

THE MASONIC HALL OPERA HOUSE: A FURTHER CHAPTER IN NEW BRUNSWICK'S STAGE HISTORY

Part II

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Part I of this article, which appeared in the JOURNAL for June 1965, traced the history of the Masonic Hall Opera House from its inception in 1873 through the feeble season of 1880-1881.

1881-1882

THIS season cannot be dismissed so summarily, partly because it contained the date for which everybody would seem to have been waiting ever since Masonic Hall was built. For what should come to town on October 5 save yet another *Humpty Dumpty* troupe, but this one headed by George H. Adams, "emperor of clowns" and a native son of New Brunswick. Apparently he was really a near-genius in his field, which might help to explain the mob of 1,700 that managed to squeeze into the Opera House and the 200 more who had to be turned away.

The house was again packed on November 16 by Steele MacKaye's fabulously popular drama, *Hazel Kirke*, given by a company from the Madison Square Theatre, which included Georgia Cayvan, a rising young actress, and Margaret Cone, sister of Kate Claxton. New Brunswick admired them both.

On December 1 the management, with commendable foresight, brought to the Opera House a young actor and dramatist who was destined to become one of the beloved figures of the American stage, William Gillette of Sherlock Holmes fame. In the title-role of his own light comedy, *The Professor*, the *Times* pronounced him "simply perfect."

A fortnight later occurred one of the most heart-warming events in New Brunswick's stage history when Mary Anderson made her

third visit to present *Romeo and Juliet* with what was described as a powerful company, including J. B. Studley and William Harris. The house was full, and numerous Rutgers students had contrived to get seats in the orchestra. Naturally they had eyes only for the delectable Juliet, and so captivated were they by her beauty and her art that when she responded to a curtain call they could contain themselves no longer but broke out with nine raahs for Mary. After the performance as she stepped into her coach she was surrounded by a crowd of cheering students, who unhitched the horses and themselves drew the actress to her hotel in triumph. There songs and more college yells were forthcoming, which Miss Anderson acknowledged by kissing her hands to the enraptured undergraduates. It would be a safe wager that the incomparable Mary was the pin-up girl of Rutgers for months to come.

As though to make December an unforgettable month, the 27th was devoted to the high art of the elderly Bohemian, Fanny Janauschek, one of the most magnificent actresses of her time. Her vehicle was *Mother and Son*, a tragedy based on a novel by the Swedish Fredrika Bremer. Other notable visitors of this exceptional season were: on January 19 John E. Owens, the extravagantly humorous interpreter of rustic characters, as Solon Shingle in J. S. Jones' *The People's Lawyer*; on March 9 the one-role actor, Frank Mayo, known throughout the nation for his quietly restrained impersonation of the hero in Frank H. Murdock's *Davy Crockett*; and on March 27 De Wolfe Hopper in a play with the apt title of *A Hundred Wives*.

For those not satisfied with any of the fare so far listed, this generous season provided such delights as several Irish comedies, four Tom shows, a melodrama thrillingly displaying a ship on fire in midocean, and Bartholomew's Educated Horses from the Aquarium. (I'm pretty sure these were not sea-horses.)

1882-1883

On September 18 Charlotte Thompson, long famous as Jane Eyre, attracted "the best families" to her new adaptation of the Brontë novel, which was surprisingly advertised as a "laughable comedy drama." Probably the gallery gods replaced the best families 10

nights later at a showing of *Jessie James, the Bandit King*, in which Roan Charger and Bay Raider starred, those complaisant quadrupeds apparently not being unnerved by the gun play and "insane music."

The local Savoyards were gratified on October 2 by a meritorious rendition of *Patience*; and on the 17th seemingly the whole town was enthralled by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with two Topsy's, a pack of Siberian bloodhounds, and a comical donkey. Ada Dyas, an established favorite in New York, couldn't hope to outdraw two Topsy's and a comical donkey, but she did give real satisfaction on the 20th as Lady Gay Spanker, with the aid of George Holland and Barton Hill, in Boucicault's theatrically effective *London Assurance*. An actress destined to become a greater favorite with the American public than Ada Dyas, young Minnie Maddern, the future Mrs. Fiske, was seen here on January 10 in *Fogg's Ferry*, a play of rural life. Even at the age of 18, as in her later years, she impressed by her charming and individual manner of speech. The *Fredonian* found her most winning.

