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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Robert A. Ellis entitled "The Bijou Theatre: 1909-1949." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Theatre.

Allan Yeomans, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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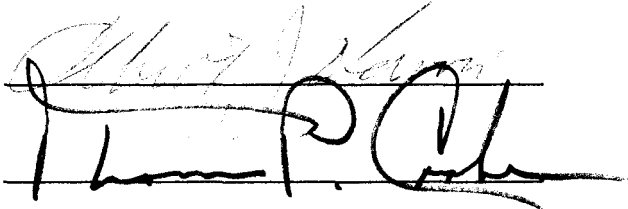
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Robert A. Ellis, Jr. entitled "The Bijou Theatre: 1909-1949." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Speech and Theatre.



G. Allan Yeomans
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Hilton P. Smith
Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

THE BIJOU THEATRE: 1909-1949

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Robert A. Ellis, Jr.

August 1976

1287955

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is most deeply indebted to Dr. G. Allan Yeomans for his continued support, guidance, and friendship during the course of the graduate program. Without his help, such a program would neither have been started nor completed.

Appreciation is also expressed for the encouragement of Drs. Albert J. Harris and Thomas P. Cooke. Their counsel both on the stage and in the academic setting will be long remembered.

Further appreciation should be expressed to Dr. William MacArthur of the Calvin McClung Memorial Collection of the Knoxville-Knox County Library; Mr. Wallace W. Baumann for giving me access to his personal collection of theatrical memorabilia; Mr. Ed Thompson for allowing me to borrow his photographic negatives of early Bijou Theatre pictures; Mr. Herbert Oakes and Mr. L. H. Smiley for sharing with me their recollections of early days at the theatre; and the women in the microfilm section of the Main Library of the University of Tennessee for simply putting up with me for five weeks.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the history of the Bijou Theatre in downtown Knoxville, Tennessee, and to ascertain the importance it had on the community during the first four decades of its existence. The wealth of talent which played on its stage during these forty years of legitimate drama (much of it coming from touring stock companies) makes the theatre a landmark within the city of Knoxville.

This study should help further the resolve of the general populace of Knoxville to preserve the Bijou as an important monument to Knoxville's cultural heritage. The renovation of the old theatre not only will be historically significant, but it will utilize a theatre facility which was designed with acoustics and other features to make it one of the South's finest theatres.

The author hopes that this chronological history of the theatre from its earliest days can help illustrate that the Bijou was much more than the pornographic movie house it was to become during the 1960's and early 1970's. Just as it was a thriving legitimate theatre, it can be once again.

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

Once the active life of a theatre is halted, its salvation can sometimes be found by looking back over the parts which comprised that active life and seeing the value which the facility had to the community in which it is located. That, in short, is what this study will attempt to do.

The Bijou Theatre in downtown Knoxville, Tennessee, has only recently been saved from demolition crews by the efforts of a concerned group of citizens. As can be seen in the following pages, the theatre's history is full of fascinating people and events who once graced its stage. The material included in this study was gleaned primarily from the newspaper advertisements, reviews, and accounts during the first forty years of the theatre's existence. In addition, anecdotes and sidenotes were obtained through interviews with some of the people who actually worked at the theatre in its very earliest days. Although the information was often unverifiable in terms of exact dates, other sources confirm the reliability of such accounts. It is from these interviews more than the printed accounts that one senses the glory which was once the Bijou Theatre, and affirms the worth of its future use to the city of Knoxville.

CHAPTER II

BEGINNINGS

During the month of May 1908, ground was broken and construction begun on a new theatre in downtown Knoxville, Tennessee.¹ Located at the rear of the historic Lamar House, one of Knoxville's oldest hotels, in the 800 block of Gay Street, the theatre was called the "Bijou," from the French for "jewel."

Knoxville already possessed one grand theatrical establishment. The Staub Theatre, directly across the street from the Lamar House, was built in 1872 by Peter Staub and operated successfully by him until 1885, at which time his son, Fritz, assumed the management of the theatre. He completely remodeled it in 1901, making it the Knoxville showcase of amusement places.² It was around this time, however, when another gentleman happened upon the scene who was to have great influence upon the life of Mr. Staub and

¹"Fifty Facts of New Theatre," Daily Journal and Tribune [Knoxville, Tennessee], March 7, 1909, p. 6.

²"Knoxville's New Theatre, 'The Bijou,' Will Open on Monday, March 8; George M. Cohan's 'Little Johnny Jones' Be Initial Attraction," Knoxville Sentinel, February 27, 1909, p. 16.

completely alter the entertainment scene of Knoxville. As one 1909 account puts it:³

Three years ago Jake Wells became attracted to Knoxville. He recognized this as one of the most rapidly growing cities in the south. He associated himself with Mr. Staub, and they formed a company which leased Staub's theater and which has been operating it. The field broadened, and Messrs. Wells and Staub determined that Knoxville was large enough for another modern theater. This determination resulted in negotiations being opened, until finally the present Bijou plan was conceived and put into effect.

Born in Memphis, Tennessee, and reared in Pensacola, Florida, Jake Wells' burning ambition was to be a professional baseball player. After playing several years in the regional leagues, he became a manager of several teams in the Southern League. It was during that time that Wells began to develop his sense of theatrics. He arranged for entertainment at some of the ball games and, eventually, with what little money he could muster, he bought the Bijou Theatre in Richmond, Virginia. Although there were several rough years, the little theatre began to make money, and Wells began dreaming bigger dreams. In 1899, he organized "the Bijou Company, a corporation, under the laws of Virginia, with himself as the principal stockholder, its director and its policy creator."⁴ He built the business

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

by leasing older theatres and renovating them until, at the time of the Knoxville Bijou, he had approximately thirty theatres under his direct control.⁵

Since construction of a new theatre was (and still is) a great deal more expensive than the renovation of an older one, Wells and Staub negotiated with three influential members of the financial and artistic community in Knoxville for the \$50,000 needed to build the Bijou. W. G. Brownlow, C. B. Atkin, and Jeanette Cowan arranged for the money with the understanding that, upon completion of the theatre, Wells and Staub would lease it for a period of ten years⁶ beginning March 1, 1909.⁷

Wells, Staub, and their backers did not hesitate to use the best people and materials available in the construction of the theatre. A partial list of those involved is given in Table I.⁸

Newspaper accounts immediately prior to the Bijou's opening attest to the new theatre's opulence:

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Fifty Facts," op. cit.

⁷"Knoxville's New Theatre," op. cit.

⁸"Fifty Facts," op. cit.

TABLE I
A PARTIAL LIST OF PEOPLE USED IN CONSTRUCTION
OF BIJOU THEATRE

Architect	Oakley of Montgomery, Alabama
Contractors	Thomas and Turner, Inc.
Electrical Contractors	Hebrick and Lawrence of Nashville
Plumbing	M. F. Rourke of Knoxville
Interiors	Brown Co. of Atlanta
Carpeting and drapery work	Loveman and Jacobs of Birmingham
Asbestos and regular drop curtain	Lee Lash Curtain Co.

The Bijou is pronounced by theatrical architectural experts to be one of the best constructed and most conveniently arranged houses in the entire south. It is modern in design, arrangement and construction. Especial attention has been given to acoustics, lighting and ventilation; nor has the matter of ample exits been overlooked. . . .

The Bijou auditorium will be reached through a spacious and attractive lobby, leading on grade from Gay Street. . . . The lobby is tiled with mosaics and the name of the theater "Bijou" is conspicuously set out in this tiling. . . . Beautiful wood work, all done in hardwood, aid the color schemes in contributing to the artistic effect. . . .

In the main auditorium, a massive and very handsomely executed electrolier is suspended from the center of the lofty ceiling. . . .

The decorative scheme of the Bijou is beautiful and yet simple. The colors are delicate, and the fresco work is of an unostentatious but very effective design. Olive green, white and gold are the predominating colors, and these are assisted by buff and other trimming which intensify the beauty of the whole.⁹ The massive columns supporting the cornices above the boxes are done in white, with gold trimmings. The railings around the boxes and balcony are of wrought iron with brass trimmings. The draperies of boxes and likewise the carpeting on all floors are of the olive green cast in keeping with the artist's conception of the color effects for the house.¹⁰

In addition to the aesthetic qualities of the theatre, it was equally modern and efficient in its technical aspects:

In the lighting system, nothing has been omitted whereby the best illuminating effects may be

⁹"Knoxville's New Theatre," op. cit. (Some disagreement here. Daily Journal and Tribune [Knoxville, Tennessee], February 22, 1909, p. 5, states "the general color scheme . . . is light yellow with decorative figures in darker colors, reds, browns, and greens.")

