

The Theater in Indianapolis Before 1880

*Eva Draegert**

During the Civil War there was little theater in Indianapolis, but afterward, as prosperity returned, theatrical activity began again. Valentine Butsch, who had ten years before built the successful Metropolitan Theater there, in 1868 built the Academy of Music on the southeast corner of Illinois and Ohio streets. Here legitimate plays were presented, while the Metropolitan offered a variety bill. Thus in 1868 Indianapolis possessed two theaters as well as other halls where public gatherings and programs of various kinds were held: the old Masonic Hall at the southeast corner of Tennessee (Capitol Avenue) and Washington streets, the old Athenaeum (the third floor of Calvin Elliott's "Liquor Hall"), and Washington Hall.¹

An Indianapolis writer, describing the status of the stage in Indianapolis in 1870, wrote: "Although Indianapolis holds a high place in the estimation of showmen, and is invariably marked for every traveling exhibition, from an operatic star to a double-headed baby, a considerable portion of its respectable patronage has been directed by a peculiarity of taste, compounded partly of Puritan traditions and partly of backwoods culture, which, even to this day, makes certain classes of entertainments 'unclean.' Menageries are illustrations of natural history, and the schools are dismissed to see them. Circuses are 'devil's devices,' and church members are, or were, 'called over the coals' for visiting them. Concerts are bearable, and even the opera is not altogether abominable, but a theatrical performance is beyond moral toleration." Shows appeared to be the favorite weakness of many citizens of Indianapolis because they flourished—particularly Negro minstrels, circuses, and ballet dancing. The theater was a real part of the city, and brought population to the growing town, diffused its earnings there, and ornamented the streets with imposing edifices.²

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¹ Berry R. Sulgrove, *History of Indianapolis and Marion County, Indiana* (Philadelphia, 1884), 259-261. Darrell Gooch, "History of the Indianapolis Stage, 1875-90" (2 vols.; Master's thesis, State University of Iowa, 1932), I, 24.

² William R. Holloway, *Indianapolis* (Indianapolis, 1870), 145. By "shows" Holloway meant all sorts of exhibitions under canvas.

During the decade following the Civil War, as the theater grew and prospered, many cities and towns, including Indianapolis, maintained local stock companies which furnished support for the stars engaged by the local managers who usually went personally to New York to select talent for the ensuing season. "When stock companies were the rule and not the exception, . . . both plays and actors placed their dependence in dramatic merit and not in stage accessories. Indianapolis at that time supported a stock company, some of the members of which have since become famous in the profession. They were under-paid and overworked, for in those days there was a change of bill almost nightly, and frequently in a two weeks' engagement as many as twenty different plays were produced, and when members of a company were not actually engaged in a performance they were busy, either at rehearsal or at their study. A good actor to get an engagement must have an extensive repertoire, a very 'quick study' as it is technically called, a wardrobe that could be utilized for either tragedy, comedy or farce, and be able to go on the stage and get through a part, after having seen it only a few hours before. It was the almost invariable custom to give a double bill every night. For instance, such long plays as 'Hamlet,' 'Macbeth' or 'King Lear' would be either preceded or followed by a farce, generally described as 'roaring,' the evident purpose of which was to display the versatility of the star and his support. Frequently two comedies were given, and it was not until as late as 1868 or 1870 that the custom of giving only one play became prevalent. Stars had no companies in those days, but they were supported by the stock wherever they appeared, and they received from 15 to 25 per cent. of the gross receipts of every performance and a so-called 'benefit,' generally on Friday night, when they were given half of the receipts. A company might be called upon to support Edwin Forrest one week, and John E. Owens the next, and they were expected to play tragedy and comedy equally well. There were no matinees then, so the entire day could be utilized in rehearsals if it was necessary."³

Account books of the old Metropolitan Theater for 1864, 1865, and 1866, kept by the proprietors, Valentine Butsch and James Dickson, revealed that salaries of leading actors

³ *Indianapolis News*, October 10, 1885.

and actresses of those years ranged from \$25.00 to \$50.00 per week, with minor characters receiving \$8.00 and \$10.00 per week. Occasionally an actor and his actress wife played leads together and their combined salary might range from \$40.00 to \$75.00. There was always the possibility of an invitation to give a so-called benefit, and "accounts show that all the leading members of the company received at least one, and generally two, benefits, getting half of the gross receipts. The financial returns indicate that 'Old' White [probably Ferdinand G. White, a comedian] was evidently a strong favorite, as his benefits always drew very large audiences, the receipts being from \$400 to \$550."⁴