The last day of February brought William Gillette's and Frances Hodgson Burnett's vastly popular *Esmeralda* with an unnamed cast. Play and players were received with much approval. Apparently even more approval was bestowed upon Fanny Janauschek in Schiller's *Mary Stuart* on March 9. In this second appearance the great Bohemian so swayed her audience that it hung with bated breath on her lightest whisper.

The rest of the season was mostly an anti-climax that may as well be omitted from our record.

1883-1884

The inescapable Daly was represented on September 10 by a finished performance of his farcical comedy, 7-20-8, a highly successful adaptation from the German, featuring Clara Fisher Maeder, George Vandenhoff, and Harry Hotto. Dickens fared less well the next evening, the players in *Oliver Twist* being saluted by a shower from the "Bean Brigade," an exacting body of critics, according to the *Times*. Presumably no beans were elicited a week later by E. A. Locke's *Nobody's Claim*, a melodrama about wild and woolly Montana, in which the wildest and woolliest episode was a terrific

combat between a man, a horse, and a bear. As a contrast the New York Opera Company should have been doubly welcome on October 22 in what the *Fredonian* considered a flawless presentation of *The Queen's Lace Handkerchief* by Johann Strauss.

In the main the rest of the season was given over to standbys, with three exceptions worthy of mention: On January 19 the successful farce, *A Bunch of Keys*, by the rising young playwright, Charles H. Hoyt, was seen at the Opera House for the first, but by no means the last, time. April 1 brought a novelty called *Vim*, in which a horse running at top speed remained in full view by means of a revolving stage. On May 9 a group of Rutgers students gave a minstrel show for the benefit of the new hospital. The fashionably dressed audience which filled the theatre was reported to have seen an entertainment that far surpassed many professional exhibitions on the same stage.

It is obvious that New Brunswick's mimic world was suffering from a general decline during the years at which we have now arrived.

1884-1885

The new season soon gave evidence that it had no thought of improving on its predecessor. About the best things it could provide were a musical version of *Peck's Bad Boy and His Pa* with John J. Williams as the "bad boy," which kept a "fashionable" audience in stitches on September 20, and Gillette and Hawtrey's *The Private Secretary* with May Robson on November 25, a source of even more laughter than Mr. Peck and his juvenile delinquent. Perhaps mention should also be made of Mrs. Burton N. Harrison's *A Russian Honeymoon* on July 1. The company giving this adaptation from Eugène Scribe was undistinguished, but its stage manager was a young man named David Belasco.

"Magnificent" scenery seems on occasion to have been a substitute for competent acting these days. In fact, in the opinion of the *Times*, New Brunswick preferred second-rate companies to better talent. But observing that second-rate companies and spectacular investiture alike sometimes failed to attract profitable houses, one discovers at least a partial explanation in the growing mania for roller-skating. At this time a new rink was opened at the corner of Livingston Avenue and

Morris Street, and to this spot the fascination of the sport, with the added inducement of exhibitions by visiting troupes of skaters, drew large crowds—sometimes 800 or 900 nightly. Against such competition the Opera House booked only about half as many attractions as for its first season.

1885-1886

Interspersed through a schedule of clichés appeared a few novelties of some interest. On January 5 came Arthur Wing Pinero's brisk new farce, *The Magistrate*, which gave John T. Raymond a chance to prove that he could shine in another role than Colonel Mulberry Sellers. An innovation of significance—and of some ominousness—may be said to date from January 11 with the arrival of Miss Floy Crowell's stock company for a week of 10-20-30 cent melodrama and sentimentality. Such aggregations, familiar enough at the time, could seldom boast of anything better than modest talent, and their influence could scarcely have induced an elevation of theatrical standards. But undeterred by any such paltry considerations, the New Brunswick public rushed unseeing past the skating rink and packed the Opera House to the doors. *East Lynne* jammed 1,658 people into an auditorium designed for 1,200. The week of May 3 was graced by the stereotyped productions of another 10-20-30 stock company. Again good, though not packed, houses were the rule.

