and Main streets in the latter part of 1864. The Julien lapsed into desuetude for many months, while the New Athenaeum became the most popular playhouse in the city and retained that popularity long after the Julien passed out of existence.

Combined with other factors, the Civil War caused the ultimate decline of the Julien. The attention of the people was centered on matters far more serious than literary drama.

The formal demise of the Julien Theater occurred in 1870. On October 9th of that year the Masons held a meeting at which it was arranged

to "rent and fix up a suite of rooms in the Julien Theatre Building for their lodge." In February, 1871, a "grand public demonstration and celebration" marked the installation of the Masonic Lodge in its new quarters. As the *Herald* remarked, "Where comedy and tragedy have been disadvantageously patronized by amateur burnt-cork artists, the "goat" will butt his way, and where eloquence and pathos have enlivened or sickened the multitude, there will the mystic rites be observed."

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