

THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK STAGE

By ORAL SUMNER COAD

PART II

FROM THE CIVIL WAR TO 1871¹

1861

THE first year of the Civil War was a lean one so far as New Brunswick amusements were concerned, unless five minstrel shows and two circuses are to be considered adequate fare. But 1861 brought a new source of entertainment to the city, namely, the stereopticon. This machine apparently was first operated here on October 9th and 10th when an assortment of views ranging from architecture to the Southern Rebellion was shown. The place of exhibition was a room known as Lyceum Hall on the corner of George and Albany Streets, occupied today by the Strand Theatre. The building had recently been the home of the Second Dutch Church, but when that society moved diagonally across the street to its new edifice early in 1861, the old house was transformed into a public hall. Following this introduction of the novelty, stereopticon shows were frequently advertised during the ensuing months. For example, on December 4th Lyceum Hall housed an exhibition, using two cameras, of "Moving and Dissolving Views" of the Rebellion. How the movement was achieved is not revealed. Another event of the year at Lyceum Hall was a series of readings on November 13th and 20th by H. R. Ball, a professional elocutionist, of the inescapable *Lady of Lyons* and Sheridan Knowles' *The Hunchback*.

1862-1863-1864

Perhaps a desire for temporary respite from the strain and anxiety of war explains the unusual prevalence of minstrel

¹ Part I of this article appeared in the *Journal* for December, 1941.

programs at this time, at least thirty evenings being devoted to burnt-cork amusement during these three years. Among the Ethiopian comedians that purveyed good cheer at Greer's Hall were some of the best troupes on the road, including Christy's, Wood's, Sandford's, Campbell's, Morris Brothers', and Carn-cross and Dixey's. And circuses continued to exhibit, of course—at the rate of three or four each year. Magicians, who were sometimes ventriloquists besides, were also much in evidence, one of them, Professor Carl, charging an admission fee of only six cents, and another, Professor Adrien, who advertised himself as "the Prestidigitational Philosopher of the age," demanding a quarter, while Professor Wittifelder provided a program in which he cut off and restored a person's head for the reasonable sum of twenty-five cents. At this time too a novel form of amusement was appearing: on October 31, 1862, Professor Wallace illustrated various aspects of spiritualism "without recourse to spirits;" on March 24 and 26, 1863, Professor Wiseman exposed spiritualism; and on April 15, 16, and 18, 1864, the Davenport Brothers, mediums, made spirits appear—or at least advertised their intention of doing so. Another curiosity was Dr. Allen's exhibition on April 13 and 15, 1863, "of the marvelous and amusing effects of LAUGHING GAS."

A special badge of merit for originality should have gone to Captain Williams for his South Sea Whaling Voyage, which sailed the stormy waters of the Greer's Hall stage for five nights between May 18 and 22, 1863. The Captain, using an actual whaleboat and a crew of six, as well as a set of paintings for background, described and directed the activities of whale fishing while his men acted out the episodes. New Brunswick was delighted. Ellinger and Newcombe's Great Moral Exhibition and Parlor Opera of October 15, 16, and 17, 1863, promised almost anything by its title; it actually provided three dwarfs, ranging from seventeen to twenty-nine inches in height, and several vocalists, presumably of normal dimensions, among them a comedian who would sing an extemporaneous song on any subject the audience proposed.

A minor dramatic event of 1864 was a performance at Greer's Hall of *Robert Emmett* on March 30th, the part of Darby O'Gaft being taken by J. Williams of New York, and the other rôles by local amateurs presumably. Of rather more importance

in the field of amateur theatricals was the activity of a German group in 1864. On April 11th the German Glee Club Eintracht held a "dramatic soiree" at Saenger Hall, formerly a gymnasium, on Richmond Street. The actors offered *The Night Watchman*, a farce in German, and *The Irish Haymaker*, a farce in English. At a second "soiree" on May 2nd the program again contained two farces, each of one act, *Die Zerstreuten* and *The Limerick Boy*. Another dramatic evening on May 16th was announced without the bill of the day, and a fourth took place on July 12th, when *Lorenz and His Sister*, a one-act burlesque with music, was given.

While we have excluded concerts and other strictly musical events from our survey, we should find room to mention a visit by the Holman National Opera Troupe, a well known family organization, on May 4, 5, and 6, 1864, when they presented Donizetti's *The Daughter of the Regiment*, Rossini's *Cinderella*, and Bellini's *La Sonnambula*, much to the satisfaction of the auditors. But the Holmans never came back, perhaps because at the close of their last performance some "scamps" turned off the gas at the meter, and a riotous demonstration followed, which greatly shocked the *Fredonian*.