Indianapolis audiences of 1865-1875 saw many of the leading stars of the New York stage, including Frank Chanfrau, Lawrence Barrett (then a young actor who appeared in Indianapolis for the first time in November, 1865), Lotta Crabtree, Charlotte Thompson, and others. The performances ranged from *Enoch Arden* and grand opera to burlesque and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁵

The depression which settled down over business activities in 1876-1877 resulted in small audiences and unsuccessful productions. Theaters were closed for occasional periods, and newspaper notices of performances in the 1876-1878 seasons were scarce. Apparently the Metropolitan enjoyed more prosperity than the others, for its variety shows were announced regularly. In order to draw audiences, both the Grand (built in 1875) and the Academy of Music resorted to engaging types of shows similar to the variety performances at the Metropolitan. For example, the Grand announced the burlesque opera *Evangeline* and the Academy of Music opened a two weeks' season with a performance of

⁴ *Ibid.* According to William George Sullivan of Indianapolis, whose uncle, Austin H. Brown, was deeply interested in the Indianapolis theater, the nature of these benefit performances was very similar to the "bespeak" described by Charles Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby*. In the English theater of the mid-nineteenth century, a member of a theatrical company would personally canvass the theater-going public, inviting persons to request the actor to perform certain roles. If enough patrons signed the "bespeak" and agreed to purchase tickets, it was considered a safe risk; and on the appointed day the actor would appear in the requested roles. During the seventies and eighties in Indianapolis this routine was sometimes reversed. The friends of the actor, taking the initiative, would often request him to appear in a certain role and would present to him the written request with signatures of leading citizens.

⁵ *Indianapolis News*, October 10, 1885. Miss Crabtree was usually billed as Lotta.

The Black Crook, a musical comedy-type of performance with singing, dancing, and a kicking chorus.⁶

Hard times may have had a bad effect on theater audiences of the decade, or perhaps the period was not highly cultivated. In 1875 a writer for the *News* offered this criticism: "There has not been a night at either of the two leading places of amusement for the past two weeks but what some portions of the audience have been annoyed and their attention distracted from the stage by the muttered comments of ill-bred people in their immediate neighborhood. During the 'Two Orphans' at the Academy, night after night, there were those who had seen it elsewhere, a fact soon made patent to every one occupying contiguous seats, and they being interested only in the climaxes, contented themselves with commenting upon 'how much different it was there than here,' or other matters equally irrelevant and excessively annoying to those to whom each feature of the drama was a charming spectacle. Saturday night, at the Opera House, well dressed parties, careless or perhaps ignorant of the common rules of etiquette, were excessively annoying with muttered speech, continuous in every scene, and only drowned from ear when Hamlet with his powerful voice rolled out those glorious bursts of rhetoric with which the play abounds. These disturbances are of nightly occurrence, and they come from a class of people of whom better things are expected; and yet who, by just such gross violation, show themselves ignorant and uncultivated, and deficient in those impulses which make the natural gentleman or gentlewoman. A hoodlum at the same place would have more regard for the rights of those surrounding him than do these people, and would show more courtesy to the square inch in one hour, in this regard, than the class above mentioned during an entire evening. The evil has become a crying one, and is on the increase, for the ushers and 'grand bouncers' of these respective establishments, keen to correct a fellow if his foot protrudes beyond a supposed horizon, or to bounce an ill-dressed person if he shows signs of intoxication, are loth to interfere with showy broadcloth, or shining head trimmings, and therefore virtually license the most troublesome class of the two to do just about as they please. No

⁶ *Ibid.*, September 23, 1876; March 16, 1877; August 15, 1876.

matter how poor the play, or how wooden-headed the support, there are spectators whom it interests, and they come with the expectation and the right to be undisturbed in their enjoyment; hence it is the bounden duty of the two managements to take such steps as will break up this unpleasant and inexcusable business. The enforcement of the 'grand bounce' would soon work a remedy, and a 'Bogardus kicker' distributed here and there would strengthen the reformation."⁷

Perhaps the theater was suffering a general decline, but Barney Macauley of Louisville blamed newspapers, Sunday night concerts, and variety theaters for cultivating low tastes.⁸ Conversely, the attitude of the public was doubtless responsible in part for the introduction of poor, even low types of performances. In 1876 Matt Morgan's Art Exhibition at the Grand Opera House was said to display beautiful women posed in living pictures which represented scenes in nature and art. The characters appeared in a somewhat undressed state, and the audiences were almost entirely men. The newspaper critic insisted the performance was artistic and not necessarily immoral, as some charged.⁹

