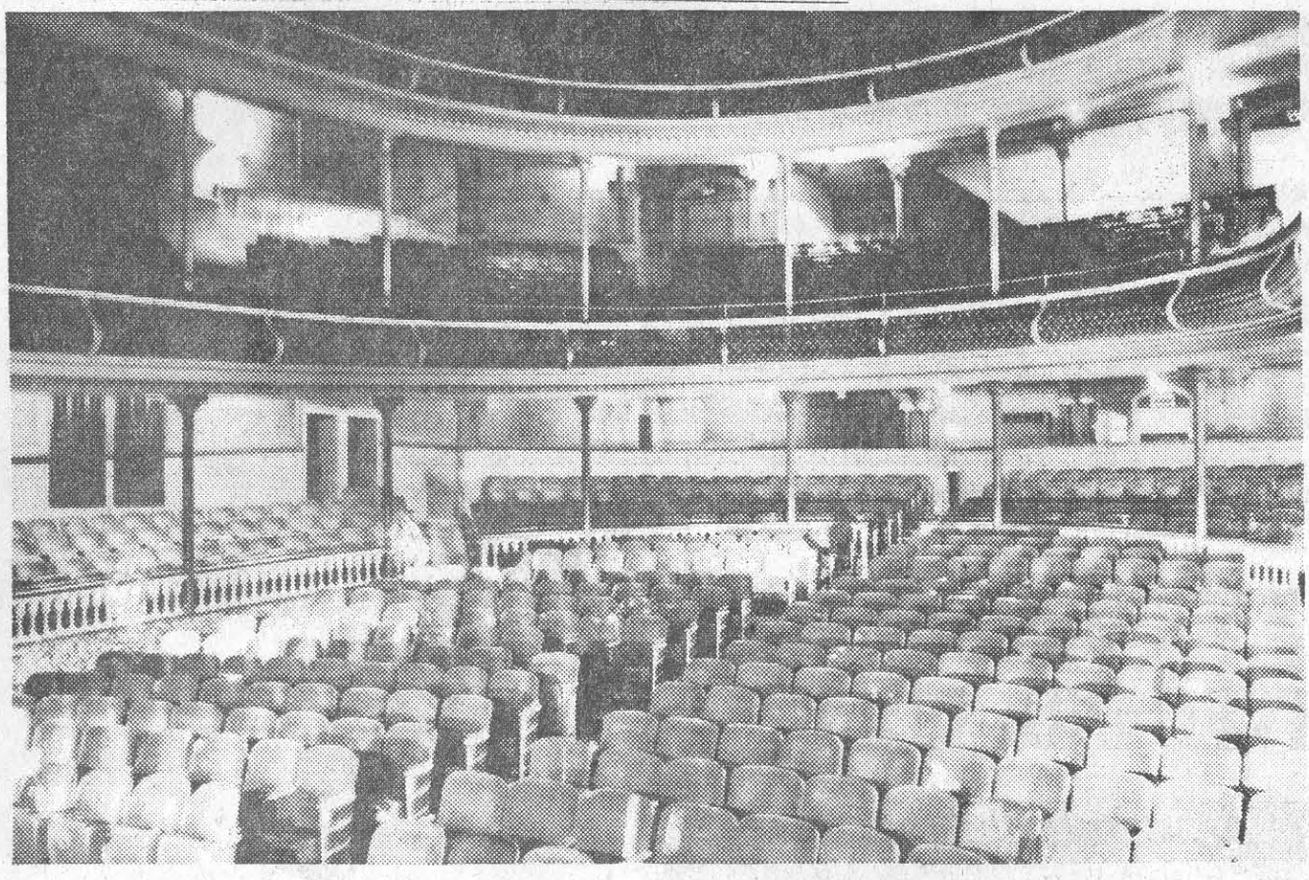


Academy of Music

The interior of the city's most famous old-time theatre, as seen from the stage. The railing and seats of the parquet, the rear section of the orchestra, are raised slightly above the front section. The posts holding up the balcony are clearly visible, and it is obvious why they interfered with the sight lines. The first balcony can be seen, but the second balcony is lost in darkness. The semi circular structure of seating area is also visible.