1865

The last year of the war was marked by somewhat more activity and variety in the amusement field than any previous war year had shown. Two dioramas with a difference call for brief citation. Davies and Company's Polyrama of the War was accompanied, on February 20th and 21st, by an unusual program consisting of comic character songs by Miss Emma Stanley and a "laughable [but unnamed] farce each evening." Two months later Chase and Newcomb held forth for five nights with their "GREAT WORLD EXHIBITION OF LIFE-LIKE MOVING FIGURES AND GIGANTIC MUSEUM OF ART." Further information would be welcome but is not forthcoming. We learn, however, that Chase and Newcomb provided the additional attractions of a concert of music and 150 beautiful presents to be given away each evening. Let us hope there was at least one paying attendant for each gift.

On March 27th and 28th occurred the first New Brunswick appearances of Tony Pastor, the principal American perfecter

of what we today know as vaudeville. His Mammoth Combination Opera, Farce, Minstrel, and Pantomime Troupe was an assemblage by means of which he at last arrived, to quote Dr. Odell, "at his long-possessed throne as prince of 'variety' purveyors."² Not the least reason for the wide favor which Tony enjoyed is to be found in this promise from his announcement in the *Fredonian*:

The programme will embody all the latest gems of Opera, Comedy, Farce and Minstrelsy, unalloyed by any indelicate acts or expressions—which, although they might satisfy the vitiated taste of the depraved—would cause a blush to mantle the brow of modesty. Our motto—fun without vulgarity.

Legitimate drama was provided this year by Higgins, Sherry, and Harrison's Grand Combination. Opening on May 11th with *The Lady of Lyons* and *Cousin Joe*, the company performed for three nights, but we are deprived of their other bills by a gap in the file of the *Fredonian* for this year. Of the company's merits I know nothing except for the paper's vague assertion of its high standing in the profession and of its possession of the necessary scenery and paraphernalia. A higher degree of talent was no doubt shown by Nicoll McIntyre of Wallack's Theatre, who, on July 27th, gave a dramatic and musical entertainment, in the course of which he rendered several scenes from standard comedies, including an impersonation of Lord Dundreary, the ineffable English swell in Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin*, a part he had performed "for upwards of 1,000 nights in England and America."

In respect to the inevitable black-face programs during these twelve months, we need merely to record that their number was eight or more. The circuses, on the other hand, appear to have dwindled to a single one, Stone and Rosston's, which arrived on July 10th, presenting as a special attraction Cullen's band of Iroquois Indians, who depicted their tribal dances and rites, and enacted a tableau of Pocahontas saving Captain Smith.

By way of a final addition to the year's diversified attractions, Professor Donaldson, the wizard, reappeared with a fresh accomplishment. As a build-up for his program of necromancy on July 25th, he gave a free exhibition in Commerce

² G. C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, VII (1931), 707.

Square, walking and performing on a tight rope stretched from the top of the Bull's Head Hotel to the top of the Paterson Block.

1866

The report for this year can be only fragmentary because of the incompleteness of the newspaper files. We learn that the Bohemian Glass Blowers were in town again for three days about mid-January; that the Neafie Dramatic Association (presumably under the direction of J. A. J. Neafie, who was a fairly prominent actor at the Bowery and other New York theatres) gave one of its "CHASTE AND SELECT ENTERTAINMENTS" on March 17th, consisting of an unspecified drama and farce; and that Tony Pastor's Combination returned on May 17th. Apparently magicians were doing a good business: the "Fakir of Ava" spent a week at Greer's Hall in January—thanks in part to the hundred presents he gave away at each performance—and four evenings in November with the aid of John W. Whiston, humorist; while Professor Anderson provided a "World of Magic," with presents, for a week in December. As for circuses and minstrel shows, my feeble roster of two each indicates the inadequacy of the information for 1866.