That winter the city council sought to institute reform without passing specifically on the moral quality of shows by prohibiting Sunday evening performances. Soon the Matt Morgan troupe made another appearance, at the Metropolitan and on a Sunday night. This was to be a test case for the Sunday blue law, and the police dutifully raided the theater. During that first raid, as officers moved into the theater, the actors tried to carry on with the show until the orchestra leader disappeared under the stage, a bass fiddle went sailing for the galleries, and a policeman sprawled into the footlights. Then the manager rang down the curtain and announced that the show was over. Twenty-five actors were arrested and a crowd followed them to the police station. The following Sunday the Metropolitan was raided again. Many had come to this performance or stood outside to watch the fun, but the police were more efficient this time, and the raid was carried on so quietly that the audience was not aware of what was happening. Although the actors were all

⁷ *Ibid.*, October 25, 1875. Similar criticisms had appeared in 1874 and recurred in 1875 and 1877. *Ibid.*, October 28, 1874; November 3, 1875; April 5, 1877.

⁸ *Ibid.*, December 3, 1877.

⁹ *Ibid.*, May 16, 17, and 19, 1876.

arrested, cash bail was readily furnished by the treasurer and the performance continued undisturbed. When the cases came to trial, all were acquitted, but as a matter of record the treasurer of the theater was fined one cent and costs. Just who was the actual victor in the affair remains a moot point.¹⁰

City authorities tried in other ways to control questionable shows and theaters by requiring a license and forbidding the sale of liquor where a performance was given, but they failed in an attempt to raise the license fee for so-called "concert saloons" to \$100.¹¹ One type of show engendered no ill will nor desire to restrict or curtail its activity. The "greatest show on earth," Phineas T. Barnum's circus, continued to grow in popularity throughout the period, and the tents were always filled to overflowing.¹²

In spite of efforts to place a stamp of approval on certain types of shows and disapproval on others, the burlesque and minstrel continued to thrive. Their variety nature gave opportunity for all sorts of elements to be displayed. If some acts were risqué or immoral, others were doubtless above reproach. It is well known that through the years these shows gave opportunity for young, inexperienced actors to get a start and served as stepping stones to better things. Cultured and intellectual people, particularly women, rarely patronized the burlesque, whose audiences usually consisted of men of the working classes, salesmen, traveling men, and some stage people.¹³ Certainly the actor's elementary school was in many respects a rugged one.

The 1875 season opened with three fine theaters, the "re-adorned and improved Academy, the rejuvenated and enlarged Metropolitan, and the bran [*sic*] new Opera House."¹⁴ The Metropolitan, oldest of the three, was by this time not a strictly legitimate house, but operated as a vaudeville theater in the fifteen-, twenty-five-, and fifty-cent class. In 1875 its remodeling came to \$25,000 and provided for a green room, iron opera chairs, a music room, a larger stage, new scenery,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, January 16, April 2, 9, 12, and 18, 1877; *Indianapolis Journal*, April 2 and 3, 1877.

¹¹ *Indianapolis News*, March 11, 1879; October 16, 1877.

¹² *Ibid.*, September 8 and 22, 1875; September 1, 1879.

¹³ Bernard Sobel, *Burleycue: An Underground History of Burlesque Days* (New York, 1931), 31 and *passim*.

¹⁴ *Indianapolis News*, August 30, 1875.

and increased seating capacity. No mention was made of specially designed scenery, but for years Thomas B. Glessing, well known Indianapolis painter, had been the principal scenic artist there, and it is probable that their stage sets were excellently done. It opened with a full house; Simon McCarty served as manager and Henry D. Beissenherz as director of the orchestra.¹⁵

In 1879 the Metropolitan was remodelled again and rechristened the Park Theater. The front was altered by the addition of a stairway, the roof was raised, and a dome added. Inside, new boxes were installed with the latest style opera chairs, the stage was enlarged, and new scenery and stage props secured. In spite of all these changes, the acoustics, which had been a remarkable feature of the theater from the beginning, were preserved. It was said to be extremely neat, comfortable, elegant, and artistic, and was now to be a legitimate theater. The opening on September 19, 1879, presented the incomparable Joseph Jefferson as Rip Van Winkle, and the managers, James B. and George A. Dickson, journeyed east to complete engagements for the coming season.¹⁶

During this period misfortune was the lot of the Academy of Music. When in 1875 the lease of William H. Leake and James B. Dickson expired, a new and aggressive manager, Daniel Macauley, took charge. Before Leake departed as manager he was tendered a final benefit which stirred the emotions of many in the audience. Since 1868 he had been both a good manager and an actor. Now as he took his departure tender words were spoken, and Dan Macauley presented him with a gold-headed cane, a gift from the orchestra. "There were real, unmistakable tears in Leake's eyes as he thanked the musicians for the unexpected compliment."¹⁷

Then a grand remodelling program for the Academy ensued. The stage was enlarged, the whole interior of the theater redecorated, and a new front drop curtain added. The two Macauley brothers, Barney and Daniel, now managed three theaters: Wood's Theater in Cincinnati, McCauley's

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, October 16, 1874; August 26 and 30, 1875; Sister M. Dolorita Carper, "A History of the John Herron Art Institute" (Master's thesis, Butler University, 1947), xi.