City Has Long Show

The history of the theatre in Fall River falls into two main parts: The first from the end of the Civil War until the end of World War I when at least one theatre was constantly in operation here and constantly popular, and the second from 1918 until the present, when legitimate theatre was more or less supplanted by the movies and then by TV.

But even before the opening of the first phase, that is, even before the Civil War, there were theatrical entertainments in this area, the first of which there is known record being, appropriately enough, the New York Circus. The circus appeared in May of 1845 in Tiverton between Main and Second Streets and advertised a company of "100 persons and steeds."

There was no menagerie of the kind P.T. Barnum made famous later in the century. The circus featured horseback stunt riding, trapeze artists, gymnasts and a man who was billed as being able "to stand for a full five minutes on his head."

There is no reason to think the New York Circus, also known as the Olympiad, was any better

described as "two boards and a passion," and in the early days here this is just about all it was.

Outside the city hall, however, during those years of the 60s, textile mills were mushrooming and as they did, the population kept doubling and tripling almost annually. It was during those years too that train service was established, making it possible to ship the city's textile products faster and cheaper, but also making it possible for first-rate theatrical companies to come here, at least for a one-night stand.

It worked both ways. Just as it became possible to bring well-known performers here, an audience for them was growing up.

With that in mind the Fall River Opera House was built on Bedford Street a block away from Main. The opera house was an imposing structure and had a seating capacity of 1,000. According to one of its advertisements, "This theatre is excellently ventilated, lighted and heated, all of which is included in the rent."

In other words, the theatre was rented by the producer of the com-

symbol to the city itself of the way it had grown and prospered.

The theatre had an orchestra pit, then a second tier of seats, known as the parquet, that was a step above the floor level. The parquet was separated from the orchestra proper by a balustrade.

The reason for two separate orchestra pit levels was the fact that the Academy was not only a theatre; it was also what we would call today a civic center.

The lower level could be covered with a dancing floor, and from time to time balls for civic purposes were held there. The parquet level then became a place for the dancers or their chaperones to sit.

Above this split-level orchestra pit were two balconies. The first balcony was more or less comfortable and conventional; the second, however, had benches instead of seats. It provided a rather primitive way of seeing whatever production was being presented on the stage.

The entire theatre was semicircular so that the sides of the orchestra on the parquet level faced each other rather than the

dark, but on Friday it reopened for Professor Marshall's lecture, "The Age of Gold." The lecture, which was illustrated, was given with the aid of "oxthydrogen lighting," and covered all aspects of mining for gold.

The following week the Academy offered the popular light opera, "The Chimes of Normandy," a melodrama, "A Celebrated Case," and Dr. A. Hastings, late of San Francisco, Calif., "the wonderful Indian physician . . . He tells you your diseases without asking any questions."

A varied bill, to be sure, offering something for virtually every taste. An operetta, a couple of melodramas, and the lectures which filled something of the role a century ago that talk shows do today.

Popular taste has changed less in a century than the ways of gratifying it.

This was the ordinary bill of fare at the Academy, but the great stars came too.

Edwin Booth came, bringing with him his great fame and also the tragic aura that clung to him because his brother, John Wilkes Booth, had

There is no reason to think the New York Circus, also known as the Olympiad, was any better or worse than the other traveling circuses that in the pre-railroad era, made their way by cart and carriage through the countryside in the spring and summer. But it served as an introduction to theatrical entertainment for the people of this still predominantly rural part of the state. (The boundaries between Massachusetts and Rhode Island kept shifting at this time.)

In the 1850s an auditorium known as the Columbian Hall was available for concerts, lectures and plays. The Columbian Hall was located at the northeast corner of Borden and Second streets and burned down in 1860.