Between these ever-memorable weeks two events that also attracted large numbers did represent a considerably higher level of theatrical entertainment. March 10 brought James O'Neill in his immortal portrayal of Edmond Dantès in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Both his acting and his scenery were hailed with superlatives. And the 22nd of April was made glad by the delights of *The Mikado* sung by the Alfa Norman English Opera Company, which apparently gave one of the finest Gilbert and Sullivan performances yet heard in New Brunswick.

1886-1887

After a few evenings of burnt cork, trained horses, Irish comedy, and the always welcome Maggie Mitchell and Kate Claxton, the

10-20-30s again claimed the boards for the week of November 8. The company, Ida Lewis's, did *Jane Eyre*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, and the like—all to hearty applause. Indeed such was now the appeal of bargain-counter entertainment that during the season six weeks in all were given over to it as purveyed by five different troupes. In their advertisements were listed such further titles as *Ingomar*, *Camille*, *The Lady of Lyons*, and *Little Emily* (based on *David Copperfield*). Somewhat surprisingly one group devoted its week to light opera—*The Chimes of Normandy*, *The Mikado*, *The Queen's Lace Handkerchief*, and others—and despite a top of 30 cents the singers' efforts inspired the *Fredonian* to declare: "Very seldom does a company visit this city which has given such general satisfaction." Could this have been a release from the company's press agent?

The interstices left in the season's schedule by stock were partially filled on November 17 and 18 by the Hanlon Brothers' *Fantasma*, a vast mechanical spectacular with a thin thread of plot; on the 23rd by Daly's recent comedy, *Nancy and Company*, as adapted from the German, in which the admirable Clara Maeder had a prominent part; on March 23 by Gillette's highly successful *Held by the Enemy* with what were advertised as the original cast and scenic effects.

During this season the orchestra came in for criticism from the *Times* for its silence preceding performances and for its very limited repertory, which necessitated the playing of the same piece twice in a single evening.

1887-1888

It seems that even the New Brunswick devotees of cut-rate stock had a saturation point after all, for when the fourth such troupe—obviously a feeble one—took over toward the end of this season, the usually undemanding customers began to protest in vigorous terms. Louise Pomeroy and company served the usual fare in the main, but in the middle of their week they had the temerity to attempt *Hamlet* with Miss P. as the Dane. Maybe there is no connection, but I like to think that the audience was still remembering the leading lady's indiscretion as a would-be Hamlet when it hissed a performance of *Oliver Twist* on Saturday night and when, in the

death scene, a denizen of the gallery shouted, "Kill her!" On the following Monday the *Fredonian*, disregarding any press releases, denounced these "alleged actors" and added: "The drama-loving portion of this community has begun to ask how much longer seventh-rate theatricals are to be palmed off here for first-class plays."

Yet on a higher plane than "seventh-rate theatricals" were a few of the season's attractions: *Hoodman Blind* by Henry Arthur Jones and Wilson Barrett on November 23 with Frederic De Bellville and Viola Allen, both fine players; Charles Hoyt's amusing *A Rag Baby* on January 6; and James O'Neill again in *Monte Cristo* on February 27.

1888-1889

One bright spot in a very ordinary season was achieved on September 14 by the inimitable comedian, Henry E. Dixey, in William Gill's "Burlesque Drama," *Adonis*. As the animated statue Dixey gave great enjoyment to an audience whose enthusiasm was not dampened by a top of \$1.50. Nor was dullness in evidence a week later at a pre-New York showing of *A Brass Monkey*, an uproariously funny piece by Charles Hoyt, who was rapidly becoming New Brunswick's favorite playwright. Of this performance the captious *Times* remarked that "Contrary to the usual order of things the ladies were good looking."

