Actors, Audiences, and Historic Theaters of Kentucky

Marilyn Casto

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Actors, Audiences, & Historic Theaters of Kentucky
Actors, Audiences, and

Historic Theaters

of Kentucky
To my mother

Winifred Casto

and to the memory of my father

Gene A. Casto
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The staff of several historical organizations and libraries assisted in the use of their collections. These include the Kentucky Historical Society, the Filson Club, the University of Louisville Rare Books and Special Collections, the University of Kentucky Special Collections and Archives, and the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives. B.J. Gooch of Transylvania University was especially helpful in locating photographs. At the University of Kentucky, Lisa Carter and Claire McCann provided much appreciated assistance in locating photographs. Inter-Library Loan at Western Kentucky University was always willing to search out obscure publications. The staff of the Kentucky Library at Western Kentucky University was invariably more than willing to provide assistance. Connie Mills, Nancy Baird, Jonathan Jeffrey, and Riley Handy made the task of locating information and illustrations much easier. No one could ask for better colleagues. The Kentucky Heritage Council permitted use of their files and assisted with a computer listing of theaters.

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This book examines the relationship between two art forms—architecture and theater—as they existed in Kentucky from the eighteenth through the early years of the twentieth centuries. The very word “theater” refers to a pairing of place and event, with action and setting inseparable. Theater and architecture, both concerned with the interaction of people, have been intertwined since each began. However different their surface appearance, these two art forms share a common element in the humanity that participates in and observes both dramatic arts and the built environment. Both are cultural products embodying the aspirations, beliefs, and values of creators, critics, and users. Both have meanings assigned to them by the viewer, who sees and interprets theater, whether tangible building or intangible performance, through the lens of his/her own experience. Architecture and performance parallel each other in appealing to the audience’s emotions.

During a performance the audience remains a collection of detached eavesdroppers, removed from actions on stage in which they take no part. At the same time, their presence gives the performance meaning; without an audience, the actors engage only in a narcissistic exercise. In the words of actress Colleen Dewhurst, interaction with the audience is “what makes acting the beautiful thing it is.” Similarly, those who use architecture do not expect to plan or execute a building. They try it out, walking through spaces, inspecting the design and, like the playgoer, critiquing the results. Experience of function and design is an activity set apart from the architect and builder who created the space, but like the dramatic audience, environmental participants make the structure complete. Architectural features and performance methods are inextricably mingled. Architecture enclosing drama inevitably interacts with both performers and onlookers, either making the staging easier and the audience comfortable, or imposing constraints on performance modes and interfering with the audience’s comprehension.
Theater entrepreneurs often emphasized a building’s visual impact, making the structure as much a part of the theatergoing experience as the play.

Theater design says as much about the people who watched performances as about the actors or the drama. Like all public spaces, theaters present complex multilayered images. Different people saw them differently. To actors, theaters were work spaces and familiar in the sense that all such places are to their daily occupants. To audiences, they were places for occasional visits where only the public areas were visible. The two groups, actors and patrons, used the spaces for separate and distinct purposes, and this divergence is reflected in the architecture.

Kentucky has a long theatrical heritage, but throughout much of its history, the state’s theaters contended with inadequate architecture. Indeed, the word “architecture” is hardly descriptive of some performance spaces. Kentucky’s recorded theatrical heritage dates from 1790, when a group of Transylvania Seminary students entertained their trustees with a play as one of the activities associated with an examination. They certainly had no theater building and probably lacked even a stage. Several strolling (transient) performers of highly variable quality passed through Kentucky. The state also created its own entertainment through amateur groups, usually titled the “Thespian Society.” All of them staged their performances in whatever space they could find. Kentucky’s landmark year for theater building was 1808, when the first real theater opened in Lexington. Luke Usher, the owner, wanted a permanent company but initially had to make do with amateurs and occasional visiting actors. More professional theater arrived in 1815 with Samuel Drake and his troupe of eastern actors, who had been persuaded to attempt a tour of the wild West.

Remote as it was, and despite considerable difficulties, Kentucky emerged as a prime site for Western theatrical activity. During the era when professional actors first entered the state, Kentucky’s population was growing rapidly. With greater numbers of inhabitants came a correspondingly larger potential audience. Over one thousand miles of navigable water, more than any of the other states, offered a way to reach settlements. In addition, visitors to Kentucky often noted the people’s hospitality and curiosity—traits likely to encourage residents to welcome actors. Perhaps there is merit in an early actor’s comments: “In all new countries the early inhabitants are very fond of amusements . . . The first adventurers to a new country are generally bold and active spirits, with an unbounded desire of novelty and
Introduction

excitement. Such have, besides, a considerable amount of romance in their natures, and take hold of the ideal with an eager, though rude grasp."6

Kentucky residents may have been anxious to view drama, but the state offered little in the way of performance spaces. In the initial decades, players were obliged to perform in makeshift structures, temporary “theaters,” and more permanent structures of little architectural distinction and often less practicality. Inadequate though these buildings may have been, they are worth considering in relation to drama of the period and with respect to architectural and theatrical traditions. They have much to tell us about early Kentucky’s cultural environment.

That stages and audience response left something to be desired is less remarkable than the fact that theater existed at all. The United States did not see its first professional performance until 1752, although the first recorded play was produced in Virginia in 1665.7 An observer writing of the period 1797–1811 recorded that “All the other cities, Boston only excepted, had either temporary erections in some warehouse or barn, or else some poor wooden building, such as that of New York, which was equally meager in look and appointment.”8 Kentucky built its first theaters just at the end of that era. When even eastern city theaters lacked elaboration, better could hardly be expected of Kentucky, then widely regarded as a wilderness fraught with difficult travel and living conditions. Early managers and actors deserved credit for trying, instead of giving up in despair at the lack of supporting facilities or organizations.

Drama, and the design of structures that housed it, came west from eastern urban areas. In turn, the eastern United States had inherited its theatrical tradition from England.9 The result for Kentucky was a diluted form of play and playhouse derived from much earlier techniques, distanced by time and place. The search for suitable performance areas led, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to the use of structures designed for widely divergent purposes at considerable variance from entertainers’ needs. It cannot have been easy to convert ballrooms and distilleries to dramatic needs, but early thespians managed. Adjusting to local geography, they discovered that boats could journey easily into newly settled areas of the West, eliminating much of the difficulty involved in overland transportation and the problem of locating suitable buildings for performances. Stage and players traveled together. Managers did not overlook the inherent financial advantages of avoiding the rental fees for performance areas. Al-
Though it was not until after 1830 that the first real showboat (as we now use the term) was created, the principle existed long before.

Early in the nineteenth century, Kentucky acquired its first real theaters. Throughout this era, British fashions heavily influenced its former colonies in architecture, furnishings, clothes, and even food. Breaking Americans of the English tea drinking habit required great effort. It was natural that stages followed English patterns. British theaters had changed little since the Restoration. Seventeenth-century architects had favored a U-shape; the division of the house (the audience seating) into boxes, pit, and gallery; a raked (sloped) stage; proscenium (the stage opening); and a broad apron (front of the stage). Separate house areas offered the economic advantage of separate and escalating prices. Box occupants paid the most, followed by those seated in the pit (floor level) and the gallery, where sat the "gallery gods," usually the lower classes. Managers who divided houses kept economic considerations uppermost in their minds, but social stratification soon became a dominant factor in their use. In purchasing a box seat, patrons acquired not only more comfort, but a degree of privacy unavailable to other areas. Box occupants could avoid any jostling from fellow theatergoers. Theaters mirrored the culture, permitting all to be present, but in their assigned places. Social divisions would be a prominent feature of theaters into the twentieth century. In this, as in other theater characteristics, purely utilitarian purposes were insignificant in comparison to symbolic functions.

Prosceniums, or picture-frame stages, originated in the seventeenth century, remaining standard for theaters well into the twentieth century. Prosceniums defined the stage, setting a division between actors and audience and between fantasy and reality. Like a picture on the wall, the framed stage presented a visual display to be perused by detached viewers. At least that was the idea. Early audiences tended to participate wholeheartedly in the play, shouting out to actors, stamping their feet, and whistling. Nevertheless, the existence of the proscenium did maintain some literal and psychological separation.

Early Kentucky theaters lacked their English prototypes' refinements, but as time, money, and circumstances permitted, they, too, began house divisions. It was this basic plan that dominated theater design through the nineteenth century. Surface decoration changed in the direction of greater elaboration, but layout remained unaltered. Facades were plain. Even the English did not begin to elaborate exteriors until the eighteenth century.
Explicit dramatic character was utterly lacking in many theater exteriors, which were designed to blend into commercial streets. Contemporary theater descriptions by actors, actor-managers, and theatergoers provide a glimpse of typical early Southern theater interiors. Exteriors generally received cursory or no description. The implication is that exteriors struck no one as being particularly worthy of mention. It evidently was not considered necessary to attract the public through architectural display, but rather by scenic stage effects.

Significantly, prominent manager Noah Ludlow specifically detailed only one exterior (in St. Louis) of the theaters with which he was associated, although he did discuss interiors. The facade he mentioned, never finished, was to have had a large portico with Corinthian columns. Judging from his remarks, Ludlow considered the whole idea a waste of money better spent elsewhere, and he chose to "defer the finishing of the front to a more favorable time" that never arrived. 15

Interiors in all but the roughest theaters had the usual three divisions of pit, boxes, and gallery, with the pit closest to the stage. That basic arrangement remained throughout the century, only becoming larger with more tiers and boxes. Ludlow recorded several theaters with benches arranged on an inclined plane, with one rising above the other toward the back of the room. A side ramp provided access. The incline, of course, was intended to improve sight lines. He pointedly mentioned cases of unpadded seats covered by canvas and paint. 16 Features that Ludlow recorded as inadequate or absent reveal much about what he considered standard or desirable. Complaints about dismal paint colors suggest that some paint was expected. He mentioned plastering of theater walls and, in one case, covering them with white cotton when the plastering could not be completed. Few accounts specifically described decoration, but Ludlow complained of theaters with rough or plain interiors, which implies that he expected at least some attempt at adornment. Theater ventilation, particularly in the summer, was a problem. Ludlow spoke of both house and stage windows in one of his theaters, although such arrangements posed winter heating difficulties.

As urban areas expanded, managers erected permanent theaters according to the prevailing fashion. By the middle nineteenth century, taste favored an explosion of ornament. By twentieth-century standards, these were judged too elaborate, their decoration competing with the drama for attention. Conditioned by our own expectations that architecture should not detract from the stage or screen, viewers today sometimes comment
that such elaboration is “too much,” thus missing the point of earlier the-
aters. They were never too much for audiences of the period. Cultural val-
ues were being expressed through aesthetics. In the nineteenth to early
twentieth centuries, audiences not only expected elaboration, but regarded
it as a delightful adjunct to theater. Without such elaborate settings and
intriguing scenic effects, the audience often felt cheated. To theatergoers’
marks, highly embellished proscenium arches, together with painted and
gilded walls and ceilings, enhanced theatricality while adding excitement
and allure to an evening at the theater. Theater dealt in both leisure and
education, advertising novelties while simultaneously promoting sophisti-
cation and education. Theater architecture did the same by incorporating
classical motifs into flamboyant decor. In recent years, these splendid spaces
have returned to favor and some have been renovated to enchant new gen-
erations of viewers.

Theaters bedecked with classical ornament offset one of the profession’s
problems. Long before any actors set foot in Kentucky, they had been plagued
with accusations that staging and viewing plays was immoral. By extension,
actors received the same condemnation. At best, they might be regarded as
a shiftless group unlikely to pay their bills. At worst, actresses might be
called a collection of whores. Classical theater design spoke of respectable
Greco-Roman origins, the very embodiment of culture for the nineteenth
century. It was a theme that persisted into the movie palace era.

Kentuckians held mixed attitudes toward theater’s respectability but,
by and large, the troupes were welcomed. Between the early 1800s and the
turn of the century, Kentucky played host to nearly all major stars of the
theatrical circuits and quite a few of the lesser lights. Among the stars were
Joseph Jefferson—famous for his portrayal of Rip Van Winkle—Mary
Anderson, Helena Modjeska, Edwin Forrest, and Edwin Booth. Touring
companies augmented local resident companies’ offerings. Theaters often
housed amateur performances, thus providing a forum for local talent and
a focus for community social life. As theatrical attendance rose, a number
of houses opened their doors, offering everything from drama to equest-
rian shows and burlesque. Some were fine theaters in larger urban areas.
Smaller communities often contented themselves with modest opera houses.
These are no less significant for their small size and often restrained de-
sign. Their existence and purpose reveal a great deal about cultural aspira-
tions. The quantity of newsprint devoted to theaters and performances
suggests considerable public interest. Local newspapers ran theatrical col-
umns detailing current and coming attractions and expounding upon new
and old theater design.

With the advent of motion pictures, playhouses began to die out or be
reincarnated as movie palaces. At first, they retained a stage for the vaude-
ville performances that were interspersed with early films. In their earlier
incarnations, movie palaces derived from known performance areas. Only
as their function began to be perceived as separate from performance needs
did the stage and orchestra finally disappear. Beyond consideration of their
theatrical heritage, this book ends its concern with motion picture theater
after vaudeville’s death, when live performances ceased to be a part of the
buildings’ functions.

What follows is an account of how Kentucky theaters were designed,
used, and perceived by the actors and audiences who worked or were enter-
tained in them. Because early accounts are sparse, more recent buildings
can be more thoroughly described. Little evidence exists for the earliest
structures’ exact appearance, particularly with regard to exteriors. No illus-
trations of very early theaters exist. Contemporary accounts do reveal bits
of information on the general layout. This has been combined with evi-
dence relating to other theaters of the time and region to provide a clearer
picture of the temporary and first permanent buildings. Generally speak-
ing, there is a larger body of evidence relating to urban theaters, particularly
those of Louisville and Lexington, hence the frequent citation of those
examples. The material is chronologically organized into four chapters: the
first deals with the period from the late eighteenth century through the
1830s; the second concerns the building of structures from ca. 1840 through
the first years of the twentieth century; the third addresses the use of the-
aters within that time span; and the final chapter examines early twentieth-
century combination houses built for both live performances and movies.
Within the chapters, material is arranged by topic. Unless otherwise noted,
I have not altered the terminology of contemporary observers. Without
physical evidence it is difficult to say whether a “fresco” literally fit the defi-
nition of that technique or was merely a painting on the wall or stenciled
pattern. It was probably the latter, but I have let the record speak for itself.
Similarly, I have not changed the terms used to title theaters. For example,
the term “amphitheater” was loosely used in contexts that do not fit the
strict architectural definition of that structural form. But if that was the
theater's name, it would be inappropriate and historically misleading to change it.

Architecture is a field replete with jargon and idiosyncratic terms. Theater employs its own considerable specialized lexicon. To the extent possible I have tried to avoid terms that might serve only to confuse a nonspecialist. This book's purpose is to illuminate the past and to encourage appreciation for theater's historical role, not to convince readers that they should avoid both architecture and theater like the plague. Where architectural or theatrical terms are unavoidable, they are either immediately defined or explained in footnotes.

In no sense should this be considered a catalogue of historic theaters. The emphasis is on the social meanings of theaters and the manner in which they reflected the society for which they were designed. Selected examples are discussed, some because the architectural features are interesting and others because they hold a notable place in Kentucky history, but no attempt has been made to mention every theater constructed in the state or even every theater examined in conducting the research. Such an approach would produce either a publication voluminous enough to daunt the most determined reader or one so superficial that the unfortunate reader would be left wondering whether any were significant enough to warrant his/her time. Theater design and use tended to follow a pattern, which can be well illustrated by representative structures. The very similarities suggest the degree to which theaters represent social patterns. Overall layout, form, and ornament deviate little, although the decorative specifics change. Builders followed a type of unwritten code, the meaning of which was abundantly clear to patrons, who knew how to interpret nonverbal messages built into floor plans and incorporated into adornment.

Because it is an art form, theater, both as an artistic form of expression and as a structure, acts as a cultural barometer reflecting the changes in a society. Historic theaters are important not just as an esoteric study, but as a segment of the state's and the nation's history. Embodied in their design is the story of nearly two centuries of performances, of changing styles and social life, and of the actors who performed, and the audiences who watched. Their chronicles link art, literature, architecture, technology, and values. What did people consider entertaining and why? Did they seek intellectual enlightenment? Laughter? A view of the past? Revelation about their own lives? And in what architectural setting did they choose to present and view
performed? The answers to these questions shed light on past thoughts and beliefs, helping us to understand our inescapable heritage and its effect on present-day lives. As the playwright Eugene O'Neill wrote, "The past is the present, isn't it?"
Kentucky theater can boast of a lineage extending into the eighteenth century. Early in its history, the state caught the attention of traveling acting troupes, eventually becoming a center for theatrical activity. Strolling players arrived from diverse locations, including several from Canada. Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville formed more established bases for players, but most towns saw some type of theater, even if only for one night at a time. Often they all saw the same actors and the same plays. Even troupes ostensibly based in one urban location shifted between towns and did short temporary engagements. A single theater’s profits might not be sufficient to keep the company adequately fed and clothed. Descriptions of the conditions under which actors operated inspire admiration for their persistence. Battling dismaying travel conditions, carrying their own scenery and costumes, and improvising performance areas, the troupes pressed on through Kentucky. Less valiant people would have given up and fled East to seek easier employment.

Kentucky was geographically and socially diverse. Steep mountains in the eastern part of the state gave way to gently rolling hills in the Southwest. No area had good roads, and some were dreadful. Most of the state was agrarian or sparsely settled, although citizens evidenced considerable interest in founding towns. The commonwealth boasted few towns of any size, and these were concentrated toward the center where Louisville and Lexington vied for prominence. Frankfort, the capital, never possessed the economic or cultural activity of Louisville and Lexington. Outside of the three main towns, the educational level was low. Even in the two main cities the population ranged from fashionable people of means to the illiterate poor maintaining a daily struggle for survival. In none of this was Kentucky unique. These were conditions common to many states outside of the longer established eastern United States.
Travel, seldom easy and frequently extremely trying, required determination and stamina. Navigation of either rivers or roads could be difficult, accommodations were a problem, and adequate performance space was a chronic headache. Actor Noah Ludlow recalled an 1815 trip from Limestone to Frankfort as a slow twenty or twenty-five miles a day, achieved only by starting at daybreak. Companies tried to keep baggage to a minimum. Solomon (Sol) Smith, an actor-manager and partner of Ludlow, with whom he operated a series of theaters through the West and the South, described an 1833 trip including stops in the Kentucky towns of Paris, Richmond, and London. He took along two wagons and teams, one set of scenery, and a small wardrobe. At one point, crossing the Kentucky River, they were forced to unload and carry the trunks half a mile up a hill. Under those circumstances, one can see why they were traveling light.

Of course, the limited scenery must have required ingenuity on the company's part and imagination from the audience. Actors normally traveled with the scenery in tow, an absolute necessity for playing regions with no resident company. Upon arrival, they did their best to fit scenery to stage. The "theater," like the play, had a limited engagement and moved with the troupe. Actor-manager Samuel Drake departed Albany, New York, in 1815, on a tour of the Midwest with typical stage properties, intended to suit the entire repertoire of plays. A green baize carpet, an act curtain, and a painted drapery proscenium, which could be drawn, would establish the stage parameters. When suspended between two walls, the proscenium curtain defined the stage area, a very necessary distinction when performing in rooms with no platform. The drapery proscenium opened at the beginning of the performance and remained open. Audiences anticipated watching scenery changes between performance segments. The entertainment value of watching the company lug scenery back and forth helped compensate for lack of dramatic polish. According to Ludlow, western theaters lacked equipment for shifting scenery mechanically. All changes had to be accomplished through muscle power by scene-shifters following a written plat. Scenery was painted with distemper paint and sometimes had some gilding.

Six drops had to suffice for all scene settings. This was about half the number common for stock theaters. Drake took drops for a wood, street, parlor, kitchen, palace, and garden. As the name implies, drops consisted of scenes painted on fabric attached to rollers. They formed the plays' backdrop. The company also carried three sets of structural wings and three sets
of flaps or aprons matched to the drops, which went over the wings. Wings, flat rectangular boards, which slid onto the stage in front of the background drops, were arranged three on each side of the stage. Drake’s aprons illustrated an outside scene intended to coordinate with the garden or street drop, an inside setting meant to correspond to the parlor or palace, and a flap to go with the kitchen drops. Such stage settings required two or three hours to position. Any scenic changes required carrying items on and off the stage. Early structures did not use labor-saving fly spaces, the overhead areas to which later theaters raised scenery.

Flat wings forced the audience to exercise their imaginations, because three-dimensional effects were extremely limited. Wings gave a vague impression of perspective, but were light years away from the realistic box sets that appeared at the end of the century. Until then, painted imitations served as doors and windows. Actors made their entrances from between the wings. Flat wings were the standard scenery even in eastern theaters, so Kentucky audiences were no worse off in that sense. They did experience some limitations resulting from limited quantities of scenery. Since the troupe made do with a single exterior setting, the background to plays must often have failed to entirely match the script!

Limited props and stage properties accompanied the troupe. Rocks, caves, and waves, composed mostly of canvas, would be among these items. Crude scenic effects, lacking in realism, sound completely inadequate to modern audiences accustomed to computer-generated virtual reality. However, it must be remembered that neither actors nor audiences knew of better effects and, since they had never seen realistic sets, they did not expect them. Audiences mentally filled in the missing elements, much as we might visualize a total landscape while reading a description. That visualization was needed for costume as well. At this point in theatrical history, actors expected to provide their own costumes. Of necessity, large wardrobes were rare. Clothing was selected and adjusted to fit the various roles as well as possible, with inevitable compromises in accuracy.

**Plays and Players**

Actors and managers associated with these earliest theaters formed a mixed group. An actor-manager frequently led the company, perhaps employing several members of his immediate family as actors, a practice common to both England and America. This did provide a reliable supply of actors, if
not necessarily those possessed of the greatest talent. Amateurs, professionals, part-time actors, and even an umbrella manufacturer worked in theater-related jobs. The umbrella manufacturer was Luke Usher, who built the first Kentucky theater, possibly at the instigation of his actor son, Noble Luke Usher. One acquaintance described the elder Usher as “a man of large hospitality, and had a heart in proportion to his body, which latter was of the Falstaffian model.” In time, Usher owned theaters in Lexington, Louisville, and Frankfort, between which scurried his company of actors, performing their plays in each town in its own season.

Usher brought to Kentucky Samuel Drake and Noah Miller Ludlow. Both were to become major figures in Western theater history and both would operate Kentucky theaters. Drake had a company composed primarily of family members, with Ludlow as one of the few nonrelatives in the company. Among the actors was Samuel Drake Jr., described by Ludlow as a “devilish good-looking fellow” although with a face “more indicative of good-nature than intelligence.” The company also included Drake Sr.’s other sons, James and Alexander, and daughters, Julia and Martha. The Drake family ranked among the more talented of this country’s early thespians. Alexander Drake became an audience favorite in Western and Southern theater. Among the other company members was Thomas Jefferson (no relation to the more famous Jefferson), son of a popular comedian and grandfather of Joseph Jefferson, a noted actor of the latter nineteenth century who would have some comments to make on Kentucky theater of his day.