¹⁰Ibid.

obtained, both in the auditorium and upon the stage. Clusters of incandescents, behind glaring reflectors, are concealed in the proscenium arch, and these will intensify the lighting upon the stage when it is desired. "Border" and "spot lights" are also arranged upon the stage to produce the best effects possible. . . .

Upon the stage, which is one of the largest in the south, measuring 70 × 35 feet in size, every requirement is provided whereby the largest and best attractions may be successfully put on. All the devices known to New York theatricals are reproduced here, making the house complete in this respect. The scenery is well selected and was executed by scenic artists of pronounced ability. Nothing of the inferior order is to be found in the properties. The large scene storage room is capable of accommodating a supply of scenery sufficient for a theater much larger than the Bijou, thus insuring an adequate equipment in this respect. The stage is reached direct from Cumberland Avenue, through great doors which will admit the largest properties and scenery that may be brought here. A separate stage entrance for players and others also opens into Cumberland Avenue.

There are twelve dressing rooms, situated between the theatre and the Auditorium rink. Each of these is equipped with running water, hot and cold, large mirrors, brilliant lights, wardrobes, etc. They will be ample to accommodate the demands of the most exacting stage folk, and are a decided improvement over the conventional dressing rooms. A very large ballet room is located in the floor beneath the stage. This, too, is fitted with all the requirements that may be expected.

The orchestra pit is reached by means of an entrance beneath the stage, and the musicians will be in direct touch with the stage by the aid of speaking devices. The same applies to the box office and the stage, the former being in the very front of the house.¹¹

There was some controversy prior to the opening night concerning exactly how many people the Bijou could seat at

¹¹ Ibid.

any one time. One source stated that it was "capable of accommodating 1,503 people. A number of extra chairs may be placed in the boxes and loggias which will enable this to be increased to 1,600."¹² Others claimed that "Its seating capacity is 1,590."¹³ And yet another stated that "The theatre will seat fifteen hundred people," but, when it delineated the seating capacity of the individual sections of the theatre, the figures add up to 1,514!¹⁴ Regardless of the actual figure, most sources agree that there were approximately fifteen hundred in attendance on opening night.

¹²Ibid.

¹³"Interior View of the New Wells Bijou Theatre," Daily Journal and Tribune [Knoxville, Tennessee], February 28, 1909, p. 7. (Also see Daily Journal and Tribune [Knoxville, Tennessee], February 22, 1909, p. 5.)

¹⁴"Fifty Facts," op. cit.

CHAPTER III

OPENING NIGHT

Actually, opening night came one week later than was originally intended. According to an article in one newspaper, "It was expected that the theatre would be opened about March 1st, but a show could not be booked for that date."¹⁵ From all reports, however, the delay was well worth it, for it offered Knoxvilleians an extravaganza unlike any which had been held for several years.

Unlike Fritz Staub and Jake Wells, some of the citizens of Knoxville were worried that a new theatre in town would lessen the quality of the entertainment which might be booked into Knoxville's older theatre, the Staub. The backers, the lessees, and the media all joined forces to reassure those worriers:

The opening of the Wells Bijou theatre will in no wise affect the character of plays or the number that are booked at Staub's theatre. That splendid and thoroughly established house will continue to get the best bookings and Manager Fritz Staub will be none the less attentive to the interests of Knoxville's lovers of good theatricals.¹⁶

¹⁵"Wells Bijou to Open March 8th," Daily Journal and Tribune [Knoxville, Tennessee], February 26, 1909, p. 5.

¹⁶"Grand Opening of Wells Bijou Tonight," Knoxville Sentinel, March 8, 1909, p. 11.

Such concern did not deter people from filling the Bijou on opening night, nor did it lessen their enthusiasm about the new theatre, as was reported in the next day's newspaper:

If the personnel and the number of the first audience assembled at the new Wells Bijou theatre last night, to witness the sparkling musical comedy Little Johnny Jones, is to be accepted as a forecast of the future of the house, there is no question but that Jake Wells and Fritz Staub have done wisely in this great venture.¹⁷

Described as "distinctively a social occasion as well as an enjoyable theatrical event,"¹⁸ the evening saw the cream of Knoxville society in attendance. Everyone was dressed in evening attire, including the ushers, attendants, maids, and orchestra members.

Between Acts I and II, Mayor John M. Brooks presented Jake Wells with a diamond-studded Elk insignia as a handsome token of the city's appreciation for his interest in its theatrical growth. Between the second and third acts, James E. Thompson took a flash picture of the opening night audience.

Although the majority of the evening's attention was paid to the theatre itself, the play received very good

¹⁷"Wells Bijou Holds Gala Opening," Knoxville Sentinel, March 8, 1909, p. 8.

¹⁸Ibid.

notices, too. Little Johnny Jones was written by George M. Cohan and was described in the preshow publicity as "one of his superior creations."¹⁹ After viewing the show, that same newspaper gave it excellent notices, calling it "one of the best, if not the very best, musical play that has been contributed to the amusement world by that clever author-actor-composer, Geo. M. Cohan."²⁰

¹⁹"Grand Opening," op. cit.

²⁰"Wells Bijou Holds Gala Opening," op. cit.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST DECADE

Jake Wells was emphatic about the style of theatrical events which would play in his new theatre. Shortly after the theatre opened, a newspaper article reported on Mr. Wells' purpose in opening the Bijou:²¹

From the beginning of the life of the Bijou here, it has been the plan of Mr. Wells to run it as the home for popular priced attractions as long as the season was in vogue and, as soon as the companies quit the road and went into headquarters for the summer season, to place in the house a high class of vaudeville and moving pictures. . . . There will be none of the cheap "penny arcade" vaudeville with a few old picture films to fill in the gap, but vaudeville of the kind that has made this feature of public entertainment so popular throughout the English speaking portions of the world. And, in bringing about this result, it was first necessary to get a line on the best make of picture films. There are 3000 feet of pictures in the rolls that will be shown at each one of the four daily performances at the Bijou and these rolls will be changed twice or more each week, giving 48,000 feet of pictures each and every week.

As with the pictures, in making his selection of vaudeville acts for the circuit, Mr. Wells has insisted that nothing but the best—morally and artistically—shall be placed on the books at any of his houses.

In an effort to maintain such a high standard of theatrical excellence for his new theatre, particularly in

²¹"New Theatre Sets High Standards," Knoxville Sentinel, April 26, 1909, p. 6.

light of the outstanding success of the opening week, Wells signed Miss Cecil Spooner, one of New York's highest salaried stage personalities of that time, to appear during the second and third weeks of the Bijou's operations. Signing Miss Spooner to a contract was not as easily accomplished as it might seem, however, for she had a great aversion to the road show concept and was certain that she was not known south of Richmond. Her agent finally arranged with Wells to offer her a guarantee (although the amount was never discussed in any of the media accounts) for each of her fourteen weeks on the road; but, as one reporter put it, "In these days of theatrical business the matter of a guarantee is rare. There are very few plays or players who are considered by managers to be a safe enough attraction to risk a guarantee."²² In addition to the guarantee, Miss Spooner insisted on having sole authority to pick her plays. The first week she chose The Dancer and the King and The Girl and the Detective. The second week she did The Girl from Texas and The Girl Raffles. She provided her own supporting players for each of these shows. Knoxville was her last stop before closing in New Orleans, having already played Norfolk, Richmond, Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis, Atlanta, and Birmingham.

²²"Miss Cecil Spooner Next Attraction at New Wells Bijou," Knoxville Sentinel, March 11, 1909, p. 9.

The remainder of the season was rather unspectacular. Miss Spooner was followed by a Western play entitled Texas by J. Maudlin Feigh which received no critical notices at all, other than the normal preshow publicity. The first week of April saw Tennessee Tess or Queen of the Moon Shiners by Charles E. Blaney on the boards of the Bijou. There was not anything spectacular or unduly exciting about the play itself, but it did introduce Blaney to the Bijou audiences. He was to reappear frequently during the next few years in various nondescript shows.