What should have been a satisfactory evening was that of December 7, which brought Sir Charles Young's serious social drama, *Jim, the Penman*, a recent New York triumph, under the direction of A. M. Palmer of the Madison Square Theatre and with a good cast including Ada Dyas, Joseph E. Whiting, Harry Eytinge, and Evelyn Campbell. But the *Times's* curious comment that those present might have asked for "less cutting out of the principal parts" leads one to wonder just what actually happened on that evening.

Probably nobody asked for a refund on April 4 as he left *The Stowaway*, which boasted such features as a full-rigged yacht at sea and a real iron safe blown up on the stage by two real burglars (reformed burglars, let us hope). And surely no one demanded his money back on the 22nd after a vaudeville and extravaganza program provided by the "40 handsomest ladies in the world." More

“select” playgoers seem to have been well pleased on May 2 by David Belasco and H. C. De Mille’s *The Wife*, which had recently completed a long run at the Lyceum Theatre. As usual the cast appearing in New Brunswick (Frank Carlyle, Charles Kent, Eliza Logan, and others) was not the original New York one, but it was under the supervision of Daniel Frohman, the original director.

If, as stated above, this was a very ordinary season, it was made so mainly by five weeks of stock featuring four different 10-20-30 aggregations. To their credit it must be said that they offered some fresh titles, for instance, *Tom Sawyer*, *Faust and Marguerite*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *The Danites* by Joachin Miller.

1889-1890

Thanks to four stock companies and numerous return engagements of thrice-familiar pieces, this was as uninteresting a season as the Opera House had yet devised.

Only four occasions call for mention. *A Legal Wreck*, Gillette’s new play about a New England fishing village, was well liked on October 11, as was Hoyt’s “tremendous farce,” *A Hole in the Ground*, on November 15. Quite a different order of entertainment was provided on February 24 by Thomas W. Keene, a tragedian especially esteemed on the road, in one of Henry Irving’s great parts, the title role in *Louis XI*. The *Home News*, a recent arrival in the local journalistic field, considered the acting of the star and his able support, including George Learock and Lavinia Shannon, by far the best seen here for some years, but it added that the attendance was very meagre because the play was clean and an intellectual treat instead of appealing to the baser passions. For April 14 the major attraction was “a real Edison phonograph,” to be introduced into the play of the evening “with startling effect.” And that is honestly the best I can do for 1889-1890.

1890-1891

Evidence during this autumn that New Brunswick was becoming a theatre center in a small way is found in a newspaper report that large numbers were coming to the Opera House *via* the Raritan Valley Railroad and in several notices that special trains were being

run between this town and South Amboy for the convenience of playgoers. Probably the visitors contributed to the good-sized audiences that greeted three weeks of 10-20-30 this season. The more discerning among them may have witnessed *A Texas Steer* on October 17, one of Hoyt's more mature plays, which was yet to have its New York première; and they may have joined in the vociferous applause earned on November 17 by *Shenandoah*, the greatest drama Bronson Howard was ever to write.

The other principal novelties were E. E. Price's *One of the Bravest* on January 20, one of the numerous plays of the time glorifying the fire-fighter with the aid of spectacularly realistic scenic effects; Gillette's brisk new comedy, *All the Comforts of Home*, with the New York cast including William Faversham, Rose Eytinge, and Bijou Heron on February 18; and the inexhaustible Hoyt's *A Midnight Bell*, a rural comedy less farcical than most of his, on March 28.

During this season of over 40 professional attractions, good and bad, local talent was also exceptionally busy. At least a half dozen amateur performances were given by Rutgers seniors (enacting a farce based on college life by two members of the class), the Catholic young people, and other groups. And of course the local reviewers found everything above criticism.

1891-1892

Several perennial favorites, which were on hand in August and September, gave way to something new on October 12, Abbey Sage Richardson's *The Prince and the Pauper*, a dramatization of Mark Twain's story. What particularly appealed was not so much the play or Daniel Frohman's direction but the currently admired child prodigy, Elsie Leslie, said to be 12 years old, who assumed the roles of Tom Canty and the Prince of Wales. Therein, so the *Home News* averred, she swayed the notably "representative" audience at will.

