Theatre in Pioneer Utah

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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 theaters in the United States at Nauvoo, Illinois, in the early 1840s. These early pioneers believed that the theater had been created for an elevating 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 theater 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 theater. 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." 

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" and a "large stage with curtains" at one end.1 The Old Bowery accommodated around 1,000 people, and the Pioneer’s Musical and Dramatic Company performed many plays there in the early 1850s, accompanied by the Nauroo Brass Band.2 Edward W. Tullidge wrote: "No religious chief, excepting one like Brigham Young, a great society founder, would have permitted the performance of theatricals in the temple of an Israelite people, for such the Bowery was in a primitive sense. But Brigham with his practical mind, realized that it was ... a Moses-like performance to keep the modern Children of Israel alive and happy in the wilderness of their isolation, lest they sigh for the folks of Egypt and the merrymaking of their native lands.3

Plays were performed in the bowery for only a few years. On 1 January 1853, Amasa M. Lyman dedicated the Social Hall which, according to Ono F. Whitney, was "the chief altar in Utah upon which incense was burned to the dramatic muse" throughout the 1850s.4 The hall was located just south of the Lion House on State Street in Salt Lake City. The auditorium was 40 by 60 feet, which could hold approximately 300 patrons. However, according to one actor, nearly 400 people often crowded into the small building to see a play. The basement held two dressing rooms and a banquet hall. The building was 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 Nauroo for Joseph Smith.5

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."6

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."7

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.8

In the fall of 1859, Phil Margetts 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 Margetts organized the association independently 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.9

Margetts 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

Salt Lake Theatre Group (p. 5), Tullidge (p. 61), Margets (p. 5); © Utah State Historical Society, Social Hall, (in Connecticut Archives, Social Hall photo (p. 1); © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc., courtesy LDS Family and Church History Archives. All rights reserved.
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 endorsement.

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 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 Pixies or The Death of Rolla was to be performed on April 24, 1844. 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 Missouri, and vexatious law suits.”

Although heavy rains postponed the performance until April 26, the unfavorable weather did not inhibit Nauvoo 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 Alonso, and Amasa Lyman as Ias Casus.”

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 ogee 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 composed of seven two-by-fourteen stringers 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 workers.” It was by far the largest structure yet built by the Latter-day Saints.

The site for the 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. 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 brickings. 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 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 Bowery could not, even in the public mind, bear the name of theatre; and similar views may be taken of the Social Hall. . . . It [the proposed Salt Lake Theatre] was a theatre now, no longer a bowery; no longer a Social Hall; secular, not sacred. . . . 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 build a large building for the specific purpose of theatrical performances.

As 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,
President Young was good to his word. When Lucille Western asked "the wildest sensations" by pasting a thin slice of raw beef to her face in an 1869 production of Oliver Twist, Brigham Young, horrified 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." 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 McDonald 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." However, Brigham Young's control over the theatre began to slip as the years went by. His daughter tells of an incident when a producer called for a brunette in the script. Brigham Young instructed the managers of the Salt Lake Theatre that no non-Mormon actors to help with productions. However, when Brigham Young's control over the Salt Lake Theatre less frequently in the 1870s, LDS Church leaders also were vocally critical of the theatre's productions. Historian Ron Walker observed, "The secularizing trend continued in the twentieth century as the theatre became increasingly tied to the national theatrical circuit and consequently to New York booking agencies that virtually controlled attractions." This led to "growing uneasiness by church leaders." When Daniel D. Wells had dedicated the Salt Lake Theatre in 1862, he prayed: "Suffer no evil or wicked influences to predominate or prevail within these walls; neither disorder, drunkenness, debauchery, or licentiousness of any sort or kind; but rather than this, sooner than it should pass into the hands or control of the wicked or ungodly, let it utterly perish and crumble to atoms; let it be as though it had not been, an utter waste, each and every part returning to its natural element." Commenting on this prayer, historian Edward W. Tullidge wrote: "Not in the whole history of the stage, ancient or modern, was ever a theatre before thus endowed as a sacred dramatic temple for the people.... Brigham Young, a man of no art culture beyond that which was self-evolved, but the high priest of a despised church, should have so lifted the theatre to the conception of the great high priests of the stage."

—Edward W. Tullidge

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matic history that Brigham Young, a man of no art culture beyond that which was self-evolved, but the high priest of a despised church, should have so lifted the theatre to the conception of the great high priests of the stage; and, if Brigham’s Theatre has fallen from its pinnacle, we shall not debit the fall to him nor his counselor whose dedicatory prayer is before our eyes.”

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.”

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. 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. In 1986, construction began on a re-creation 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
reorganized in 2000 and performs pioneer plays year-round at the reconstituted Social Hall. The greatest memorial we have today of Utah's pioneer theatre heritage is the multi-tude of plays and musicals being performed in local communities throughout Utah for the entertainment and edification of the local citizenry.

Notes

2 Claris Young Spencer and Mable Harvey, Brigham Young at Home (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1947), 196.
6 Whitney, History of Utah, 1:301.
7 Piper, 24.
9 Edward W. Ballidge, History of Salt Lake City (Salt Lake City: Star Printing Company, 1896), 741.
14 Piper, 168-43.
16 Spencer, 141.
18 Piper, 85.
19 Walter, 66.
20 Piper, 87.
21 Spencer, 141.

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
Pioneer Celebration
July 3, 4, 5

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. 20, 21, Oct. 3, 4, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31
 Hear spine-chilling 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, as the reading 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.

Messiah 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.

Visit This is the Place Heritage Park.