Drake’s company developed an established performance pattern in the three cities then considered major stops on the Kentucky circuit. Lexington enjoyed a fall season, Frankfort saw theatrical performances during the winter legislative season, and Louisville hosted the troupe in the spring. Drake dropped Lexington from the circuit in 1820, although he continued periodic visits. In writing of the Drake company, Ludlow was extremely critical of both the Louisville and Lexington theaters, indicating that both had required substantial repair before they could be rendered usable.

Ludlow himself erected in Louisville a temporary theater of questionable quality. He entered into a partnership with Sol Smith, from whom he parted on bad terms in 1851. It would be difficult to locate two more disparate personalities than Ludlow and Smith. Smith was a gregarious hail-fellow-well-met individual, popular with most people he encountered. Ludlow, reserved and cautious, struck new acquaintances as stiff. The differences in each man’s approach to life were apparent in their respective
Sol Smith was a prominent actor-manager. In partnership with Noah Ludlow, he made significant contributions to the establishment of theater in the West and South. (From Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management*, 1868, courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

Despite their differences, the two managed to work tolerably well together for many years. They were instrumental in establishing theater as far west at St. Louis and south to New Orleans. The breakup of their partnership was partially due to money that Smith said Ludlow owed him. Smith went out of his way to avoid mentioning Ludlow's name in his memoirs, and Ludlow expended considerable effort and a great deal of vitriol in his own autobiography defending himself against Smith's accusations. Ludlow claimed Smith's memoir as fiction: "Truly this man was a magician; he..."
Amateur actors often trod the boards of Kentucky theaters. Some were members of local thespian societies, and others aspired to acting careers. (From Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management*, 1868, courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)
could make things appear to be just what he would have them. He would have succeeded better as a conjurer than he ever did as an actor; he mistook his calling.” 14

Whatever their partnership problems, by the time they entered Kentucky, Ludlow and Smith had acquired theatrical background. Although neither came from a show business family, both expressed strong feelings about the importance of professional actors versus amateurs. Many of the people who brought theater to Kentucky had experience elsewhere and a corresponding familiarity with theater building and management. Experience must have helped in dealing with the numerous problems of facilities and actors.

Acting in early Kentucky theaters was uneven at best. Managers understandably experienced difficulty in persuading high-quality actors to leave the relative comforts of eastern cities for uncertain accommodations and rigorous travel in the West. Ludlow declared that the West was: “supposed by many to be semi-barbarous; and to go to Kentucky or Tennessee was to banish yourself from civilization. When actors were asked to go to those new States or Territories, they would shake their heads and say, ‘No, I’ve no desire to be devoured by savages.’” 15 Most of Kentucky’s stars were virtually unknown to New York or Philadelphia audiences. 16 Actor John Bernard commented in a rather sarcastic tone that Noble Luke Usher, whom Bernard said he had promoted from a supernumerary (an extra) in Philadelphia to a better situation in Boston as he sought to acquire actors for the Kentucky company, “only applied to those we could well dismiss.” 17

Theaters provided a forum for many amateur performances, conducted either for the thespians’ own pleasure or to benefit various causes. Members of the Lexington Light Infantry put on a show in 1812 to purchase “arms, ammunition, camp equipment and baggage wagons, for the convenience and comfort of the volunteers on their march to Canada.” 18 Such activities highlight the integration of theaters with the community. Theater, which represented more than entertainment, was integrated with the community’s economic and social affairs.

The players may have been geographically restricted and sometimes less than wonderful, but plays differed little from those of eastern urban areas. Unlike today, spectators expected a diversified program, rather than a single play, and would have felt shortchanged with anything less. The standard format was a dramatic play followed by a farce or pantomime (called the afterpiece), possibly with recitations between events. 19 Typical was a
A standard evening at the theater consisted of a dramatic play followed by a farce. (KG 1 January 1802).

Lexington performance of a comedy, Reconciliation, followed by a local dancing master; a recitation on jealousy; a comic song, Tom Our Pussy; and then the farce, The Weathercock. Two less complex evenings consisted of a drama, Lovers' Vows or the Natural Son, followed by a farce, Love A La Mode; and Othello followed by a farce, Blue Devils. One of the odder combinations consisted of Bunker Hill or the Death of General Warren followed by the farce, How to Die for Love. A mixture of performance types presented in a single night at the theater was not unique to Kentucky, where the managers were simply following a long theatrical tradition. The practice of following the main production with a farce dates back to Shakespeare's time. England's Charles II indirectly encouraged the combination of legitimate drama with singing and other performances in 1660 by restricting legitimate theater to two licensed playhouses. Other theaters began to defend their right to present plays by claiming that their productions consisted not of pure drama, but of a mixture of acts. By the time theater arrived in Kentucky, such methods were well entrenched. The Kentucky troupes clung to a traditional repertoire with classic plays presented in their nineteenth-century versions. Between 1790 and 1820 the three most popular playwrights in Kentucky were Colman the younger, Shakespeare, and Sheridan. MacBeth and Pizarro ranked among the favorite plays.
THEATRE.

On Thursday Evening, August 26, 1813,
Will be presented a HISTORICAL PLAY, in
five Acts, called
BUNKER HILL,

OR THE
Death of General Warren.

"LET THE WAVING WORD THRO' ALL THE DAY BE
LIBERTY OR DEATH."

Act 5th
A view of Bunker Hill fortified—Engage-
ment between the American and Brit-
itish troops, the second blow given to Despotism, in which
Gen. Warren is mortally wounded.

Scene last,
FUNERAL PROCESSION
And Solemn Dirge, over the body of the
brave WARREN, who died in de-
fince of his Country.

To which will be added a farce in two acts,
called
How to Die for Love.

Theater advertisements in newspapers often provided
not only the names of the plays, but also a description
of the action and the scenery. (KG 24 August 1813)

Newspaper accounts tended to obsess with the scenery rather than the
action, a habit they carried into the latter part of the century, when elabo-
rate architecture gave even more scope for ecstatic accounts of theaters and
fantastic special effects. Nineteenth-century easel artists tended toward in-
creasing naturalism, and that influence was noticeable in stage sets. Since
the late eighteenth century, the public had followed the discovery of an-
cient ruins with great interest. That fascination with archaeology, com-
Announcements of theater performances often cited the sources of scenery production materials and the artisan's name. (KG 2 April 1811.)

combined with the desire for realism, led to precise architectural descriptions.24 Theater announcements sometimes included extensive descriptions of scenery, such as the following: "A Rude Gloomy Room the retreat of the banditti ... The Garden of the Palace of the Doge of Venice ... The Great Hall of the palace of St. Mark, an Arch in the centre, with open folding doors—the
Scenic artists painted scenery, such as these trees, on flat boards. Audiences greatly enjoyed the stage sets—almost as much as the play. (Romeo and Juliet, in Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management*, 1868, courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

whole supported by *Pillars of Variegated Rich Marble*; pannels, cornices, &c, of the same. *The Throne of Venice* on one side—seats, sophas, &c. surround the room . . . the whole scene brilliantly illuminated. The design of this scene is from one of the noblest and richest specimens of Roman architecture—its order is that of Corinth, and its marble pillars in imitation of
Parian.” There was something for everyone in that account, a promise of brilliant lighting effects, plenty of painted scenery, and an appeal to cultural interest. The *Kentucky Gazette* praised the scenery as being “from the most elegant and correct models” with “architectural uniformity.” The artisan, a member of the company, not only painted the scenery, but acted in the play as well. The newspaper expressed a wish that the “ingenious painter” would “meet due encouragement for his expense and labour.”

An 1812 Fourth of July performance announcement detailed a “grand triumphal arch” decorated with an eagle, George Washington, the names of the states, and names of Revolutionary heroes. The spectacle, dedicated to the father of our country, was followed by a farce called *Father Outwitted*, although it is extremely doubtful that the audience found the combination unusual. Yet another newspaper advertisement detailed the following scene:

> A gloomy prison in the Castle of Bargen, in which ADELMORN is confined; he is discovered asleep on a Couch supposed to be in a dream, the incidents of which are represented in a vision, as follows: suddenly the walls separate in the centre and display in the background a desert heath with a sepulchral monument on which is inscribed in crimson characters, “BLOOD WILL HAVE BLOOD”—An old man is seen, clothed in white garments, stained with the sanguinary gore, holding a dagger towards heaven; two friends appear on the opposite side holding the reluctant Ulric, who immediately falls on his knees and seems to beg mercy; the old man points to his bleeding breast, and plunges his poinard [sic] in . . . Adelmorn awakes in rapture, and INSTANTANEOUSLY THE WHOLE VISION VANISHES! Solemn music during the scene.

The quantity of scene changes was sometimes ambitious, as in the twelve scenes advertised for an 1810 performance of *Pizzaro*. Since the play’s proceeds were intended to benefit the new Lexington Oil Cloth Factory, the owners of which, Levett and Smith, produced the scenery, the designs were undoubtedly meant to showcase their abilities. The play was composed of the following scenes:

ACT 1 SCENE I—Elvira sleeping underneath a canopy—and a view of the Spanish camp.
ACT 2 SCENE 1—A bank surrounded with wild wood and rocks.
SCENE 2—The temple of the sun: in the centre is a magnificent altar.
SCENE 3—A wood between the temple and the camp.
ACT 3 SCENE 1—A wild retreat among stupendous rocks.
SCENE 3—Pizarro's tent.
ACT 4 SCENE 1—A dungeon in the rock, near the Spanish camp.
SCENE 2—The inside of Pizarro's tent.
ACT 5 SCENE 1—A thick forest; a hut &c.
SCENE 2—A back ground, wild & rocky, with a torrent falling down the precipice, over which a bridge is formed, by a fell'd tree.
SCENE 3—Ataliba's tent.

If the acting accompanying the scenery fell short of perfection, lack of talent could not always be blamed. Stock companies expected to put on a series of plays, usually a different drama every night. Circumstances did not permit much rehearsal time, even if it had been desired, and at least some stars avoided rehearsals. Further, deficiencies of theater buildings frequently rendered audiences uncomfortable, forcing actors into histrionics to hold their attention. Great realism was not intended anyway. What happened on the stage was entertainment and not to be confused with real life. It was a much later generation of actors who instituted realistic acting and box settings in immitation of real rooms. The settings may sound simplistic, but audiences had a background and mindset far different from ours, and their perceptions of stage and performers were not those of the twentieth century.

Players and Audience

Aspirations to high culture formed part of its appeal, but drama in early Kentucky offered substantially more than educational enlightenment. Audiences might attend a play out of simple curiosity. Performances brought a touch of the exotic to otherwise monotonous lives of socially isolated frontier residents. Strolling players carried theater to tiny settlements as well as more populated areas. An 1819 visitor found that: "Straggling play-actors and tightrope dancers had found their way to Paris." In towns that saw few strangers, it is not difficult to imagine the excitement people must have felt at meeting actors, whose lives were wildly different from those of their audience. Even if (like the theatergoing novice in Paris, Kentucky, who laughed at the tragedy and solemnly regarded the farce) the play was not wholly understood, the audience still found enjoyment.
formed only the official part of the entertainment. Actors’ clothing, demeanor, and accents were probably rigorously scrutinized. Plays provided a glimpse of other lives and locales in which the audience could participate, if only vicariously. In growing towns, theater’s presence suggested an aura of culture and sophistication, which city promoters dangled as a lure to settlers and visitors. Luke Usher, advertising his Lexington theater for rent to “any genteel company” boasted of the audience’s literary taste, as well as the lack of a tax on companies and labeled Lexington “the ATHENS of the west.” Newspaper descriptions of performances, generally written with an eye to civic pride, almost always invoked the words “cultured,” “fashionable,” “respectable,” “brilliant,” and “large” in boasting of the audience that had been drawn to the theater. The implication was that in attending a play one would be in desirable company. Actors favored that viewpoint because it cast their profession in a positive light. City promoters liked to suggest that the citizens fostered an appreciation for literature and the arts—demonstrated through support for drama. Hence the enthusiastic citation of high-class theater patrons. The truth was that audiences were diverse and seeking diversion. Theatergoers represented several layers of society, from upper class to servants.

The popularity of these visceral experiences indicates concerns beyond eking out an existence in what easterners commonly assumed to be total wilderness. Though many in the audience wanted spectacle, not education, the excitement engendered by dramatic performances marked a curious people with a lively interest in the world outside Kentucky. They were not entertainment-hungry enough to swallow, without examination, anything offered. Defensively, the Lexington Herald and Commercial Gazette remarked on inadequate strolling players who believed Kentuckians to be credulous and half-civilized. Neither distance from eastern cities nor the novelty of theater kept audiences from criticizing plays and theaters. Newspapers freely condemned actors, whose performances they found wanting, or buildings that lacked convenience or aesthetic appeal.

Kentucky’s drama defenders, like those of other states, cited inculcation of moral lessons and cultural education as primary justification for theater. Whether the audiences had such lofty expectations for their entertainment is debatable. Frankfort citizens subscribed to a new theater in 1811 in an effort to divert men from gambling. In a letter to the Kentucky Gazette signed “Matilda,” theater was cited as a major influence for good behavior:
The various scenes of vice and folly common in our little town, are more or less known to the greatest stranger; as well as the eagerness of the Lexingtonians to enter into any and every species of dissipation, wearing the appearance of novelty; under the mask of pleasure or amusement. It may be unnecessary to advert to the extremes into which those specious pretexts have often led the unthinking part of your sex, some of whom appear to be under the influence of fatal infatuation. Alas! A little sober reflection on this subject will place the habits and practices of some of your neighbors in a very humiliating point of view; and more good too would result therefrom, than a score of moralizing essays. Under those circumstances, I presume the importance of a Theatrical establishment will be readily admitted, as the utility of it must be obvious to all. The most pleasing and instructive lessons of morality are to be obtained at a well regulated Theatre and the frailty and vices of mankind are there depicted in the strongest colours, and in too abhorrent [sic] a shape not to be detested and perhaps shunned. It is there too that instruction and amusement are so delightfully blended, as scarcely to fail producing a good effect upon the morals of society.

Drama’s defenders homed in on critics, presenting point-by-point refutations. Shortly after “Matilda’s” letter was published, the newspaper printed the following statement: “The stage is an important coadjutor in the refinement of manners and the improvement of taste... By its lively delineation of real life, kings have been arrested in their path of luxury, and directed to a higher and a holier way; the rudest intellect has been insensibly forced to learn—Virtue has been strengthened... and guilty creatures, with their hearts subdued by the cunning of the scene, have, it is said, proclaim'd their malefactions.”

Sol Smith published a lengthy discourse on the value of theater and the mistaken notions of its critics. Noting that theater had been declared “too exciting,” “surrounded with many incidental evils,” and leading “young men to become immoral and dissipated,” Smith defended his profession:

Now it appears to me that, if the tendency of stage representations be for good they can not be “too exciting”; ... When the heart throbs with the feelings of patriotism and virtuous indignation against tyranny and oppression; when the eye of youth fills with tears of sorrow for suffering virtue; when the cheek burns with indignation at successful villainy—all the effect of the poet’s language and the actor’s power—will it be said that these aroused feelings are to be suppressed because they are “too exciting?” ... [Young men] learn there the best lessons taught by history and experience; they pass
their time pleasantly—commit no sin—and retire to their homes satisfied that they have spent the evening in rational enjoyment. . . . For twenty-five years I have followed the stage as a profession. If I thought it a sinful one I would leave it tomorrow. . . . I invite all who believe that theatre-going is attended with injurious effects to examine well the subject, discard all illiberal prejudices, exercise a Christian spirit toward those who differ with them in opinion. 

As well as brightening mundane lives and moral education, theater served a social purpose. Performances supplied an excuse for a gathering of neighbors and provided a conversational topic long after the event was over. Play, players, scenery, and props were subject to inspection, criticism, and admiration. In an age of difficult travel and few diversions, a touring troupe must have enlivened local gossip considerably. Actors provided one of the few alternatives to home-produced entertainment and a welcome change from the familiar faces and activities of the neighbors. Plays sometimes drew small audiences, although not necessarily as a result of disinterest. Sol Smith found that fear of cholera kept Paris residents away and that Richmond performance taxes substantially decreased his financial assets.

The rare eyewitness accounts by the first actors to enter Kentucky are emphatic in their assertion that Kentucky made them welcome. If true, for a profession long derided as a collection of vagabonds, any positive reception must have been a pleasant change. Noah Ludlow’s memoirs, Dramatic Life as I Found It, provides one of the best and one of the few accounts of life in early Western and Southern theater. He carefully recorded instances in which actors were well received by other citizens and, conversely, recounted several instances of the opposite. He consoled himself for slights with Alexander Pope’s soothing advice: “Honor and shame from no condition rise / Act well your part, there all the honor lies.”

Of Frankfort, Ludlow exulted: “The theatre was attended by the best educated and most respectable people of the town and country around about, and the performers, many of them, received into some of the first families. I mention this latter fact, because it is somewhat irregular in the history of the stage; but the truth is, that dollars had not yet, in Kentucky, usurped the place of brains.” According to him, the troupe’s landlady, a Danville widow named Davenport, treated the actors much like members of the family, leaving them with a comfortable feeling of being at home.

Anxious citation of favorable receptions may be a case of protesting too much. Kentucky did have its share of moralistic theater opponents. At the
turn of the century, Transylvania University attempted to forbid student participation in drama.44 In 1808 the Kentucky Gazette congratulated “the lovers of the drama, and the friends of morality” on the new theater. The writer noted that “the fastidious and cynical may regret it—but the liberal minded and enlightened portion of society must be pleased. An entertainment, innocent and instructive, which makes us moralize while we enjoy pleasure, which brings home to the bosoms of men the works of genius, of learning and piety . . . can have no other effect than to refine and polish.”45 An 1810 letter to the editor, signed only Theatricus, expounded with pleasure on substantial attendance at Lexington theater performances and the presence of fashionable people.46 Whether the author was a member of the company, as might be suspected from the anonymity and tone of the letter, or a genuine theatergoer, he clearly wished to establish a respectable aura about the theater.47

Frankfort audiences were informed that their theater would provide instruction through the medium of entertainment.48 Samuel Drake, an early manager, declared that Louisville’s City Theater would “blend rational amusement with instruction, that mankind might know how to estimate honor and virtue.”49 A Lexington manager went to considerable lengths to cite theater’s advantages, although his case was rather overstated. He meant to provide drama “of approved worth, of moral and political tendency . . . Neither expense nor pains will be spared to lift the Drama from the chilling obscurity of a barbarous epoch, and to place it on the pinnacle of national respect, worthy of a free, unprejudiced people, whose labors to enlighten and cultivate the field of science, are so eminently conspicuous.”50 Such vehement, not to mention verbose, rhetoric implies defensiveness. Nevertheless, substantial righteous outrage at the supposed depravities of the stage did not emerge in Kentucky until the revival movement later in the century.

Despite Kentuckians’ divergent viewpoints on the desirability of theater, actors continued to enter the state. The desire for culture played a role in the welcome players received. Though it was castigated by religious fanatics as immoral, theater was initially welcomed by Kentuckians as an improvement over other amusements, such as gambling. Until later religious revivals provided their own melodramatic speakers, drama opponents received little support from entertainment-hungry Kentuckians. An 1811 visitor to Frankfort observed that the theater under construction was for the intention of entertaining ladies, who would then be accompanied by
Women comprised only a small portion of early nineteenth-century audiences, although a few can be seen in this illustration. The crowded conditions of areas adjacent to the stage can be seen clearly. (From Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management*, 1868, courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

The suggestion that luring ladies into the theater would automatically result in compelling the gentlemen's attendance reflects two facts of nineteenth-century life. Women could go virtually no place unescorted, and they were considered virtuous, stabilizing influences on men who might be tempted to stray. Hence, if women could be persuaded into theater attendance, their male escorts would find themselves in a cultural environment that they presumably might not have chosen if left to their own devices. Women comprised a small segment of early nineteenth-century audiences,
and their approval conveyed moral sanction. The presence of ladies tended to figure largely in newspaper reports, the writers of which shared theater managers’ beliefs that women could bestow respectability.

By mid-century, theater had become a fairly regular urban phenomenon. The institution of the “star system” encouraged tours. Major performers made stops on the established circuits. Kentucky cities, once having established theaters, generally found the means and the audiences to support them. By 1811, a traveler could record in Lexington a courthouse, market house, jail, four churches, a bank, the Transylvania Seminary, a library, three newspapers, four taverns, thirty stores, and two bookstores. In 1815, with Louisville newly in possession of its earliest theater, the town boasted an assortment of businesses, including eight boot makers, four cabinetmakers, five tailors, and two printing offices. Four years later, a listing of businesses included thirty plasterers, six brickyards, twenty-two physicians, and two hundred carpenters. An area in the midst of such growth found itself in a position to provide audiences of sufficient size to support theaters.

**Theater Buildings**

The first theater groups entering the state found, of course, no theater buildings. It was some time before they were able to erect buildings with theater in mind, and longer still before structures of any architectural pretensions appeared. Early structures were nondescript. The often-quoted assertion by Spanish playwright Lope de Vega that theater needed only “four trestles, four boards, two actors and a passion” would have been well suited to Western conditions. Players found it necessary to adapt to the vagaries of an assortment of buildings. The regular Louisville theater being closed in 1829, one touring actor, Joe Cowell, reported that, “a cattle shed or stable had been appropriated to that purpose, and fitted up as a temporary stage. The yard adjoining, with the board fence heightened and covered with some old canvass, supported by scaffold poles to form the roof, and rough seats on an ascent to the back, and capable of holding about two hundred persons, constituted the audience part of the establishment, the lower benches nearest the stage being dignified by the name of boxes, and the upper, nearest the ceiling, the pit.”

That maligned structure was Noah Ludlow’s temporary theater. Ludlow’s own harsh criticism of Usher’s Lexington theater sounds mild by
comparison with Cowell's comments. Derogatory as Cowell's remarks were—referring to the actors as a "deplorable party"—he did not entirely blame Ludlow, whom he characterized as a man of ability working with poor material.  

Kentucky was not alone in converting makeshift structures to Thespis's needs. Sol Smith recorded in his memoirs an incredible variety of unlikely buildings in which his troupe performed: salt houses in St. Louis and New Orleans, the garret of a hotel in Florence, Alabama, a room over a billiard hall in Mobile, a carpenter's shop in Greenville, Tennessee; a Masonic lodge in Greenville, South Carolina, and a warehouse in Nashville, Tennessee, all housed performances. Of one site in Milledgeville, Georgia, Smith moaned that "the famed Augean stable must have been a carpeted parlor in comparison with it."  

The places the troupe played in Kentucky were, if not better, probably no worse than those of surrounding states. Moving through Georgetown, Frankfort, Paris, Nicholasville, Maysville, Harrodsburg, Versailles, Shelbyville, and Lexington, it made do with such places as ballrooms, court-houses, stores, and inns because no other venues were available. To the best of its ability, the company tried to create a traditional theatrical layout. One end of whatever relatively large room could be located was designated the stage and separated from the audience by the portable curtain proscenium. The audience sat on chairs or benches on the flat floor, which must have considerably restricted clear views of the actors. Professional actors were not the only groups to use whatever extant building seemed large enough and sufficiently flexible in arrangement to house a performance. A court-house in Maysville hosted a play by the local theatrical society as early as 1797. Such arrangements were less than ideal, but at least provided a relatively comfortable indoor performance arena.  