Melodrama in its most horrendous embodiment was available on November 2 in the then famous *Blue Jeans*. The moment of well-nigh intolerable suspense in this unexcitingly named play was provided by a villain, an entrapped hero, a buzz-saw, and a fearless heroine. *A Barrel of Money* on January 28 gave the hero a chance

to return the compliment by rescuing the heroine from another cruel machine. But these thrillers were out-thrilled on February 9 by *The Limited Mail*, "the heaviest mechanical play ever staged." For the price of a single admission one could witness the flight of the mail-train, the wrecking of the same, the blood-chilling sawmill scene, and the deadly struggle at the lever.

A lively satire on racing entitled *A Straight Tip* created much merriment on March 29, the star being the irresistible James T. Powers. Apparently the heartiest laugh of the evening was earned by a familiar steed from Mr. Ferguson's livery stable which, assuming the role of the winning horse, was led in covered with soap lather. Hoyt comedies, low-priced stock, local talent, and other odds and ends rounded out a meagre season.

1892-1893

Still more meagreness was immediately available. Two comedies with singularly vapid names, *Grimes' Cellar Door* and *The Two Johns*, which had long been regular visitants at the Opera House, dutifully dropped in again, as did other old friends. Nor, judging from their titles, could much have been expected from *Miss Roarer* (with horses and hounds), *O'Dowd's Neighbors*, *The Scout* (with cowboys, bronchos, and Indians), or *She Couldn't Marry Three*. With such feeble competition the season's two stock companies played to standees, as did the New Brunswick Musical Association on April 5 in *The Pirates of Penzance*, which may indeed have been the best offering of these impoverished months.

1893-1894

Perhaps a little improvement is in sight. *In Old Kentucky* on September 27 was, to be sure, another "horse opera" with a realistic race scene and a burning stable. And I must record that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was still prospering during these latter years, was on the boards yet again (November 3) as it had been on an average of at least once a year ever since the first season at Masonic Hall. But it is agreeable to note that the more discerning patrons on January 31 numerous supported and hugely enjoyed *Walker, London*, a highly successful farce by J. M. Barrie, in which the delightful James T. Powers had the leading part.

February 15 brought another spectacular. *The Fast Mail* advertised a steamboat explosion, a freight train of 14 cars hauled across the stage by "a practical locomotive," and Niagara Falls in full action. But the biggest thrill of the evening—and one not listed on the program—came when the steamboat explosion completely blew out the electric system of the house and knocked Professor Wilmot of the orchestra clear off his feet. But, the audience being small, there was no panic.

New Brunswickers demonstrated that lively comedy could sometimes draw better than spectacular scenery when they filled the Opera House on March 23 for Hoyt's *A Trip to Chinatown*, which had broken all of New York's long-run records. And once more the theatre was filled to hear a pleasant amateur contribution on May 10, an "admirable" performance of *Iolanthe* by the local Gilbert Society with some non-resident assistance.

1894-1895

Even though this season's dramatic fare was mostly commonplace, there were a few events of interest. On October 9, for instance, the Ideal Opera Company of New York gave *Rigoletto* with a cast of minor singers under the baton of Max Spicker, a musician of some standing in New York. The audience was appreciative, but its meagreness probably explains the company's failure to make good its promise of a series of operas during the fall and winter.

Charley's Aunt, the tremendous London hit by Brandon Thomas which is not unknown even today, arrived on November 22 with what was advertised as the original New York cast under the direction of Charles Frohman. Something really worth attending on December 17 was Henry Guy Carleton's *The Butterflies*, a successful farce comedy with John Drew and Maude Adams in leading parts. Happily the town rose to its opportunity with a "splendid" audience, refuting, in the words of the *Times*, "the slander that New Brunswick people are not capable of appreciating a fine company and a high class theatrical performance." In fact the "superb" players got a curtain call after each act—"which is very remarkable for a New Brunswick audience," quoth the *Home News*.