¹⁶ *Indianapolis News*, May 31, June 23, July 10, and September 20, 1879.

¹⁷ *Indianapolis Journal*, May 3, 1875; see also *Indianapolis News*, May 3, 1875.

Theater in Louisville, and the Academy of Music in Indianapolis.¹⁸

Then on January 27, 1877, the Academy became a smoking ruin in the space of two hours. Fire was discovered and an alarm sent in about 9:30 that evening. Apparently no audience was in the theater, though had one been present it would have had time for a safe exit since the fire seemed to start slowly. Once under way it burned furiously, and by 11:30 nothing but bare, blackened walls remained. Frozen fire plugs had effectively delayed the work of the fire department. In 1868 Valentine Butsch had paid \$113,000 beyond the original purchase price of \$40,000 to complete construction of the building as a theater. Purchased by Nicholas Ruckle in 1874 for \$140,000 and redecorated in 1875 at an added cost of \$20,000, it was now a total loss. Encumbrances on the building at the time of its destruction totalled \$75,000, only \$57,250 of which were covered by insurance. The cause of the fire was said to be a defective flue, but some hinted at incendiarism.¹⁹ The hard times which had reached a climax in Indianapolis no doubt made this blow doubly hard for its owner. Although there was some talk of rebuilding, nothing at all was done with the ruins, and after two years had passed residents began to complain of the stench in the area.²⁰

The Grand Opera House (now Keith's Theater) was built in about one hundred days during the summer of 1875 and was ready for its opening by mid-September. Designed by Wallace Hume and built by the Dickson brothers at a cost of \$48,000 or \$50,000, it was generously evaluated by the audience on the opening night as one of the best seated, best lighted, best decorated, and best appointed places of amusement extant. Two elaborate chandeliers, one on either side of the proscenium, each with thirty-six lights, silver and prismatic pendants, revealed colorful carvings ornamenting the interior, with green and orange frescoes around the dome. Paneling in blue and orange and red and orange cov-

¹⁸ *Indianapolis News*, August 30, 1875; *Indianapolis Journal*, September 4 and 7, 1875. Barney, the brother in Louisville, usually spelled his name McCauley or McAuley, while Daniel used the spelling Macauley.

¹⁹ Jacob P. Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis* (2 vols., Chicago, 1910), I, 468; *Indianapolis News*, January 29, 1877; *Indianapolis Journal*, January 29, 1877.

²⁰ *Indianapolis News*, June 13 and 26, 1879.

ered the fronts of the proscenium boxes, while a green baize drop curtain added to the variety of color. The scenery had been painted by Ed Harvey of Cincinnati and Thomas Knoxon of St. Louis. The theater was heated by furnaces, and a marble fountain to supply ice water for the audience was situated back of the dress circle. Eleven dressing rooms served the needs of the performers. Seating capacity was 1,608, with room for one hundred more if crowded in, but all seats had a good view of the stage. James Dickson managed the theater with the help of Ed Harvey, scenic artist, John Sanders, stage carpenter, and A. R. Miller, director of the orchestra.²¹ On opening night *Love's Sacrifice* presented Mr. and Mrs. Leake in the leading roles before a capacity audience.²²

The Grand was popular from the beginning but during the first two years its managers were confronted with the same trouble that businessmen were experiencing. Construction costs remained unpaid, and bankrupt notices began to appear in the newspapers under the name of the Dickson brothers.²³

Several other theaters or places of amusement during this period deserve at least passing notice. Crone Theater or Crone's Garden, known also as the Coliseum, combined the beer and variety business in violation of the city ordinance. The Germania, at Christian Stein's Garden, claimed to perform nothing but legitimate theater.²⁴ A little earlier a music hall had conducted business in the Exchange Building on Illinois Street and a varieties theater was located on Court Street south of the old post office,²⁵ but these probably ceased to function before the end of the seventies. Since variety theaters seldom advertised and since the occasional

²¹ *Ibid.*, September 10 and 14, 1875; *Indianapolis Journal*, September 11, 1875. Although the theater was said to have adequate fire protection, someone observed two years later that carpenters had never completed the fire escape on the south side of the building. A frame for swinging steps had been installed, but no steps—a death trap in case of a fire. *Indianapolis News*, September 6, 1877.