True to his word, Wells brought in vaudeville acts as soon as the touring season closed in the middle of April. The first of these was Tim McMahon and His Minstrel Maids. The remainder of the summer was filled with similar vaudeville acts and, when the legitimate season opened in mid-September, the plays were reinstated as the primary attraction for the theatre. Some of the highlights of this season included David Copperfield with Franklin Pangborn, who was later to find fame on the silent screen in the title role; the return of Miss Cecil Spooner for one week in the plays The Little Terror and The Adventures of Polly; and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde with Thomas E. Shea in the lead role. Vaudeville returned in the summer with the 1910-11 season opening the second week in September. The plays which were offered during the season, were mediocre with the exception of

Camille or The Fate of a Coquette by Alexander Dumas, Jr. and starring Corrine Snell, and a few Charles E. Blaney offerings.

In keeping with the usual custom, vaudeville returned during the summer months, but the opening of the regular season brought something new to the Bijou. On October 23, 1911, a five-reel motion picture of Dante's Inferno was shown. In terms of the usual playbill at the Bijou, a motion picture was not unique; one-reel films, or "shorts," were sometimes shown in between vaudeville acts. The uniqueness of this particular occasion came because the film was comprised of so many reels and because it was shown as the main attraction. In the volumes of programs of Bijou presentations found in the McClung Historical Collection at Lawson-McGhee Library, this is the first instance where a film held such high esteem on the week's program.

The season had two other uncommon presentations. On November 6, 1911, a play entitled The Stampede was given. It was based on a true story of an attempt by the United States government to defraud the Choctaw and Chicksaw Indians of over 450,000 acres of land worth approximately \$160,000,000. The play's uniqueness did not arise from the incredible nature of the story, however, but rather from its author. The playwright, a young man who was just becoming known in California for a multitude of talents, including directing as well as writing, was Cecil B. DeMille.

The second event of the season which offered something out of the ordinary was the motion picture entitled Oberammergau on March 11, 1912. Another multiple reel film, it was a pictorial reproduction by Henry Ellsworth of the people of the German city and the manner in which they enact the passion play once every decade.

Vaudeville returned again during the summer of 1912, but this time it remained until the first of December. Comedienne Billie Burke was the star of one show during the week of September 2, 1912, but it was an unusually bland series of programs otherwise. After the legitimate season officially opened in December, the highlight of the play schedule was a play entitled Mr. Green's Reception. It didn't draw very much attention at the time, but today the program would probably be a collector's item and the performance would be a sellout, for the stars of the show were four young brothers from New York who were to later revolutionize the comedic genre. Julius (Groucho), Arthur (Harpo), Leonard (Chico), and Milton (Gummo) Marx played one night on the stage of the Bijou Theatre on March 24, 1913, and, although Groucho was to become the most famous in later years, it was Harpo who received the notice in the paper. The preshow publicity announced, "Among the various contingents will be found Arthur Marx, long a favorite

harpist in the realm of variety."²³ Other than that slight comment, there was no publicity or review.

It was during this period of time that managers Jake Wells and Fred Martin disappeared from the picture and were replaced by Frank Rogers. According to Mr. L. H. Smiley, now a resident of Strawberry Plains, Tennessee, but a stagehand at the Bijou during this time period, it was union negotiations which eliminated Mr. Wells from the Managerial position. The stage and motion picture hands at the Bijou were unionized sometime in 1911 (the local union organizations do not have records which go back that far) and held a strike during the spring of 1913. It was during this strike that Jake Wells allegedly lost control of the theatre and new management took over.

Various vaudeville acts appeared during the summer and fall of 1913 and the winter of 1914, but, beginning with the spring of 1914, the Bijou began featuring the B. F. Keith Vaudeville Company exclusively. Although the theatre occasionally brought in photoplays (sometimes in serials) and used the stage for a few local talent shows, the Keith Company remained the mainstay at the Bijou through the spring

²³"Mr. Green's Reception to Play at Bijou," Knoxville Sentinel, March 22, 1913, p. 5.

²⁴L. H. Smiley, private interview held at Fort Sanders Presbyterian Hospital, Knoxville, Tennessee, July 6, 1976.

of 1921. The theatre did close from June 28, 1920, until September 6, 1920, for remodeling, but remained open during that entire period of time as primarily a vaudeville house.

Although Jake Wells' initial dream was to alternate the types of entertainment to be found at the Bijou, the first decade ended with the theatre being used as primarily a vaudeville house, with legitimate drama appearing infrequently. This, however, was merely the management attempting to keep pace with the entertainment demands of the day. Vaudeville had become increasingly popular and not infrequently had it relegated the more serious works to a place of lesser importance.

CHAPTER V

THE TWENTIES

In the summer of 1921 (July 4, to be exact), a new stock company opened at the Bijou. Labeled "The United Southern Stock Company," it had as its artistic manager a man by the name of C. D. Peruchi. He later was to hold a place of importance in the history of the Bijou Theatre. The theatre became billed in newspaper advertisements as the "Bijou Theatre: The Home of Elite Stock for the Family by the United Southern Stock Company." Mr. Peruchi and his stock company closed at the end of August, however, and opened January 1, 1922, across the street at the Lyric (formerly the Staub). Yet the season was not a total loss. On October 7, 1921, Fritz Leiber, a touring Shakespearean actor, opened at the Bijou and played two nights. His Friday evening performance was Macbeth; his Saturday evening performance was Hamlet. Although the papers at that time did not review the performances, the preshow advertisements were very lavish and impressive.

Beginning in 1922, the Bijou gradually adopted a new policy concerning its entertainment schedules. The theatre's bill became interspersed with classical and operatic music, minstrel shows, Shakespeare, and various dramatic activity. Other Knoxville theatres maintained a format of programming

resembling that which the Bijou had used during the Keith Vaudeville: unvarying programs of melodramas, farces, and flimsy one-acts with very little variety in their offerings.

One of the first legitimate plays on the Bijou stage during this period (on March 20, 1922) was Blood and Sand, a play by Thomas Cushing based on Blasco Ibanez's novel. It starred the father/daughter acting team of Otis Skinner and Cornelia Otis Skinner. Ms. Skinner had only been on the professional stage about four months at that time. She had begun her stage career by filling in for the leading lady with only one day's notice during a run in Chicago.

The Bijou was closed during the summer and reopened for the regular season in mid-September. On September 30, 1922, the stage was the scene for a concert by John Phillip Sousa and his band. The famous "March King" gave both a matinee and an evening performance.

The spring of 1923 brought continued variety to the Bijou. Such acts as violinist Fritz Keisler, the Chicago String Quartet, and a three day run of Keith Vaudeville were on the season's bill along with legitimate plays such as The Book of Job and Eve, the latter starring Nyra Brown, later a silent screen star. One interesting attraction occurred in late May when a film entitled Some Wild Oats was the main attraction. The audiences were segregated according to sex, males being given one showing time and females another.

The 1923-24 season opened on September 12, 1923, with the Al G. Field Minstrels. The month of October provided two good plays: Venus starring Nyra Brown, and The Bat which was to play frequently at the Bijou and was billed as "The World's Greatest Mystery Play." The next month saw a Jerome Kern musical entitled Good Morning, Dearie (on November 19 and 20), and Edward Johnson, billed as the "world's greatest tenor." The prime December feature was a musical entitled Wildflower by Arthur Hammerstein and his son, Oscar Hammerstein II, in collaboration with Otto Harbach.

The remainder of the season included such entertainment as Josef Hoffman, billed as "King of Pianists"; Blackstone, billed as "The Greatest Magician the World Has Every Known" (he placed a tremendous amount of publicity in the news media); the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, billed as "the foremost orchestra in the Western Hemisphere" (soprano Helen Troubel appeared at the evening performance on March 22, 1924, with the St. Louis Symphony); the film The Hunchback of Notre Dame starring Lon Chaney; and the first performance of the musical play which was to appear many times at the Bijou—Blossom Time, the dramatization of the life story of Franz Schubert written by Dorothy Donnelly. The highlight of the season had to be the appearance on February 25, 1924, of Russian ballet star Anna Pavlova (at that time spelled Pavlowa) and her Ballet Russe. The tour

was booked into Knoxville by impresario Sol Hurok. The Knoxville News, which was a relatively new paper in the city at the time, nonetheless sent a reporter to review the performance. His review was rather succinct: "The audience which packed the Bijou Monday night . . . did give enthusiastic appreciation to pavlowa and her Ballet Russe."²⁵

The Bijou was closed during the late spring and summer months, reopening on September 10, 1924. The autumn programs brought back to Knoxville such proven favorites as Al G. Field Minstrels, Blossom Time, Fritz Leiber (The Three Musketeers and Romeo and Juliet), John Phillip Sousa, Keith Vaudeville (for only three days), and Blackstone. Two important films played during the early winter months. The first was The Thief of Bagdad starring Douglas Fairbanks (November 6-8), and the second was Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments starring Rod la Rocque.