Perhaps those not attracted by a company of sterling artists saved up for *The Still Alarm* a month later and gave a curtain call to the

“flashing-eyed” horses that drew the fire-engine in its dash across the stage.

Music lovers disappointed by the non-return of the Ideal Opera Company may have been somewhat consoled by Grau’s Operatic Concert Company on February 25, which included in its program the entire third act of Gounod’s *Faust*. A substantial and well patronized production was that of March 1—*Charlotte Corday*, in which the interpretation of Marat by the noted Briton, Kyrle Bellew, was regarded as a powerful piece of acting. A neat contrast was furnished on the 11th by *Gentleman Jack*, the title-role being assumed by “Gentleman Jim” Corbett, heavyweight champion of the world. Of course the house was packed to the ceiling. Such was not the case on May 1 for Morrison’s version of Goethe’s *Faust* in spite of its “marvelous” Brocken scene with genuine lightning and magic rain of fire, which the *Times* admired vastly.

Not the least important occurrence of this period was a business transaction. In January Masonic Hall, which had been in financial difficulties almost from the start, was bought for about one seventh of its original cost by Frank B. Allen of Newark. It was renamed Allen’s Building, and the Opera House, soon to be renovated, was henceforth Allen’s Theatre, with J. E. Starkes as the new manager. Attractions of the highest order only were promised.

1895-1896

Mr. Starkes may have caused some doubt concerning the validity of his word when his first season opened with a minstrel show, to be followed almost immediately by such chestnuts as *She Couldn’t Marry Three* and *Grimes’ Cellar Door*. But it soon became evident that the new management believed devoutly in quantity at any rate, for I find in the newspapers announcements of no fewer than 100 performances at Allen’s Theatre between August 24 and June 5, a number exceeding anything the old Opera House had ever known in a single season. Many of these, of course, were popular thrillers, spectacles, sure-fire repeaters, and low-priced stock, without which, I suppose, no small town theatre could hope to survive.

But quality was not wholly neglected either. Robert Hilliard, a sound actor, gave much pleasure on October 11 in what was called a brilliant social comedy, *Lost—24 Hours*. Three days later Sheridan

Knowles' *The Love Chase* commended itself, partly by its handsome costumes of Charles II's time. *The Girl I Left Behind Me* by Belasco and Franklyn Fyles, a tensely effective drama involving the relations of whites with Indians, was listed for November 19; while the 29th brought Augustus Thomas's newest play, *The Capitol*, which Dr. Quinn has called "a masterly study of politics at Washington."⁶ Four pieces produced by William A. Brady were presented during the winter, one of them being Paul M. Potter's dramatization of Du Maurier's *Tribby*, which inspired three curtain calls after Svengali's death. Stuart Robson and his company in *Mrs. Ponderbury's Past* on February 15 displayed comic acting that equalled anything seen here for many years; on April 17 Augustus Thomas's much esteemed *Alabama* received a "first class" performance.

On the whole, what with a full schedule, several able actors, and some stress on recent plays of substance, 1895-1896 was one of New Brunswick's more creditable seasons. Accordingly a reasonably bright future for Allen's Theatre might have been predicted, and indeed it was bright—too bright, as we shall soon see.

1896

The late summer and fall months promised a duplication of the previous season in respect to quantity, with an average of nearly three performances a week. Qualitatively the attractions were relatively ordinary with two exceptions. On October 12 *Hamlet* was presented by James Young and a company of 17. It was the youthful Mr. Young's ambition to reach Edwin Booth's high position some day, and the *Times* thought he had good prospects of attaining it, but I'm afraid he never did. December 4 was marked by a performance of James A. Herne's *Shore Acres*, a domestic comedy notable for the naturalness of its characters.

How the season in its entirety would have compared with its predecessor it is impossible to say, for in the early hours of December 21 Allen's Building was ravaged by a fire that left only the blackened walls standing—and New Brunswick's principal era of theatrical activity abruptly ended.

⁶ A. H. Quinn, *op.cit.*, I, 247.