Theatre in Pioneer Utah

J. Michael Hunter

Brigham Young University - Provo, mike_hunter@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub

Part of the Mormon Studies Commons, and the Theatre History Commons

Original Publication Citation

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1407

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
FEATURES

2 Theatre in Pioneer Utah
   by J. Michael Hunter

13 Pioneer Memorial Theatre
   by Janet Peterson

15 Leading Ladies: Four Grande Dames of Early Utah Theatre
   by Janet Peterson

19 Illuminating Theatre
   by J. Michael Hunter

23 Ariel Davis: Utah Innovator
   by J. Michael Hunter

DEPARTMENTS

1 President's Message
   by Louis Pickett

24 Pioneer Spotlight
   Emma Lucy Gates Bowen

30 National & Chapter News

32 SUP New Members

32 Guest Editorial
   by Mary A. Johnson,
   President of DUP

33 Legacy Trust Fund
Latter-day Saint pioneers brought a heritage of theatrical activities with them when they entered the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. They had established one of the first community theatres in the United States at Nauvoo, Illinois, in the early 1840s. These early pioneers believed that the theatre had been created for an ennobling purpose and that theatrical productions should present the highest moral standards and Christian values. Brigham Young observed, "If I were placed on a cannibal island and given a task of civilizing its people, I should straightway build a theatre for the purpose." And that's exactly what the Saints did when they entered the Salt Lake Valley.

It was a little rough at first. The pioneers were busy raising food and building forts; they had little time to worry about building a theatre. They performed their first
Pioneers performed their first plays in the Old Bowery, built in 1849 in the southwest corner of Temple Square. It was built on 104 posts, approximately 100 feet by 60 feet, with "boards and planks for seats.

The audience made of adobe brick with shingle roof. The newly organized Deseret Dramatic Association gave their first performance on the 20 by 40 foot stage on 19 January 1853. The play was Pizarro with Porter Rockwell playing the Spanish soldier. Another word, grey-headed ruffian, and I strike," Rockwell uttered and then nervously turned toward the prompter and whispered loudly, "Shall I stick him?" The audience "convulsed" with laughter.

The production, no doubt, brought back memories for Brigham Young who had played the role of the high priest when Pizarro was performed in Nauvoo for Joseph Smith.

Brigham Young kept himself fully informed about theatrical productions performed at the Social Hall. He made it very clear to everyone involved that he planned to maintain the propriety of the theatrical productions in Salt Lake City. David McKenzie wrote: "It was indispensable with him [that] all those entertainments should be conducted under the terms of the strictest morality. As early as 1854, he personally attended our rehearsals. He had his private carriage convey the lady actresses to and from the Social Hall on every occasion, so as to avoid the society that might embarrass them after the performances. Those rehearsals and dances were invariably opened with prayer. He sternly opposed the habits of smoking and drinking, and he insisted that the playhouse ought to be as sacred as the temple, and might be made so by the proper conduct of those who were engaged in them. He used every laudable means to inculcate those views, but President Young was no autocrat and his good counsels were not always enforced, although not altogether unheeded. Yet I know of several instances where improper conduct on the part of performers caused their instant dismissal."

Theatrical productions declined in Salt Lake City with the coming of Johnston's Army in 1857. However, when federal soldiers established Camp Floyd in Cedar Valley, west of Utah Lake, in 1858, they also built a small playhouse. One visitor to the new playhouse described it:

"Scenery and fresco work painted from the most ordinary materials. Mustard, common chalk, and blacking used for boots, were the elements from which palaces, cottages, gardens, and landscapes generally were brought out upon the canvas, while Shakespeare, himself, the patron saint of the Dramatic Temple the world over, loomed out above the curtain drop done up in common chalk."

On 9 November 1858, the Military Dramatic Association performed a two-act farce Used Up and an afterpiece The Dead Shot. The Seventh Infantry Band furnished the music.

In the fall of 1859, Phil Margets organized the Mechanic's Dramatic Association in Salt Lake City. "As society in the Rocky Mountains began to recover from the partial disorganization consequent upon the Utah War," wrote Edward Tullidge, "the men in whom were the strongest professional instincts of the theatre began now in their line to revive the social life of the people."

