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# The American Theater

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## 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.