²² By a strange coincidence Leake had spoken the first lines in the Metropolitan in 1858, in the Academy of Music on its opening in 1868, and now inaugurated the new Grand. *Indianapolis News*, September 13, 1875; *Indianapolis Journal*, September 13 and 14, 1875; Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, I, 468.

²³ Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, I, 470; *Indianapolis News*, May 20, 1878.

²⁴ *Indianapolis News*, May 6, 1878; May 30, 1877.

²⁵ Holloway, *Indianapolis*, 152.

references to them in the newspapers reveal little, the extent of their contribution to the social history of the time is difficult to determine.

The earliest account of a theater circuit in Indianapolis—in 1879—announced that the Dickson brothers had formed an agreement with theater manager Tom Davy in Detroit and Nashville, and Joseph Brooks in Memphis.²⁶ Evidently the Dicksons were branching out in still another direction that year, for on March 1 it was revealed that J. B. Dickson's comic opera company was touring the country playing *H.M.S. Pinafore* and that it had so far been successful. Billed as Dickson's Fifth Avenue Comic Opera Company, they performed at the Grand for the first time before a crowded audience which displayed only moderate enthusiasm for the presentation. Their season continued until late in April, when it ended with a performance at Evansville.²⁷

The importance of Indianapolis as a theatrical town during this period is indicated by the fact that most of the first rate actors and actresses appeared there, some only once, others for several seasons. That the leading actors of the New York stage regularly included Indianapolis in their tours is significant. Generally two or three performances were scheduled, though occasional one-night stands were played.

In 1873, the famous Charlotte Cushman, then fifty-seven, appeared in Indianapolis supported by a full company from McVicker's Theater in Chicago, with J. H. McVicker himself as one of the company. A number of performances were given, at the Academy of Music before an unresponsive audience.²⁸ The next spring the great Joseph Jefferson played but one performance of his masterpiece, *Rip Van Winkle*. In the great rush for seats, hundreds were unable to gain admittance. As always, the audience thoroughly enjoyed Jefferson's characterization. He appeared in the Hoosier capital again and again in the same role, always before a

²⁶ *Indianapolis News*, July 10, 1879. When a manager signed a company, it was expected to play at all four cities on the same terms. Since the Academy of Music had been destroyed by fire two years earlier, the Dicksons controlled both the important theaters left in the city.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, March 1 and 11, 1879; April 23, 1879.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, November 17, 20, and 21, 1873.

packed house. There were those who made a point of seeing him every time he came.²⁹

No other stars of like caliber performed there that season, but in November, 1874, Fanny Janauschek, the famous Polish tragedienne, appeared as Mary Stuart. In December Maggie Mitchell played in *Fanchon, Lorle*, and *Jane Eyre*. She was well received and acted the new roles well, but like Jefferson as Rip, she had become so much identified with the role of Fanchon that it was impossible for her audience to appreciate her as anything else. Small audiences were reported in 1874 for performances of *Marie Antoinette* and for Henrietta Chanfrau's engagement at the Academy; the latter appearance occurred during Christmas week with small profit. In November, 1875, Lotta appeared at the Academy as Zip and was enthusiastically received.³⁰

Three months later, in February, 1876, Agnes Booth and her husband, Junius Brutus Booth, Jr., elder brother and former manager of Edwin Booth, came to Indianapolis, performing four times in three days: *Femme de Feu* the first; *As You Like It*, the second; and on the third day *Camille* at the matinee and *King John* at the evening performance. Mrs. Booth's acting was much more highly regarded than that of her husband, and she was compared favorably with Adelaide Neilson, who had also performed the part of Rosalind there. Some idea of the difficult life led by actors of that time is revealed in the description of the closing day of the Booths' engagement. During the forenoon *King John* was rehearsed; the matinee of *Camille* followed almost at once; then the evening performance of *King John*, with scarcely a pause between them. The climactic scene was too much for Agnes Booth, who appeared in a half-faint brought on by acute hysteria. Since that state seemed a realistic part of the per-

²⁹ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1874. In an interview with Miss Grace Nixon, she recalled these statements of her father. Joseph Jefferson was chiefly known for his interpretation of Rip Van Winkle, though he was also famous as Bob Acres in *The Rivals* and Trenchard in *Our American Cousin*. His rare knowledge of the art of acting, and of the force of repression as well as expression, enabled him to appear to grow old and feeble before his audience, which became lost in sympathy with and for him. Montrose J. Moses and John M. Brown (eds.), *The American Theatre as Seen by its Critics, 1752-1934* (New York, 1934), 75-78, 365. The tribute always paid by Indianapolis audiences was conversely a tribute to their own culture and appreciation for dramatic art.