Since Margets organized the association independent of the LDS Church, he needed to find a place to perform other than the Social Hall to which the inactive Deseret Dramatic Association had claim. Harry Bowring was building a new home on First South between Third and Fourth East, and since the partitions had not yet been constructed, the entire ground floor was made into a theatre.

Margets was anxious to get official approval for his project from Brigham Young, so he invited Brigham, Heber C. Kimball, and their families to a performance of The Honeymoon. When they arrived with their families (a crowd of about 100), they found that the two families could barely fit into the small building. Yet, Brigham Young was so pleased with the performance that at the end of the play he said, "The people must have amusements as well as religion." He then announced that the time had come to...
Though Brigham Young was credited with cultivating theatrical affairs in territorial Utah, the inception of such entertainments took place much earlier, with Joseph Smith's encouragement.

The inauguration of Mormon theatricals came during the spring of 1844, after the conversion of Thomas A. Lyne, a professional actor from Philadelphia. Lyne, acting on an appeal by his brother-in-law, George J. Adams, contributed his experience and talent for the benefit of the financially encumbered Prophet. Following the April conference, a playbill announcing a “Grand Moral Entertainment” in the Masonic Hall was distributed. Richard Sheridan's Piuzza or The Death of Rolla was to be performed on April 26. According to the playbill, this production was intended “to aid in the discharge of a debt, against President Joseph Smith, contracted through the odious persecution of Moosoro, and vexatious law suits.”

Although heavy rains postponed the performance until April 26, the unfavorable weather did not inhibit Sarsen citizens from enjoying the first of several productions under Lyne's direction. The newspapers reported that even the Prophet appeared “highly gratified” by the participants and expressed “no small amusement” regarding their performance. The cast included Brigham Young as the high priest, Heber C. Kimball as Gomez, George A. Smith as the old blind man, Erastus Snow as the old man, and Amasa Lyman as Las Casas.


The people must have amusements as well as religion.” Brigham Young said, then announced that they had come to build a large building for the specific purpose of theatrical performances.

Edward Tullidge explained: “In the Bowery the performances, though theatrical in their character, were nevertheless given in a religious sanctuary. The Bowery could not, even in the public mind, bear the name of theatre; and similar views may be taken of the Social Hall. . . . It was the beginning of our proper dramatic era.”

The soldiers at Camp Floyd had been there about a year when they were ordered east because of the growing conflict that resulted in the American Civil War. Before heading east, the soldiers sold their supplies at auction.

Brigham Young sent Hiram B. Clawson to the auction with $4,000. Some of the supplies he purchased were used to build the Salt Lake Theatre while other supplies were sold at a profit to form the nucleus of the theatre building fund. Brigham Young sent teamsters to the federal wagons in Wyoming, which had been burned by the Utah militia when the federal army first approached the Salt Lake Valley in 1857. The teamsters removed the iron from the wagons, brought it back and hammered it into nails to be used in the theatre.

The site for the theatre on First South and State Street was next to a streambed of one City Creek's meandering branches. Workers had to carefully excavate and place the footings, which were made of large sandstone slabs from Red Butte Canyon. Teamsters shipped giant red pine beams from Big Cottonwood Canyon to support the parquet and stage. The walls of the theatre rested on four-foot-thick stonework encased by one-foot-wide adobe brickwork. Workmen took clay from the benches above the city and mixed it with straw and gravel to make the 385,000 bricks needed for the project. The roof was constructed of eighty-five-foot spans composed of seven two-by-fifteen strings tied together by handcrafted wooden pegs. The thousands of pegs needed were whittled by women in the evenings. According to one historian, “nearly every family residing in Great Salt Lake City at the time was represented on the roster of workmen.” It was by far the largest structure yet built by the Latter-day Saints.