Conventional buildings were not the only available shelter for performers. Kentucky's first version of a showboat made an early appearance. The first professional players to enter the state made use of boats, although the two most prominent managers, Ludlow and Smith, avoided any suggestion that what they used were, in fact, showboats. Such a theater was beneath their dignity. Ludlow described Samuel Drake's flat-bottomed boat as having boarded sides and an elliptical roof. In each of their memoirs, Smith and Ludlow described the Chapman family's Floating Theatre on which the group traveled the rivers, tying up and giving a performance where adequate attendance seemed likely. One actor described this boat as
"a temple of the muses erected upon a flat-boat where the study of Shakespeare alternated with the perusal of Isaac Walton." Ludlow described it as "a large flat boat, with a rude kind of house built upon it having a ridge-roof, above which projected a staff with a flag attached, upon which was plainly visible the word Theatre." Lighting, as in any theater of that time, came from candles, including those in a hoop serving as a chandelier. Benches for the audience and a small stage with muslin curtains served as the performance area.

Inns offered standard locations for theatrical performances as well as a range of other entertainment. They also served as local meeting places. Kentucky performers used the ballroom or whatever space the proprietor offered for public assembly. Lexington performers appeared early in the century in local inns, including the Eagle Tavern. Until acquiring its first theater in 1811, Frankfort saw performances at Mrs. Love’s House (an inn) or in Price’s Friendly Inn at the Sign of the Buck. The habit of performing in public buildings extended well beyond construction of the first permanent theater buildings. Entertainment of various types, not necessarily professional theater, was held in Lexington into the 1820s in Mr. Darral’s Ballroom, Keen’s Hall, Mr. Giron’s Ballroom, and a room over the Lexington Public Advertiser offices. At various times, performances took place in Traveller’s Hall Hotel, in the Hotel Theatre, and in the courthouse. Whatever their drawbacks, the spaces would certainly have been an improvement over improvised shelters. During breaks between regular engagements, stock companies might travel among surrounding small towns in what Ludlow called a "gagging scheme." Despite the appalling implications of that appellation, no nefarious actions were intended. Likely sites for such performances included ballrooms and courthouses. The troupe with which Ludlow performed gave a play in Danville’s courthouse and, on the same trip, in the ballroom of a Harrodsburg inn. The latter, according to Ludlow’s memoirs, was well lit, and the troupe had the services of three black musicians employed by the hotel to play at balls, who were willing to provide music between acts in exchange for viewing the play. A side room served the purpose of wings for the entrances and exits. A little later, in Paris, the company again made use of a ballroom for performances.

After the Louisville season, Ludlow joined a “commonwealth” company headed for Nashville. As the name suggests, commonwealth companies shared the profits (if there were any) among all the members. Stopping at an Elizabethtown hotel, the troupe played to a disappointingly small
audience with correspondingly low profit. On the same trip, it performed in Russellville, at an unspecified location. Lack of a suitable space thwarted its intention to perform in Hopkinsville. Most traveling troupes found locating available and feasible performance sites to be a constant and aggravating problem. However, as Ludlow’s records indicate, even very small communities saw theatrical performances. Both facilities and production might have left much to be desired, but in an age before television and movies, the existence of these groups indubitably livened up local conversations.

Though managers might complain about accommodations, as Smith did about an eight-by-ten-foot stage in Vincennes, Indiana, actors tolerated spaces that would appall modern performers. They often demonstrated considerable ingenuity in creating and adjusting to makeshift stages. Production problems were somewhat mitigated by the fact that audiences remained largely ignorant of better theaters and, therefore, less likely to complain about flaws resulting from physical conditions. Ludlow recalled the company’s Nashville performance: “The very finest ladies of the city would sit out a long five-act comedy or tragedy on a narrow board not more than ten inches wide, without any support for their backs, and appear delighted with the performance; but then they had not been corrupted with fast times, sensational dramas, and easy, cushioned chairs.” In connection with this comment, it should be noted that Ludlow may have been overanxious to record enthusiasm from ladies.

Makeshift structures sound terribly provincial to modern ears, but touring companies were only following long-established traditions, set by English actors touring small towns and cities, converting whatever they found for a performance. Kentucky actors and audiences were certainly not alone in their problems. American actors traveled farther because the United States is vast by comparison with England, but the performance methods remained much the same as the British ones. Smith’s description of a dining room performance in Tazewell, Tennessee, was likely typical of many such settings. The audience, twenty strong, sat on ordinary chairs watching the actors perform on “a sort of landing-place or gallery, about six feet long, and two and a half feet wide” and four feet high. Given the narrow width, the actors must have been compelled to watch their footing carefully to avoid falling into the audience. Three doors from the platform led to a retiring or green room (a space for the actors), a sitting room, and a stairway to upper rooms. In addition, there were steps to the dining room at each end of the platform. Centered in the middle of the traffic path, as it was, the stage was a thoroughfare for hotel guests.
Acting in close proximity to the audience had its good and bad points. On the positive side, the spectators could certainly see and hear clearly, an advantage not always present in today's more comfortable, but often larger, theaters. Unfortunately, the actors could see and hear the audience with equal clarity. In his autobiography, Smith reconstructed a scenario of an actor performing "All the world's a stage" from *As You Like It* with his asides to audience members who were interrupting him. The account may have been exaggerated for effect, but it does give an idea of the actor's frame of mind as he was jostled by passersby, subjected to an unhappy infant's wails, and hindered by a child's attempt to extinguish the footlight candles. That actor's experience was an extreme case, but audience decorum often left much to be desired, and the lack of physical separation between actors and audience did not help:

All the world's a stage,

[Sir (to the landlord, a fat man, who entered at the moment, shoving the actor against the wall), I'll thank you not to crowd me so—our stage is very small.]

And all the men and women merely players:

[Don't—don't crowd me off!]

They have their exits and their entrances;

[Indeed sir, if you keep going in and out in this way, I can not go on with my speech.]

And one man in his time plays many parts,

[Now, sir, if you'll shut that door, I'll be obliged to you. "Certainly, sir, go on."

His acts being seven ages.

[Thank you sir. Now, pray, sit down.]]

At first, the infant, Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;

[If you can't stop that child's crying, madam, I respectfully recommend that you retire with it into another room, and furnish it with some refreshment suited to its tender years.]

And then, the whining school-boy, with his satchel,

[You needn't snuff these candles just now, boy.]71

Spaces intended for entertainment predated Kentucky's first true theater. Seven years after students at Lexington's Transylvania Seminary gave their 1790 performance, thus acquiring the distinction of providing Kentucky's first recorded theatrical event, an exhibition room opened next to Coleman's Tavern. Advertised were: "A variety of new FEATS," including wire dancing and tumbling. The proprietor charged 3s.9d. for a seat in the pit and 2s.3d. for the gallery, which indicates some type of division.72 Probably it was not more than a railing or slight raising of rear seats. American the-
Various performances were given in exhibition rooms and inns. Division of the room described in this advertisement into a pit and gallery provided social separation and an excuse for higher prices. (KG 31 May 1797.)

aters, following English models, often separated areas, giving some social distinction and an excuse for higher prices, but the separation was not necessarily wide or emphatic. If any patrons really felt separated from their social inferiors, it must have been more psychological than physical.

Something identified as a theater existed in Lexington by 1802, although its physical appearance is unknown. Inasmuch as strolling players and amateurs gave the only available performances, it was probably a rather simple hall—possibly the previously mentioned exhibition room. It would be six more years before Kentucky acquired its first real theater building.
Luke Usher, a Lexington businessman, provided the city with its first real theater building. (KG 26 March 1819.)

Lexington Theater

In 1806, a major name in early Kentucky theatrical history arrived in Lexington and proceeded to open an umbrella factory. The umbrellas had no connection whatsoever to theater, but they served the purpose of bringing into town Luke Usher, the owner, and his actor son, Noble Luke. Succeeding in the umbrella business, they then built a brewery whose second floor they equipped as a playhouse for amateur performances, opening in October 1808. The business combination may sound bizarre, but Lexington was not alone in housing drama in a brewery. In 1750, Walter Murray and Thomas Kean's troupe performed in just such a building in New York. Noble Luke Usher had previous experience as an actor. His father, perhaps
Mr. DRAKE respectfully informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of Lexington, that having completed the various improvements in the interior of the Theatre, the house will be opened for a short season immediately; and again he pledges himself to an indulgent public, that no effort on his part will be wanting to prove himself deserving of their patronage.

A few season tickets, (transferrable) will be issued. The box office will in future be kept at the lower end of the theatre, and will be opened every day on which a performance is to take place, from four o'clock in the afternoon until nine at night.

A coffee room in the rear of the boxes will be provided, and also a side room with refreshments and other refreshments.

Sale of refreshments was a common amenity of theaters, and early theater patrons often ate and drank during performances. (KG 23 August 1817.)

less stagestruck, ran the theater as a commercial enterprise, much like his other ventures. In addition to the umbrella factory and the brewery, Usher, clearly a man of many parts, operated an inn, The Sign of the Ship. Since he did not go out of the umbrella business until two years after the theater opened, the elder Usher may have preferred not to have his income too dependent on the uncertainties surrounding the theater business, until he had established its profitability. Evidently finding that theatrical enterprises paid well enough, he also opened theaters in Louisville and Frankfort.

The history of the brewery-theater is better documented than that of its predecessors. Little is known of the exterior, but comments on the interior, some favorable and some definitely the opposite, have survived. When the building was sold at auction in 1825 the notice stated that the structure was brick. On the basis of Ludlow’s description, it must have been built to conform to its steeply sloped site, giving an upper entrance for the audience on High Street and a lower actor’s entrance on Spring or Water Street.
Audiences entering from the street were almost level with the second story. Judging from the absence of further comments on the exterior, it was most likely rather plain and almost certainly not in the least theatrical.

At the end was a room for the sale of beer and "other equally refined refreshments." In 1817 a coffeehouse was added at the rear of the boxes along with a side room for "Confections and other refreshments." In keeping with nineteenth century perceptions of gender roles, a bar was available to the men. All of these amenities were common in theaters of that era. Liquor’s availability contributed to perceptions that women would best avoid theaters, and the audience’s often rowdy nature did not help theater’s image.

Theater attendance was not strictly an upperclass activity, although Ludlow bolstered his claim to culture by insisting that his company’s support came from wealthy and well-informed individuals. Lower classes, many of whom had never seen a play and had no idea how to behave in such surroundings, composed a large segment of the audience. Rowdy individuals kept themselves amused during the performances by eating, drinking, and talking. Judging from contemporary comments, it must have been extremely difficult for either actors or audience to focus on the play. Patrons had to be asked to refrain from smoking cigars during performances. The behavior of Cincinnati audiences, where men sat in the boxes without coats and sometimes with their sleeves rolled up, horrified the very critical Mrs. Frances Trollope, who toured the United States in the late 1820s, went back to England, and wrote a book about her experiences. Yelling and stamping of feet to signal approval disgusted her, as did the spitting and whiskey drinking. Western audiences did not hold an exclusive patent on such actions. Mrs. Trollope described similar behavior in the nation’s capital. Her disdain for all Americans influenced descriptions of anything she saw but, in this case, her comments are consistent with other observers’ appalled reports. However, poor audience behavior was just as much a problem in England.

Reviews of Usher’s new theater were mixed. It opened to the usual local acclamation inspired by civic pride in a new business. Local residents apparently looked to the theater building with satisfied complacency. The Lexington Kentucky Reporter said it was “fitted up in a very handsome style.” Presumably, the additional boxes installed in 1810 reflected good attendance warranting further investment in the property. Lexingtonians must have sometimes neglected to follow a common practice with regard to arrival at the theater. Elite individuals had a habit of arriving at the last minute.
to occupy boxes in which a servant had previously been instructed to sit, thus holding the box for the employer. The Lexington management, disclaiming responsibility for such boxes, had complained that no one was being sent to hold seats.\textsuperscript{85}

Actors who later performed in the theater viewed the situation with less enthusiasm than did the local residents. A few years after the building’s construction, visiting performers held opinions about the structure that differed substantially from local praise. Ludlow recorded the most extensive description of the building.

Luke Usher had been directly responsible for Ludlow’s presence at the brewery theater. Having established playhouses in Lexington, Louisville, and Frankfort, Usher felt he needed a stock company to perform in them. In 1814, his son went to Albany, New York, on a quest for actors and met Drake, an actor-manager. Ludlow was a member of Drake’s company. His memoirs, written in 1880, condemned the Lexington theater as the “poorest specimen of theater . . . of the most simple and unpretending character,” disagreeing sharply with theater historian William Dunlap’s more glowing citation on the grounds that Dunlap had not seen the building. He was right. Dunlap took his comments from the \textit{Kentucky Gazette}\textsuperscript{6}.

According to Ludlow, the theater room was long and narrow. Seating capacity has been estimated at five hundred to six hundred people, based on prices and Usher’s claims of earning capacity of six hundred to seven hundred dollars per night.\textsuperscript{87} Some consideration had been given to sight lines because the seats rose in graduated heights, reached by a raked platform to the side. This would have been an improvement over ballrooms with chairs placed on a flat surface, particularly for anyone unfortunate enough to be seated behind a tall person, or one with a hat! Otherwise, audience comfort was evidently not a primary concern. The seats were backless, had no padding, and were merely covered by painted canvas.

Local patrons were better pleased by the seating than was Ludlow. The \textit{Kentucky Gazette} praised the “convenient and safe seats, separated as in Theatres in the atlantic cities,” a novelty that the reporter noted as previously unknown in Lexington.\textsuperscript{88} Just what he meant by “separated” is unclear, but since Ludlow leaves the impression of benches arranged in the same fashion as bleachers, individual seats are unlikely. Probably the separation referred to the pit, boxes, and gallery.

The performance itself was referred to in a lukewarm comment as “respectable,” making allowances for “youth and inexperience.”\textsuperscript{89} Since ama-
NEW THEATRE,
LEXINGTON.

ON Wednesday evening, the 10th October,
THE THESPIAN SOCIETY
WILL present to the public, the celebrated
PLAY, in five acts, (written by Augustus Von
Ketzeler) called
LOVERS' VOWS.
To which will be added a celebrated Dramatic
Entertainment, called
AS IT SHOULD BE.

TICKETS to be sold, and places in the Boxes
to be taken from nine o'clock in the morning,
until one in the afternoon, and from 3 until 5 in
the evening at the Theatre. Tickets may also
be had at office of the Kentucky Gazette.

Box 75 cents—Pit 50 cents—Gallery (for
servants) 37½ cents. No servant can be admis-
ted without a pass.

Doors will be opened at 5 o'clock, and the
curtain rise at half past 6 precisely.

The profits arising from the performance,
after defraying the expenses, will be appropri-
ated to charitable or other useful purposes.

Boxes, the most expensive seats, provided more
privacy. The much cheaper gallery often accommo-
dated servants. (KG 18 October 1808.)

teurs composed Usher's acting company, the reporter was probably justified
in that remark. Attempts to recruit professional actors in Boston had been
unsuccessful. One theatergoer complained that while the company, then
appearing at the theater, "acted very well," a female character played by a
male actor held no appeal. The "fake female" was not exclusive to Ken-
tucky; theater has had a long history in which males frequently played
women's roles. Nevertheless, the imitation woman evidently disconcerted
at least one audience member.

The Lexington Kentucky Recorder praised the scenery and the interior
decoration. Nothing is known of the ornament, but apparently Usher made
some effort in that direction. Ludlow castigated even the scenery as limited
and badly painted. The interior he found poorly ventilated, noting that,
when summer came, both the audience and actors complained of the heat.
Box seats were generally more comfortable than others. They also permitted occupants to separate themselves from lower social and economic classes. (KG 10 July 1810.)

Ludlow found less fault with the dressing rooms, located beneath the stage, where one could enter from the cross street. Those he regarded as “comfortable enough, and quite equal, in fact, I may say superior, to some in theaters of greater pretensions.”93 This latter comment does not reflect extreme praise on the Lexington theater. At that time, dressing rooms, even in eastern cities, were frequently uncomfortable. Any extra money spent on theaters went to areas that might impress and draw customers, not to the actors’ convenience.

Ludlow’s account did not specifically mention divisions into pit, gallery, and boxes, but the management announced prices for all those areas at the time the theater opened. Audiences could sit in the pit for fifty cents, boxes for seventy-five cents, and the gallery for thirty-seven and one half
The gallery was specified as being only for servants, who were required to have an admission pass. Three years later a performance announcement stated that no blacks would be admitted. Theaters, reflecting nineteenth-century attitudes, practiced social stratification. Other theater patrons would never socialize with the gallery occupants and did not want to be forced into contact with them in public places. Theater owners obliged by providing separate areas.

Usher made continuous attempts to please his customers through building improvements. Periodically, almost from the moment of construction, he made interior changes or added scenery. Early in 1810 he divided some larger boxes in front of the stage in order to increase seating capacity. The need for that change suggests that he was successfully drawing audiences. Another 1810 addition was a new curtain adorned with an illustration of the American navy engaged in the war at Tripoli. He did not have to go far to obtain his curtain. Local entrepreneurs Levett and Smith painted the curtain and other scenery. They had recently opened an oilcloth factory and advertised, in addition, house and sign painting, gilding, glazing, paper hanging, and paint mixing. Such combinations of skills were common to painters, who typically broadened their reach to obtain more business. True, they were not theatrical specialists, but many theaters obtained scenery and embellishments from similar sources, and Levett and Smith certainly could not have paid their bills by relying on local theaters for all their business.

Usher continued to tinker with the theater's appearance. In announcing the January season opening in 1811, he claimed "considerable alteration" as well as a new paint job. By April, the proprietor was enticing customers with the information that new paints had arrived from Philadelphia to be applied to creating some new scenery and regenerating the older scenery. Citing a large eastern city as the source appealed to the audience's desire for cosmopolitan fashion. Advertising the structure for rent in 1819, Usher boasted that it had recently received two thousand dollars worth of embellishments, but their nature was not specified.

More serious changes included the 1812 addition of a door intended to speed up the audience's exit. This followed a highly publicized catastrophic fire in a Richmond, Virginia, theater—an event extensively covered by the Kentucky Gazette that evidently caused the Lexington management some concern about potential loss of fearful customers. Theater fires, because they involved large numbers of people, tended to be well publicized, leaving many nervous about entering theater buildings. The managers were
right to be worried, since theater lighting involved open flames on stage and in the seating areas. The Richmond fire began when flames from a chandelier set the scenery ablaze. The Lexington manager invited local residents to examine his building in order to reassure them of its safety.

In 1822, the management upgraded the interior with new lights and stoves to resolve complaints about the cold and darkness. Samuel Drake altered the interior two years later, probably superficially. Decoration was added to boxes, stage, and scenery, and some repair of the boxes and pit was mentioned. A visitor immediately criticized the new drop curtain as having figures that were “horrible, most horrible. I would be glad never to see again such odious, misshapen things.” The critic might have been relieved to learn that curtains changed often. Managers routinely advertised the addition of such items, hoping to draw a sensation-hungry audience. Visual effects mattered to the nineteenth century in many areas of life. Homeowners regarded the exact impression created by interior furnishings and exterior architecture as crucial to their image. As the century progressed, the many exhibitions drew hordes of visitors anxious to see novelties. Theatrical managers, in stressing what might seem trivial novelties, simply appealed to the prevailing sentiments. Just as managers’ descriptions of audiences evoke an image of fashionable and cultured people, theater buildings were “tasteful” or “of the most approved fashion.” Patrons needed reassurance that a theatrical environment was respectable. Managers claimed large audiences, but the evidence suggests that theaters often had trouble attracting enough support.

Despite the various attempts at drawing audiences, the Lexington Theater’s time was limited. For a few years after the theater was sold at auction (1825) the city lacked a permanent theater building. When Drake and his Louisville company played Lexington in 1828, they were forced to return to a makeshift structure, the Masonic Hall. Philadelphia manager John Sharp Potter used the same room for performances in 1835. A year later, a temporary theater opened. Despite lacking a real theater building, Lexington enjoyed a number of performances. From 1820 to 1840, at least nine touring companies visited, some on a recurring basis. These included an equestrian troupe in 1831, which had some type of amphitheater constructed for its performances. Nevertheless, Lexington was fast declining as a cultural center. Residents periodically discussed constructing a new theater, but little came of these campaigns. In 1837, vandals damaged the old theater, inflicting five hundred dollars worth of damage to the proscenium
and other parts of the structure. The owners announced a reward of one hundred dollars to anyone who apprehended the miscreants. The next month the theater did reopen, but it never regained its old status.\textsuperscript{114}

\textit{Louisville Theater}

In many respects, Louisville's early experience with theater paralleled that of Lexington's, and with good reason. Professional players, when they arrived in 1815, were the same as those appearing in Frankfort and Lexington, using the same plays, scenery types, and architectural forms, and managed by the same people. As in the case of Lexington, both actors and audiences found plenty to criticize in the existing facilities. Around 1808, the Dramatic Institution of Louisville, a local amateur society, had erected a small theater on Jefferson Street. Ludlow, arriving in town with Drake's company, found it "not in a condition to be occupied ... dark, dingy, and dirty." Furthermore, he criticized the scenery as badly painted, the auditorium as being painted in dismal colors, and the lighting as inadequate.\textsuperscript{115} Ludlow's derisive analysis of the theater rather resembles the one given for a theater occupied by Mr. Vincent Crummies and Company in \textit{Nicholas Nickleby}: "coarse, cold, gloomy, and wretched."\textsuperscript{116} Making the best of a bad situation, Drake's troupe set to work to improve the facilities. Local actor and, sometimes, sign painter John H. Vos was hired to paint the house (and later to be a supporting actor). Samuel Drake and his son, Aleck, reworked the scenery. After two weeks labor they had it in what Ludlow unenthusiastically pronounced a "passable condition."\textsuperscript{117}

In 1818, Samuel Drake purchased the theater and had it sufficiently renovated that an observer referred to it as "now fitted up with a degree of taste."\textsuperscript{118} The City Theatre was, for a while, the scene of lively theatrical activity. An 1819 out-of-town visitor who saw \textit{Wives as They Were and Maids as They Are} with Drake as a character seemed surprised that the play exceeded his expectations, declaring Drake worthy of a better theater. On the other hand, some actors the visitor described as "made of wood and more like a gate-post than an animated being. This had the happiest of effects, for after shedding tears of grief at interesting parts of the play they were kept flowing with laughter at those ridiculous performers making tragedy into comedy."\textsuperscript{119}

These Pinnochio-like thespians worked in what actor Joe Cowell described as "an excellent brick building."\textsuperscript{120} Other than a reference to it as three
stories tall, little is known of the exterior. Like the Lexington theater, the outside does not seem to have inspired either enthusiasm or much criticism. The most extensive interior description, by John Thompson Gray, occurs in a history of Louisville that called the structure “a very creditable one, and had some features not excelled by its successors.” It went on to say:

The old motto over the proscenium, *Veluti in Speculum*, had been regilded, the walls handsomely frescoed, the hangings and curtains and the ornamental woodwork being of crimson and gold. On each wing hung large chandeliers studded with wax candles; others of smaller size being grouped along the circles of the first and second tiers of boxes. Lamplighters came with slender ladders, upon which they mounted, and touching the wicks saturated with turpentine, the house was at once in a blaze of light.