³⁰ *Indianapolis News*, November 6, December 4, 6, 7, 22, and 29, 1874; November 12 and 15, 1875.

formance, the audience applauded wildly, doubtless unaware that the condition was real. Mrs. Booth was brought out to acknowledge the applause, then collapsed in the arms of her husband. It was some time before she could be moved to their hotel for a much needed rest.³¹

In December, 1876, Edward H. Sothern came to Indianapolis in *Lord Dundreary* and was pronounced excellent. Later that season Lawrence Barrett and Denman Thompson appeared. These actors were more highly regarded than others who came to the city, for up to that date they were the only ones noted to have been engaged for an entire week's performance at a time. Barrett had played for a week in March, 1874, and for several appearances in September that year, but did not come again until April and November, 1877, in the autumn of 1878, and in December, 1879. He was regarded as the best Richelieu of the American stage and usually included that play in his repertoire; his other performances were devoted to Shakespeare. He did not always command large audiences, and a frank critic suggested that he was so artificial and so reserved that he could never be accused of overplaying a role.³²

But it is doubtful whether such criticisms greatly affected the size of audiences. One writer commented: "That the frequent admission of variety shows to the Grand opera house has lowered the tone of the audience which is attracted there seems undeniable. While there was a large element of culture and appreciation in the audience last night, it was evident that to the larger proportion the play was comparatively new. This was shown by the applause bestowed upon the text of the play instead of the good points made by the actors. Thus the pleasantries of the grave digger were applauded much as a fresh gag would be at the Metropolitan, while but for the loud-palmed claquers stationed near the entrance some of Mr. Barrett's best acting would have been applauded only by the quiet and appreciative few who love art and good acting well enough to enjoy it anywhere. When the opera house is the only place here exclusively devoted to the drama, it seems a pity that it can not be kept from defilement

³¹ *Ibid.*, February 3, 5, and 7, 1876.

³² *Ibid.*, December 23, 1876; March 17 and 20, 1874; April 3 and 5, 1877. In 1874 the prices were doubled because of Barrett's popularity, but hard times added to the difficulty and resulted in houses of indifferent size.

and deterioration, and opened only to the legitimate [*sic*] performances."³³

No such reports are available for the appearance of Denman Thompson, a comedian, whose role of Joshua Whitcomb continuously drew full houses. He appeared for engagements in the spring and fall of 1877 and again in the spring and fall of 1879, each engagement lasting for a week. But this was a species of vaudeville and naturally drew audiences from a wider segment of the population than could have been expected for performances of Barrett in Shakespearean roles.³⁴

Other prominent New York actors who appeared in the years 1875-1880 were Maurice Barrymore and Georgia Drew, with Frederick Warde in a "combination"; they appeared in November, 1878, and again the next spring. Charlotte Thompson played in *The Hunchback* at the Grand in 1879, drawing out for her audience many "people of culture and refinement, who of late years have almost ceased to be patrons of the theater, and are only called out by what they call, with much stress upon the words, 'the legitimate,' and the legitimate they require to be rendered by no second rate talent." Lotta came twice in 1879, in January and December. Mary Anderson, a young actress from Louisville, appeared in 1878 and again in 1879, first at the Grand and later at the Park, where she was greeted by a brilliant audience. On both occasions her critic frankly pointed out her shortcomings, attributing her limitations to youth and inexperience.³⁵

In 1879 Helena Modjeska, who had recently returned to the stage after failing with other Poles in an attempt to found a socialist community in California, made several appearances, in *Camille*, *Frou Frou*, *Adrienne*, *Romeo and*

³³ *Ibid.*, November 21, 1877. Whether or not hard times greatly affected the box office for the Barrett performances, there was never a very large percentage of the population which habitually attended the theater. Many of them would see all performances of an actor scheduled for two or three nights' appearances; an entire week of such activity would tax the endurance, if not the purse, of many, so that some houses would necessarily be small.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, May 1, 1879.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, November 8, 1878; April 4, 1879; October 14, 1879; January 29 and December 10, 1879; March 15, 1878; October 22, 1879; Moses and Brown, *The American Theatre as Seen by its Critics, 1752-1934*, pp. 104-107, 356. For quotation see *Indianapolis News*, October 14, 1879.