By March of 1862, the Salt Lake Theatre, which could seat 1,500, was ready for use. The ground floor was 80 by 144 feet. Architect William H. Folsom stated, “The auditorium has a parquette and four circles, 60 feet on the outer circles, 37 feet on the inner, and covered with a circular dome in ogre or bell form.” He went on to explain, “In the interior, the stage has an opening at the drop curtain of 31 feet front by 28 feet.
high, shows 27 feet in flats and 62 feet deep from footlights. "The ten feet proscenium and 40 feet high from stage floor to ceiling." 18

Brigham Young was the "designer and general director of the whole affair," and this was consistent with his belief that theatre was a "civilizer and moral teacher to the masses." 19 In the dedicatory prayer of 6 March 1862, Daniel H. Wells prayed, "All and every part of this building we consecrate and dedicate unto Thee, our Father, that it may be pure and holy unto the Lord our God, for a safe and righteous habitation for the assemblies of Thy people, for pastime, amusement and recreation; for plays, theatrical performances, for lectures, conventions, or celebrations, or for whatever purpose it may be used for the benefit of Thy Saints." 20

On this occasion, according to his daughter, Clarissa Young Spencer, Brigham Young said: "Every pure enjoyment was from Heaven and was for the Saints and when they came together with pure spirit and with faith that they would pray for the actors and actresses they would be refreshed and benefited in their entertainments and that those on the stage should ever be as humble as if they were preaching the gospel. Truth and virtue must abound and characterize every person engaged on the stage or they should be immediately ejected from the building. No person would be permitted to bring liquor into this edifice." 21

President Young was good to his word. When Lucille Westerby declaimed "the wildest sensations" by pasting a thin slice of raw beef to her face in an 1869 production of Oliver Twist, Brigham Young, haunted by such staged realism, promptly put an end to the technique. John Sheepshanks, a non-Mormon visitor from England, said, "The President Brigham Young did not like much noise and if the applause became loud and vigorous, his well-known face would be seen protruding from the curtain of his box and looking round, and lo! At once all was hushed." Indeed, Brigham Young once said in a sermon, "I have often felt that I would order the curtain dropped, and give a sharp reproof to those who scream, whistle, stamp, and indulge in many other unwise [and] reprehensible demonstrations." 22

Brigham Young kept a close eye on the theatre. During the performance of one play, Sara Alexander, a blonde, played a role that called for a brunette in the script. Brigham Young pointed out the discrepancy to Alexander. She indicated that the matter was easily remedied if she could wear the glossy black curls worn by John Donaldson in the play. McDonald "was inordinately proud of his wonderful locks that reached down to his shoulders." However, when Brigham Young asked for them, McDonald said, "If the success of the play depends upon my hair, Brother Brigham, you shall have my hair." 23

However, Brigham Young's control over the theatre began to slip as the years went by. His daughter tells of an incident when a professional ballet was scheduled to appear at the Salt Lake Theatre. Brigham Young insisted that the dancers perform in ankle-length skirts. While the ballet manager was not happy about this, he had the dancers perform in ankle-length skirts on the first night. However, "on each succeeding night for a week the wily manager cut off several inches from the bottoms of the tutus until at the final performance they had reached the forbidden knees before Father was at all aware of what had happened." 24

Brigham Young instructed the managers of the Salt Lake Theatre that no non-Mormon actors be engaged and that no tragedy be performed. However, when the managers heard that Thomas A. Lyon, a Mormon apostate and actor who had performed in Nauvoo, was in Denver, they invit-
The tradition of theatre started by the Utah pioneers continued and spread to local communities throughout Utah.

As a reporter for Harper's Weekly who visited Utah in 1910 stated, "They [the people of Utah] are a literary people, lovers of art, music and drama. There is scarcely a city, town or hamlet in Utah that has not got its dramatic association." 32

The tradition of theatre started by the Utah pioneers continued and spread to local communities throughout Utah. A reporter for Harper's Weekly who visited Utah in 1910 stated, "They [the people of Utah] are a literary people, lovers of art, music and drama. There is scarcely a city, town or hamlet in Utah that has not got its dramatic association." 32

The Salt Lake Theatre was razed in October 1928. The Social Hall had been razed in 1922. Yet early theatre in Utah was not forgotten. In 1962, 100 years after the founding of the Salt Lake Theatre, the Daughters of Utah Pioneers dedicated their national headquarters building in Salt Lake City. The buff-colored building's façade was a replica of the old Salt Lake Theatre. The DUP museum that was housed in the new building contained memorabilia from the Salt Lake Theatre, including a curtain, some original seats, and a collection of costumes.