Legitimate drama at the Bijou received a distinct transfusion when, during the first weeks of December, it was announced that, beginning December 15, 1924, the Peruchi Players would be using the Bijou as their home. These actors, under the direction of C. D. Peruchi, had been formed by him from The United Southern Stock Company which had played the Bijou during the summer of 1921. They opened with

²⁵Review, Knoxville News, February 26, 1924, p. 5.

Sweet Seventeen by John Clements and L. Westervelt, followed two weeks later by Strange Bedfellows.

Why did the Peruchi Players choose the Bijou Theatre for their home? A possible answer was supplied by an article in the Knoxville Sentinel on the evening before the Peruchi Players opened. "The Bijou offers really better opportunities (than does the Lyric) for the exploitation of plays by a stock organization. It brings audience and company into closer contact and the finer points of a drama and comedy are thus better appreciated."²⁶

The Peruchi Players remained at the Bijou for three weeks in January presenting Daddy Long Legs, The Unkissed Bride, and Smilin' Through. Then, regardless of the excellent opportunity which the Bijou offered a stock company, the Peruchi Players left. Nothing else played the theatre until May 4, 1924, when a musical revue entitled Honey Bunch appeared for two weeks.

During the mid-1920's movies were beginning to come into vogue, especially with the advent of the talking films. Many of the theatres built in Knoxville during that time were opened specifically for the purpose of showing motion pictures. The Riveria, the Strand, the Queen, and later the Rialto, ran them all year round. Any stage acts which came

²⁶"Peruchi Company Opens at Bijou Tomorrow Night," Knoxville Sentinel, December 14, 1924, p. E-7.

to town were restricted to the Lyric or the Bijou. The only problem was that the touring companies greatly curtailed their engagements in the Southeast.

The only entertainment which appeared at the Bijou during the 1925-26 season was a four-month run (December through March) of Keith Vaudeville. (The John Phillip Sousa Band returned to Knoxville, but played at the Lyric Theatre.) After Keith closed, there was no further mention of entertainment at the Bijou Theatre that season. In fact, it would be a long time before the Bijou stage was again used for any type of theatrical activity.

CHAPTER VI

THE THIRTIES

After a silence of almost exactly six years, a full-page notice appeared in the Knoxville newspapers on March 13, 1932, announcing two items of interest to the community-at-large: (1) the "new" Bijou Theatre would open on Monday evening, March 14, 1932, at 8:15 p.m.; and (2) the Peruchi Players, under the reorganized name of Peruchi-Booth Stock Company, would be using the newly remodeled theatre as a home. On March 14, 1932, the front page of the Knoxville News-Sentinel reported, "The curtain will rise again tonight at the old Bijou, dark for years. Spoken drama has been revived here by the Peruchi-Booth players who will offer their first play, This Thing Called Love, at 8:15 p.m."²⁷

During those six years of darkness, the theatre had been used for a rather unique and, considering its original purpose, unorthodox facility. On Sunday, March 13, 1932, the Knoxville News-Sentinel reported, "E. A. Booth, former manager of a number of picture houses in East Tennessee, is business manager of the new Peruchi-Booth Company. Under his direction, the old Bijou, which has been used as a shelter

²⁷"Curtain Up Tonight," Knoxville News-Sentinel, March 14, 1932, p. 1.

for secondhand cars, has been restored to its original dignity."²⁸ For approximately six years, the Mahan Motor Company, which owned the Ford dealership in Knoxville and was located directly behind the theatre where the Greater Tennessee Building now stands, parked its used cars in the once magnificent Bijou.

Mr. Herbert (Spike) Oakes,²⁹ a resident of Knoxville and former stagehand at the Bijou during those years, explained to this author in an interview that the theatre was closed because the City of Knoxville condemned it as a fire safety hazard for public use because of insufficient exits. The only stipulation under which the theatre might have remained open was if two exit doors could have been built along the south wall, but permission for this was denied by the owner of the building whose north wall adjoined that south wall of the Bijou. Mahan Motor Company then gained control of the property, removed the seats on the ground level, and parked their stock of used cars on both the floor and the stage of the theatre. This was legal because such a use evidently did not constitute a "public use" in the eyes of the fire

²⁸"Peruchi Stock Company Opens at Bijou Here Tomorrow," Knoxville News-Sentinel, March 13, 1932, pp. 4-5.

²⁹Herbert Oakes, private interview at James White Civic Auditorium and Coliseum, Knoxville, Tennessee, July 4, 1976.

marshall. (Unfortunately, there are no longer records available from the Knoxville Fire Department concerning such condemnations.) Mr. Oakes said that he was given permission to sell the removed chairs to a Black church in the Morningside district of the city.

According to the Knoxville News-Sentinel review of the opening night:

Peruchi said the Bijou Theatre had been leased for 10 years and that he intended to play in Knoxville that long. Great applause greeted that statement. "I always call Knoxville my home," Peruchi said. "I have owned the oldest stock company in America, that has been under the same management, and we were always billed as being from here, where I originally started dramatic productions. Now we have a home."³⁰

That season was one of the most consistently active in terms of straight dramatic presentations on the Bijou stage. The Peruchi-Booth Company stayed through the entire spring and summer, closing after the week of July 11. During that period of time, they performed such shows as Smilin' Through, Holiday by Phillip Barry, Irene (the first musical comedy of the season using several University of Tennessee students in the cast), Ten Nights in a Barroom, and Uncle Tom's Cabin.

During the six weeks' absence of the Peruchi-Booth Company, the Bijou featured vaudeville acts and variety shows with such outstanding names as Faye Hammond's Frivolities.

³⁰ Roscoe Word, Jr., "Peruchi's Opening Night Pleases Large Audience," Knoxville News-Sentinel, March 15, 1932, p. 7.

The Peruchi-Booth Company returned on September 5 with The Parisian Romance. They remained throughout September and October doing a different show each week, with such shows as Dracula and St. Elmo highlighting the period.

The Peruchi-Booth Company's commitment to Knoxville and the Bijou was seemingly sincere. The front of their program on September 5, 1932, the opening night of the 1932-33 season, stated:³¹

Greetings on our twentieth season to the people of Knoxville. Once again the Peruch-Booth Players are at home. You have helped us to become a definite and integral part of the civic spirit of our city. Yes, we are proud to belong to you, to be a part of the daily life of the community. Again our endeavor shall be to bring to you a message of color and beauty. Plays that not only spell rich entertainment but those that lift you out of the humdrum workaday scheme of things, and bring to you romance, laughter, cheer and life itself. The theatre of today is not bounded by the skyscrapers of Manhattan. It is in its rightful place in the cities large and small throughout this great country. Your fine support and keen appreciation have made the Peruchi-Booth Players a Knoxville institution. We know that our selection of plays for the coming season will bring you rare enjoyment. They are the best comedies, dramas, and melodramas that the theatrical market can offer. They have been chosen with a keen eye to your especial want. Many of our company are old friends. Our new members you will take to your hearts. On this our twentieth season, we greet you across the sparkling footlights of our charming, cozy theatre. It is your theatre as well as ours.

³¹Bijou Theatre Program, September 5, 1932, University of Tennessee, Special Collections, Malcolm Miller Collection.

Regardless of the company's sincerity, however, the Bijou closed on October 31 for what was termed "reorganization" and was scheduled to be reopened on November 14. The term "reorganization" was never explained in the media, and the reopening date passed without any notice of delay or permanent closing. Finally, on December 4, 1932, the front page of the Knoxville News-Sentinel ran an item in which it was explained that "Knoxville is to have a new downtown motion picture theatre. The Bijou is to be turned into a picture house with W. E. Drumbar, former Publix manager, as manager. . . . The theatre will be equipped with sound apparatus and will be ready about Christmas."³² It actually opened on December 23, 1932, with the featured film being Bird of Paradise starring Delores Del Rio.