Juliet, and *East Lynne*. Though she was pronounced unequaled by one observer, others were less generous with their praise. She had been highly rated in advance notices, but at the repetition of *Camille* the audience in general was more interested in styles displayed by its own members than in anything happening on the stage. Her engagement closed with *Romeo and Juliet*, in which she played an entirely unorthodox but strong and artistic version of Juliet. The audience applauded her warmly and recalled her many times.³⁶

Other Shakespearean actors appearing in Indianapolis from 1875 to 1880 included Barry Sullivan, Rose Eyttinge, George Rignold, and a Mr. Hanchett, an actor of the Forrest School. The poor support for the last included the son of Daniel W. Voorhees, who was said to possess "not a single qualification for the stage except self possession and assurance."³⁷ Additional legitimate actors who visited Indianapolis during this period included Jane Coombs, Fannie Davenport, Florence Chase, Rose Macauley, and John T. Raymond, all of whom were warmly welcomed and praised for their performances. Jo Emmet, comedian, who specialized in German characterizations, came to the Grand in 1878 and played before one of the largest houses of the season. Seats cost 25¢ to \$1.00, but many in the balcony sold at a premium of three times their original price. His acting was as admirable as always, and his songs were sung with the same sweetness. According to a newspaper report, he seemed to sing and dance just for love of his art and completely won the hearts of his audiences.³⁸

Then, as now, it was fashionable to attend the opera and the legitimate theater, but minstrels, burlesques, and variety shows drew the large crowds. Managers of these last entertainments could always count on full houses, all through the hard times. The burnt-cork minstrel show, the burlesque which borrowed some of its routine from the minstrel (first part, olio, and afterpiece), and the variety show made up of

³⁶ Mary C. Crawford, *The Romance of the American Theatre* (Boston, 1913), 297. *Indianapolis Journal*, February 24, 1879; *Indianapolis News*, February 15 and 28, March 1, 1879.

³⁷ *Indianapolis News*, February 9 and 10, 1876; January 4, May 4, 1878; June 6, 1879.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, November 20, 1878.

songs, choruses, and gags, were scheduled at regular intervals in the legitimate theaters. Such productions brought along their own stars and support of chorus girls and comedians.

One of the variety type, *The Black Crook*, reputedly was the first show to introduce a kicking chorus when quite by chance a stranded foreign ballet troupe was invited to liven up a rather dull piece. It appeared in Indianapolis twice during the seventies and returned at intervals until the turn of the century, continuing perennially popular, although it as constantly offended many with refined tastes. The scenery was dazzling and costumes magnificent, but the brevity of the latter shocked some Victorians. A critic pointed out that "as long as the New York Weekly and the Dime Novels find two readers to one of the better class of newspapers and books, this style of drama, illegitimate in its most offensive sense, will draw a crowd. But for this state of things public taste is more to blame than the management whose business it is to cater to it."³⁹

Burlesque and variety shows at the Metropolitan sometimes listed members of the supporting cast, among them Fannie Beane, Annie Fox (the first Mrs. Will E. English), George A. Beane, Fannie Kemp, Al Lipman, and others. They were some of the players of the Metropolitan Stock Company, which had functioned for many years. Formerly managed by William H. Riley, it held a reputation for excellence in its field.⁴⁰ Occasionally performers were listed as combinations, which indicated a complete cast traveling together. Most of the engagements by theater managers at this time were made with stars only, and the supporting cast was recruited from the local stock company.

Minstrel troupes were regularly presented. From two to four minstrel shows per season were noted during the seventies, though fewer appeared during the depression years. A popular minstrel company of this decade was Haverly's Mastodon Minstrels, which made regular appearances, playing to capacity houses. On one occasion at the Grand, every seat on every floor was taken, chairs were put in the aisles,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, October 1, 1873; October 5, 1875. Sobel, *Burleycue*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Indianapolis News*, January 3, April 4, May 15, 1876. MS, English Collection, Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis, unsigned but probably by William E. English.

and standing room was at a premium. The Berger family, comedians, and Sol Smith Russell (named for his uncle by marriage, Sol Smith, pioneer actor in the Wabash Valley), followed and were likewise greeted by a full house.⁴¹ The minstrel show had been popular for a long time, and according to one writer originated in 1837 in Pittsburgh when Thomas D. Rice, in an effort to intrigue his audience, borrowed a Negro's clothes and sang a local Negro song. It was so well received that it grew to the proportion of an entire program in blackface; however, the presentation of Callender's Georgia Minstrels, a troupe of all-Negro men, was unusually well received, indicating that Negroes were better in the roles than white men.⁴²

Interspersed with the performances already mentioned were a revised version of the ever popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; the Buffalo Bill Combination, which advertised the first appearance of Buffalo Bill from the late Indian war; and various melodramas.⁴³ In the last group *Under the Gaslight* was popular and often raised its audience to a high emotional pitch as the spectators wondered whether the heroine would be able to release the hero from the railroad track before the train arrived. This performance ran for a week in January, 1876, and was followed by another melodrama, *Hidden Hand*, by Emma Southworth, with an added attraction, the burlesque *Girl of the Period*. Further attractions at this performance were the prizes offered: \$20.00 in gold and silver coin and a ladies' piano to patrons in the dress circle and parquette; three bags of flour and six hams to the family circle; and a live pig and a rooster to the gallery.⁴⁴

