

# NEW YORK THEATERS IN THE FORTIES

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By STEPHEN FISKE

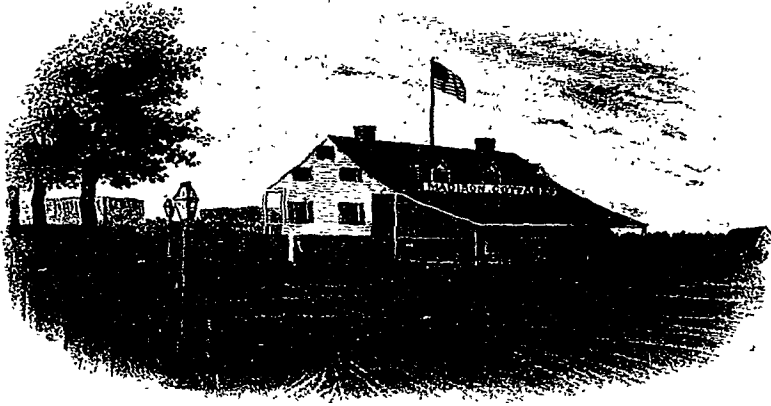
Better than words, the picture of the Madison Cottage, on the site of the present Fifth Avenue Hotel, suggests the condition of New York in what may be called its middle age. Twenty-third Street was the northerly limit, and we used to drive out to this roadside tavern, as we now drive to a clubhouse in the Bronx. In 1853 it was replaced by Franconi's Hippodrome, a large, round, wooden building, flaunting the flags of all nations, and New Yorkers made outing and picnic parties to see the wonders of the arena, as they now go to Coney Island.

The regular theaters nestled together, as is their custom; but the City Hall Park was their nucleus, as Broadway at Forty-second Street is now. Almost within pistol shot were the Park Theater on Park Row and Theater Alley; the Chatham Square, the Anthony, (now Thomas) Street; Burton's, on Chambers Street, where the American News Company's building stands; the Franklin Square; the Broadway, near Duane Street; the Bowery, already called "the Old," and Barnum's Museum, where pious people, who would not go into a theater, saw capital plays in "the lecture room." Later came Brougham's Lyceum, Niblo's Garden, at first a real garden, with a theater annexed, like our Terrace Garden; Laura Keane's, where Sothorn, the elder, made himself famous in "Our American Cousin," and the Winter Garden—the floriculture being left to the imagination—where Edwin Booth proved himself a tragedian by acting "Hamlet" for one hundred nights—a run equal to five hundred performances at present.

I do not remember the Park Theatre, the third of its name, and the second theater opened in New York, succeeding the John Street. It was erected in 1795, and burned in 1820 and 1849. Plays were given four times a week, as at the Opera. James W. Wallack made his American debut there in 1818, and became the manager of its fashionable successor. The casts at the Park are still wonderful to the profession. A benefit was given in 1848 for the family of Manager Simpson, who died, broken in heart and fortune, and "The School for Scandal" was presented, with Harry Placide as Sir Peter, Burton as Sir Oliver Surface, W. R. Blake as Backbite, Barry as Joseph, Barrett as Charles, Charles Walcott as Careless, Mrs. Shaw as Lady Teazle, Mrs. Winstanley as Mrs. Candour, Mrs. Gilbert as Lady Sneerwell, and Mary Taylor as Maria. A regular performance of "Richard III," was cast with Hamblin as the King, Susan and Kate Denin as the Princes, Miss Menges as Lady Anne. These would be described now as "all star casts."

Burton, an actor of the broadest humor and the highest culture, shook his theater with laughter in plays and farces that have died with him, and led a life of refined elegance in a handsome mansion opposite St. John's Park. We have his books to show his serious studies, but who can revive his Elizabethan comicalities in "Toodles" and "The Man Milliner?"

The Broadway was between Duane and Anthony Streets, opposite the former New York Hospital. Edwin Forrest played an annual engagement there, and in the



THE MADISON COTTAGE ON THE SITE OF THE FIFTH AVENUE HOTEL,  
BROADWAY AND TWENTY-THIRD STREET

intervals superb spectacles, like "The Cataract of the Ganges," were produced. This policy of alternate tragedy and spectacle seems to be adopted at our New Amsterdam Theater.