Motion Pictures continued to be the fare during the remainder of 1932 and on into 1933. Occasionally, the management would offer a stage act of some variety (e.g., Kirma, the mentalist) who would do four shows a day in between showings of the week's feature. It was not until August 28, 1933, that legitimate drama returned to the Bijou stage. The Lagretta Morgan Players presented short comedy-dramas before each showing of the movie. Their first show was The New Deal, a short vignette about the National

³²"Bijou Will Be Movie Theatre," Knoxville News-Sentinel, December 4, 1932, p. 1.

Recovery Act, and other administration measures. The Players stayed through September 22, 1933.

According to Mr. Smiley, it was during this time that the Bijou was struck by pickets from the motion picture operators' union. In an evidently retaliatory measure, the theatre announced that the "Bijou Theatre, storm center of a labor controversy, will abandon motion pictures and have only stage shows if satisfactory arrangements can be worked out. . . . The 'arrangements,' it is understood, consist of procuring stagehands and musicians."³³ There was evidently some community support behind such a suggestion. Edward B. Smith, a local theatre critic and entrepreneur, in an article in the Knoxville News-Sentinel on October 1, 1933, entitled "New Life is Injected into Bijou," called the Bijou "a sturdy little theatre that has withstood a lot of kicking around these past few years."³⁴ He further reported:

Harry Beekner, lately of Nashville and now associated with George Denton [manager of the Bijou at that time], is determined to put new life into the Bijou's bones. For the moment, the theatre is to be a straight cinema house, on a two-a-week feature basis. Third class stage show stuff is definitely out. . . . Mr. Beekner can see no reason why a permanent line of eight or ten chorus girls with a change of routine each week wouldn't go over. And I don't either. Import a bevy of

³³"Bijou to Have Stage Shows," Knoxville News-Sentinel, September 3, 1933, p. C-5.

³⁴"New Life Is Injected into Bijou," Knoxville News-Sentinel, October 1, 1933, p. C-5.

first-rate lookers and dancers, keep them here, provide plenty of costumes, scenery change, and good music—and there wouldn't be any worries about about paying the rent."³⁵

Regardless of these well-intentioned plans and suggestions, however, the Bijou remained a motion picture house through the 1936-37 season with only vaudeville, variety, and dance acts such as The Imperial Hawaiians, Oriental Fantasies, Folies do Nuit, etc.) to break the monotony.

From 1935 throughout the remainder of this study, the Bijou was leased and operated by the Wilby-Kincy Theatres. Although the management's primary intent was to use the theatre as a second run and holdover house for films from the Tennessee Theatre, it was still used frequently for legitimate stage plays as well.

On October 11, 1937, the first legitimate drama in over four years appeared on the Bijou stage. Tovarich by Jacques Deval featured Eugene Leontovich and was given for one performance that evening. Although significant if only for ending the drought of drama on the Bijou stage, Tovarich was also important because of its translator, Robert E. Sherwood, who later wrote another play which was to have even greater significance to the Bijou.

Although the majority of "follies" shows which appeared at the Bijou were of lesser quality than one might see in

³⁵Ibid.

New York or another major show city, such was not always the case. On November 5, 1937, at 3:00 and 8:30 p.m., the New York Winter Garden production of the Ziegfeld Follies performed on the boards of the Bijou. There were over 100 people in the company.

The 1938-39 and 1939-40 seasons offered no legitimate drama on the Bijou stage. The theatre was used as a second run or "holdover" movie house during those years and even did away with the concept of intermingling stage shows and films. The stage shows were resumed during the summer of 1940 (e.g., "Harry Clark's OOMPH Parade featuring 15 professional OOMPH models") and continued into the fall (e.g., "The French Follies: The Show the War Sent Home"). Although these shows were usually booked on Saturday, it was during these years that the trend shifted from Saturday to Monday. The shows would normally play one or two nights and then leave; it became rare for them to remain for any length of time.

Thus, this decade saw the revival of not only the Bijou itself but also of more and more legitimate drama on its stage. There was apparently two reasons for this: first, touring companies began to regain popularity during the 1930's because of the decline of vaudeville; second, the country was just beginning to recover from the grips of the Depression, and the rural areas, in particular, began to

clamor for exposure to those art forms to which they had been denied access for so long. Movies merely whetted their appetites; live stage plays gave them the real thing.

CHAPTER VII

THE FORTIES

It was to be the middle of the 1940-41 season before the stage of the Bijou was to be graced by any legitimate form of dramatic activity. On Friday evening, February 21, 1941, Lillian Hellman's play, The Little Foxes, with a cast headed by Tallulah Bankhead, Dan Duryea, and Frank Conroy appeared for one performance on the Bijou's stage. It had been more than three years since any drama had been performed there, so the preshow publicity was generous. As one article put it, "Producer Herman Shumlin's advertising of it as 'the greatest play of the generation' probably is a little extravagant, but there is little doubt that The Little Foxes, which brings Tallulah Bankhead to the Bijou stage next Friday night, is a rare play-going opportunity."³⁶ A rather unique event awaited the audience of that particular performance, however; the train which brought scenery and company from Louisville was over an hour late, so the manager allowed the audience to watch the stagehands set up the stage

³⁶"Highly Praised Bankhead Play The Little Foxes Coming Friday," Knoxville News-Sentinel, February 16, 1941, p. C-8.

for the performance. Because of such quick and ingenious thinking on his part, there was very little impatience exhibited by the audience.³⁷

There was less of a wait before the next dramatic performance on the Bijou stage. The theatre returned to such acts as Harry Clark's OOMPH in Swingtime and George McCall's Glamor Girl Revue for about two months, but on April 23, 1941, Ruth Chatterton and Hayden Rorke appeared in the comedy, Treat Her Gently, for one performance at 8:15 p.m. Unfortunately, the reviewer in this case did not think very highly of the play or Miss Chatterton. In the next day's paper, he wrote that both "fell far below expectations. Of course, her part did not call for any great acting."³⁸

The 1941-42 season offered several good touring companies to the theatre patrons of Knoxville, beginning with Blossom Time, the dramatization of the life story of composer Franz Schubert, with baritone Everett Marshall in the lead role.

But it was November 12, 1941, that offered what many Knoxvilleians consider the most outstanding theatrical event of the Bijou's history. On that evening, the husband and wife team of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontaine came to the Bijou

³⁷ Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, February 22, 1941, p. 6.

³⁸ Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, April 24, 1941, p. 18.

in playwright Robert E. Sherwood's Pulitzer Prize winning play, There Shall Be No Night. The play was produced on the road by The Playwrights' Company (comprised of such men as Maxwell Anderson, S. N. Behrman, Elmer Rice, and Robert E. Sherwood)³⁹ and The Theatre Guild. Its supporting cast featured Thomas Gomez, Sydney Greenstreet, and a very young Montgomery Clift. The play was very timely in that it portrayed Finland's fight against both the Nazis and the Russians during the early days of resistance of World War II. However, in giving the performance rave reviews, Knoxville News-Sentinel critic L. W. Miller said:⁴⁰

The crowd endured without complaint the stuffiness of the small Bijou Theatre, the bottleneck in the lobby where patrons are jammed like sardines while they attempt to get to the drink stand between acts, and the other inconveniences—proving, undoubtedly, that if more really good plays with really good casts could be brought to an adequate theatre, this city and environs would support them well.

In support of this statement, Miller cited the fact that the Lunts were given seven curtain calls.

December 7, 1941, changed the history of the United States of America with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

³⁹Bijou Theatre Program, November 12, 1941, University of Tennessee, Special Collections, Malcolm Miller Collection.

⁴⁰Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, November 13, 1941, p. 26.

On that afternoon, the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra was presenting a concert in the Bijou with pianist Eugene Buxton as guest soloist. According to one listener of a question and answer radio show on WUOT-FM, Knoxville, in which the author took part on June 28, 1976, the concert was interrupted with the news of Pearl Harbor.

The country at war did not lessen the number of plays coming to the Bijou's stage, however; a little over two weeks later, the Russel Crouse and Howard Lindsay dramatization of the Clarence Day work Life with Father played there with Dorothy Gish and Louis Calhern in the leading roles. The show received very good notices from the reviewers, although one of the larger roles (the Reverend Dr. Lloyd) was done by an understudy because the regular cast member fell while stepping from a train in Charlotte.