In 1940, a commemorative plaque was placed on the new telephone building that stood where the Salt Lake Theatre once stood. 34 In 1992, officials dedicated a memorial to the Social Hall on State Street. The memorial was an open-air, steel-framed glass enclosure with the same dimensions as the original Social Hall. On the lower level of the memorial is a museum consisting of large sections of the hall's original foundations, scenes used for dinners and social occasions, artifacts found during excavations at the site, and a scale replica of the original Social Hall. 35

In 1980, construction began on a recreation of a pioneer village at the mouth of Emigration Canyon. The village is called Old Deseret. A prominent feature of the village is a reconstruction of the original Social Hall. The Deseret Dramatic Association, the Social Hall's original theatre company, was

The site for the Salt Lake theatre on First South and State Street was next to a streambed of one of City Creek's meandering branches. Workers had to carefully excavate and place the footings which were made of large sandstone slabs from Red Butte Canyon.
The people of Utah are a literary people, lovers of art, music and drama. There is scarcely a city, town or hamlet in Utah that has not got its dramatic association.

—Harper's Weekly, 1910

By Janet Peterson

T
doctives in Salt Lake City bear resemblance to the original Salt Lake Theatre, which was razed in 1928. One is the Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum, built in 1956, and located on north Main Street. The other is the Pioneer Memorial Theatre on the University of Utah campus, completed in 1962.

The 1928 sale and razing of the much loved, but decaying, pioneer theatre caused great dismay among its patrons. The classic Salt Lake Theatre provided the stage for developing local thespians and attracted many nationally acclaimed actors. Kingsbury Hall on the university campus opened two years later, providing a new and elegant setting. This theatre was best suited to large-scale productions rather than more intimate theatre.

In 1945, Dr. C. Lowell Lees, then chairman of the Theatre Department at the University of Utah, proposed building a replica of the Salt Lake Theatre. Fundraising began and support was sought from the community and businesses, the Utah Centennial Commission, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, it would not be until 17 years later that the new theatre was completed. Ninth Church President David O. McKay dedicated Pioneer Memorial Theatre on 10 October 1962, 100 years after the dedication of its predecessor.

The building is a stylized replica of the old Salt Lake Theatre, with the main floor seating 1,000. Many seats have the names of pioneers engraved on the arms representing donations of patrons who wished to honor their ancestors. The new theatre complex serves both the university and community as a teaching facility and as a site for high-quality dramatic and musical productions.

Visit the Social Hall replica (left) at This is the Place Heritage Park.

The 2003 Season of the Deseret Dramatic Association includes the following productions:

Patrick Henry, Patriot

One-man show by Michael Bennett

July 3, 4, 5

Pioneer Celebration

July 24, 25, 26

An Evening at Sleepy Hollow

Sept. 26, 27; Oct. 3, 4, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31

Guests enjoy an interactive evening in Sleepy Hollow. Meet Ichabod Crane and be chased by the Headless Horseman.

Haunted Desert

Sept. 26, 27; Oct. 3, 4, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31

Haunt spine-titting local legends and ghost stories as you move through the village by candlelight to visit the haunted buildings and sites.

Sunset Talks with Mountain Man Caler Stockton

Wednesdays in the Fall: Sit around the fire pit and hear the adventures of a "real" mountain man.

An Evening with Dickens

Dec. 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20

You will never experience A Christmas Carol more poignantly than by hearing Charles Dickens, himself, do the readings of his famous Christmas tale.

Charles Dickens Nativity

Dec. 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20

For the first time, the nativity written by Charles Dickens will be performed using beautiful handmade figures in a puppet theater format. Both children and parents will love it.

Messianic Sing-In at the Pine Valley Meeting House

Dec. 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20

Join in with the pioneers of the "Pioneer Chorale" as they sing Handel's Messiah to an authentic pump organ.

Contact This is the Place Heritage Park at (801) 582-1847 for times, prices, and additional information.