1867

Explain it as one will, 1867 was by far the most crowded year New Brunswick amusement-seekers had ever seen. Aside from some sixteen evenings of "burnt-cork opera," two circuses, one Indian show, and an exhibition of tumbling and acrobatics by the Red Dragon Troupe of twenty-four Japanese and the Beni Zoug-Zoug Tribe of thirty Arabs, there were no fewer than eighteen programs of magic, in one of which Hartz the Illusionist introduced "the wondrous head, the real Indian basket trick," and "the instantaneous growth of flowers," while in a series of three others Logrenia the Conjuror displayed his trained birds, learned mice, and performing Russian cats. In addition three variety troupes appeared at Greer's Hall: on February 12th and 13th Skiff's Comedy Combination, "Comprising every variety of Performance known to the Stage," on July 2nd Tony and Billy Pastor's Combination Troupe with

Professor Tanner's performing dogs and monkeys, and on August 26th Sam Collyer's Combination, providing music, dancing, Indian club exercises, and fun. Moreover there were, on October 3rd, three programs of songs, dances, and burlesques by General Tom Thumb and his wife, Commodore Nutt, and Miss Minnie Warren, whose combined weight was a trifle over a hundred pounds. So great was the rush to see the dwarfs that hundreds were turned away.

But for our purpose these attractions are all of secondary importance in comparison with the twenty or more performances of legitimate drama by three different companies that played at Greer's Hall in 1867. May 13th brought Scott's Ocean Yacht Dramatic Troupe of about fifteen people, including Hattie Rainforth, Samuel Rainforth, and Mrs. A. Glassford, from the New York, Cincinnati, and other theatres. They opened with the wearisome *Lady of Lyons* and *The Dumb Belle*, a farce. Other plays presented during their two weeks in New Brunswick were *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (inevitably), *The Drunkard*, and Tom Taylor's popular *Ticket-of-Leave Man*. For May 22nd was announced the appearance of "the noted tragedian" (unknown, however, to Odell's *Annals*), Fred Alexander, "now a resident of New-Brunswick," in *Don Caesar de Bazan*. The *Fredonian* of May 24th gave the Scott Troupe a long and highly laudatory notice, pronouncing its performances the best "we" ever saw outside of large cities. The players were commended for doing and saying nothing that could offend taste or morals and for presenting plays that conferred a moral benefit as well as entertainment.

Heretofore [the comment reads in part] the Drama has been most wretchedly represented in this City. The companies who have been here have generally been charlatans, who have most egregiously humbugged our citizens with their coarse and in some cases immoral representations. Our people had therefore become disgusted with dramatic representations, and could hardly be led to believe that any thing good or decent could come from the stage—at least from travelling dramatic companies—and on the first night of the appearance of Scott's troupe here the performance was but slimly attended. Since the first night, the attendance has been generally large, on many occasions Greer's Hall being literally jammed with delighted audiences.

On July 17th Winner's New York Dramatic Troupe arrived for a week's stay, with Mrs. A. Glassford, Katie Glassford, Mr.

and Mrs. J. P. Winter, W. Barret, and W. Winner in its ranks. Among its dramas and farces were Dion Boucicault's *The Streets of New York*, *The Irish Cobbler*, *Lucretia Borgia*, or *the Poisoner*, *The Gun Maker of Moscow*, *The Swiss Cottage*, *The Irish Heiress*, *Ireland as It Is*, or *Landlords and Tenants*, *Black-Eyed Susan*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. But despite the fact that the (possibly fickle) *Fredonian* pronounced this company considerably better than Scott's Troupe, especially on the male side, the attendance seems to have been somewhat meagre.

No such complaint could have been made in behalf of the third stock company of 1867, Holmes Grover's European Dramatic Alliance, which spent October 31st and November 1st in the city. J. Holmes Grover was a specialist in Irish parts, and in such plays as *The Irishman's Fortune*, *The Irish Lion*, and *Handy Andy*, or *the Blundering Irishman*, he appealed to the current taste, prevalent in England and America, for Irish drama. But Grover's real attraction lay in the fact that he was, according to the *Fredonian*, "our enterprising young townsman," who had recently played a starring engagement in the South (and the issue of October 25th printed a highly laudatory excerpt from the Norfolk *Virginian* to prove it). Reference was also made to his appearances in the principal British theatres. Accordingly Greer's Hall, especially at his second performance, was crammed with a delighted audience. I am sorry to be obliged to add that Professor Odell describes Grover, on the basis of his New York record, as a "feeble star."³

1868

Seemingly the local appetite for dramatic entertainment was temporarily sated by the comparative riches of 1867, for the offerings of the following year were very much leaner. Circuses, magicians, and minstrel shows (including the California Female Minstrels) abounded as of yore, but there was a dearth of plays. Professor R. R. Raymond of Brooklyn offered an approximation thereof when he read *Twelfth Night* on March 16th. A melodramatic parody was provided on May 18th by Cotton and Sharpley's Minstrels, who advertised *Under the*

³ G. C. D. Odell, *op. cit.*, IX (1937), 348.