The audience might count themselves fortunate not to be also ablaze. Until the denizens of the late nineteenth century adopted gas fixtures, lighting was not only frequently inadequate, but also extremely dangerous. Oil lamps and candles lit both house and stage. On the stage, footlights set across the front provided the primary illumination. For traveling troupes and in more permanent early theaters, these were generally candles. England’s famed actor-manager David Garrick began the use of a “float” device for oil around 1765, consisting of a metal trough that could be raised and lowered. In time, this technique had found its way to America. Side lights placed between the wings extended light toward center stage. The result was rather dim and flickering light that required constant attention. The use of open flames next to moving performers and flammable scenery, combined with the materials used to paint and create scenic effects, inevitably resulted in fires. Sol Smith’s reminiscences mentioned several theater fires. He recalled keeping a tub of water and a mop at each side of the stage ready for frequent use. Another actor claimed that the risk of fire was so extreme that a theater’s life could not exceed fifteen years.

Lighting even forced a characteristic acting stance. Candles and oil lamps could not light the entire stage evenly. Consequently, actors played important scenes front and center, where they could best be seen. Of course, in European theaters, with their horseshoe shapes, acting from center front permitted the audience at the narrow ends of the horseshoe to see clearly. Imitation of European actors would have contributed to the American tendency to stand at the front of the stage even when the theater shape was confined to a simple rectangle. Nevertheless, the bottom line was that
Poor lighting compelled actors to stand front and center. Their broad gestures increased visibility. (From Olive Logan, *Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes*, 1870.)
actors who aspired to stardom literally sought to be in the spotlight. Otherwise, no one would have been able to recognize them. To early twentieth-century audiences steeped in a more natural acting style, these older thespians seemed stiff and affected as they advanced determinedly to center front, but their habits were born of necessity. 130

Audiences had their own problems with lighting. In theaters with overhead candles, the wax dropped down onto anyone unfortunate enough to be beneath the lighting device. The constant presence of light in the house must have restricted the ability to focus on the stage. The practice of dimming house lights did not become widespread until the late nineteenth century, although the technique had begun during the Renaissance. 131 Consequently, people in the audience could see each other clearly. Ignoring one's fellow theatergoers in favor of the play cannot have been easy under those conditions. In fact, many persons had no intention of ignoring others and positively enjoyed surveying their fellow audience members. Between the poor light and distractions, it is little wonder that actors engaged in broad gestures to attract attention.

The management divided the Louisville theater in the usual manner into a pit, two tiers of boxes, a gallery with a ladies retiring room, and another refreshment room. 132 Gray provided a description of that area:

It had a row of private boxes occupying the whole front of what is now the dress circle, as in the French Opera House in New Orleans. They were closed in the rear, having doors for entrance and open in front. The second tier was open and corresponded to the latter day dress circle, while the third tier was low priced as now. The pit was not the choice place, as now, but was occupied by men, veteran theatergoers and critics. The theatre was lighted with a grand chandelier, swung from the dome, and with side lights, all of sperm candles . . . there never was a dripping candle. This was in keeping with all of Drake's appointments, the decorations of the theater being in harmonious colors and every adjunct tastefully adjusted. 133

The sperm candles to which he referred constituted the best available to the early nineteenth century. As the name suggests, sperm whales were the source and were certainly not a local natural resource. The cost of transportation to inland regions upped the price, but sperm candles were considered the best and most expensive even in coastal areas. Many people depended on tallow candles made from animal fat for a cheap source of light, despite their tendency to melt rapidly and easily (thus producing an
abundance of drips). If the theater did, indeed, use sperm candles the management had opted to pamper its audiences. Perhaps they were pampered in other ways as well. Gray was impressed by the use of real food and wine on stage, rather than wood and colored water. However, noting the increase in refreshment sales following a food-laden scene, he was somewhat skeptical of the motive. “This was harvest time for the theater refectory. It was noticeable that always, after one of these scenes, the demand for cakes and comfits was very great among the younger portion of the audience, and among the ladies, and the house was odorous of orange-peeling.”

Not all observers were so enthusiastic as Gray. Richard Mason, visiting it in 1819, briefly noted the structure as “a neat little building,” but apparently did not feel inspired to further comment. During an 1826 visit, Duke Bernard of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach described the theater as rather simple and small with a pit, row of boxes, and a gallery. The proscenium he considered small. Six years later, following improvements made in 1829–30, the *Louisville Directory* cited the seating capacity as seven hundred people.

One visitor commended provision of a “separate entrance for ladies who are not received in society.” The persistent early nineteenth-century problem of prostitutes in theaters did nothing to enhance acting’s reputation. Their mere presence was problem enough for a profession struggling for social acceptability, but solicitation inside the theater was not unheard of. These women kept the third tier or gallery as their usual domain, hence its lack of respectability. One actress condemned it as “That dark, horrible, guilty third tier! How dreadful . . . that the theater should be cursed with such a monstrous iniquity.” Other patrons’ disinclination toward direct contact with prostitutes necessitated a separate entrance to the gallery. That ordinary theatergoers had previously shared a passageway leading to both the boxes and the gallery horrified one observer, who worried that the sensibilities of respectable females would be offended. Ludlow recalled with considerable satisfaction his success in excluding prostitutes from his New Orleans theater, but it would appear that they were present in Louisville. Early theaters tolerated their presence, but the ladies of the night were gradually pressured out of theaters.

The 1829 alterations enlarged the two tiers of boxes into thirty-two compartments capable of containing about four hundred people. Out of concern for audience comfort these were totally enclosed and equipped with spring locks on the doors to avoid drafts caused by careless patrons.
leaving the doors open. Some customers were inclined to tardiness, so the management reserved two double boxes on each tier for late arrivals. The decision to adjust to their schedule rather than to demand punctuality suggests that the problem was seen as intractable. The saloon, equipped with a fireplace at each end, was redecorated. Customers expected to be provided with access to drink and food within the theater. Audience behavior continued to concern the management, which imposed eleven regulations on its patrons. From the sound of these regulations, late arrivals were the least of the management’s problems. Among the new restrictions: cracking nuts and throwing debris were prohibited; men were asked to take off their hats, which was a concern less related to etiquette than to the practical matter of making sure patrons did not have to peer over the headgear of the person in front of them; and those seated in the pit were asked not to stand on the benches to improve their view of the stage; those seated in the boxes were asked not to prop their feet on the edges. Such behavior partially explains why the theater was considered an unsuitable environment for respectable women, in whose presence decorum was mandatory.

By the 1830s the City Theatre had seen better days. No longer kept in good repair, it was derided by journalists. One called it “one of the dirtiest theatres that you ever saw . . . six hundred fills it till you are almost suffocated.” A detractor claimed that it had “ceased to be the resort of any but the most profligate members of society.” Another more directly called it an “uncouth structure.” In light of previous problems with the audience, these all seem likely. A critic of the lighting declared it “more like Vulcan’s sooty shop than the brilliantly illuminated scene.”

Still, occasional alterations continued. In 1834, the following was offered as an enticement: “The Proscenium will be found altered with taste and classical correctness, festooned with rich cushion drapery. The columns surrounding the box tiers will be so altered as to give lightness and relief to the general effect, and the box panels renewed with arabesque ornaments, after the most approved models.” As late as 1840 the interior was repainted and redecorated. A year later and under new management, alterations continued. Changing the pit to a parquette (entered by the first tier of boxes) and planning the installation of gas lighting and new scenery was evidently not enough to bring in adequate audiences. The following year, the theater, now being managed by Henry Coleman, received new decorations and scenery by a Mr. Sweeny. In the same year came an announcement that Coleman intended to enlarge the structure onto an adjoining lot.
He never got the chance. An arsonist torched the old theater in 1843, leaving the way open for a new playhouse. Samuel Drake, who had carried no insurance on the theater, chose to end his theater days and retire to a farm near Louisville.

The old building may have had its deficiencies, but it had provided theatrical magic for at least one audience member. As a child, Mary Anderson, later a theatrical star, saw a play for the first time at the City Theatre:

We would . . . sit alone in the large, dimly lighted theatre, feeling the most privileged of mortals, silently watching the great green curtain, and imagining all the enchantments it concealed . . . mysterious feet, generally in shabby boots and shoes, were seen under the curtain . . . Then the doors opened; people began to drop in; there was a rustle of programmes and banging of seats. Suddenly the foot-lights flared against the green curtain, under which mysterious feet were seen again . . . Then the orchestra . . . after which a tinkling bell, and, to the traditional pizzicato (if the villain commenced the play) or the sweet tremolo of violins (if the angelic maiden began), the curtain slowly rose . . . only after the curtain fell upon the last act was our dream broken, when, with a shock, we found ourselves once more in the cold and dusky streets.

Louisville did have another theater dating from the 1830s. By that time, equestrian drama—hippodrama—was drawing large audiences. The new taste in theatrical sensation presaged the shift toward flamboyance, which would strongly affect theaters in the latter years of the century. These spectacles involved the incorporation of horses into the performance. Probably the best known was Mazeppa, in which a “wild” horse carried off an actor strapped to his back. Actor Joseph Jefferson found hippodrama ludicrous, but the public had an insatiable appetite for novel effects. Ludlow, although he said he had “the usual antipathy of actors to sawdust and its concomitants,” thought that money could be made from hippodrama and it became a pet project for him. Nevertheless, he worried about the potential for lowering theater to the level of a circus. “The building must be a regular dramatic theatre, with elegant and appropriate requisites, and without any of the sawdust attendants that present themselves in circuses. All must be neat, elegant, and orderly.” The nature of the performance obviously required facilities unlike a traditional theater. Most early theaters would have had trouble fitting a standing horse onto the stage, let alone accommodating a horse in motion.
Ludlow, working with one of the best known of the equestrian drama managers, J. Purdy Brown, decided in 1829 to put up structures to shelter such shows and their audiences in a series of towns. Louisville was included. Ludlow's idea was to use a canvas tent covering both ring and audience, with the addition of a cheap appendage for the stage apparatus. Since he intended building the appendage anew at each town, the term "cheap" was probably quite descriptive. In Louisville, Ludlow and Brown intended to construct a temporary theater containing a stage and seating approximately five hundred people, but only if they had to resort to building in the absence of an existing structure. A Mr. McConkey, the group's primary carpenter, was ordered to Louisville on a search for a building capable of easy, and therefore inexpensive, conversion to an amphitheater, or failing that, for a lot and lumber.

As it turned out, no suitable building could be found, making construction necessary. Near Drake's Louisville Theatre, then entering its last years, Ludlow proceeded to build a theater "though temporary, yet extensive...rough, but substantial."152 The proximity of another theater apparently did not bother him. In fact, his reference was to the "old" Louisville Theatre. It seems likely that the older theater had deteriorated to the point where he did not see it as serious competition. Furthermore, he had the advantage of novelty. In his opinion, the lot was ideal, on a corner fronting Jefferson Street and adjoining a livery stable at the rear, where the horses (two of them named Smith and Ludlow) could be stabled.

Ludlow's account stressed the cheapness and roughness of construction, which he accomplished in a mere two weeks. He meant to use it for either dramatic or equestrian performances. That was to be achieved by movable seats in the pit, allowing conversion of that area into a ring. He must have liked the effect because it was a technique he also used in New Orleans in 1840. It was this Louisville theater that actor Joe Cowell castigated as a "cattle shed" although, given the circumstances, "horse shed" might have been more appropriate. Defending himself against this charge, Ludlow pointed out that the theater was never intended as more than temporary and added several cutting remarks about the veracity of Cowell's report. Among other comments, Ludlow stated that Cowell wrote his remarks "between dinner and bed-time, when it was no unusual occurrence for his mind and vision to become warped."153 To be sure, Ludlow's was not the only simple building ever used as a theater. Joseph Jefferson described
one that his father erected in Springfield, Illinois, as resembling “a large dry-goods box with a roof.”

Ludlow’s theater operated for a period of time far exceeding that implied by the term “temporary.” Under a series of names—Melodramatic, Amphitheatre, American, and Caldwell’s—and with periodic renovation, it sheltered performances for eleven years. Interior divisions lacked the degree of separation characteristic of more elaborate structures, but the American did advertise boxes at seventy-five cents and the pit at fifty cents. Patrons must have been rowdy. The management firmly declared that it meant to keep order and had employed police to assist in this goal. A year later the theater was under repair again and the local newspaper expressed a desire that it serve part of the time as an amphitheater. In 1838 it was renovated as a summer theater. Finally, in 1840, the eleven-year-old “temporary” theater burned.

The state was about to enter a new theatrical era that would see a great expansion in quantity, quality, and type of theater structures. None of this was exclusively an architectural development, although advances in technology made much of it possible. Public entertainment tastes shifted, necessitating changes in building forms. Customers’ changing social habits demanded more specialized spaces. The result of compounded and interlinked mechanical innovation and new cultural patterns meant that Kentucky finished the nineteenth century and advanced into the twentieth with a far wider range of theaters than had existed in the preceding years.
Neat and Commodious Halls

Kentucky theater builders hit their most prolific period from the middle nineteenth century into the early years of the twentieth century. City theatergoers enjoyed plays and vaudeville performances in structures designed to reflect theater grandeur found in eastern cities. Smalltown opera houses could not compare with the opulence of New York playhouses, but their backers built them in large numbers. Regardless of size or decoration, theaters of all types became objects of civic pride. Previously nondescript exteriors blossomed into incredible combinations of columns, wreaths, pilasters, and any other decorative motifs their designers could locate in Greek or Roman history. Interiors became riots of ornament strewn through lobbies, the auditorium, and the stage. Larger theaters amounted to counterfeit palaces in an age that glorified imitations. There was no sense of inferiority attached to faux materials, which were considered fascinating examples of human creative ability. Home parlors abounded in mass-produced “sculpture” and wax flowers. Theaters expressed themselves in simulated gold leaf and plaster “carving.”

Showboats and Tents

Audiences did have alternatives to permanent theater buildings, although the variants never achieved the respectability or status of true theaters. During this era, the flatboats that carried early theater into the state evolved into large and elaborate showboats. These floating theaters appeared in most parts of the country but particularly in the West and South, especially Kentucky, where Paducah became a popular winter tie-up site. Showboats adopted the decorative designs of more firmly anchored structures. Outside, showboats often displayed the gingerbread trim of earthbound Victo-
rian houses. Inside was a standard theater layout, similar to that of opera houses. Extent of decoration varied, but there would be a stage, an orchestra pit, and perhaps a balcony. Calliopes, composed of whistles activated by steam, served to announce the boat's pending arrival and were added to boats from 1856 on into the twentieth century.

On most showboats, patrons entered from the front into the vicinity of the box office and business office. Generally, the auditorium floor sloped down to the raised stage. Dressing rooms lay behind the stage. On an early New Sensation, one of a series of boats bearing that name, striped ticking upholstered the first six rows of padded benches. The front curtain had been made of red-and-white checked fabric. Like their landlocked cousins, floating theaters acquired more elaborate facilities with time. The 1887 New Sensation had opera chairs, as did the 1924 Cotton Blossom. Bryant's New Showboat (1917) had an auditorium decorated in white and gold with red plush and black tassels adorning the boxes and with flooring of green-striped coconut matting. Colored bulbs outlined the proscenium arch.²

In time, virtually any town located on a navigable river would have periodic access to one of these theaters. Showboat travel was seasonal, of course, closing down in the fall when the weather worsened. Proprietors aimed at rural audiences and rarely attempted to take showboats to cities. In the 1920s, one showboat included Frankfort in its stops, but also Rabbit Hash, Old Crow, and Paint Lick.³ The repertoire leaned heavily to melodrama, most of the plays being extremely forgettable. After a boom era from 1890 to 1910, showboats fell victim to changing conditions. Melodrama struck city audiences as funny rather than dramatic, and rivers lost to railroads their lead in transportation. By mid-century, showboats had acquired a questionable reputation as a result of their use for medicine shows, circuses, freak shows, waxworks, museums, and gambling.⁴ Perhaps their peripatetic nature, as opposed to the solid foundations of theaters, contributed to the impression that they were the domain of less-than-solid citizens. They formed a part of the available entertainment and drew inspiration from traditional theatrical layout and decoration, but did not compete directly with conventional theaters.

Early twentieth-century Kentucky residents had access to theater through another medium that was reminiscent of the first traveling troupes and showboats, although considerably more respectable. Tent Chautauqua, summer cultural programs, brought drama into rural areas and into the lives of many people who otherwise would never have laid eyes on a stage.
Chautauqua organizers and performers claimed as a prime contribution that individuals who viewed the theater as an entity wrapped in sin went away with more tolerance. Ultimately, permanent theaters must have gained more support and larger audiences as a result. Chautauqua and its tent theaters bore little physical resemblance to traditional theater structures. Similarities are strongest between smalltown opera houses and tents. Many Chautauqua performers came from a stock repertory background, playing the opera houses in winter and Chautauqua in summer.

Most people associate the Chautauqua name with performers who arrived for an average of seven days in the summer, erected a large brown tent, and provided a wide-ranging program of lectures, readings, music, and drama. The events were popular from the late nineteenth century into the early years of the twentieth century. The organizers of these events borrowed the name from a permanent Chautauqua in New York State. Bishop John Vincent started with training for Sunday school teachers and developed an institution noted for summer programs of education, music, art, theater, dance, and painting, in other words: culture. Despite their religious origins, Vincent avoided evangelistic gatherings of the tent-meeting type. His interest lay in providing education to people who lacked access to formal instruction. Under Chautauqua's auspices, many communities organized Literary and Scientific Circles, providing people of like interests an opportunity to read and debate. Struck with the original Chautauqua's success, other gatherings appropriated the name.

In time, it occurred to some individuals that communities, which would not support a permanent Chautauqua institution, might patronize a short interval of such programs. The Chautauqua circuits were born of that idea. Precedent for centralized booking of lecturers had already been established by the lyceum movement that provided speakers. One of the better-known lecture bureaus was that of James Redpath, whose Redpath Circuits brought Chautauqua to Kentucky. In order to have the event, a community had to agree to raise the funds. This meant requiring a local committee to sign a contract assuming responsibility for the money. At the scheduled time, Chautauqua would arrive, erect a tent, build a stage, present its performances over five to seven days, and then depart. It became a gala event in many areas, eagerly anticipated and well attended.

Drama was far from the only performance given at Chautauqua, but opera houses and theaters also tended to book widely assorted entertainment. In 1887, Lexington watched stereoptican views, heard musical per-
performances, and listened to speeches. Inspirational talks exhorting the audience to aspire toward better lives gained great favor in the nineteenth century and remained popular into the twentieth century. The lectures leaned heavily to a type referred to as "Mother, Home, and Heaven." As the name suggests, these admonished listeners to revere mothers and the home life centered on them, influences that would lead them toward a righteous life culminating in an ascent to heaven. Such talks dripped with sentiment. The circuits booked some well-known speakers, such as Jacob Riis, author of *How the Other Half Lives*, and William Jennings Bryan, who developed a close association with the Chautauqua. Jane Addams was among the speakers at a 1907 Louisville Chautauqua.

Theater came into the tents gradually and with much initial dubiousness on the part of the organizers. Chautauqua's rural audiences held a long tradition of distrusting actors. Plays first appeared as readings by a single person, who could be billed as a reader, entertainer, elocutionist, or impersonator, rather than an actor. An elocutionist giving poems and dramatic recitations formed part of the program for Lexington's 1887 Chautauqua, and a eulogy for Garfield added a patriotic note. An editorial at that time pointing out that a dramatic stage at Woodland would be desirable, praised the use of drama in Chautauqua (as long as it was moral) as an influence for good. In 1907, a Louisville Chautauqua featured a performer reading from *In a Balcony*. After the prominent actor-manager Ben Greet and his performers began to work with Chautauqua in 1913, plays became a more established part of the offerings. In time, they ranked among the favorite events. By 1922, Chautauqua was offering a prize for clean "dramatic comedy suited to the tastes of the plain folk of the nation." Chautauqua's reputation for worthy cultural events permitted even actors to become respectable under its name.

Drama that was presented in the tents was not avant-garde. Audiences would have had little comprehension or interest in the psychological insights of Eugene O'Neill or the social criticism of Henrik Ibsen. "Toby" plays, which stressed the virtues of rural life while condemning city sins, remained favorites with rural audiences. The success of Ben Greet's Shakespearean plays might seem surprising under the circumstances, but the secret lies in the fact that Shakespeare's stories could be enjoyed without looking for deeper meaning, especially if the play was bowdlerized. Removal of lines to which the audience might take offense sanitized the plays. Remoteness of time and place meant that audiences were not forced
to see themselves in the plays, as they would in O'Neill's characters. Given the physical performance conditions, the type of plays, and lack of trained performers, quality was naturally highly variable. In defense of the sometimes questionable dramatic quality, a Redpath circuit organizer offered a defense familiar to critics of today's insipid television offerings. He declared that they could not limit themselves to producing programs aimed only at the well-informed because no one would come.

Chautauqua appeared all over Kentucky. The Redpath Circuit, run by Harry P. Harrison, set up in eleven communities, including Hopkinsville, Bowling Green, Danville, Cynthiana, Henderson, Harlan, Ashland, Paducah, and Morgantown. Harrison estimated that attendance at single shows averaged well over one thousand, which he considered the break-even point. Other circuits also scheduled performances in the state. Because no national booking organization existed, any circuit that thought it profitable could schedule performances.

Organizers preferred erecting the tents in a park or a similar place to approximate the original New York Chautauqua's lakeside setting. One viewer wrote that "the great spread of tents presents a military appearance; put one in mind of war lines." Chautauqua was known for its large brown tents (as opposed to white circus tents). During performances the sides were rolled up to reduce heat, a constant problem in the South. Wind and rain created another weather-related concern. Harrison wrote of a case in Bowling Green in which a storm bent the center pole, forcing the performers to use a local auditorium. Upon reflection, he decided the acoustics were better anyway. Wind from a storm in Lexington pulled the shorter tent poles from the ground and flung them about to the considerable alarm of the audience, who promptly fled. "Many of the ladies gathered up their skirts, and lit out without regard to proprieties."

During an Owensboro performance, an attempt to shift rainwater from a sagging pocket above the stage resulted in a pole punched through the canvas and an irate wet performer. Other problems occurred. Mischievous boys in Henderson gathered a group of dogs near the tent, where the animals howled in accompaniment to a cornet solo.

Participants' accounts suggest that little scenery was available. Props might be supplied by local citizens. Some performers, such as the Ben Greet players, used no scenery. Stages, significantly referred to as platforms, had to be simple to facilitate quick construction and rapid removal. Chautauqua tents lacked the luxurious drapery and decoration of large permanent the-
aters, which would likely have been deeply suspect to audience members alert for any sign of decadence.

Chautauqua began to die out in the 1920s and, by the early 1930s, had vanished. Technology had brought more sophisticated entertainment to rural audiences, and regional theater of all types was feeling the effect of the movies. The need and demand for traveling troupes disappeared. To assert, as one organizer did, that Chautauqua was largely responsible for ending smalltown opposition to drama is an overstatement. Nevertheless, it played a role in luring more people into theaters and is a significant backdrop to the more developed playhouses.

Chautauqua was not the only drama housed in a tent. Kentucky saw such performances in the late nineteenth century. Of one in Lexington the Lexington Transcript said that it was a “novelty” and “admirably adapted to this hot weather affording as it does such splendid ventilation.” From World War I until the Depression years, repertoire shows (also called tent shows, tent rep, or Toby shows) traveled around the country. Traveling troupes of this kind originated with nineteenth-century companies that played the opera houses. At its height, there were around four hundred companies. These summer shows capitalized on the fact that in a pre-air-conditioning era most theaters closed during the weeks of heat when enclosed populated spaces became unbearable. Legitimate theaters, vilifying tent rep or Toby shows as little more than circuses or medicine shows, never regarded them with much favor, but audiences felt differently, especially in the central United States. A Midwest community might have five one-week shows during a summer. It has been suggested that these shows provided a valuable source of training for actors, as well as giving impetus to community theaters through the efforts of former actors.