It was remembered especially for the affecting performance of the Wyatt Sisters in "The Little Lamplighter," and because on one occasion a Know-Nothing lecturer so aroused the anger of his audience that he had to jump from a window of the hall to avoid bodily harm.

During the Civil War years and immediately afterward the auditorium of the city hall was used for theatrical performances. The melodramas and minstrel shows that were the popular forms of theatrical fare at the time found adequate space there, and the effect at times must have been similar to that in today's theatre in the round or improvisational theatre.

Scenery was necessarily limited; the audience sat on an unraked floor watching performers on a temporary stage set up at one end. Theatre has been rent."

In other words, the theatre was rented by the producer of the companies that played there, just as legitimate theatres are today, and evidently, heat, light and (presumably natural) ventilation were provided without extra charge.

The Opera House was a small (by modern standards) but fully equipped theatre that was able to bring the people of Fall River the touring companies of a century ago in whatever their vehicles happened to be.

Many of the performances, however, were by the stock company from the Providence Opera House which apparently presented its full season's repertoire here. Some New York companies, however, were also booked into the Fall River Opera House on tour, offering the popular vehicles of the day, such as Augustin Daly's "Saratoga" and "The Lady of Lyons."

Alternatively, Fall Riverites were offered the pleasures of Carolton Hall at the corner of South Main and Anawan streets where there was often a kind of vaudeville show, usually presented by a producer named Wally Ward. Both the Fall River Opera House and Carolton Halll soon disappeared once the Academy of Music opened its doors. Almost at once the Academy became the city's major theatre and remained in that position for at least a generation.

The opening of the Academy on Jan. 6, 1876, was as glittering a social event as Fall River had had up to that time. In a sense the theatre within the office building known as the Borden Block was a semicircular so that the sides of the orchestra on the parquet level faced each other rather than the stage. Furthermore, the narrow pillars holding up the first balcony remained as so many obstructions to the view of those sitting behind them in the parquet.

The stage itself, by standards either of a century ago or today, was deep and commodious, suitable for the performance of either plays or musicals, initimate dramas or spectacles on the scale of "Ben Hur." It was well-equipped, and had ample wing space and dressing rooms.

Once the Academy opened, the Fall River Opera House closed its doors in short order and was later demolished. Until the close of World War I, virtually every major theatrical performer appeared at the Academy. It was a regular stop on the theatrical road.

That "road" was very different from what little is left of it today. For one thing, although there were prolonged stays in major cities like Boston or Philadelphia, much of any production's touring season was made up of one-night stands. Most of the performances here at the Academy were for one night only.

For instance, in the first week of April, 1878, there was nothing being shown at the Academy on Monday night. On Tuesday night, however, Mr. George C. Boniface appeared as Corporal Antoine in a melodrama of the French Revolution, "A Soldier's Trust."

Boniface proved popular enough to extend his stay for a second night. Thursday the theatre was great fame and also the tragic aura that clung to him because his brother, John Wilkes Booth, had assassinated President Lincoln.

Booth never smiled, except when one of his roles demanded it. He refused to obey ordinary house rules, such as the one forbidding smoking backstage. Booth's cigar accompanied him everywhere, except when he was actually performing.