Gaslight, or the Streets of New York "with the Great Railroad Scene and Terrific Conflagration," which proved to be an Ethiopian extravaganza at the expense of the two popular thrillers named in the double title. Three days later a Burlesque and Opera Troupe from the Fifth Avenue Theatre, made up in part of Millie Sackett, Lina Edwin, and M. B. Pike, who were later to be well known on the New York stage, presented a program of selections from Offenbach's opera, *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein*, and two comedies, *The Maid of Tyrol* and *The Shoemaker of New Brunswick*. Meagre fare withal after the abundance of 1867.

1869

The first six weeks of 1869 are a blank so far as our newspaper files are concerned, but when the record is resumed we find black-face minstrelsy still unassailably pre-eminent. One result of the burnt-cork epidemic was the organization of a local troupe, known as the New Brunswick Minstrels. This band gave what was probably its very first public performance on March 10th, including in its program "the laughable Farce entitled the Wickedest Den in New-Brunswick." The *Fredonian's* comment reads:

This troupe of *native* artists propose to demonstrate to the citizens of New-Brunswick, at Greer's Hall, this evening, that it is folly to invite wandering, or *foreign* minstrels to this classic City, when we have plenty of Ethiopian talent at home.

Apparently the success of the "*native* artists" was such as to fire them with zeal to invade foreign fields themselves, for the *Fredonian* of November 27th, announcing another performance of theirs for November 30th, remarks:

A company of young men of this City have organized themselves into a Minstrel and Burlesque Troupe, under the proprietorship and management of Reeves, Lyons and Wilson, and before starting on their tour through the West, by request of some friends, intend to give one entertainment in their native City.

A form of variety program was offered on March 11th, 12th, and 13th by the Zanfretta Combination Troupe, which had recently been connected with the long famous Ravel Family of gymnasts and pantomimists. The Zanfretta Company like-

wise consisted of tight rope artists, athletes, dancers, and pantomimists, with the addition of musical clowns and "Negro Eccentricities." Their skill earned them a two-night return engagement in October. Billy Pastor's Burlesque Combination, of male and female composition, entertained with minstrelsy, opera, mimicry, and burlesque on August 25th. Buckley's Serenaders (minstrels) on November 16th offered a three-act burlesque of Donizetti's opera, *Lucrezia Borgia*; and on December 2nd and 3rd Rupert's Excelsior Company entertained with comedy, farce, and burlesque of some sort, but was loath to present a revealing advertisement of its wares.

1870

The attractions of 1870 were somewhat more numerous than those of the two previous years. The Bohemian Glass Blowers spent four evenings in February and March at Greer's Hall, Billy Pastor and troupe returned to town in March, and local talent presented *tableaux vivants* for two nights of the same month for the building fund of the Y.M.C.A.

June 13th saw the beginning of a week's engagement by Glassford and Winter's Theatrical Troupe. The opening piece was *Fanchon, the Cricket*, a play by Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer, which the irresistible acting of Maggie Mitchell had made a tremendous favorite with American audiences since 1862. The title rôle was taken in New Brunswick by Katie Glassford, the manager's daughter, whose acting far exceeded the expectations of the *Fredonian*. Indeed the company as a whole was praised for its success considering that it labored under many disadvantages "for want of room." (The first intimation of the city's need for a more capacious playhouse.) Other plays acted by this company were the long popular melodrama, *The French Spy*, *The Hidden Hand*, based on Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's novel, Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*, with Katie Glassford in the exquisite Agnes Robertson's part of Eily O'Connor, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Ireland As It Was*.

Among the several minstrel troupes this year was Kelly and Leon's company, which advertised forty-seven people on the stage at one time, a number contrasting revealingly with the six performers of the band that exhibited here on April 19, 1848. Of the forty-seven one of the most admired was Leon

himself, whose impersonations of the "colored female" were pronounced unbelievably lifelike. The Skiff and Gaylord Minstrels showed commendable originality by performing with white faces and costumes.

After another visit on September 5th by the Zanfretta Troupe with new pantomimes, acts, and dances, the amusement-seekers had a chance to patronize home talent on September 13th and 14th when the Young Men's Catholic Club gave *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* and followed it with a farce, at St. Peter's Hall, Bayard Street. The *Fredonian* described the production as rather good except for the use of too many expletives that seemed out of place in such an environment. On Thanksgiving evening the same club presented *The Arrival of Dickens*, a drama, and *The Village Ghost*, a farce.