No aura of high culture surrounded the plays, but no one could complain of salacious content. Most were either melodramas or comedies, in part because Broadway plays tended to have too many suggestive lines. Managers presented plays under a variety of titles, sometimes to avoid payment of royalties and sometimes to imply a wide range of offerings. Following the usual habit of interspersing other entertainment with drama, tent shows included jugglers, knife throwers, chalk-talk artists, and singers. Toby plays attained a particular association with tent rep. Actors, an average of ten in a company, worked hard. Generally, three to seven plays had to be rehearsed in the two weeks before a company began constant travel.

The usual two-section division of the tents provided for “blues” or gen-
eral admission in the back and a larger reserved section in the front. Seating often consisted of boards. Alternatively, folding chairs might be used. More elaborate setups had raked wooden floors and, occasionally, boxes. Usually, the placement of boards on jacks sufficed for stages. Sometimes truck beds were pressed into service. According to one local newspaper, the open air during a hot July compensated for a small stage. One of the problems attendant upon performance in a tent was the pole, located directly in front of the stage. The pole had to be there because the slope would otherwise be too low for stage rigging. Experiments eventually resulted in improvements, but new techniques did not see much use until around 1920.

Tents may have been pale reflections of city theaters, but they did adopt the usual theatrical layout in a vastly simplified manner. Generally, companies employed little scenery, although there were exceptions. Slipcovers could alter the guise of seating. Diamond dye scenery, achieved by painting durable dyes on cloth, which could then be folded for easy packing, was one of the more popular forms. These cycloramas utilized top strings tied onto the framework above the stage and were tacked to the stage at the bottom. A curtain running the width of the tent hid the backstage area. At the curtain’s center opening a front curtain and specialty (olio) curtain parted to reveal the stage. Lighting, provided by kerosene, calcium carbon, acetylene, gas, or electricity, was generally confined to overhead strips, footlights, and possibly small spotlights. None of the available techniques even approached the dazzling lighting effects of permanent theaters.

None of these alternative theatrical forms—showboats, Chautauqua, or tent rep—competed directly with conventional theaters. In the first place, they were confined to the summer season, filling a vacuum left by the closing of regular theaters. Furthermore, the target audience differed from that of permanent theaters. Rural residents who attended tent shows might never darken the door of an opera house. That does not preclude a relationship to theater architecture. Many people saw their first play and developed their concept of theater from rural alternative theaters. The similarity in layout meant that a person who had seen tent rep could enter a theater and be in a familiar and, therefore, emotionally comfortable format.

Outdoor Theater

Occupying a ground midway between tents and permanent theaters were
various forms of outdoor theaters. Before air-conditioning, gathering outside held more appeal in the summer than did sweltering in enclosed theaters. Traditionally, managers bowed to necessity, resigned themselves to lost profits, and closed theater doors, but by the latter part of the nineteenth century, entrepreneurs had hit on the idea of pleasure gardens, beer gardens, and rooftop theaters. Summer theaters generally closed when the regular fall theatrical season opened. This suited everyone. Normal theaters did not have to worry about competition. Outdoor theater managers made money, and the public acquired entertainment throughout the year. Outdoor theaters leaned heavily to vaudeville, a frothier fare better suited to its surroundings than legitimate drama.

As with other Kentucky theater forms, outdoor theater originated in European precedent filtered through eastern cities. New York led the way in establishment of roof gardens in America, building The Casino in 1882 and later Madison Square Garden. The heyday of such theaters was short-lived. Greater building height and correspondingly windy conditions spelled the end and, by the 1920s, the concept had died. Other outdoor theater forms survived longer. In the quest for diversified entertainment, summer-theater entrepreneurs built into single complexes parks, music pavilions, bicycling paths, theaters, and promenades. During the summer months, a family could be sure of finding some type of wholesome amusement at these attractions. Gottfried Muller (Miller), a German builder who operated taverns and sold real estate in Louisville, built a brewery in 1865 which he expanded into a beer garden with a large rooftop hall, a pavilion, skating rink, bandstand, and bowling alley. The extensive range of activities formed part of Phoenix Hill Park's appeal, and it was quite popular in the years around 1900 until Prohibition killed the brewery and, with it, the park amenities.

The Auditorium (1889) was the best known of these Louisville facilities. It played to the century's fondness for light and action. Spectacular effects with plenty of activity appealed to sensation-hungry audiences. Bright lights were still new enough to attract attention. An amphitheater used for fireworks and spectacular performances such as The Last Days of Pompeii or Americus sat next to the Auditorium building. In the center of the amphitheater, multicolored lights shaded tall streams of water shooting up from a fountain. Patrons could sit with their drinks or stroll and socialize along an esplanade lined with white, blue, and orange lights between the fountain and the building. Customers might while away the time between acts
admiring the fountain and the decorative foliage. Band music gave further incentive to linger. If patrons preferred to stray further afield, the grounds included a deer park, an artificial lake, a music stand, and a bicycle path. The ground level esplanade seemed to one reporter exactly like a roof garden without the city pollution.

This assemblage was the brainchild of Capt. William F. Norton who, having acquired about three thousand folding chairs and a collection of scenery, acted with what must have seemed to him perfect logic and constructed a facility to hold his new possessions. Working with local theater manager James B. Camp, Norton had brought well-known actors Edwin Booth and Lawrence Barrett to Louisville for a series of performances in the old Exposition building. Since that structure lacked scenery and seats, Norton and Camp bought some scenery that actor Thomas Keene had left behind in the building. Later, they decided to make further use of their new possessions and construct a permanent summer theater. Norton, an eccentric individual, carried out his theatrical activities under the name Daniel Quilp, the villain in Dicken's *Old Curiosity Shop*. Having diverged from the staid banking career of his father, Norton chose a nom de plume to avoid embarrassing the family. Theatrical associations still lacked respectability in some circles. The name seemed an odd choice, but Norton explained that he preferred a pseudonym that no one else was likely to adopt.

A frame building with vertical siding, the Auditorium was garnished by gables, a pediment, and balustrades. Wood was the normal material for such structures, which generally featured some means, such as louvered walls, of letting in air. Loss of heat was not a problem, since summer theaters generally closed during the winter. The interior followed a common theatrical layout, with private boxes flanking the stage. Beyond a horseshoe-shaped parquette divided by a central aisle, the dress circle swept around in a vast semicircle. Matting was placed on the aisles in an attempt to reduce noise. This large hall could be converted for balls and similar assemblages by installation of a secondary floor resting on trestles over the parquette. A huge stage incorporated the necessary facilities for handling extensive scenery, having a tall rigging loft and fly gallery. A deep cellar gave adequate space for traps. Taking advantage of the latest technology, Norton installed incandescent, arc, and gas lights. Running the complex required a vast and expensive physical plant. The Auditorium never suffered a fire, but the management installed seven twelve foot pocket doors as a precaution.
Quilp opened his amphitheater with Booth and Barrett in a week of Shakespearean repertoire. Supposedly, during Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” speech, Booth looked down at the footlights and unthinkingly read off the sign written across the back—“Do not spit in the trough.” The story is likely apocryphal, but it clung to the building and the actor. In later years, summer opera by the John C. Duff Opera Company and the Fay Opera Company drew crowds. Other prominent performers included Ellen Terry, Henry Irving, and Sarah Bernhardt. In its brief life, the Auditorium hosted concerts, lectures, and political speeches. The latter included speeches by Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Stanley, the African explorer of “Mr. Livingston, I presume” fame. The hall was also used for exhibitions and balls at various times. In 1904, it closed forever with a last performance by John Philip Sousa.

**Situating Theaters**

Various forms of outdoor theater were among the many theatrical offerings that evolved in the nineteenth century. By virtue of larger populations and more money, cities offered the widest range of theatrical experiences. Patrons could find almost any performance level, from more high-cultural Shakespearean offerings to melodrama to distinctly noncultural vaudeville. By the late nineteenth century, several Louisville theaters offered a considerable range of entertainment. In 1897, the *Courier-Journal* fretted over the number of theaters in the city, contending that intense competition for a small pool of customers damaged all theatrical enterprises. At the time, Macauley’s, the Auditorium, Music Hall, the Grand Opera House, the Avenue, the Temple Theatre, the Bijou, and the Buckingham all had performances booked. Not all of these were major theaters or had stable management. The history of Weisinger Hall typifies many. First located on the second floor over a meat market (1867), it subsequently had six different names: Public Library Hall, The Opera House, Harris’s Theater, Harris’s Mammoth Museum and Theatre, and, finally, the Bijou. It has been called a ten-twenty-thirty theater, the type of place that offered cheap melodrama at ten, twenty, or thirty cents admission. As Public Library Hall, performances included minstrel groups and a reading by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Another Harris’s Theatre, across the street from the first, but on the first floor, specialized in summer light opera and winter touring.
shows.\textsuperscript{70} Claims for their educational value notwithstanding, performances in most theaters usually represented popular, rather than high, culture.

While Louisville theaters continued to draw audiences and to present a diverse range of entertainment, Lexington theater declined through the 1840s and 1850s. Sporadic attempts at resuscitation met with little success. City Hall and the courthouse were still being used for performances as late as 1849. Several explanations have been advanced for Lexington's decline as a theatrical center. The town did not experience Louisville's economic growth. Also, Lexington suffered from persistent fundamentalist religious opposition to drama, partially stemming from a new wave of revival meetings. A local newspaper complained in 1844 of the "bigoted enemies of theatricals," suggesting that they would best be ignored.\textsuperscript{71} Whatever the reasons, Lexington was slow to recover the position it had initially held as a prime site on the Kentucky circuit. By the latter part of the century, the city did revive sufficiently to draw major performers into the new opera house.

No one had to live in or journey to a city to enjoy drama. Theaters found their way into virtually every corner of Kentucky. Sardis, population one hundred and fifty, built an opera house (1907) capable of seating six hundred.\textsuperscript{72} Most smaller towns built some type of performance area, usually entitled the "opera house," a name reflecting more cultural aspiration than reality. Opera, even the more lighthearted Gilbert and Sullivan, seldom made an appearance in these structures. Whatever the productions' merits, and many were by local amateur groups, the structures provided a focus for community social life. They played a role that reached far beyond entertainment to include functions central to local affairs, such as graduation exercises. Their purpose did not require grandeur or immense size. It was enough that they reflected their community's cultural pride. On a smaller scale, they attempted to imitate the layout of their big-city cousins. As actor Joseph Jefferson observed, opera houses lay in the town center and often ranked among the best local buildings.\textsuperscript{73} Whatever their location, opera houses generally formed centerpieces of civic pride, and were pointed out to visitors and mentioned in city directories. Engravings of opera houses appear among other significant structures in local newspaper special editions celebrating community life. Victorians cared greatly about the impression made on outsiders by individuals and by entire social groups. Objects and buildings carried meanings "read" by others. The presence of an opera house implied educated citizens with an awareness of the larger world. In other words, the town was not inhabited by rubes. Opera houses were once
Opera houses served many functions apart from theater. They were common sites for graduation exercises, as is shown by this invitation to a 1903 high school graduation at Horse Cave Opera House. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)
The architectural style of opera houses, such as the Winchester Opera House, often resembled that of neighboring buildings. They were designed to blend in, rather than stand out. (From *Handbook of Clark County and the City of Winchester*, 1889, courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

ubiquitous features of American small towns, although they have received scant attention from either architectural or theater historians. For the most part architecturally undistinguished, these structures form an important segment of cultural history. They were not elite culture, but they were popular culture in every sense of that term. As architectural artifacts, they show the transition of styles from metropolitan areas to small communities. Housing theater in a commercial building implies that it was an integral part of a town’s economic as well as social life. A case could be made that opera houses, relatively speaking, were more important than big theaters. Major theaters were among several attractions of a city. For a small town, the opera house was likely the only entertainment source, and it touched the lives of many
The local opera house provided many people with their only chance to see entertainment. Broadside for Bryan's Hall, Hopkinsville, 1867. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)
citizens who would never see a city theater. People depended on them for entertainment, socializing, and a focus of community cultural life.

To sophisticated viewers' eyes, the buildings frequently suffered shortcomings. The title "opera house" sounded grand, but some consisted of little more than a second-floor room with a platform at one end. Many of these buildings were quite unpretentious. A claim in an opera house guide that "where only a few years ago the red man reigned supreme, stately edifices, superior in many instances to those which are the pride of the chief capitals of Europe, are now occupied by the servants of Art, and are nightly thronged with her ardent votaries" was something of an overstatement.74 One observer recalled a lengthy climb to Versailles's second-floor opera house and the dismay when a lamp fell over in a space with inward-opening doors.75 An 1895 remodeling of Shelbyville's Layson Hall installed a platform at the end of the room farthest from the stage in an effort to improve visibility and desirability of those seats.76 Accounts by actors who worked in opera houses recorded many instances of lamentably inadequate facilities and scenery, although records of well-equipped theaters also exist.77 Theaters sometimes needed cleaning and might be badly lit with smoking kerosene lamps. Kentucky certainly was not alone in such problems. Actors who played smalltown opera houses all over the country soon learned to expect that some structures offered less than ideal conditions. Accounts of actors' dismay at the worst theaters make entertaining reading, but not all opera houses were theatrically inadequate firetraps. The Woodruff Opera House in Murray had all the components of a theater, from boxes and orchestra pit to a balcony and fresco decoration. The Maysville Opera House boasted a parquette, dress circle, balcony, and gallery.78

The tendency to place theatrical activities on the upper level of structures, which began with Usher's brewery-theater, continued unabated into the opera house era. Rather than having a building to itself, the theater quite often occupied only a top floor of a structure otherwise devoted to commerce. Mt. Sterling's opera house, which burned in 1904, shared a building with a grocery store.79 Caneyville located its opera house above retail space, as did Walton, Cynthiana, Petersburg, and numerous other communities. Frankfort's 1872 Major Hall occupied the second floor above the post office until that structure burned in 1882.80 Lexington's notable mid-century theatrical acquisition was the Melodeon, located above a drugstore.81 Maysville's Washington Opera House (1899) took its name from the Washington Fire Company, which once resided in the building.82 This
Opera houses frequently occupied the second floor of commercial buildings, and were an integral part of daily life. Potter Opera House, Bowling Green, after the 1899 fire. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

close entanglement with commerce and community illustrates two facts about the status of theater. It was a business and was viewed by the proprietors not as glamorous but as a profit-making venture. Furthermore, it was an integral part of both the physical structure of towns and their economic, social, and cultural life. In communities where theater was only an occasional diversion, using part of the structure for commercial purposes made sense. Dual use was economically sound and kept the building an active part of daily life.

**Exteriors**

As the century advanced, theaters across the nation began an escalating trend toward complex design with considerable stress on fashionable interior decoration. By the late nineteenth century, interior theater architecture reached its zenith in fanciful swirls of velvet, gilt, mahogany, and marble. Still, many theater facades lacked distinctly theatrical quality. They were not particularly flamboyant, nor did the architecture usually signal per-
The Savoy Theater in Louisville boasted an ornate entrance, but the remainder of the facade was relatively plain. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

forming arts use. Given the Victorian penchant for ornament, structures might have plenty of decoration, but generally nothing that was exclusively or overtly theatrical. Apart from the marquees, even the facades of major theaters resembled other commercial buildings. In fact, retail establishments might be housed on the ground level of the city theater building, just as they were in smalltown opera houses.

Louisville’s 1867 theater was somewhat unusual in carrying emblems of its purpose. Within three blind arches were bas reliefs of theatrical characters. Pediments, unfinished at the opening, were to enclose sculpture on a theatrical theme.83 Builders usually favored classical motifs in one form or another. First Italianate and later Beaux-Arts facades imparted a touch of class to the buildings. Long associated with intellectual refinement, designs drawn from antiquity suggested the cultural value of activities within.
Use of familiar architectural guideposts created a respectable aura in an era when theatergoing's morality was still questioned, and proponents stressed the cultural and educational attributes of plays. Attending the theater in a structure whose architectural style resembled that of libraries and museums offered reassurance to customers who might otherwise hesitate. Some theaters, including the 1857 Lexington Opera House, reflected other current architectural trends, such as Gothic Revival or Romanesque Revival, but most stuck to classical. None had the exoticism that would accompany moving pictures at a later date. On the other hand, they were not as architecturally undistinguished as early nickelodeons.

Exterior ornamental details leaned heavily toward pilasters, engaged columns, arches, cornices, pediments, and entablatures—in other words, the hallmarks of Renaissance-derived architecture. One of Kentucky's most opulent city theaters was Macauley's in Louisville (1873). It had the narrow street facade favored by many theater builders, who, acutely aware of street frontage cost, tended to extend the bulk of the building back on the
Narrow facades reduced the cost of expensive street frontage. Macauley’s Theater in Louisville made the most of its narrow facade with extensive ornament. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

lot. Its materials, a mixture of cast iron and stone, were typical of the era. Cast iron, which enjoyed great popularity in the latter nineteenth century, was a fast and, therefore, inexpensive method of producing and installing ornamental components. It was quite common to many commercial buildings. The vertical thrust of Macauley’s slender facade broke emphatically at floor levels and terminated in a heavily pronounced cornice. Each floor level featured a distinctive central embellishment. Between the first and second floors, a cast-iron balcony incorporating Macauley’s initials extended the width of the facade. At the division of the second and third levels a smaller balcony was supported on brackets and a female bust. Elaborate window surrounds (the moldings and trim around the window opening)
Even large city theaters often did not have overtly theatrical facades. Masonic Theater program, Louisville. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

projected strongly from the surface, giving a pronounced play of light and shade. The result was a structure differing from its contemporaries more in quantity than in type of details.

Many theaters had no more decoration than did any other commercial building. Louisville's 1903 Masonic/Strand stuck to a straightforward rectangular exterior with the most obvious ornament confined to the center top of the building. In the same city, the 1910 Walnut Street/Drury Lane/
Scoop had more color than many pre-movie palace theaters, mixing stone, colored tile, and terra-cotta. Among the designs, rectangles adorned with leaf motifs flanked red medallions, green bands, and white rosettes. Originally, a red tiled roof provided additional color.

Theater architecture received little critical analysis, most citizens preferring to celebrate the buildings as community assets, but the occasional viewer took exception to a design. Of Lexington's 1887 opera house, architect John McMurty said that the sheet-iron parapet was "a pile of guts or snakes with a couple of hybrid pilasters pitched in and standing on their heads."84

Builders generally located theaters in the town center where the audience had ready access. In a century accustomed to conducting its business on foot within a small radius, people would have found a suburban location strange and decidedly inconvenient. Most Kentucky towns were too small to support anything like a theater district, with the result that theaters shared the street with diverse other businesses. Livery stables, barbers, and churches all operated near theaters, which were only one part of decidedly mixed-use areas. Apart from the marquees, most theaters blended with the commercial structures around them in terms of both scale and decoration. Melodeon Hall in 1840s Lexington typified many. Three stories high, handsomely fronted with cast iron in 1858, and featuring pilasters, brackets, and projecting cornice, it was described as a "beautiful new Hall... built with a view to elegance and comfort." Winchester proudly claimed fine scenery and "the full equipment of a city theatre" above a store fronted with the usual classical details.85 Maysville's Washington Opera House opted for a facade partially of patterned brickwork but with some iron features, including the entablature and balustrades. Similarly, Millersburg's opera house employed a mixture of brick, cast-iron store fronts, and a pressed metal cornice. Cast iron achieved considerable popularity in the nineteenth century, partially because ornamentation cost less in iron than in stone, but also because it was thought to be fireproof. Builders of the era often proudly inscribed building names and dates at the top of new structures. Typically, the Maysville building carried the words "Washington Opera House" below the pediment.

Although most theaters contented themselves with classical inspiration, a few looked in other directions. Caneyville's opera house featured stepped gables. Lexington's first opera house (1855–57) was done in the Gothic Revival style. It combined the large pointed windows of Gothic
Most communities took great pride in their opera houses, and local newspapers seldom criticized the design. 1887 Lexington Opera House. (Courtesy of Transylvania University Photographic Archives.)

cathedrals with the battlemented tops of castles. Harrodsburg’s Chenoweth Hall, constructed in the Romanesque Revival style, and located above a store called the Blue Front, exhibited nothing explicitly theatrical on its facade. Even when they deviated from the classical, builders rarely ap-
Small towns certainly did not have theater districts, but they did place theaters downtown. Horse Cave Opera House building now converted to Horse Cave Theater. (Photograph by author.)

plied anything other than conventional historical ornament. Frankfort’s combination city hall and opera house (1884) was an exception. Its facade was a wonderfully ornate amalgamation of conventional and innovative decoration surmounted by Victorian turrets. The heavy window surrounds featured stylized musical instruments.

**Opening the Theater**

Theater names changed frequently. A new name signified a change in ownership or use, but constantly shifting identification complicates researchers’ lives. Anyone investigating theater history soon becomes uncomfortably familiar with the fact that theaters recycled names common in other areas, such as Bijou or Rialto, that later theaters may bear the name of predeces-
A few theaters used styles other than classical. Lexington once had a Gothic Revival opera house. 1857 Lexington Opera House. (Courtesy of Transylvania University Photographic Archives.)

sors as in the case of Louisville's two Buckingham's and two Macauley's, and that owners might bluntly title their recent acquisition the New Theater or the Grand Theater. Furthermore, theatrical chains often imposed their names as they bought and sold buildings. B.F. Keith, owner of Keith's vaudeville circuit and a chain of theaters, used the company name for Louisville's Mary Anderson and later the National. As the names changed, so did the marquees, sometimes with striking effects on the facades. The Walnut/Drury Lane/Scoop in Louisville ran through everything from a curvilinear shelter to a large globe perched above the entrance. Owners were seldom overcome with originality in naming their theaters. Most used standard theater names, the owner's or lessee's name, or the company name.

Whether located in a city or a small town, theaters were objects of intense interest to local residents. Newspapers frequently weighed in with their opinions. Even before Samuel Drake's old City Theatre in Louisville burned and its venerable manager retired, newspapers had been agitating in favor of a replacement building. One journalist claimed that Louisville
theaters "were not recognized by people of taste and principle." Once an arsonist had conveniently removed the old structure, the clamor for a new theater intensified. Culture was not entirely the motivating factor. Local journalists stressed the economic benefits of luring tourists and businessmen through entertainment, an argument still familiar today.

Owners strove to ensure that maximum publicity attended a new theater's opening. Stressing the wonders of the building's architecture and decor offered one method. Advertising a magnificent and flamboyant production was another. If a recognizable theatrical name could be advertised, that was even better. Opening in 1846 in great style, Louisville's Bates's Theater arranged for Julia Dean to give the opening speech as well as play the lead in the opening production. As Samuel Drake's granddaughter and a member of Noah Ludlow's company, Dean had sentimental ties to Kentucky. In 1846, she was sixteen years old and a regional favorite. That year, following her first New York appearance, Dean began a brief national career as an acclaimed actress. Louisville's Mozart Hall opened in 1851 with a performance by Jenny Lind, partially because the Mozart Society wanted to raise money toward furnishing the new facility and Lind's name virtually guaranteed a large audience. In the interest of drawing the largest possible crowd, managers often opted to open with diverse attractions. The Washington Opera House reopened in 1899 after a fire—with speakers, tableaux, music, and a drill by members of the Knights of St. John. Opening nights often featured speeches extolling the new theater and an audience composed of as many prominent people as could be persuaded to attend. Civic leaders and military officers from nearby Camp Zachary Taylor and Camp Knox received invitations to the Jefferson in Louisville. The presence of notable personalities gave social sanction to a new business and attracted publicity.