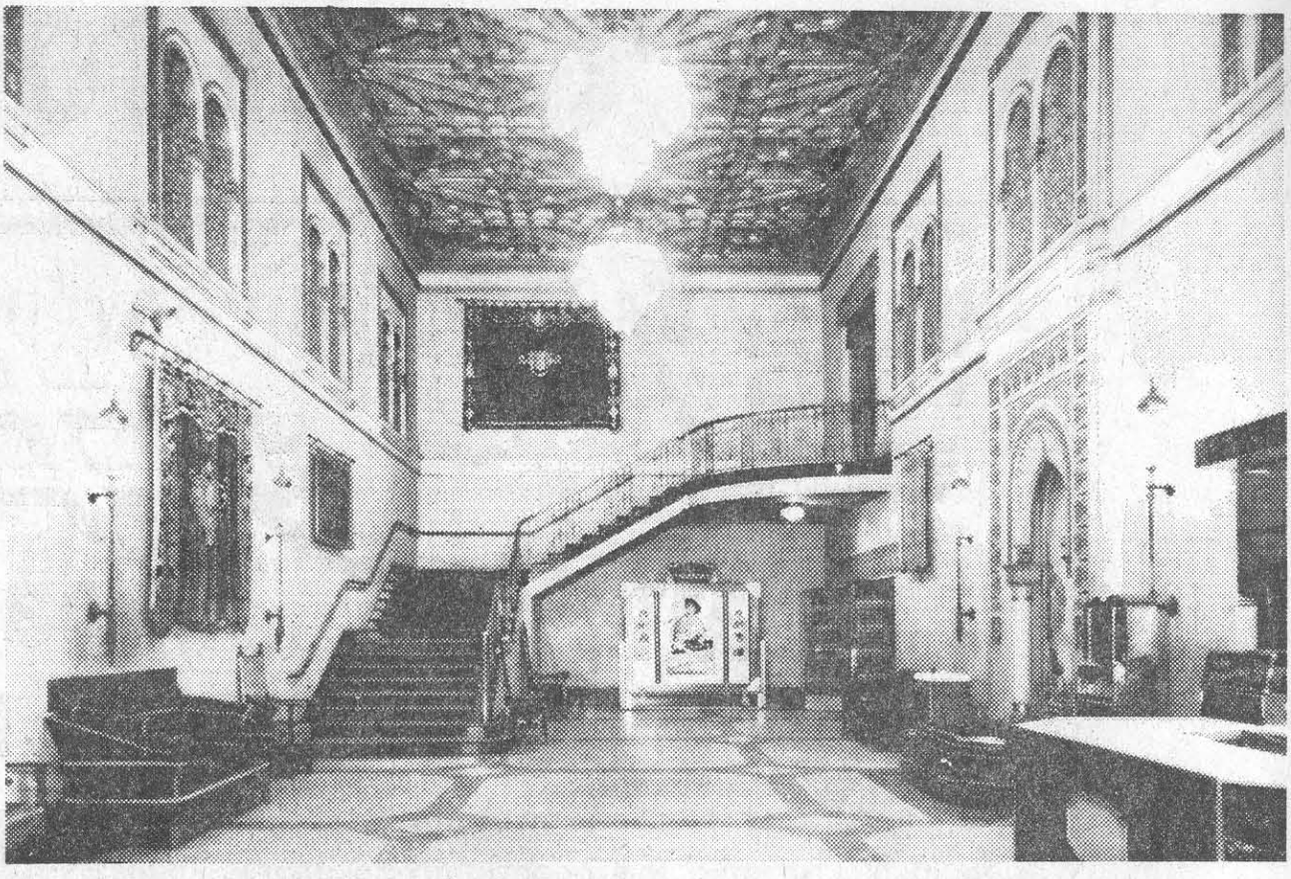
He was a law unto himself financially as well. He demanded a flat 90 per cent of the house's receipts — and got it. Once, when he played to a packed house at the Academy, and at substantially higher ticket prices than usual, all that the theatre got was $155. It was an honor to present Mr. Booth, but the honor came high.

Until 1918 and the golden age of the movie houses, the Academy presented all the major American stars. Cohan played there, David Warfield, the Barrymores, Mrs. Fiske and Otis Skinner.

But its greatest coup of all was booking Sarah Bernhardt on one of her last American tours. Bernhardt was old then; she had had one leg amputated; some of the glamour of her great days had faded.

Still, she was unquestionably the most famous living actress, and doubtless one of its two or three greatest. Because of her difficulty in moving about, most of the scenes she presented she acted reclining on a couch.

Even so, her voice which was always her greatest theatrical asset had retained its extraordinary range and ability to communicate emotion.