This decade apparently witnessed the passing of the old stock companies, for in 1877 it was announced that a new phase of the coming season would be the great number of traveling combinations to replace the local companies. Among the stars who would take their supporting companies with them were Dion Boucicault, Joe Murphy, William H. Lingard, Edwin Booth, Frank Mayo, Frank S. Chanfrau,

⁴¹ *Indianapolis News*, February 8 and 11, 1879. On another occasion at a performance of Haverly's at the Academy, nearly every piece on the bill was encored and the show did not end until nearly eleven o'clock. *Ibid.*, June 15, 1875.

⁴² *Ibid.*, January 7, 1876; *Indianapolis Journal*, January 8, 1876.

⁴³ *Indianapolis News*, November 21, 1878; March 27, 1877.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, January 28, 1876.

Rose Eyttinge, Edward H. Sothern, John T. Raymond, Alice Oates, Lydia Thompson, Marie Aimee, Emily Soldene, Genevieve Rogers, Lawrence Barrett, Kate Claxton, Katie Putnam, Fanny Janauscheck, George Rignold, Mrs. George C. Howard, John Brougham, and John Dillon.⁴⁵

The activity of the legitimate theater and of the local stock company left its impression on the cultural scene of Indianapolis, but how much and what kind is somewhat uncertain. Evidently few Indianapolis young people turned to the professional stage, though considerable encouragement was no doubt provided for the amateur theatricals which were popular entertainment during the seventies. The Indianapolis Dramatic Society, the third dramatic club in the city's history, was organized November 19, 1872, with twenty-two members, eleven men and eleven women. The only juvenile member was Fanny Ramsay Wilder, who was eighteen at the time the club was organized. The moving spirits were Austin H. Brown and Daniel Macauley, who later became manager of the Academy of Music. Macauley and Kate Tousey, who went on the stage in the eighties, were the only members of the Dramatic Society who were known to have had professional connections. The others continued to maintain an amateur status. Brown voiced the opinion that participation in an amateur group was a sort of insurance to prevent anyone from wishing to turn professional. The society gave plays, usually for charitable purposes, until March, 1878, when it suspended activities, not to become reorganized and operative again until 1890. Performances by the group were generally well attended so that charitable work was benefited and the actors were encouraged. This activity must have proved a boon to some as hard times became evident. In January, 1875, the *News* stated: "Home amusements are unusually frequent this winter. In the absence of club dances and gay parties, our people are directing their powers to amuse toward presenting masquerades, scriptural opera and the drama." Often other clubs in the city, such as the Cecilian Glee Club and Lyra Orchestra, assisted the Dramatic Society in giving a complete entertainment.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, I, 467, says the old stock companies passed away at the close of the 1868 season. *Indianapolis News*, July 13, 1877.

⁴⁶ Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis*, I, 470-472. *Indianapolis News*, January 28, 1875; April 12, 1877; March 26, 1878. Eloise W. Wilder, A

An amateur effort not connected with the Dramatic Society was the 1875 production of *The Spy*, which had been dramatized by Katharine Merrill and a Mrs. Harrison in the interests of the Centennial fund. Four performances were given, but so few attended that it was a financial failure and the management of the Academy of Music admitted a loss of \$500.00 on the venture. Perhaps the presentation of *The Black Crook* at the Metropolitan at the same time affected the attendance.⁴⁷ In 1879 performances of the North End Dramatic Club were held at the residence of Anna Butler on Home Avenue. Since no further evidence of this club is available, its life was probably short.⁴⁸

At the close of the decade no outstanding amateur dramatic group functioned. The destruction of the Academy of Music in 1877 left only the Metropolitan, a variety theater, and the Grand, the only legitimate theater, in Indianapolis. As the Dickson brothers assumed a monopoly of the theatrical field, they rechristened the Metropolitan the New Park and transformed it into a legitimate theater. This situation no doubt challenged William H. English and influenced his decision to build another theater in 1880.

Memorial of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Marriage of Philip Schoff and Elizabeth Ramsay, April 10, 1794 (Greenfield, Indiana, 1922), 236-237. For quotation see *Indianapolis News*, January 28, 1875.

⁴⁷ *Indianapolis News*, October 2, 5, 6, 8, and 11, 1875; *Indianapolis Journal*, October 5 and 8, 1875.

⁴⁸ *Indianapolis News*, January 20, 1879.