The rhetoric attending an opening was often verbose and florid. Overwhelmed by the wonders of Macauley's Theater a reporter could not say enough about its attractions:

In recording the details of the superb theater, it is difficult to find words to express the impression of refinement and elegance. . . . The utter brilliancy of the varied effects is so toned by taste and refinement and luxury sufficiently introduced to make a happy accord that it is entirely natural to feel that one has really stepped into the abode of the muses, and that those faces far above him [part of the decoration] are the veritable lineaments of the presiding genii
A theater background was not a prerequisite for building theaters. Local businessmen often owned opera houses. Letterhead illustration of Potter Opera House, Bowling Green. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

who look in their lofty eyries as though they were very well satisfied with their rose-colored location and almost believed themselves in *nubibus*.

At the 1903 opening of Louisville’s Masonic Theater a reporter said: “It was a scene to dazzle and to please. It was a theater to be proud of. It was enough to make not only the builders glad, but to send the people generally into enthusiasm. Few in the South can compare with this Masonic in design, decoration, comfort and all the other things that make for a complete theater building.”

**Building and Owning Theaters**

Theater owners, builders, and managers were a diverse lot. Some came from a theatrical background. Others approached theater from a commercial standpoint. Many were well-known citizens, perhaps operating other businesses. This was especially true of small towns. Winchester’s 1877 opera house was built for local businessman J.D. Simpson. Bowling Green banker Pleasant J. Potter not only purchased the opera house, but renamed it for himself. Potter Opera House had been built in 1866 as Odeon Hall, “a neat and commodious theatrical hall,” for John Cox Underwood, later Bowling Green mayor and Kentucky lieutenant governor. Campbellsville’s
Willock Opera House was built for Joe Willock, a merchant, who also owned a Coca-Cola bottling company. His theatrical enterprise shared a building with stores and with a Masonic lodge. Mason and Orlando Brown, members of a prominent Frankfort family, owned the Metropolitan Opera House. J.I.D. Woodruff built Murray's Woodruff Opera House.

Local ownership by established businessmen reinforced the tie between theater and community. That began to change toward the end of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, theater ownership had become concentrated in the hands of a few national companies operating as monopolies. Even if the building was locally owned, the entertainment often came from a national group. At Henderson's Park Theater an 1895 audience could view a range of traveling comedy and burlesque shows, including the Al Field's Minstrels and other groups sponsored by the Jefferson Klaw and Erlanger circuit. Frequent shifts in ownership and management meant that the quality and type of entertainment varied in many theaters.

Some structures originated with groups rather than individuals. Liederkranz Hall, a structure resulting from the amalgamation of new construction with an old rectory, served as a performance arena for Louisville's German theater. The Liederkranz Society, a men's singing group formed in 1848 (women were permitted to join in 1870) became quite popular with Louisville's substantial German population. The organization's second, and best-known, building dated from 1896 and housed opera, theater, and concerts until World War I antagonism toward Germans spelled the end of the Liederkranz Society. Louisville also had a Mozart Society, organized in 1840. Its 1851 structure was intended for members-only functions, although the building evolved into broader uses under a succession of names.

Combining theaters with the Odd Fellows Hall or Masonic Hall was not unusual. Lexington's first opera house was typical of this approach. The Odd Fellows Hall Association sponsored construction with the idea of using the hall as a meeting room. It opened in 1857 with a performance of Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals* and thereafter sheltered a variety of performances until it was consumed by fire in 1886. In the same decade, architect J.B. McElfatrick designed a Masonic Temple for Louisville with a similar site suitable for theatrical purposes. The proprietors would rent it for "all respectable amusements." These included such popular performers and lecturers as Tom Thumb and Artemus Ward. Phineas T. Barnum, the circus entrepreneur, lectured there on "The art of money getting, or success in
life.” Certainly, it was a subject on which he was qualified to speak. Later, the theater housed legitimate drama, touring road companies, and vaudeville. (“Legitimate” is a traditional theater term that refers to the legitimacy of serious drama as opposed to the movies, vaudeville, or burlesque.) A number of opera houses shared quarters with Masonic groups. The Paris Odd Fellows Hall, renovated in 1879 to incorporate an opera house on the second floor, booked a diverse range of entertainment. Performers, many staying only one night, ranged from traveling actors such as Julia A. Hunt or the Alvin Joslin Comedy Company to a drawing room recital by a local woman and her pupils. Entertainment might be sponsored by community groups, as in the case of the Mendelssohn Quintet Club of Boston, provided under the auspices of the Ladies’ Aid Society. One can see why a civic group such as the Masonic lodge would see value in providing the community with a performance area. The buildings generally saw extensive use.

The owner’s activities could affect perceptions of the theater. Of Louisville’s legitimate theaters, the Grand Opera House/New Buckingham/Jefferson/Savoy acquired the most checkered background, together with its long trail of names. In its first years as the Grand Opera House (1894), it carried a blameless repertoire. Some time later, during a brief tenure as the Jefferson, family-oriented fare aimed at respectability. In between and after, burlesque played the New Buckingham and Savoy. As the Savoy, entertainment changed from movies to burlesque to X-rated films. Perhaps its fate was inevitable, given the theater’s origins, early political-boss owners, and mid-nineteenth century decline in the appeal of live performances. Although not associated with the best of Louisville theater, the Savoy embodied much early Louisville political, social, and economic history. Much of the building’s historical value lay in the connection with James and John Whallen. The two never held office but did maintain considerable control over local politics. During the operation of the New Buckingham and its predecessor of the same name, the theater served as their command post. A local resident complained that no one could enter Louisville politics without going through the Buckingham’s doors.

Whallen business interests began with a saloon in which a stage was erected for variety acts. Subsequently, they owned the Buckingham, the New Buckingham’s precursor, with a reputation for less than first-class vaudeville, but successful enough to encourage the Whallens in theatrical entrepreneurship. Their names became associated with the Louisville entertainment industry, although not with high cultural values. Published
The Whallen brothers, well known in Louisville political circles, operated a theater sometimes notorious for its performances. This advertisement for the Whallen Brothers’ Buckingham appeared in the 1882 Louisville Mascotte. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

comments often concerned the entertainment. In 1895, the subject was some female impersonators, and a year later, an announcement that a show had been canceled because it was so risque that “even the waiters blushed and tittered until they spilled the beer.”111 A reporter sarcastically commented on the violation of the Buck’s high moral code, declaring that if any show was too risqué for the Buck it might even be possible that William Jennings Bryan could be elected president.112 The newspaper tagged an 1897 performance by female impersonators as indecent and a prime candidate for a police raid, concluding that “naturally, the work will be a prosperous one.”113

Occasionally, a name change heralded an attempt at more respectable entertainment. Despite the moneymaking potential of racy productions, the Grand Opera House set out featuring family fare to compete with legitimate theaters.114 Its repertoire, comparable to that of its contemporaries, mingled good vaudeville acts and melodrama. Unfortunately, the Grand
never achieved great success. Businessmen that they were, the Whallens decided to sacrifice art to economics and give Louisville patrons the entertainment type they apparently desired. The Grand closed, the old Buckingham closed, and the New Buckingham opened. Soon it became more familiarly known as the Buck. The burlesque for which it is remembered was less risqué than many movies today, but the theater acquired a reputation as a place no lady would visit. Those who did entered through the stage door and were escorted to boxes where they could be discreetly screened from the eyes of other patrons.

At the time of its 1897 opening, a reporter remarked that the heat inside might be attributable to the show as much as the weather. He wryly commented that “the American Burlesque carry no stereoptican views of the Holy Land, and Sunday-school picnic managers and Young Men's Christian Associations are advised not to engage the company as an extra attraction.” This should not be interpreted as an indication that all entertainment was second class or unsavory. The Buck booked performances by popular entertainers Jimmy Durante, Red Skelton, and W.C. Fields, their performances being heralded by an orchestra playing from the balcony over the entrance. Furthermore, language once considered objectionable would cause no blushes today. Louisville's audiences once considered the word “nightshirt” vulgar. Other words frequently forbidden by theaters were “liar” and “son-of-a-gun.” Vaudeville was not in the same category as legitimate theater, but excellent performers made or started careers on vaudeville circuits. Critic Boyd Martin did recall performances as “bedlam” with a noisy audience and waiters serving drinks. The old Buck's reputation as a center of operations for the Whallen brothers stuck to the new Buck. In 1907, the Courier-Journal printed a Winken, Blinken, and Nod parody, beginning, “Aaron, Whallen and Knott one night Went into the Buck's back room. They took with them chalk, for they went for a talk, That shouldn't go up the flume.”

Other theaters began with and maintained utterly respectable reputations. Louisville's most famous nineteenth-century theater, Macauley's, owed its origins to Bernard (Barney) Macauley, an actor-manager. Prior to constructing his Louisville theater, Macauley had acquired twenty years of experience as a stock actor with companies from New Orleans to Indianapolis. Even after embarking on a management career, Macauley continued to act, often with his wife, Rachael. He appeared on the theater's opening night in October 1873. Macauley had been in Louisville off and
Macauley's was long the center of Louisville's theatrical activities. The original owner, Bernard Macauley, was an actor-manager. Macauley's Theater program, 1904. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

on for a little over a decade before going into theatrical management. He acted at the Louisville Theater and at the Louisville Opera House, managing the latter as part of a partnership. Just prior to constructing his own theater, he managed Weisiger Hall and also served as stage manager for Odd Fellows Hall in Lexington. For a short time, he also managed theaters in Detroit and Toledo. By the time he decided to construct his own
theater, Macauley knew the business thoroughly, from both sides of the curtain, and he knew his Kentucky audiences. Unfortunately, that background did not save him from financial disaster. In 1881, John T. Macauley, his brother, bought the theater from the company that had purchased it after the financial failure. Colonel (an honorary title) Macauley had been his brother's business manager. Barney Macauley's bitterness spilled over in an impassioned speech from the stage of the Masonic Temple Theater, in which he accused his brother and the building's architect (who had Macauley arrested for failure to pay debts) of dishonorable behavior. 126 Exactly what happened in the sequence of events leading to the sale is unknown, but the division between the brothers is a sad chapter in the theater's history.

Colonel Macauley remained associated with the theater until his death, apart from a period between 1893 and 1902 when Jefferson, Klaw, and Erlanger, the national conglomerate, took over management. Not long before Macauley's came into their orbit, the firm joined the Theatrical Syndicate, which gripped most theaters in a stranglehold. Abraham Lincoln Erlanger and Marc Klaw were among the six men who in 1896 agreed to form a trust with the intention of controlling both theaters and performances. 127 Until the founding of Actor's Equity's in 1913, actors lacked organizational backing. The Syndicate intimidated most stars into signing with them. It was either sign or leave the stage. One famous actress, Mrs. Fiske, was a notable and vociferous holdout opponent, but most theaters and actors caved in to the pressure. The Shubert Brothers damaged Syndicate dominance, although only to form their own monopoly, but the Theatrical Syndicate staggered on until the 1930s, when growing demand for movies over live performances and the original founders' deaths ended the trust. In the intervening years, Kentucky theaters followed the national trend of monopoly ownership.

Louisville's Mary Anderson Theater (1907), built for a local businessman, was typical of this trend. The theater opened to controversy over its purpose. The owner did not wish vaudeville to be booked on the grounds that it irretrievably lowered a theater's reputation. The Schuberts defended their vaudeville as acts of superior quality. 128 Despite any objections, the theater rapidly became part of Klaw and Erlanger's vaudeville circuit. When the B.F. Keith chain took control, it became the B.F. Keith Theater, only returning to the name Mary Anderson when the Keith chain took over the National Theater and moved its name to that facility. 129 Similarly, the Brown Theater (1925, subsequently renamed Macauley's) was built by local busi-
nessman J. Graham Brown to house stage productions produced by Abe Erlanger.  

Theater architects were as diverse as the owners. Some Kentucky theaters came from the offices of architects who specialized in theaters, but many were produced by firms with only the occasional theater in their portfolios. Hotel specialist Preston J. Bradshaw of St. Louis designed Louisville's Brown/Macauley Theater. Nationally known architects built some Kentucky theaters, although many came from the offices of unknown builders. Hiring of architects from outside the state was not confined to cities. Smalltown opera houses might be designed by out-of-state architects, as in the case of Russellville's 1903 structure designed by Chicago architect George O. Garnsey. Some towns employed architects with a local or state reputation. The architect of Bates's Theater, a well-known Louisville theater that opened in 1846, was North Carolina native John Stirewalt. Stirewalt had been a student at the busy and prominent firm of Ithiel Town and Alexander Davis. Town, employed to design a truss bridge in Louisville, sent Stirewalt as a field supervisor. Stirewalt went on to design several Kentucky buildings for such diverse clients as churches and the University of Louisville. Cincinnatus Shryock, who designed Lexington's Gothic Revival opera house, was a well-known local architect with several Victorian buildings to his credit. Louisville builder John F. Hendlin constructed Mozart Hall from plans drawn by George C. Davies, an amateur architect and member of the building committee. From a newspaper description, it appears that Davies worked primarily with the interior of the hall. Henry Struby, a Louisville architect of Swiss birth, designed the 1873 Liederkranz Hall. Newspapers often cited theater architects, but no particular cachet seems to have been associated with hiring a theatrical specialist. Many towns were just as happy to have a building designed by a local name and perhaps happier since it kept credit within the community.

The Liederkranz Society hired the Louisville firm of Maury and Dodd for their 1890s structure. William J. Dodd, in partnership with Kenneth McDonald, was a leading Louisville architect in the early twentieth century. Dodd's experience included training in William Le Baron Jenney's and S.S. Beman's firms. Much influenced by Beaux-Arts as practiced by McKim, Mead and White, Dodd had ample exposure to the style. He designed the Kentucky Building for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Chicago's Great White City represented the ultimate expression of American classical revival. Mason Maury, a Louisville High School gradu-
ate, took much interest in classical revival and in the Chicago School's technical innovations. Together, Maury and Dodd designed in a variety of late Victorian styles. The Masonic/Strand in Louisville (1903) was the product of Dodd in partnership with Arthur Cobb. Brinton B. Davis, the supervising architect, moved to Louisville in 1902 from Bowling Green. In the latter town he designed a number of Beaux-Arts-inspired structures for Western Kentucky University. In another partnership with McDonald, Dodd also designed the Mary Anderson Theater. The McDonald brothers—Harry, William, Allen, Kenneth, Donald, and Roy—were well-known Louisville citizens. In partnership with a variety of other architects, McDonald firms often ranked in the forefront of important architectural commissions.

Another popular Louisville architect, Dennis Xavier (D.X.) Murphy, converted an existing structure to a theater for the Whallen brothers. Among the firm's better-known works was the Clubhouse at Churchill Downs. At the time of the theater remodeling job Murphy was in partnership with his brother James as D.X. Murphy and Associates.

Barney Macauley hired an architectural firm with a specialty in theaters to design his new structure. There was much to be said for that approach. Theater design demanded reconciling aesthetics with acoustics and sight lines, and many architects failed at the task. The firm chosen, J.B. McElfatrick and Sons, had been responsible for a number of Cincinnati theaters and went on to a major national reputation. During the firm's existence (until 1922) it designed about three hundred theaters in the United States and Canada, including almost forty in New York. John Bailey McElfatrick had taken up residence in Louisville in 1865, where he remained until the early 1880s, when he moved his office to New York City with a branch in St. Louis. Macauley's Theater, built in 1873, incorporated many features that came to characterize the firm's work. Its preference for extremely ornamental facades with stone and wrought iron, combined with ornate interiors, was reflected in the Louisville theater, as was its tendency to use paneling and red or green with gilt or ivory interiors.

Exactly who designed theaters is sometimes difficult to determine. Two architects' names have been cited in connection with the 1887 Lexington Opera House, which replaced a predecessor that had burned the previous year. At least one observer shed no tears at its demise, noting that "no good citizen would have put that [fire] out." Oscar Cobb, a Chicago architect specializing in theaters, was responsible for the 1887 design. It was not his
first contact with Kentucky. Cobb had done Frankfort's 1880s combination city hall-opera house.\textsuperscript{144} Local architect Herman L. Rowe, cited by the \textit{Lexington Transcript} as the Lexington Opera House's architect, provided architectural services and construction supervision.\textsuperscript{145} Cobb began his career as a carpenter and acquired his education at MIT and Harvard. In common with other fledgling architects of his generation, he moved to Chicago, where the 1871 fire had opened great architectural opportunities. Rowe arrived in Lexington in 1880 by way of Chicago and Nashville after receiving his training at Stuttgart Polytechnic Institute.\textsuperscript{146}

The Walnut Street/Drury Lane/Scoop was another Louisville theater with a clouded attribution. At the time of construction, newspapers cited two different firms as being responsible for the design—McDonald and Dodd, and John Eberson. Eberson then lived in Hamilton, Ohio, the hometown of three men involved with developing the theater, and it is possible that Eberson could have been hired for the project. However, the theater's exterior bore a resemblance to other McDonald and Dodd projects. Well over a year passed between the first announcement and opening night, which might indicate a shift of architect. It is clear that Eberson attended the opening night. A reporter, citing Eberson as the theater designer, reiterated his name as the lighting switchboard designer. Furthermore, speakers at the banquet following the performance complimented Eberson on his design.\textsuperscript{147} Whether or not he was responsible for the entire building, Eberson obviously designed the interior. At the time of its construction, he would have been in the early phase of his career, acquiring the sobriquet “Opera House John.” In the next decade he became noted nationwide for atmospheric theaters.

The design of Louisville's National (1913) came from the office of Albert Kahn, a Detroit architect best known for far different buildings and designs. Kahn, also architect of Detroit's National Theater, made his reputation as the United States' foremost creator of industrial buildings, many commissioned by the Ford Company. Although these strictly functional factories are more publicized, Kahn designed many buildings in the National's traditional mode. Since he preferred visually complex historical designs and wished to be remembered for a Beaux-Arts library in Ann Arbor, he probably enjoyed designing the two National Theaters. The exterior of the Louisville theater bore a striking resemblance to John Carrère's and Thomas Hasting's 1909 Century Theater in New York. As a leading firm, its work would have been familiar to Kahn.\textsuperscript{148}
The Walnut Street Theater in Louisville was probably designed by John Eberson, an architect later renowned for his atmospheric theaters. (Photograph by author.)

Thomas Hastings developed the plan for Louisville's Memorial Auditorium in association with local architect E.T. Hutchings. Hastings attended the dominant architectural school, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the dictates of which affected the work produced by a generation of architects. Students learned to use rigid symmetry, to design on an axis, and to draw inspiration from Renaissance precedent. Hastings received further grounding in the Beaux-Arts tradition through his employment as a draftsman in the preeminent firm of McKim, Mead and White. The effect of such a background is clearly visible in the auditorium's design.
Thrills, Spectacles, and Glittering Lights

Performances, thespians, and audiences changed substantially in the years between the middle of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Shifts in theater design were partially the result of alterations in audience expectations and in the types of performances offered. However, architectural designs, partially driven by technology, also affected the behavior of actors and audiences. In other words, the question of whether architectural innovations were the result or the cause of modifications in building use is complicated. The interplay between people and theater buildings absorbed viewers, who never tired of analyzing the structures, the manner in which they staged performances, and the provisions for audience comfort.

Actors

As in the case of the architects, the actors appearing in these theaters were a mixed group. Some theaters employed a resident company. These maintained a grueling schedule of constantly changing plays. Resident actors normally specialized in “lines of business,” meaning that they preferred to be typecast, which simplified the frequent transition from one play to another. Even so, changing roles as many as three times a week must have been stressful. Many theaters, especially smalltown opera houses, relied on traveling shows. Fortunately for Kentucky, an extensive rail system made that feasible. Railroad expansion partially inspired proliferation of opera houses. From the later nineteenth century into the first decade of the twentieth century, opera houses rose in great numbers. A list compiled in 1920 included at least forty-six Kentucky theaters in small towns, with provisions for live performances.1 With more miles of track, small cities once
Extensive rail service made it possible for acting troupes to travel among even small towns. *(Ladies’ Home Journal, October 1899.)*

accessible only by long and unprofitable travel methods were easily reached. Performers experienced no trouble finding rail service in Kentucky. Traveling troupes found it advantageous to perform in local opera houses rather than make long trips between performances. They felt that as long as they were passing through, they might as well stop and make a little money. Theatrical guides provided managers and actors with data on railroad travel, hotels, local newspapers (for advertising purposes), and the theater's architectural features. The troupe more or less knew what type of facilities they would encounter. If the theater had no stage traps, the performance would have to do without them, but it was better to know in advance than to discover it just before the curtain rose. Even quite small towns with very basic opera houses might see major stars, although rarely for long. The combination system, by which a company of actors traveled the country with a play, was well-established during the heydays of the opera houses. In 1860 theatrical entrepreneur Dion Boucicault had put *Collen Bawn* on the road, thus introducing the concept of a road tour, bringing a single play to
disparate places. The concept caught on rapidly. As actor Joseph Jefferson claimed, this system did make some good performances available to the smalltown houses. Most small towns would not have been able to support a resident company.

Traveling troupes rarely enjoyed easy lives. Apart from the distraction of carrying one's luggage around for several weeks a year, performers risked sudden unemployment miles from home if the promoter went bankrupt. Furthermore, their traveling accommodations were often poor, as were the dressing rooms upon arrival. A theatrical guide's note that the Henderson theater was “Lighted with gas and good dressing rooms” must have been welcome, although experience probably taught actors to take managers' descriptions with a grain of salt. More prestigiously employed actors sometimes referred to the traveling troupes derisively as “prairie actors.” Food was no more dependable than the accommodations. One traveling actor wailed: “I can't abide pork, yet I've been compelled to live on nothing else while playing the southern circuit.” Many actors continued to battle for respectability in the eyes of the public. One opera house guide advised against carrying miscellaneous boxes and packages in luggage lest it create a disorganized, disreputable look. An actor recorded the example of three females of the company who carried a copy of the *Ladies' Home Journal* as evidence that they were ladies. Presumably, reading women's magazines indicated familiarity with the concept of the women's sphere, if not total compliance with its dictates. These women were not alone in their efforts to show at least a veneer of conventional feminine behavior. For many years, actresses had been fighting against public perceptions of them as painted hussies by leading private lives that adhered scrupulously to the tenants of the defined roles of Victorian women.