Durfee Lobby

The lobby of the Durfee Theatre with its ornate decor was the meeting place for virtually all Fall River every week for decades. The entrance to the theatre proper was at the rear right through the two open doors. The spacious staircase led upstairs to the mezzanine and balcony. The Moorish influence on the theatre's architecture is evident in the grill work on the artificial windows and in the fountain on the right.

w Business History

Her performance at the Academy, especially of the death scene from "Camille" remained in the memory of everyone in the crowded theatre.

A theatre that could present Booth, Bernhardt and the Barrymores obviously did not need to consider itself inferior to any in the Western world. And the fact that these great luminaries were willing to come here meant that there was an audience ready — indeed eager — to see them.

The Academy was also used for some civic occasions. For instance, when the great Irish leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, came here, it was at the Academy that he spoke. It was also the place where major concert artists appeared for many years.

Other theatres were now coming into being along Main Street. Some of them, like the Empire and the Bijou, were equipped for vaudeville as well as movies. Others, like the Savoy, which later became the Rialto, were built exclusively for films. None of them had the history or prestige of the Academy, although one, the Bijou, brought here just before World War One a traveling troupe that presented "An Even-

tan centers like New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago.

Stock companies were still flourishing, however, and here the most popular of them, featuring the matinee idol, Frank Burke, played for months at the Bijou. They were called stock companies, because they usually presented the ordinary stock farces, mysteries or domestic comedies, seldom if ever venturing toward anything more unusual or daring.

They drew very well, though, with the same people going back week after week to see their favorites, especially Burke, in one role after another. And for a long time they kept the legitimate theatre alive here and elsewhere.

Their death knell sounded, though, with the advent of talking pictures. Ironically, the Bijou where stock companies had been so successful was the theatre here where Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer," the first taling picture, was shown. And after the talkies took over, the stock companies disintegrated; the theatre, as distinct from the movies, almost disappeared.

It was what a matter of

demy was intended to be a legitimate theatre, while the Durfee was an extremely comfortable motion picture palace, made for the period where going to the movies at least once a week was the most popular form of entertainment.

To say the Durfee supplanted the Academy is simply to say the movies took the place of the stage.

The latest of the Main Street theatres was the Center which opened as a movie house in 1941. It was built on South Main Street not far from the corner of Spring and after all the demolitions and rebuildings of the past decade and a half, it is still in operation.

The Durfee and Empire were torn down; the Capitol is used for other purposes, even the Plaza has long since gone, but the Center remains as a twin cinema showing first-run films.

Meanwhile, shortly after the close of World War II, the Embassy, a relatively small movie house, was built at the corner of Purchase and Franklin Streets. For a time it featured art films of the kind that were coming into vogue elsewhere, but it failed to do enough

empty, or worse; a different audience was coming into being, one that preferred the "drive-ins," of which Greater Fall River has had several.

Briefly it seemed that television would swamp both the theatre and movies, but the alarm proved premature. Instead, both developed new forms over a period of years, as well as new means of reaching a wide public once again. The readjustment took time, and is not in some cases complete even now, but its general outlines are clear enough so that it is not impossible to see what the immediate future is likely to be.

After a century or more of theatre here, the most evident forms it takes right now are in our schools, colleges and community groups.

Here the instinct to act, to stage, to perform attracts adults and young people and very sizable audiences turn out all the time to see them.

For instance, one of the most important factors in preserving the continuity of theatre here in Fall River has been the Little Theatre which was founded in the mid-1930s and has continued to flourish ever since.

One a traveling troupe that presented "An Evening at the London Music Halls." And the most prominent member of the company was a very young comedian shortly to try his luck in films. His name was Chaplin.

The appetite for movies here was enormous. In the 20s during the heyday of silent films, apart from the theatres already mentioned, there were two new ones, the Capitol on South Main near Morgan Street and the Premier, which was on Rock Street almost opposite the courthouse. The Premier burned down in the Great Fire of 1928 and was never rebuilt. The Capitol remained in operation during the 30s, 40s and 50s.