Until the production of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," the Chatham Square was an obscure theater. Mrs. Stowe made it famous. The Franklin Square and the Anthony Street are forgotten, except for a visit of the Park Theater Company to the Anthony after one of the periodical fires. Barnum's Museum was contemptuously regarded by New York theatergoers, but it drew large audiences of religious ruralites; its stock company included Miss Mesteyer, Levick, Hadaway and C. W. Clarke, who could play anything from a melodrama to a light comedy, and among the occasional "guests," as the Germans call them—actors specially engaged for brief runs—were Coudock, Owen Marlowe and John R. Scott. Marvin R. Clark, the heroic blind journalist, who sees more and remembers more than writers with good eyes, tells me that Phineas T. Barnum appeared at his "lecture room" in temperance dramas. But I never saw Barnum in a play; he was always sitting in his room near the ticket office, supervising the receipts and plotting the sensational advertisements which our Tody Hamilton vainly endeavors to imitate.

The Old Bowery was called Old Drury, after Drury Lane Theater, London, and for years presented the same program of tragedy or melodrama and pantomime. Gradually the pantomime became preëminent here as in London, and G. L. Fox, whose "Humpty Dumpty" has never been surpassed, was the popular star. He and Lingerd built the New Bowery a few doors away, and one theater neutralized the other until both were closed. Fox's great success was at the Olympic, which was Laura Keane's Theater renamed.

Late in the 'Forties, John Brougham, a wit on both sides the Atlantic and rivalling the Brough Brothers as a writer of burlesques, opened his Lyceum on Broadway near Broome Street. There Mrs. John Wood, the queen of burlesque actresses, first appeared in America. Afterwards she managed the Olympic. Brougham, who knew more of literature than of business, was soon succeeded by James W. Wallack, from the Park Theater, and the name of the Lyceum was changed to Wallack's. For many years—certainly until 1864—this was the best theater in the United States. It was removed to Thirteenth Street and Broadway, and then to its present location.

The Wallack Company is a tradition—Lester, Blake, Gilbert, Reynolds, Young, Sefton, Mrs. John Hoey, Mary Gannon and Madeline Henriques. Yet we would not permit the liberties taken at Wallack's with the old comedies and new plays. I have seen Lester Wallack as Charles Surface with big, black sidewhiskers, and Mrs. Hoey as Eveline, a poor girl in "I'll Sleep on it," wore her diamond earrings and her dainty lace petticoats. I was then the dramatic editor of the Herald and a guest at the John Hoey dinner every Sunday. But when I wrote that Eveline might be relieved of her impecuniosity, without selling herself for gold, by simply pawning her jewelry, I was invited no more.

Niblo's Garden was opened in 1837 as a foreign vaude-

ville house; burned in 1846; reopened in 1849. It had been notable for the Ravel Family, unrivalled pantomimists, and Madame Celeste, Clara Fisher, Thomas Placide, George Vandenhoff and his daughter had been among the attractions. With the reopening, under the management of William Chippendale, came Forrest in the height of his fame, J. H. Hackett as the greatest of Falstaffs and Rip Van Winkles, "The Duke's Motto" and "The Black Crook."

The prices at the theaters have crept up from seventy-five cent stalls and a sixpenny gallery to two dollar stalls and fifty cents in the family circle. But everything else has increased in price proportionately, and theaters are relatively no dearer than before, though they pay playwrights and actors much more liberally. The receipts for the Simpson benefit at the Park Theater in 1848 were \$4,739. This would be equivalent to a \$10,000 house now, and there are no such receipts except for grand opera. The pit, to which the English managers still adhere—giving the best part of the theater at the lowest price—did not long survive American common sense outside the Bowery. I tried to introduce the all-stalls system at the fashionable St. James Theater, London, but the public and the press protested. No New Yorker can realize the effect of a shouting and booing crowd of rough men and boys behind orchestra chairs.

Otherwise there are few changes in the arrangements of our theaters. The side boxes, from which the inmates cannot see the stage, are retained. The one vital improvement is that the most of our fifty-seven places of amusement are fireproof. Chief Croker says that ten are firetraps, but he refuses to name them, and since his oracular utterance the Casino, which was one of the most dangerous, has been burned and rebuilt. In the 'Forties, a fire was the legitimate end of every playhouse. Now a theater fire is exceptional.

Nor do I observe marked differences in the audiences. There are still fashionable and popular theaters; the class of patrons of Barnum's "lecture room" goes to the Proctor music halls, where excellent stock companies are maintained. There are theaters for tragedy—when we find a tragedian—for comedy, for farces and for burlesque, now called comic opera. We even have a Hippodrome to replace Franconi's. But a novelty that the 'Forties never knew is the Didactic drama, in which the characters argue instead of acting, and there is a marked improvement in the style of presenting plays, and especially in a strict regard for decency of dialogue, if not of plot.