During the nineteenth century actors achieved celebrity status. Popular stars substantially increased theater attendance. This did not sit well with everyone. A Louisville resident bitterly complained that actors got more attention than philosophers. They probably did. However, theater managers focused on filling seats by booking the most popular thespians they could attract. The quality of performers varied. Some of America's major actors traveled between opera houses, but so did some of its least capable performers. Thespian specialties ran the gamut from comedy to tragedy to the merely curious. One actor's memoirs included an example of his company's attempt to improve business in an era of declining theater popularity. When playing Louisville, a woman from that town became a
Churches, despite religion's sometimes jaundiced view of theater, often sponsored events held in opera houses. Broadside for Odeon Hall, Bowling Green, 1874. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

Amateurs appeared in both large and small theaters. Smalltown opera houses booked numerous productions by local groups, thus providing an important outlet for community activities. Residents sometimes decided to

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Churches, despite religion's sometimes jaundiced view of theater, often sponsored events held in opera houses. Broadside for Odeon Hall, Bowling Green, 1874. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

Amateurs appeared in both large and small theaters. Smalltown opera houses booked numerous productions by local groups, thus providing an important outlet for community activities. Residents sometimes decided to
Various local organizations sponsored fund-raising events in opera houses. Broadside for Metropolitan Hall, Frankfort, 1867. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)
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put on a play, but were just as likely to present piano recitals and recitations such as the Declamatory League Contest held in Cynthiana's opera house. Civic organizations might also use the theater in connection with a fund-raising activity, as when the Women's Mission Aid Society of Lexington sponsored a vocal group from Chicago. Political groups sometimes used theaters for conventions since they offered a large space arranged to focus attention on the stage and, therefore, the speakers. A Frankfort thespian group contributed proceeds of a performance to the Episcopal Church, and the profits from a cantata at Bowling Green's Odeon Hall went to the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. A memorial service for Woodrow Wilson was held in the Lexington Opera House. Many high school graduates received their diplomas on opera house stages.

Despite other disparate uses, a theater's main purpose centered on actors. A number of popular theatrical stars appeared in Kentucky theaters, many playing in star vehicles. For example, Bates's Theater in Louisville housed performances by the Booth family, James E. Murdock, James H. Hackett, William Macready, Charlotte Cushman, Joe Cowell, Anna Cora Mowatt, and Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kean. These actors represent a fair cross section of nineteenth-century thespians. Junius Brutus Booth, family patriarch, led one of the most popular acting families in the country. His son, Edwin, was considered the most famous tragedian of his day, although his popularity diminished in the wake of his brother's assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Laura Keene, who was starring in Our American Cousin the night Lincoln was shot, also acted in the Louisville Theater. Tempting though it might be to call this ironic, both actors undoubtably appeared in the same theaters several times. The touring system made this almost inevitable. The irascible Charles Macready was another Englishman who made his name as a tragedian. His mutual antagonism with Edwin Forrest resulted in an 1849 riot at New York's Astor Place Opera House in which twenty-two people died. Despite Macready's acrimonious nature, he was a leading actor of the century. Charlotte Cushman, a formidable woman, gained a reputation for her performances of Shakespeare and melodrama. She enjoyed playing men's roles, among them Romeo and Hamlet. Visiting performers at Macauley's included Charlotte Crabtree, a famous soubrette; Julia Marlowe; Otis Skinner; Lillian Russell; and Lydia Thompson in The Black Crook, an infamous play noted more for the amount of exposed flesh than its dramatic content. Patrons at the Lexington Opera House enjoyed performances by Ethel Barrymore, Ada Rehan, and Helen Hayes.
Since all of these thespians would have been familiar to any Kentuckian who read newspapers and magazines, audiences were doubtless eager to see stars when they performed in the state. The roll call of famous names who appeared in Kentucky theaters is impressive, but it is important to realize that large numbers of lesser figures—and sometimes noticeably lesser figures—also trod the boards of Kentucky playhouses. The state was exposed to pretty much the same theatrical fare as the rest of the country, some of it good and much of it bad.

**Performances**

Legitimate drama was hardly the only entertainment housed in Kentucky's nineteenth-century theaters. Patrons of Louisville's City Theatre witnessed in 1814 a presentation of "Arabian Transparencies or artificial fireworks, representing the Temples, Monuments, Roman and European in variegated colors." Between five sections of this exhibition, a Mr. Vaughn recited and sang. The following year, Mr. Vaughn announced: "a satirical, moral, instructive, comic, and patriotic lecture;... These Lectures are written to satirize the vices, follies, fashions, manners, customs, and eccentricities of the mimic world and part to perpetuate the Sons of Columbia. Interspersed with serious, comic, and patriotic songs." A single lecture that managed to combine satire, moral instruction, comedy, and patriotism must have been quite a tour de force. Certainly it had something for everyone. The extensive emphasis of words typified nineteenth-century overwrought emotions that found other outlets in melodrama. People of that age liked obvious content, whether literary or architectural. Subtlety was not in fashion.

An evening's entertainment commonly included bizarre assemblages of performance types, leaving the audience no opportunity for boredom. In a single night at Mozart Hall in Louisville a ventriloquist, a juggler, and an "Infant Drummer" three years of age presented their acts to the public. In an evening's entertainment at Harris's, also in Louisville, patrons were offered an exhibition of rifle shooting, Dutch-Irish comedians, and "educated cockatoos." As the century wore on, such minstrel groups as Christy and His Minstrels and the Ethiopian Burlesque Troupe became popular. Some theaters, such as Louisville's Harris's Museum installed cases to display a myriad of objects. Victorians had insatiable appetites for odd objects. Performances by trained dogs and ponies were common. One of these animal acts by "the great LaFayette" ran into a little trouble when Lexington's Phoenix Hotel refused LaFayette permission to keep his dog in his room.
Theaters also accommodated their share of lectures, a form of entertainment and education popular with Victorians. A bemused Louisville heard Oscar Wilde speak in 1882 at the Masonic Temple Theatre. According to a local reporter, his lackadaisical talk, partially addressed toward the cherubs on the ceiling, left the audience more impressed with the rosettes on his shoes than with his words. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1873 reading at Library Hall was attended by "mostly elderly ladies and bald headed men" because everyone else was at the opening of Macauley's Theater. A later audience at Macauley's heard Mrs. Annie Jenness Miller expound upon "Correct and Artistic Dress" that encompassed rainy day clothing, carriage costume, tea gowns, reception robes, business women's dress, and complete sets "of her unique underware [sic]." The audience reaction is unrecorded. Patrons of Lexington's Melodeon witnessed an appearance by Tom Thumb and lectures by a phrenologist. Accommodation of such lectures was no problem for any theater. Assuming adequate acoustics, the sole remaining requirement was a stage for the speaker.

As the century progressed and panoramas and spectacles became fashionable, the stage apparatus gained in complexity. Viewers thoroughly enjoyed panoramas. Typical was one titled *Voyage to Europe* that carried spectators from Boston harbor across the ocean to London and down the Thames. In 1830, the Melodramatic in Louisville had a panoramic view on twenty-five hundred square feet of canvas. Newspaper reports detailing the amount of canvas may seem overly enthusiastic and potentially boring, but listing quantities of scenery and materials was common. Apparently it was felt to be impressive. The notably materialistic Victorian culture favored large numbers of objects in exhibitions and likely carried that preference into their attitudes toward theater design. Besides, it sounded more dramatic to have several hundred feet of panorama than to have ten feet.

Audiences sought stimulating action and complex visual effects. Even performances of Shakespearean plays emphasized the visually exciting and sensational elements. An 1832 performance of *Macbeth* was advertised with attention drawn to the burning cauldron and the witches, the vision of eight future kings, and the invasion to "dethrone a tyrant." Similarly, *Virginius* stressed the trial, insanity, and death of the title character. Of an 1887 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* performance, a reporter wrote that two aspects most enjoyed by the audience were the escape of George and his wife, and watching trouble befall the slave hunters. One 1833 optical illusions presentation included Roman processions, Washington crowned by the Graces, and the birth of Cupid. The Washington scene was typical of an era that hero-
Theaters created scenic effects through a variety of inventive methods, such as thundering cannonballs down a trough to create the acoustical accompaniment to storms. (Ladies' Home Journal, April 1900.)

worshipped the father of its country. Early scenic effects accompanying performances depended on wide-ranging, but not space-consuming, methods of faking sound and light. Lightning might be produced by burning magnesium. Steam bathed in red light simulated fire. Vibrating fine wires bathed in light could imitate rain. A cannonball thundering down a trough
A man turning a paddle against silk created the sound of wind. (Ladies' Home Journal, April 1900.)

accompanied storms. Wooden paddles revolving against silk simulated gentle breezes or howling gales, depending on how energetically the paddles were turned. After a property man spent hours cutting up paper, “snow” was tossed down onto the stage.

As the public demanded increasingly spectacular effects and managers eagerly supplied them, theaters began to change. Technical requirements
Actors, Audiences, & Historic Theaters

forced many alterations. The more elaborate the effects, the more space they required. Fly lofts for bigger and fancier scenery became essential, together with wider wing spaces. Scene painters held positions important enough to warrant printing their names in directories and theater reviews. Keeping pace with flamboyance on stage, auditoriums acquired greater ornament as the century progressed. Small opera houses simply could not cope with many productions' space and technical demands, but that did not prevent managers from attempting a semblance of the spectacular effects popular with nineteenth-century audiences. At Gabe's Opera House in Henderson, a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* included a street display with "a pack of man-eating Siberian bloodhounds," a breed that was undoubtably the product of an overexcited publicity man. This performance featured forty people, twenty ponies, donkeys, and burros. The spectacular effects advertised did not approach those of large city theaters, but managers clearly intended appeal to the smalltown dweller's desire to witness acts similar to those available in metropolitan areas.

Traveling troupes read published guides to determine what situations they would encounter in theaters. An 1878 guide to opera houses of the South and Southwest listed them in sixteen Kentucky communities. The list was not all-inclusive, but the data offer some information concerning the range of available entertainment facilities. Of those for which stage dimensions were given, the smallest, at twenty by twenty feet, was City Hall in Henderson. The largest, at thirty-six by sixty feet, was St. Clair Hall in Paducah. Seating capacity ranged from three hundred to eleven hundred. Of a total of twenty-two facilities, fifteen seated six hundred or fewer. The picture resulting from examination of this guide is of generally small theaters, some constructed for that purpose, but many in other structures, including city halls, Masonic lodges, and a courthouse. Available scenery ranged from none to a "fair stock" to full sets with drop curtains. Hopkinsville's Mozart Hall possessed seven sets of flats. Covington's Odd Fellows Hall had "Scenery sufficient for all ordinary purposes." Some of these theaters would have had trouble handling standard productions, let alone staging the popular spectacular shows. Scenic possibilities were so limited in theaters, such as one in Versailles that possessed but two drop scenes, one for a street and another portraying a landscape, that it brings to mind the stages encountered by Noah Ludlow. Things were not much better in 1911 when Cahn's theater compendium listed thirty-seven in
Kentucky, in addition to the separate record of Louisville theaters. Twenty-five seated eight hundred or fewer, although the seating range ran from four hundred at Elkton to fifteen hundred at Lexington. Traps were recorded for eighteen theaters, half of which possessed only a single trap. Several still employed grooves to hold scenery. Only one indicated ownership of a bridge (for raising or lowering a stage section).

Such data indicate why theaters with the financial resources to do so often altered their stage facilities. In 1861, a new Mozart Hall manager lengthened the stage, extended the scenery height, and widened the proscenium. The opening production suggests why all this was necessary. Seven Sisters and the Birth of the Butterfly in the Bower of Ferns had “marvelous scenic and mechanical effects.” Covering the stage with plate glass created an illusion of a silver lake. To add to the festivities a grand ballet dance and a Zouave march and drill by thirty young women were performed. The space required was mild by comparison with other attractions. Stages underwent a metamorphosis as the century advanced. Theatrical managers began to mount visually stunning productions with plenty of action. By the end of the century, audiences exhibited a pronounced preference for big, exotic, grandiose spectacles accompanied by animals and special effects. An 1836 presentation of Jean de Arc specified King Charles and Jean on “war chargers,” although the chargers were more likely those horses deemed relatively placid and therefore least likely to cause problems during their public performances. Acts featuring animals could more closely resemble circuses than legitimate drama.

As traveling spectacular shows became increasingly flamboyant, accommodation in existing theaters became a major problem for managers. In most cities, shows benefited from extensive publicity, and the necessary theater alterations attracted much public attention. The same public that flocked to the mechanical exhibits at fairs looked with equal interest at ingenious stage contrivances. Such inventions were regarded as evidencing modern progress, which reflected favorably on society. Lengthy articles heralded the 1904 Lexington staging of Klaw and Erlanger’s Ben Hur. As the opening date advanced, the play vied for attention with articles detailing the Iroquois Theater fire in Chicago and the World’s Fair in St. Louis. Ben Hur’s publicity first appeared as small theatrical column notes and swelled to long expositions as the opening date neared. One observer was clearly amazed by the mechanisms:
Should a person unacquainted with the manner in which huge spectacles are staged... stumble into the stage entrance of the opera house... he would imagine at first sight that he had wandered into a machine shop instead of an up-to-date playhouse. Motors, gearing, tackle, huge cylindrical objects, which one might think belonged to some gigantic printing establishment... gives to the stage an air of a manufacturing establishment rather than an amusement shop. The most important of these is the mechanism of the racing machine which is used in the great chariot race, and the other is the mechanism whereby the panoramic view given at the rear of the stage during the race is so realistic that it actually appears as if the chariots were going at... speed. ... There is a device on Messala's chariot which... automatically throws off a wheel and wrecks the chariot. All of the machinery of the play works in harmony and is considered a most wonderful piece of mechanism.45

Articles dissected the staging mechanisms and extolled the play's salutary content. Stage apparatus offered a constant source of fascination. The local newspaper gave the chariot race treadmill mechanism and cyclorama an extensive description. The canvas belt of scenery wrapped around revolving cylinders created an impression of foreground motion. To simulate a race, horses were held in place by wires and run on four treadmills supported within a frame. A generator below provided the power.46 All of this paraphernalia necessitated an increase in the height and depth of the stage and rewiring of the house. The management probably figured that the investment would pay off in increased attendance and the ability to house future spectacles.

Even standard plays required mechanical devices. Dramatic exits and entrances necessitated something more startling than an actor strolling out from the wings. Traps of various types and names swallowed or ejected performers from the stage floor. Devices with a long history in theaters, they assumed a new importance. Well-equipped theaters would have several traps spaced across the stage floor. Most acquired their names from association with plays. Vampire traps, like the one at Macauley's Theatre in Louisville, originated in 1820 with the play *The Vampire*. The Gem Opera House in Somerset had a Hamlet trap.47 As the name "trap" suggests, trapdoors were set into the stage floor. If the play required a sudden disappearance, the actor stepped onto the trap and it sank beneath the stage, carrying the actor with it. For entrances, the actor stood on the small wooden square below the stage, a spring was released, and he/she hurtled upward to the
stage. Whatever the effect on the audience, it must have been unsettling for the actor. In an age of computer-generated special effects, the whole procedure sounds primitive, but traps enthralled nineteenth-century audiences. Bridges allowed the raising and lowering of entire stage sections.

Victorians favored verisimilitude in their art and in their stage sets. Paradoxically, they wanted the illusion of reality, but also wanted to know the details of how it was achieved. Caught between the desire for legerdemain and an opposing wish for technical information, audiences insisted on both. Audience demands for greater realism forced changes in scenery techniques. The method used for much of the century involved a raked (sloped) stage with grooves for sliding scenery on and off. The raking helped flat scenery simulate a normal perspective view. Space to both sides of the stage (the wings) accommodated the offstage scenery as it was positioned for use. As box sets, introduced in the 1840s, gained favor, the nineteenth century witnessed the demise of both raked stages and grooves. Removal of those items often formed part of theater renovations in the latter part of the century.

**Layout and Audiences**

Apart from the fact that older stages could not accommodate spectacles' enormous sizes, the mechanical facilities were generally inadequate for them as well. Through the century, more theaters began to construct fly lofts, towers soaring above the stage. Using a series of ropes and pulleys, the
stage crew could fly scenery up and off the stage, or lower it into position. The upper area’s appearance was sometimes compared to ship rigging. By easing the labor required for shifting scenery, fly lofts increased the quantity of scenic changes. Some buildings now converted to other purposes retain the telltale towers that mark the structures as former theaters. The Mary Anderson and Walnut Street Theaters in Louisville are now completely unrecognizable as former theaters, except for the fly lofts.

Numerous types of plays and other entertainment used traps and fancy scenery. Mid-nineteenth-century audiences could choose from a wide selection of entertainment, but plays generally fell into standard categories. Shakespeare was one. Melodrama was ubiquitous. Variety acts, such as the equestrian shows, burlesque, and spectacles, composed a third group. Recurring dramas included Our American Cousin, East Lynne, Camille, Faint Heart Never Won Fair Lady, Macbeth, The Married Rake, and She Stoops to Conquer. Audiences also saw frequent performances of As You Like It, H.M.S. Pinafore, Abbie’s Irish Rose, and Lady Windemere’s Fan.

All legitimate theaters housed frequent performances of Shakespeare, not necessarily because he was lauded as a great poet and playwright, but for diverse other reasons. Leading actors specialized in particular Shakespearean roles, which they expected to play during any engagement. So if the theater booked a prominent actor, it was almost certainly going to get at least some Shakespeare. Further, the sometimes potent force of drama’s moralistic opposition could be countered by citing Shakespeare as educational and, therefore, an excellent influence on youth. Selling plays as culture also characterized the era’s interest in self-improvement. People worked diligently to develop an appreciation for art, science, and literature, and made sure that their friends and acquaintances recognized those efforts. The praise given a company playing Lexington as “instructive and moralizing” was indicative of prevailing dramatic preferences. Given the array of potential benefits, it is not surprising that Kentucky saw numerous Shakespearean plays. John Wilkes Booth played in Richard III at Mozart Hall. At his January 1864 appearance, the newspaper praised him as “a great tragedian . . . illustrious with the American people.” The editor did not know that a year later Booth would headline an American tragedy that made his name notorious with the American people. Mary Anderson, a nineteenth-century theatrical star, made her debut on the stage of Macaulay’s in Romeo and Juliet. She went on to a successful career before retiring into marriage. She was a bit shocked by her first look behind the scenes. What
Melodrama, very popular with audiences, relied on emotional effects. Virtue triumphing over evil evoked strong sympathy from viewers, as in this scene from Mary Warner. (From Olive Logan, *Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes*, 1870.)

had seemed glamorous from the front looked gloomy from the back “with the noisy patter of the rain on its tin roof, a small gas-jet burning in the centre, throwing a dingy light on the men and women.”

Twentieth-century audiences would find nineteenth-century versions of Shakespeare oddly awry. Victorians preferred a clear-cut division of good and bad characters, sentimental, simplified stories, and happy endings. Since the original plays rarely provided unambiguous characters or events, could be bawdy, and often were tragic, they were frequently rewritten to suit the prevailing taste. This is the time period when the Reverend Bowdler attempted to sanitize Shakespeare, giving rise to the term “bowdlerized.” What audiences did like about Shakespeare’s plays were opportunities for melodramatic confrontations and dramatic speeches.

Melodrama, in which virtue persistently and dependably triumphs over evil, became a Victorian playhouse staple. Such plays mirrored the sentimental idolatry of family and home so apparent in nineteenth-century interior design. The title of one, *Mother’s Dying Child*, suggests the dramatic
content. Melodrama was as overwrought as the theater decoration. Neither could be considered high art, and both aimed for effect. Set back into the proscenium arch, an emphatic physical separation from the audience, the plays fostered a mental separation as well and clearly portrayed fantasy. They did not aim to engage the audience’s intellect or deeply touch their emotions. Emotional they were, but in a superficial way. Novelist and scholar of melodrama Robertson Davies pithily described melodrama’s popularity: “It meant a world in which the spectator . . . could equate himself with the Hero, the Heroine, or the Villain in a world of Myth, a world in which these archetypal figures worked out their destiny in an atmosphere where Poetic Justice, however tardy, would manifest itself after many trials and vicissitudes.”52 Because such plays essentially followed a formula, the audience could find comfort in predictability.

Louisville audiences at the Avenue thrilled to the adventures of a persecuted heroine pursued by the villain and rescued by the hero in The Phantom Detective. Among other trials and tribulations, the unfortunate girl had to be extracted from a den of lions.53 Audiences became familiar with many of the melodramas. James O’Neill, father of Eugene O’Neill and famed for his portrayal of the Count of Monte Cristo, appeared at Macauley’s in that star vehicle, just as he had appeared in countless other productions of the same play.

The late-nineteenth century version of reality programming called for sometimes bizarre performances. In 1889, patrons of the Louisville Temple Theatre observed a fully rigged yacht on stage as “A REAL VESSEL, WITH REAL SAILS, Real Masts, and Real Sailors.”54 If that provided insufficient thrills, there was always the burglary scene showing a robbery of a real safe by real burglars, whom the advertisement carefully noted as “reformed.” Safe cracking required no extreme amounts of stage facilities, but a boat was another matter. Spectacles of that type necessitated more space in the wings and above the stage, forcing adjustments to old theaters. Small theaters simply could not cope. Such activities as the 1889 stage renovations at the Buckingham in Louisville undoubtedly were intended to allow more flamboyant productions.55

Spectacles became extremely popular toward the end of the century. These presentations contained minimal literary content. As the name implies, the idea was visual impression. To this end, producers introduced a variety of technological effects. The earliest attempts at producing ghostly apparitions on stage fascinated observers.56 Storms, volcanoes, and other
destruction could be enacted with light, sound, and movement to the great delight of audiences entranced by the mechanical possibilities of their age. All this sometimes necessitated theater rewiring.

Not all of the drama was on the stage. Patrons' activities could offer just as much entertainment. Problems with unruly audiences occurred, although their behavior improved substantially by the century's end. As late as 1900, the Paris (Kentucky) Opera House manager declared that "whistling and other rude conduct will not be tolerated." Earlier theaters experienced more difficulties. The proprietor of Bates's Theatre must have anticipated a rowdy audience. Prior to the opening he announced that he had employed the services of the police. In a further attempt to reduce noise, he prohibited babies. The Lexington Opera House cited in its theater program an ordinance forbidding catcalls or hissing, among other disturbances. One distressed actress cited bad audience habits such as spitting tobacco, profane language, arriving fashionably late, and stamping for approval. Many tales survive of unsophisticated audience members becoming so caught up in the action that they even cried out to warn the villain's victim or rushed the stage to intervene. In such a situation, the proscenium provided a reminder of the separateness of the stage by establishing both physical and psychological barriers. Rude, boisterous, and frequently offensive behavior that characterized earlier audiences did begin to disappear during the century, diminished by social pressures toward gentility and etiquette. By the end of the century, etiquette books included sections on proper theater behavior. As audience behavior improved, more women and children entered the theater.