To complete the year's unusually varied program, Greer's Hall housed a freak show on December 8th and 9th, the freaks consisting of a bearded lady, a giant, a giantess, and a two-headed mulatto girl, who could carry on two different conversations simultaneously; and the next night the same stage was occupied by the Satsuma Royal Japanese Troupe of twenty acrobats, jugglers, and equilibrists.

1871

During the year 1871 New Brunswick was favored by an uncommon number of stock companies, the first of which, the Amy Stone Sensation Troupe, held forth on January 25th, 26th, and 27th. Amy Stone was an ambitious young actress, who at this time was beginning to play leads in lesser theatres of the New York area. Her principal associate, E. W. Marston, had for some years been a fairly prominent comedian at the Bowery Theatre. Their opening play, *Fanchon*, drew a crowded house, which was delighted with the smoothness of the performance. This was followed the second night by *Katbleen Mavourneen* and *Solon Skingle*, Marston taking the title rôle in the latter, as he was to do at the Bowery Theatre the next year. *Solon Skingle*, incidentally, was the first Yankee play to be given in New Brunswick, so far as our record shows, though the type had been popular in America for decades. The third night offered *Cigarette* with Amy in the name part, which she was to play for two weeks in New York in 1873.

Amy Stone was succeeded on March 13th by the Higgins Dramatic Troupe, which presented, during its four days at Greer's Hall, *Hunted Down, or the Christmas Curse*, *The Hidden Hand*, *Rip Van Winkle* (a New Brunswick first), and Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight*, with the famous railroad scene showing a train of cars crossing the stage at full speed. Obviously Higgins and Company liked melodrama.

September brought a return of Amy Stone as a partner in Marston and Stone's Dramatic Alliance. Again she opened, on the 6th, with *Fanchon*, which inspired the *Fredonian* to characterize her as "an artiste of unusual versatility of talent . . . she displays powers over the stronger emotions which are equalled by few actresses." And Marston's acting, we are assured, "is simply perfect." The next night brought out *The Pearl of Savoy*, another of Maggie Mitchell's starring vehicles, and on the 8th the town was treated to its first glimpse of *East Lynne*. The "standing room only" sign at these performances indicated that young Miss Stone had a following in New Brunswick.

Among the lesser events of 1871 were visitations from four variety or music hall companies, one of them being Tony Pastor's entire troupe from his Opera House in New York. On June 19th to 22nd the morbidly disposed could satisfy their curiosity by viewing a "Wonderful Double Babe" with a head at either end of its body and four legs in the middle. Stone and Murray's Circus on October 7th included in its attractions a new pantomime, *The Bear and Sentinel*. But probably the citizens were more entertained by a free balloon ascension preceding the show, which was announced as a "JOURNEY AMONG THE CLOUDS," but which, after a five-minute flight, ended ignominiously among broken telegraph wires in Church Street.

Again in 1871 the amateurs were active. On March 1st Darrow's Cornet Band, a local organization, gave a program of music plus a farce called *Stage Struck, or the Great Attraction*. On October 23rd the Young Men's Catholic Social Club again presented *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* and a farce, *The Persecuted Dutchman*. The performance, which was for the aid of the Chicago fire sufferers, drew a crowded house and brought in about \$200. Later in the fall certain "young ladies and gentlemen of New Brunswick" produced three "parlor entertain-

ments" for the benefit of a "worthy cause." The first, held on November 11th at the Grammar School (now Rutgers Preparatory School) on Somerset Street, consisted of charades of the type popular in the Victorian era, which involved a deal of fairly elaborate acting. The second program, also of charades, on November 28th, had to be transferred to Greer's Hall to accommodate the crowd. The third, given on December 15th, was called "Mrs. Jarley's Wax Works," the name of course deriving from *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and the "figgers" being represented by the young people. Historical and humorous chambers and inevitably a chamber of horrors were shown, with explanations by "Mrs. Jarley." If this seems to us a brainless form of entertainment, it should be said in defense of "the young ladies and gentlemen of New Brunswick" that "Mrs. Jarley's Wax Works" were on display at church fairs and similar functions throughout New York at this time.

(Part III will be published next year.)

LIVING WILD ANIMALS
from every clime; also.
The Great Van Amburgh



THE ORIGINAL LION AND TIGER TAMER!
PERFORMING ANIMALS:

*From the New Brunswick Daily Fredonian
April 17, 1862*