The legitimate season concluded on January 19, 1942, when Rose Franken's play Claudia, came to the Bijou. The cast was headed by Mabel Taliaferro, Elaine Ellis, and Stephen Chase. The review pointed up an interesting fact when it stated:⁴¹

At last we are getting a handful of these top drawer Broadway productions per season and any empty seats, though few, are mystifying. The prices aren't movie prices, but you don't have to buy a railroad ticket to New York to see a "Claudia" or a little better or worse, as Knoxvilleians were doing a couple of years ago.

⁴¹Lee Davis, Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, January 20, 1942, p. 5.

Between the different touring companies, the Bijou management (Wilby-Kincy) continued to contract the girl revues and musical variety acts. The spring and summer of 1942 such acts as Meet the Girls, Hooray for Life, and The Renfro Valley Barn Dance (which was broadcast over the radio much like the Grand Ole Opry) appeared at the theatre.

The 1942-43 season opened on November 16, 1942, with Lillian Hellman's play Watch on the Rhine. It was an ironic choice with which to open the season, for the play had been cowinner of the New York Drama Circle Critics' award for best play of the year with a play by Emlyn Williams entitled The Corn Is Green—the very play which was to close the 1942-43 season at the Bijou. Watch on the Rhine brought a cast headed by Lucille Watson, Mady Christians, and Paul Lukas, but Lucille Watson became ill and her understudy, Zannah Cunningham, had to do the role that evening.

The season continued on December 9, 1942, with a comedy by Major Robert Presnell entitled Her First Murder. The show starred Zasu Pitts and featured Victor Payne-Jennings and Marion Gering. The reviewer loved Pitts and the rest of the cast, but abhorred the show and script. He said Pitts "was unable to save the comedy mystery from being one of the worst plays ever to show in Knoxville. A good-sized crowd

demonstrated its feelings by mild, apathetic applause and a general rush for the exits at the final curtain."⁴²

On March 15, 1943, the play mentioned earlier opened to a sold-out house. Emyln Williams' The Corn Is Green was a good play; there is very little doubt or argument about that. The primary reason for the outstanding response from the theatre-going public can be put into two words—Ethyl Barrymore. The reigning dame of the professional stage had deemed Knoxville worthy of her presence, and the Bijou Theatre was the chosen place. Malcolm Miller, the veteran reviewer for the Knoxville Journal, wrote:⁴³

Drama and dramatic art at their heart-throbbing best were exhibited to an enthusiastic audience that filled every seat at the Bijou Theatre last night for the presentation of Ethel Barrymore and her superb supporting cast in The Corn is Green by Emyln Williams. Sixty-four-year-old Ethel Barrymore played 40-year-old "Miss Moffat" with consummate artistry. Facially and vocally she cast 24 years into the discard; only in figure and movement did she seem well past middle age. However, she gave a glowing performance. Her eloquent use of pauses; her delicate vocal nuances; her incisive turn of a phrase; her meaningful gestures and expression were a constant delight.

The 1943-44 season began a little behind schedule; in fact, the autumn was filled with more stage shows such as

⁴²Al Manola, Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, December 10, 1942, p. 16.

⁴³Malcolm Miller, Review, Knoxville Journal, March 16, 1943, p. 12.

Hit Parade of 1944 and Show Time. It was not until February 10, 1944, that the first legitimate dramatic activity of the season occurred at the Bijou, and it was the old favorite Blossom Time. It was not the same version as was normally given, however, as the reviewer pointed out when he said:⁴⁴

A below average rendition of the perennial favorite Blossom Time, modernized by the introduction of slapstick comedy, was given more than average applause by a capacity audience at the Bijou Theatre last night. The original book and lyrics of Blossom Time, a favorite for more than 20 years, were followed none too closely. The comedy . . . was applauded more than the music.

The season's second and, unfortunately for Knoxville's theatre patrons, final presentation was on March 6, 1944, when Junior Miss, written by Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields and directed by Moss Hart, appeared at the Bijou. Evidently the show was of very little significance, for neither newspaper saw fit to review it.

The 1944-45 season opened on October 18, 1944, with the F. Hugh Herbert play, Kiss and Tell. The cast included Lila Lee, Walter Gilbert, and June Dayton. It received fair and polite reviews, but the critics saw nothing extraordinary in either the show or the players.

⁴⁴Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, February 11, 1944, p. 5.

The season continued with a unique entry into the playbill. On October 23, 1944, The Merry Widow, with music by Hungarian composer Franz Lehar, was presented in a ballet/opera format by a company from the Boston Opera Company. It only attracted enough theatre-goers to fill two-thirds of the house, and they recalled the cast for only two curtain calls. One critic claimed that it was "strictly a stock level production" highlighted by "choppy pickup of cues."⁴⁵

As the new year rolled around, so did a series of new productions for the Bijou's stage. On January 8, 1945, The Student Prince starring Alexander Gray appeared there. Although Gray had been given outstanding preshow publicity, he was given no special treatment in the reviews, and the show was said to be "at its best a creditable achievement and at its less entertaining moments was listless and routine."⁴⁶

The second show of the new year offered not only one of the world's greatest plays, but an outstanding cast with which to complement it. Ibsen's A Doll's House brought such stars as actress Jane Darwell, who had won the 1940 Oscar for best supporting actress in The Grapes of Wrath, British actor

⁴⁵Review, Knoxville Journal, October 24, 1944, p. 14.

⁴⁶Review, Knoxville Journal, January 9, 1945, p. 4.

H. B. Warner (real name Henry Bryan Warner Lickford), and the Czechoslovakian actor Francis Lederer. The reviewer gave the entire show (and particularly Jane Darwell) rave reviews, and concluded that "Ibsen would have appreciated the entire show."⁴⁷

The next presentation on the Bijou stage did not cause as much excitement. On January 30, 1945, a show entitled Good Night Ladies came to the theatre, but, as with a few others before, it did not excite the reviewers enough for them to even make mention of the show the next day.

Life with Father, first seen at the Bijou shortly after the outbreak of World War II, returned to its stage on February 16, 1945, with a cast which included Carl Benton Reid as a "merely adequate" Father and Betty Linley as the seemingly suppressed Mother whose "acting alternated between wilful interpretation and lethargy." The reviewer pointed out that "the backdrop sagged with age,"⁴⁸ but made no mention of the show doing the same.

Noel Coward's comedy Blithe Spirit featuring Mona Barrie, Reginald Denny, and Lillian Harvey appeared on the stage of the Bijou as the season's final offering on March 20, 1945.

⁴⁷Pat Ford, Review, Knoxville Journal, January 16, 1945, p. 8.

⁴⁸Jean Cameron, Review, Knoxville Journal, February 17, 1945, p. 10.

Although often acclaimed as one of Coward's best, the play did not create enough interest among the newspaper critics to elicit even the smallest mention in the following day's papers.

The 1945-46 season was short and, unfortunately, not too sweet. There was only one offering of legitimate drama during that season. On October 15, 1945, a play entitled School for Brides appeared at the theatre. Its cast featured Lester Allen, Ethel Britton, Warren Ashe, and Mady Correll, but neither the play nor the cast created any stir among the local critics; in fact, it once again did not make the next day's papers.

There were the usual revues during that year, however. Such stage acts as Make It Snappy, Atomic Scandals, and La Vie Paree were the highlights of the revue season.

The 1946-47 season saw the beginning of a new trend in terms of the use of the Bijou Theatre. On November 11, 1946, by special arrangement, the University of Tennessee Playhouse Players presented one performance of Rose Franken's play Another Language. This group of student and community performers were a relatively new group and were directed by Dr. Paul Soper of the English Department (later Chairman of the Speech and Theatre Department). The group normally presented their plays in the Tyson Junior High School

Auditorium, but, in this one instance, used the Bijou for an "overflow" performance.⁴⁹

According to Dr. Soper, the management of the Bijou and The University of Tennessee reached an agreement whereby the Playhouse Players could use the theatre for their productions on Wednesday and Thursday evening for \$200 per performance. Scenery could be unloaded and set on Sunday evening prior to the performances and rehearsals could be held on Monday and Tuesday. There was no charge for rehearsal periods.⁵⁰

On December 5, 1946, in an unusual twist to the types of revues which were the norm for the Bijou, the Grand Ole Opry from Nashville appeared on its stage. Then, less than two weeks later, on December 18, 1946, the first in a series of new concert presentations occurred. The Knoxville Civic Music Association developed the idea for a season of classical, operatic, and pops concerts, for which one could buy a subscription. The season was initiated with a performance on that evening of the Salzedo Concert Ensemble. Unfortunately, the papers saw fit not to review this opening night.