In addition the Strand in the Flint and the Park in the Globe played reruns of his movies for neighborhood audiences. There was also the Plaza across from the Capitol where tickets were cheaper and which therefore played to audiences largely made up of children. And in the early 1920s there was still the Nickelodeon, where, as its name indicates, admission was only five cents, and serials and westerns were still being shown. The Nickelodeon was on Pleasant Street a block above the side entrance to the Academy.

The 20s were a period of theatrical transition, here, like everywhere else. The stage was being supplanted by the movies, so that the Academy was no longer being used on a regular basis. The great stars of the period were beginning to steer clear of the "road," and confined themselves to metropoli-

peared.

It was what a matter of coincidence that the talkies came into being at almost exactly the same time that the Depression hit Fall River. The Academy closed for a time, then reopened as a movie house, functioned briefly as a theatre for a sort of civic stock company, and then, finally showed second-run films.

The fire in February, 1928, that consumed the Premier Theatre on Rock Street also destroyed the Rialto on North Main Street just beyond the corner of Bedford. The Rialto, however, was rebuilt on a larger scale and was named the Durfee.

Primarily intended for the showing of motion pictures, the Durfee did have a stage large enough for dance bands and some feature acts. Except for a few weeks when it first opened, however, the Durfee seldom presented anything but films. As the largest and most opulent theatre in the city, it took the place of the Academy for the period between 1930 and 1960.

Through those decades, and especially during the years of World War II, the Durfee was often used for civic purposes. It was, for instance, the scene of Durfee High's graduation. Visiting stars used it for bond rallies during the war. Occasional touring groups presented musicals there. The city was accustomed to going to the Durfee in the same way that it was accustomed, a generation earlier, to going to the Academy.

They were both fine theatres, but the Aca-

ing into vogue elsewhere, but it failed to do enough business to survive. It closed after a relatively brief career and was torn down to make way for the parking lot which still occupies the space where it stood.

Between 1950 and 1956 a succession of producers including John J. McAvoy, the manager of the Durfee Theatre, operated a summer theatre in the Somerset Playhouse, which had been built after the war.

Major stars, including Tallulah Bankhead, Beatrice Lillie, Mae West, John Garfield and Franchot Tone appeared in Somerset during the six summers when the theatre was functioning.

In spite of the very considerable popularity of the productions, the high overhead finally defeated this courageous effort.

The Somerset Playhouse, for the six years it functioned was a thoroughly professional attempt to make Greater Fall River part of the major summer theatre circuit which, to a considerable degree, was all that remained of legitimate theatre during the 1950s.

That it did not become permanent was in no way a reflection on the excellent management or, indeed, on the public response; it simply reflects the unhealthy economic condition of the theatre 25 years ago.

At the time the Somerset Playhouse was closing, the long reign of the motion picture houses was also threatened by the new entertainment marvel, television, the huge movie palaces built in the 1920s were half-

has continued to flourish ever since.

The Little Theatre movement nationally began in the 1920s when the decline of live theatre, as movies became more ard more popular, meant that many communities were totally without it. Those communities developed theatres of their own, usually with amateur talent, but often that talent was of very high order.

That was the case here, and over the decades the Little Theatre did develop a large and devoted audience which was, in fact, its sole support.

It has done plays by Shaw, Wilde, O'Neill, Eliot, Williams and Miller. It has consistently tried to bring to this city the very best plays it was able to stage. It has provided theatrical entertainment and stimulus in good times and bad, and it has done this while charging its patrons very little for admission.

Many of the forms professional theatre takes become more mechanical or artificial all the time, but the theatrical activity here (and elsewhere) is by no means limited to these.

It was impossible not to be excited by the prospects and potential for live theatre here when standing among an enthusiastic crowd watching a street theatre performance of "Jesus Christ, Superstar" this past summer.

It is in these terms, not so far removed from where it began with a traveling circus, that the theatree here and most other American cities is most alive today