On January 31, 1947, the season's first professional performance occurred with a touring company bringing

⁴⁹Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, February 2, 1947, p. C-6.

⁵⁰Dr. Paul Soper, telephone interview, Knoxville, Tennessee, July 15, 1976.

Norman Krasna's Dear Ruth to the Bijou stage. There were no reviews, although it was the first professional show in sixteen months.

The University of Tennessee Playhouse Players presented Sean O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock for three evenings beginning February 4, 1947. The newspapers noted that this was the "first time that a Playhouse production has been presented for its entire run in an uptown theatre."⁵¹

One week after the play closed, the second of the Knoxville Civic Music Association Concerts was presented, featuring Sylvia Zaremba, a fifteen-year-old Polish-American piano prodigy. This time the reviewers were there and were very complimentary of both the pianist and the concept of the series.

It was March 22, 1947, which brought the highlight of the season to the Bijou stage. Shakespearean actor Maurice Evans brought his G.I. version of Hamlet to Knoxville, and, although it was done in modern instead of period dress, the impact and music of the language was evidently not lessened in any way. Malcolm Miller of the Knoxville Journal commented that "the Evans' Hamlet was the finest Hamlet seen in Knoxville since the days of Sothern and Marlowe."⁵² But, he

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Malcolm Miller, Review, Knoxville Journal, March 23, 1947, p. 3A.

continued, "it was not equal to the Hamlet of John Gielgud."⁵³ The producer of this show was Michael Todd, who later was to become a famous Hollywood producer and married to actress Elizabeth Taylor.

Another community effort was presented at the Bijou for three days beginning March 18, 1947. The Knoxville Civic Opera, in cooperation with the Junior Chamber of Commerce, performed Victor Herbert's The Red Mill. It starred Lowell Blanchard, who was a radio personality in Knoxville for many years. The show's significance to the community as a whole was pointed up in Gunby Rule's review on the day after opening night in which he stated, "An important part of any city's cultural growth is the opportunity provided for its talented citizens to express themselves."⁵⁴

Louis Kaufmann, violinist, was the third person in the Knoxville Civic Music Association Concert Series, and appeared at the Bijou on March 26, 1947. There were no reviews of his performance.

The University of Tennessee Playhouse finished its season with a three-day run beginning April 15, 1947, of Moss Hart and George S. Kaufmann's The Man Who Came to Dinner, in which the authors poked fun at their friend

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, March 19, 1947, p. 5.

Alexander Wolcott. The show received no reviews from the local press.

The final two concerts in the Knoxville Civic Music Association series were probably two of the best ever performed in Knoxville. On April 24, 1947, a young Metropolitan Opera baritone, who had only debuted a short two years before, appeared on the stage of the Bijou. The reviewer praised the young man's voice to the highest, but said that, although the singer himself seemed familiar with his program, the audience did not seem to be. The reviewer continued to say that before his next appearance in Knoxville the young man should reevaluate his repertoire. The baritone? None other than Robert Merrill! The reviewer did praise the theatre itself in his critique by saying, "The intimacy and splendid acoustics of the Bijou Theatre lend much to the enjoyment of any concert there."⁵⁵

The final concert for the series occurred exactly one week later when Pennsylvania-born mezzo-soprano Blanche Theblom graced the stage of the Bijou. Her performance was greeted by fantastic reviews from the critics without the slightest suggestion for change in repertoire or interpretation.

At the end of the 1946-47 season, it was announced that the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra would move to the Bijou

⁵⁵ Gunby Rule, Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, April 25, 1947, p. 6.

Theatre at the beginning of the next season and use the facility as its permanent home.⁵⁶ The orchestra, under the baton of David Van Vactor, would feature guest soloists at various times throughout the season as well as just the Symphony as a unit.

The 1947-48 season opened with a University of Tennessee Playhouse production of the Maxwell Anderson play, Joan of Lorraine, on November 19, 1947. The play only ran for two performances. The Knoxville Symphony Orchestra opened their season on December 9, 1947, playing as a unit without the help of guest artists.

One of the last instances of a touring company playing the stage of the Bijou was on January 8, 1948, when the Barter Theatre from Abingdon, Virginia, brought the Oscar Wilde play, The Importance of Being Earnest, to Knoxville. The production was sponsored by the Junior League of Knoxville. The reviewer reported that "The play proceeded as it might have on its first night with most of the catch lines and surprise scenes still punchy in their Victorian setting. Individually the participants were somewhat better than adequate."⁵⁷ He went on to make further comment about the attitude of Knoxville audiences toward the dramatic

⁵⁶ "Symphony to Move to Bijou," Knoxville News-Sentinel, May 4, 1947, p. C-6.

⁵⁷ Gunby Rule, Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, January 9, 1948, p. 12.

arts when he said, "The long dearth of drama here is undoubtedly contributory to the apathy with which anything short of an epic is received."⁵⁸ For Knoxville it was evidently either good drama or no drama at all!

There was one sad note to the Barter's visit to Knoxville. It seems that "clothes, personal property, suitcases and trunks valued at more than \$800 were stolen from a Barter Theatre bus parked in the 200 block of West Hill Avenue"⁵⁹ during their performance.

The first Knoxville Civic Music Association Concert of the 1947-48 season took place on January 12, 1948, and featured the Griller String Quartet. It must have been a superb concert, for the reviewer stated:⁶⁰

The performance of the ensemble was so nearly perfect that aside from identification no special mention of any single player will be attempted. There were no peaks, for there were no valleys. The pianissimos of the quartet were so delicate that the normally good acoustics of the Bijou Theatre were taxed. . . . The hush on the audience was such that the loudest sound heard was the patter of the rain outside.

The remainder of the season was filled with Knoxville Symphony Orchestra concerts (Ralph Hollander, violinist;

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹"Barter Company Robbed," Knoxville News-Sentinel, January 9, 1948, p. 1.

⁶⁰Gunby Rule, Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, April 22, 1948.

Teresa Orrego Salsa, contralto; Knoxville Male Chorus), University of Tennessee Playhouse productions (Pygmalion, Dinner at Eight), and Knoxville Civic Music Association Concerts (Big Four Piano Quartet; Alexander Kipnis, bass). The Kipnis appearance on April 21, 1948, brought the most outstanding reviews. The critic felt that both the proper time and place were blended superbly for a memorable concert. The Bijou Theatre was the "proper place . . . an intimate, cozy hall where the friends of music are gathered and where hushed pianissimos echo in the farthest corners."⁶¹

The 1948-49 season, the final one with which we will deal, was filled with what had become the usual fare for Knoxville audiences (stage revues, Knoxville Symphony Orchestra Concerts, Knoxville Civic Music Association Concerts, University of Tennessee Playhouse productions) and was highlighted by three primary events. On January 5 and 6, 1949, the Barter Theatre returned to Knoxville and the Bijou to present George Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man. The show was greeted by warm reviews. In the University of Tennessee Playhouse production of Sidney Howard's 1925 play, They Knew What They Wanted, the role of the priest, small as it was, caught the eye of the audience and critic, and he made mention of it in his review. The young man who played that role later went on to Broadway and films, where he played

⁶¹Gunby Rule, Review, Knoxville News-Sentinel, April 22, 1948, p. 21.

such outstanding roles as Edward Rutledge in 1776 and the lead in the Broadway play, Shenandoah, for which he won a Tony. His name? John Cullum. The final Knoxville Music Association Concert brought soprano Eileen Farrell from the Metropolitan Opera to the Bijou stage. Malcolm Miller, in his review, called her performance "some of the grandest singing ever heard in Knoxville."⁶²

⁶²Malcolm Miller, Knoxville Journal, February 24, 1949, p. 25.

CHAPTER VIII

EPILOGUE

This study ends at this point in time because the day of the legitimate touring company was over. The Bijou was still used occasionally by The University of Tennessee until it built a facility of its own in the mid fifties. Movies returned to the theatre, with Saturday morning shows for children becoming one of its most popular features. During the sixties, however, the theatre became the home of pornographic films, and it is for this use that the Bijou is remembered today by many of the city's residents.

At this writing, the future of the Bijou Theatre is looking much brighter. Saved from demolition by a group of concerned citizens and their restoration campaign, the theatre stands as a monument to the Golden Age of the legitimate theatre in Knoxville. The history is important, but the future use of the theatre is of equal importance.

The acoustics are still outstanding ("unsurpassed by any other theatre in the Southeast"⁶³) and, although it will only seat between 1,300 and 1,500 which makes it relatively impractical for touring companies to use it with regularity

⁶³"Lamar House-Bijou Theatre," Pamphlet authored by Dr. William MacArthur and distributed by Knoxville Heritage, Inc., 1976.

(particularly in light of the Auditorium-Coliseum facility), its use as a community facility for children's theatre, community theatre, community musical organizations, and the professional company out of Clarence Brown Theatre on the campus of The University of Tennessee, makes its restoration not only feasible but practical. It is the author's hope that this practicality, combined with the realization of its historical importance to the city of Knoxville, will trigger positive action towards the theatre's renovation and future use.

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APPENDIX



Figure 1. Bijou Theatre, opening night, taken by James E. Thompson between Acts II and III.

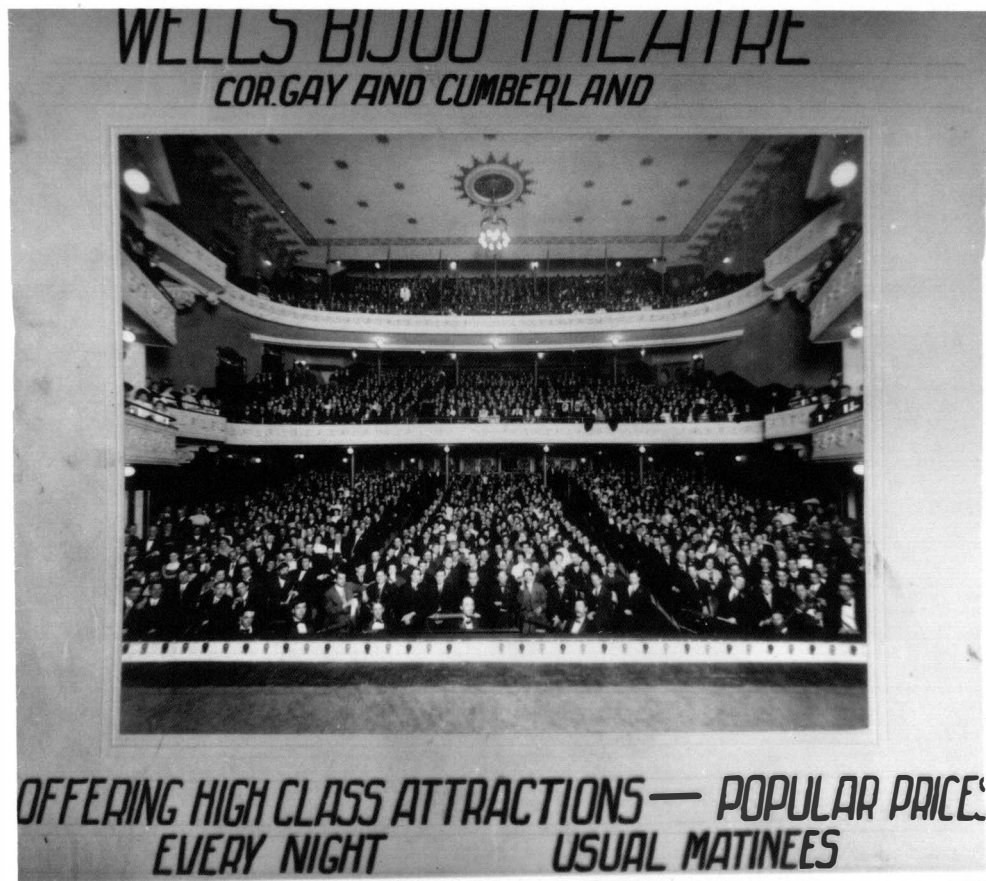


Figure 2. Advertisement made from opening night photograph.

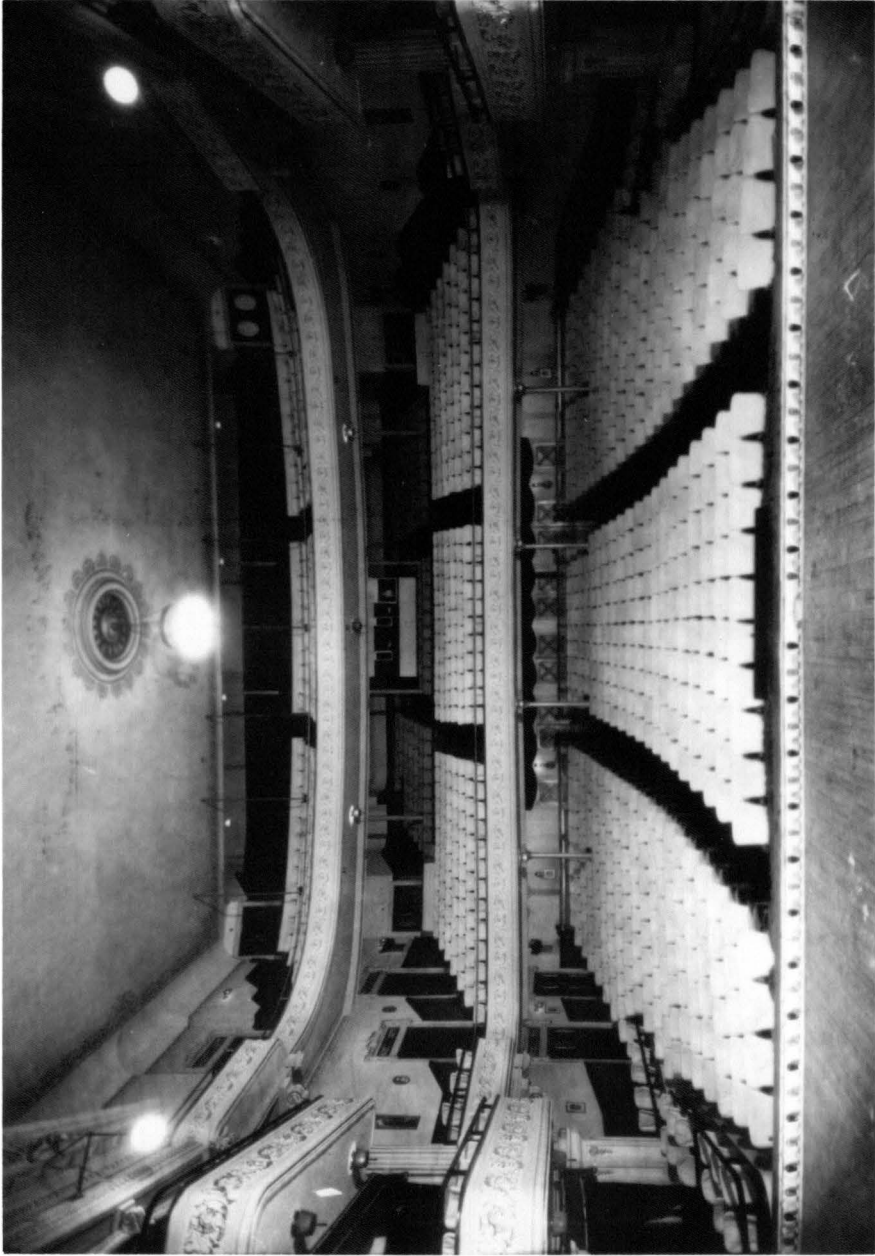


Figure 3. Interior, Bijou Theatre, Circa 1920.



Figure 4. Interior, Bijou Theatre, Circa 1920.



Figure 5. Exterior, Bijou Theatre, Circa 1920.

VITA

Robert Archibald Ellis, Jr. was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on December 18, 1951. He attended elementary schools in that city and was graduated from Holston High School in 1969. The following September he entered Emory and Henry College in Virginia, and in June 1973, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. He then entered the University of Tennessee College of Law where he remained until January, 1975, at which time he enrolled in the University of Tennessee Graduate School with a major in Speech and Theatre. He accepted an assistantship in the department during the 1975-76 school year and hopes to complete his Master of Arts in August, 1976.

He has been appointed to the position of Chairman of the Speech and Theatre Department and Director of the Theatre of Anderson College, Anderson, South Carolina, pursuant to the receipt of his degree.