Late in the century vaudeville houses sometimes felt it necessary to stress their respectability. Louisville's Bijou program was careful to specify that:

This house is conducted on a high moral plane; we cater for the patronage of ladies and children. We do not permit anyone to annoy our patrons; we tolerate no whistling, no catcalls, no stamping of feet, or anything that would lower its standard of respectability. . . . The high tone, the fidelity to the promise that the unclean shall not enter. . . . The known aim of the management to have nothing occur in the theatre that would not be allowed in the home has secured for the BIJOU THEATRE the indorsement and patronage of people who never previously looked with favor on a Vaudeville performance. The visitor is particularly impressed with the sweet pure atmosphere that exists everywhere about the building. . . . It is a high order of
Early audiences, such as these soldiers, could be boisterous and rude. Eventually, theater etiquette specified proper behavior.
(From Olive Logan, *Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes*, 1870.)
performance to be seen at the BIJOU—that is, high of that kind of amusement—as the manager discharges immediately any “eccentric artist” who offends by even a suggestion of vulgarity. It is as though the performers as well as the audience—so exquisitely orderly that no one even pushes at the box office, but stands quietly in line—were subdued and refined by the flawless surroundings.62

Victorians expected the theater environment to convey expected behavior and reveal status as did their homes. The era was never comfortable with ambiguous meanings or people who could not be accurately slotted into social positions. Thus, theater layout reflected social conditions as well as performance demands. Apart from expansion of seating areas, basic theater layout changed little from that favored in the earliest structures. Pit, boxes, and gallery continued the traditional separation of social classes. All theaters provided this range of seating for a diverse clientele. Even the grandest theaters expected and intended to attract both high and low society. The building operated as a cultural tool used to enforce codes of behavior. The elite, middle-class, blacks, and prostitutes all kept to their own areas. Separate entrances ensured that they never came in contact with each other. Patrons could sit in boxes adjacent to the stage for maximum personal visibility and the poorest sight lines, in chairs at lower levels, or on benches in the highest gallery. Audiences considered stage boxes, which flanked the proscenium, particularly desirable. The occupants not only adjoined the actors immediately, but were visible from the rest of the house. The fact that they were subject to terrible sight lines mattered little to high society. Anyone with social aspirations wanted to be seen dressed in his/her best and seated in the most expensive location. Much like actors, audience members donned clothing for an evening at the theater in order to play a role. An additional advantage accrued from the fact that stagebox occupants could readily survey the rest of the audience. For those who could afford such seating, theatergoing constituted an exercise in one-upmanship. Seeing other people during the performance presented no difficulty. Victorian theaters kept the house lights up throughout the play. In keeping with their status, stagebox decor emphasized comfort and display. Padded chairs, more ornate than those in other areas and upholstered in velvet or similar luxury fabrics, ensured that the upper classes could loll at ease. Drapery swags softened the area. Box fronts often swelled outward encrusted in cherubs, swags, and flowers.

Up to a point, theaters maintained a democratic admission policy, but
Audiences wanted to see and be seen at the theater. From the boxes, they could scrutinize their fellow theatergoers and display their own finery. *(The Delineator, January 1894.)*

differences in cost ensured that the groups did not actually mix. Apart from stage boxes, the hierarchical arrangement placed more expensive seats at lower levels with clear visual separation among the areas. The difference in price reflected more comfortable and advantageous seating, but also guaranteed restriction of social classes to separate areas according to their ability to pay. Many segments of the community attended the theater, but it was egalitarian space only up to a point. All saw the same play, but not from the same vantage point. These divisions, while they controlled behavior, did not create it. Rather, they mirrored society’s aims. Seating areas differed little from those of previous theaters, apart from the addition of more
As successive tiers of galleries rose toward the ceiling, both the price and the comfort decreased. Savoy Theater, Louisville. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

tiers of balconies. Normal divisions for big theaters included stage boxes, a parquet or parquette (the main floor), a parquet circle (orchestra circle or parterre; the area beneath the balconies), the dress circle (first balcony), a second balcony, and a gallery (top balcony). Audiences expected to pay five to ten dollars for box seats and one dollar to twenty-five cents or even fifteen cents as the tiers ascended toward the ceiling. The upper gallery remained unacceptable to most of the audience. Servants and apprentices had long staked a claim to the area. They were joined in the upper balcony recesses by blacks who, whatever their social standing, could not sit elsewhere. The rights to boxes and choice seats were sometimes sold at auction prior to a theater opening. Seating ranged in order of desirability from padded opera chairs to wooden seats to benches, decreasing in comfort with ascending height. In Bates's Theater, hair-stuffed seats upholstered in Brussels carpet provided for upper-level audience comfort. The newspaper
indicated that the pit was also arranged for comfort, but it may be presumed that the comfort was not of the same degree as that provided for box occupants.\textsuperscript{64}

More elaborate seating might take into account standard clothing and accessories. Mozart Hall in Louisville had "an excellent contrivance in the shape of a hat-rack under the seat, so that gentlemen can dispose of their hats in a clean, safe place, and not be compelled to nurse them all the evening."\textsuperscript{65} The ubiquitous nineteenth-century etiquette advice took care to specify appropriate clothing and its relation to theater. The \textit{Courier-Journal} printed a lengthy analysis of male and female roles with respect to theater attire and behavior:

The one great and all-important fact in connection with theater etiquette... is never to wear anything on or in their heads that will obstruct a view of the stage. Now, I say in their heads advisedly because I know numbers of very nice girls who always boast of wearing only a bonnet or a small hair ornament to the play... but the woman who wears a great topknot of roses, a showery white osprey, or a dot of a bonnet, with a tuft of plumes in it, is almost as great an evil-doer as the owner of a picture hat. One single osprey, by quivering before a pair of eyes, can annoy beyond measure... But one plea I do wish to make in behalf of every woman who goes to the theater, which is, if hats are to be put down, let us by all means settle it at once whether or not a man is to go out between the acts. He who practices this habit is the veriest boor... Women have no place to put their hats save in their laps, and plowing his way in and out, the restless creature sweeps hat ornaments with his coat-tails, often obliges her to stand up, her arms full, to let him pass, and quite as often knocks over her possession and brutally ruins a costly piece of millinery.\textsuperscript{66}

Lexington Opera House seats featured hat racks for men and cane and umbrella stands. At least some gentlemen must have wished for a ladies' hat rack to accommodate the voluminous millinery in style at the end of the nineteenth century. Early in July 1887 a newspaper offered a plea that ladies shed their hats in the cloakroom. A bit later it conceded that elderly ladies might do as they pleased with their bonnets.\textsuperscript{67} Those leather and velvet seats inspired several unsubtle hints that the purchase of tickets would help pay for such magnificent comfort. An auction for choice seat locations attempted to raise additional funds toward the chairs' cost.\textsuperscript{68}

Though some opera house interiors, such as Georgetown's 1906 theater, were equipped with boxes and balconies, many lacked larger theaters'
amenities. Common use for community gatherings meant that many had flat floors and easily removed seats, as opposed to larger theaters' sloped auditoriums. Seating might be no more than simple wooden chairs or benches. Many used folding chairs for maximum flexibility in use of space. Lack of tiers meant that the stage might be higher than is now customary. Like the Paris Opera House in 1900, other theaters requested that ladies take off their hats to avoid obscuring patrons' views. It can well be imagined that in theaters without tiers voluminous hats limited visibility. The manager of Shelbyville's Layson Hall added a platform at the far end of the room facing the stage in an effort to improve seating. Apollo Hall in Louisville had much the same thing in order to show off a panorama, Voyage to Europe, to better effect.

**Theater Decor**

The builders of grand theaters favored sumptuous materials. Marble foyers, walnut wainscots, and gilded columns impressed audiences. Such materials displayed the theater's position in the entertainment hierarchy and, concomitantly, the patrons' social positions. Proscenium arches could be quite elaborate, bearing three-dimensional stucco designs, gilding, and busts. Of one redecoration, the manager boasted: "The Proscenium will be found altered with taste and classical correctness, festooned with rich cushion drapery . . . and the box panels renewed with arabesque ornaments, after the most approved models." All of the aesthetic insecurities of the age are revealed in that comment on "correctness" and "approved models." Most Victorians were not given to idiosyncrasies. Any kind of uniqueness risked being out of step with aesthetic mores. Knowledge that a design fit into a standard mold meant unquestioned suitability. Theaters essentially played to middle-class taste in both drama and architecture.

Not everyone approved of traditional theater decor. A writer for the *Courier-Journal* followed an encomium to Macauley's Theater with criticism of others: "It is so common in some theaters to introduce the brilliant crimson plastered over with gilt and a profusion of too dazzling wall-covering. . . . Your gaudy trappings absorb even the stage effects, just as gaudy carpets and hangings in an art gallery draw the coloring out of the pictures." Despite the occasional critic, most people continued to favor profuse ornament with color and gilding. At the 1903 Louisville Masonic Theater opening: "The red color scheme ranging from deep cardinal on the
ground floor to a delicate pink on the walls of the upper stories was effective in the extreme. The delicate green tints of the proscenium boxes, embellished with gold, added to the impressiveness of it all. For the opening performance the house had been decorated with green plants—smilax had been draped about the railings and entwined around the electric standards.76

The opportunity to observe and critique design was not limited to the proscenium. Until improved technology permitted cantilevering of balconies, quantities of piers and columns were noticeable auditorium features. Supporting balcony posts offered an opportunity for embellishment, but they could obscure the sight lines for anyone unfortunate enough to be seated behind one. Making a virtue of necessity, designers sometimes modeled the posts on classical columns, perhaps with gilded capitals. Decoration reminiscent of exterior gingerbread trim or Moorish filigree adorned some theaters. By the end of the century, as steel replaced cast iron and wood, the number of posts dropped.

A variety of materials covered the ceilings. Pressed metal offered an easy way to obtain pattern at relatively low cost. Once painted or gilded it was not readily distinguishable from plaster. When the owners could afford and locate a painter, designs might be painted onto the ceilings. The Louisville Theater sported a blue domed ceiling adorned with stars and clouds.77 Artists were occasionally from the local area, but they sometimes came from regional cities such as Cincinnati. The Lexington Opera House’s ceiling fresco of figural and floral designs was executed by an artisan from Louisville. A reporter boasted that "The frescoes are all gems, from the beautiful female figures made to appear life-size in the dome down to the smallest flower."78 Chandeliers generally dangled beneath an ornamental medallion. Wallpaper, ubiquitous in the nineteenth century, covered several theater ceilings.

Most of the favored nineteenth- and early twentieth-century flooring materials found their way into theaters. Cork floors in the aisles subdued the noise. Encaustic tiles offered an opportunity for color and pattern, but they had the disadvantage of magnifying the noise from footsteps. Carpeting (often Brussels carpet) and matting softened the sound in the aisles and was often added as part of renovations. Soft materials served purposes other than the purely practical. Audiences who looked for mental comfort in plays with morals expected both mental and physical comfort in a familiar, parlor-like ambiance. In their use of carpet and other fabrics, owners sought to entice customers by providing all the comfort of a home parlor.
Grand though the auditorium might be, it was only one of several well-furnished spaces in many theaters. Owners devoted a considerable part of their decorating budgets to lobbies, hallways, and assorted parlors. Increasingly larger and more splendid auxiliary spaces reflected the growth in public social activities through the nineteenth century. People attended performances expecting to socialize with friends and acquaintances. An evening at the theater presented an unparalleled opportunity to dress in one’s fashionable best and to observe and comment on the appearance of other attendees. Theaters were gathering places in which people clustered in foyers and parlors to discuss the play, chatter, and reinforce social contacts. Pleasant and fashionable auxiliary rooms drew customers and enhanced the theater’s reputation as a social center where one wanted to see and be seen. The proliferation of such spaces resulted, in part, from increased accept-
Theaters commonly featured a variety of parlors and wide corridors, which provided space for audience interaction. *(Ladies' Home Journal, April 1900.)*

ability of theater attendance by women and families. Large theaters provided a series of waiting or retiring rooms and gentlemen’s smoking rooms. In some cases, occupants might while away the time by writing letters on stationery provided by the theaters. The designation and furnishing of these spaces clearly defined views of gender roles. Men smoked and drank in the theater bars. Women did not. The divans in foyers and retiring rooms were intended for the “weaker sex,” in case they should be overcome with weariness. At the Louisville Grand (1894), ladies who felt a sudden weakness could be revived by a supply of restorative that was administered by a “highly respectable old auntie.”79 If this failed, a medical attendant was on call. The Jefferson, too, addressed mothers’ needs by offering an “Elegant Lounge Room for Ladies—Beautiful Nursery for Checking Babies.”80

The local press enthusiastically described, sometimes in minute detail, new theaters or those that were extensively remodeled. Precise measurements for each area, each exterior segment, and every stage permutation accompanied many newspaper accounts. Almost invariably, the question of safety features merited analysis. Such reviews leaned heavily toward ful-
some praise and a tone of boosterism with little or no mention of perceived defects. The writer’s role did not require searching analysis but merely a list of features that was accompanied by Chamber of Commerce-style remarks on the new ornament to the community. While the detailing of colors and materials is helpful to latter-day researchers, initial reviews tell little about a given structure’s standing by comparison with others. They all sound wonderful. Outsiders’ remarks and later developments in the structure’s use reveal more about relative position.

The tendency to uncritical enthusiasm is evident in the description of Bates’s Theatre, which was hailed in 1846 as “the most complete, the handsomest, the best arranged, the most beautifully decorated, and the neatest theatre in the West or South, or even in the United States.” This overstated praise represented the usual bombastic Victorian writing, coupled with pardonable local pride in their new acquisition. Local residents greeted with applause almost any theatrical enterprise of reasonable size and configuration. In some cases, familiarity eventually bred contempt. Bates’s Theatre was a case in point. Still, if it was not quite the best theater in America, it was a distinct improvement for Louisville. Bates’s, however, did have its problems. There were complaints about some performers and arguments with traveling stars over finances. Bates was evidently somewhat tightfisted.

Accounts of theater openings and renovations tended to highlight the cost, as though this guaranteed a worthy structure. Expenditure may not have indicated taste, but at least it notified the public that something had been changed. To status-conscious and materialistic Victorians, knowledge of the investment probably did enhance the appeal. Russellville residents were informed that their 1903 opera house cost twenty-five thousand dollars. An account of Daniel Quilp’s Louisville Auditorium fervently cited one thousand dollars worth of new scenery and a three hundred dollar electric fountain requiring twenty-five to thirty dollars a day to operate. In exchange for “several thousand dollars” the Avenue (Louisville) got new decorations and seats, a new marble and concrete lobby, and a glass hood over the sidewalk. A consumer-oriented culture accounts for some of the fascination with changing decor. Victorians elevated shopping to an art form, creating department stores full of the numerous goods made possible by the Machine Age. They flocked to exhibitions and fairs to see arts and industry products. Similarly, theaters overflowed with things. That approach to theater design held sway into the early years of the twentieth century.
Entrepreneurs associated with theater construction or renovation trumpeted their contributions on the pages of programs and newspapers. In 1915, C.F. Brower and Company of Lexington seized the opportunity to advertise in the Opera House program that it had provided the floor coverings, draperies, and velvet drop curtain (claimed to be the largest in Kentucky) and stood available for other decorative work. At the opening of Lexington’s Ben Ali in 1913, advertising featured C.D. Cunningham for
FOR THE NEWEST AND BEST IN
Dress Goods, Clothing, Furnishings, and All Novelties,
ALWAYS GO TO
BRYAN & CLAYTON'S.

MISTER AND MISTUS JEREMIRE ROBKINS

SINGIN SKULE BEGINMENT.

K. P. OPERY HOUSE,
GLASGOW, KY.
Friday Nite, May 24,
Auspices of
The Ladies' Aid Societies Baptist and
Presbyterian Churches.

ETHEL DECKARD.
MANAGEMENT
J. BASSETT WILLARD.
1545 West Washington Street, Indianapolis.
229 W. Fourth Street, Cincinnati.

NOTICE. —Jeremire wants it known that
he haunts his suit that he haunts the
"Shake" to-night. He wanted to mighty
bad, but Mista Robkins says "he ain't,
so be haist.

[Run more tother side.]

An incomparable showing of
Silks for Summer—the dainti-est,
the prettiest, the brightest, the
most attractive patterns and colorings
to be found.
Accept our invitation to come and in-
spect them—we shall appreciate the
favor.

The businesses that advertised in opera house programs did not necessarily have
a direct connection to the theater. Advertisements in program for Glasgow opera
house. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)
the painting, Frazer & Bush for electrical work, Builders Supply for plumbing and heating, and Coombe Lumber for construction. Other local businesses also saw new theaters as unparalleled chances for publicity. Dewhurst Garage advertised on every page of the Ben Ali program.85

Technology

The nineteenth century witnessed striking advances in theater technology. These greatly improved conditions for actors and audiences. Deficiencies in staging, visibility, and comfort tolerated by earlier audiences became increasingly unacceptable. Structural changes affected the appearance of interiors as well as their function. Adaptations related to new building materials, improved lighting methods, safety concerns, and changes in theatrical performances resulted in interiors that bore little resemblance to those of the preceding century. Shifts in lighting technology profoundly affected theaters. As the nineteenth century began, theaters were lit by candles and oil lamps. By the turn of the century, gas lighting was giving way to electricity. The theaters of that era might employ multiple types of lighting technology, a condition also common in homes. Newspaper accounts of theater openings or renovations frequently detailed the number, type, and design of lighting fixtures. Relatively bright illumination did not become available to homes until the advent of gas lighting. For many people, experience with brilliantly lit spaces was limited to theaters. Multiple light sources became part of the theatrical experience long before Broadway’s designation as the Great White Way. Designers lit large theaters with chandeliers supplemented by brackets in the boxes and lining the various tiers of seats. The gradation of status can be read in lighting fixture quantity and ornateness. As successive tiers of seats rose up toward the ceiling with their occupants steadily decreasing in social rank, the number of fixtures lessened, and they became simpler.

From the days when Sol Smith actually stuck improvised footlight candles in potatoes, stage lighting advanced substantially.86 In more adequate settings than the one Smith was forced to use that night, stage lights emanated from troughs at the foot of the stage. These enabled the audience to see the actors but posed difficulties for thespians who preferred to have lights focused upon themselves. Limelight made its appearance on stage in the 1830s and, by mid-century, lenses had been added to promote focusing. The beam was produced by bathing a piece of lime in oxygen and hydrogen
Theater lighting entranced audiences. The buildings, such as Macauley's Theater shown here, frequently incorporated higher quantities of light than could be seen elsewhere. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

gases. The phrase “to be in the limelight” originated with nineteenth-century actors standing in the more focused pool of illumination created by limelight.

In 1816, Philadelphia’s Chestnut Street Theater advertised the introduction of gas lights to American theaters. Gas, the first major technical advance in lighting, provided unheard-of illumination levels. In comparison to candles and oil lamps, gas bathed interiors in light. Observers found themselves torn between horror at its glare and pleasure at the brilliant effect. Sometimes it was noted that gaslights were beneficial to the audience’s complexions, and sometimes they were blamed for shedding harsh light. From the actors’ point of view, the overhead lighting that began to replace lower wing lights and footlights was more flattering. As any child who ever held a flashlight beneath his/her chin knows, low lighting tends to create
Prior to gas lighting, actors tended to stay close to the footlights, where they could be seen more clearly. (From Olive Logan, Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes, 1870.)

and exaggerate shadowing on facial features. Critics regarded the effect of overhead lighting as more natural. It streamed over the actors from an angle akin to sunlight. By the 1840s a forty-five-degree angle was being promoted as more natural than direct overhead lighting. Gaslight permitted naturalism in ways other than visual. As one early twentieth-century observer put it, "Until the gas came no actor had ever been such a booby as to turn his back [to the audience]." With the brighter light they could not only turn their backs, but also dispense with many attention-getting methods. Actors were no longer compelled to gesture broadly so the audience could see them in dim light. The standard "theatrical" actors' style began to seem old-fashioned and comical. Any actor who could not adjust to the new, more natural acting style risked falling out of favor. Such systems also diminished the dangers of performers adjacent to lower open flames. Furthermore, they eliminated the impediment of lamps behind the wings. There were other practical advantages. Gaslights required less attention than candles prior to and during a performance and eliminated dripping wax.

Gas was not a perfect lighting source. Everyone concerned remained ambivalent about the wonders of gas. Apart from the ever-present fire danger that had always attended open flames, gas lights produced fumes. Au-
ditorium ventilators attempted to relieve the potential for headaches and nausea—conditions not likely to enhance appreciation of drama. Newspaper accounts carefully noted the presence of ventilators. Reporters were often at pains to specify that an abundant gas supply was accompanied by water and a hose for fighting fires. Like any open flame, gas produced soot and a resultant perennial cleaning problem.

The search for still better and brighter illumination led to carbon arc lights. Those installed in the Lexington Opera House impressed a newspaper writer as wonderfully bright, odor- and smoke-free, and with the added advantage of flattering complexions and reducing the possibility of smoke damage to the dome frescoes, which could have resulted from earlier gaslights. The new lights were "resplendent with an effulgence of light that flooded everything with a radiance that was perfectly magical, and so beautiful for the complexion of ladies and soft for the eyes and free from odor and smoke." Whether carbon arc lights flattered complexions is debatable, although the greater illumination certainly heightened visibility of facial features.

Lighting technology advanced from gas to electricity during the 1880s, pioneered by London's Savoy Theater in 1881. The bulb wattage was low, but designers compensated by using multiple bulbs. The appearance of actors and stage sets changed with the lights. Electric light gave a visually cooler glow than gaslight. Heat and flickering from gaslights disappeared. The vast amount of light and its wider distribution made the details of stage sets and performers more visible. This could be considered advantageous in some cases, but possibly not by those wishing to hide wrinkles or unrealistic set painting. Dim lights could hide a multitude of problems. Despite the disadvantages to elderly actors and untalented scene painters, electric lights burgeoned. At the turn of the century, vast numbers of electric theater lights captivated the public. Such enthusiasm for lights presaged the era of glittering movie palaces awash with all types of illumination, and the Broadway and Times Square theater districts' close identification with lights. Masses of facts greatly impressed Victorians, and newspapers abounded with detailed accounts of the number and type of lighting fixtures. With typically thorough counting, a report on Louisville's Harris Theatre renovation estimated that there were nearly five hundred lights with almost three hundred just on the stage alone. A reporter enthusiastically listed the Auditorium in Louisville's amphitheater as having hundreds of electric lights in various colors and arc lights by the dozens.
As the century progressed, a quest for realism resulted from the public's desire to rely more on theatrical magic and less on their imaginations. Effects requiring considerable suspension of disbelief but that had satisfied an earlier generation began to seem crude. By the early twentieth century, theater managers could choose from a bewildering array of special-effect lighting. The 1830s attempts to limelight ghostly apparitions onto the stage had fascinated observers. Gas and electricity vastly extended the illusionary range. In 1911, Klingle Brothers (a supplier) advertised a machine intended to produce illusions of snow, water ripples, fire, rain, rainbows, flying butterflies, falling flowers, lightning, and a volcano. Storms, volcanoes, and other natural disasters could be enacted with light, sound, and movement, all to the great delight of audiences entranced by their age's mechanical capabilities.

Shrewd managers routinely invited the public to visit new theaters or extensively remodeled facilities and preview the architectural splendor awaiting those who attended performances. At the Lexington Opera House opening in 1887, all "well-behaved persons" were admitted to see a demonstration of the lighting and the curtain. A free demonstration could pay off for the management. If they were suitably impressed, visitors might
return to pay the entrance fee for a performance. Even better, they might bring friends to marvel at the theater and its capabilities. Theaters mirrored their culture's preoccupations. In their own way, they served as smaller versions of the wildly popular nineteenth-century expositions. Just like an exposition, theaters offered both visual and technological excitement. Many innovations of the Industrial Revolution made their way into theaters, greatly improving comfort and safety, and the public lined up enthusiastically to sample them.

Theaters sought new ways to improve climate control. A desperate builder of New York's Chatham Garden Theater left openings in the partitions behind boxes enabling patrons to stand *behind* the box rather than be enclosed in its smothering heat. Again predating movie palaces, which advertised cool interiors as a summer attraction, theaters advertised pre-air-conditioning cooling methods. These had distinct limitations, but at a time when people suffered through the summer heat in constrictive clothing, any temperature drop was welcome. In 1889, one theater boasted of its cooling by "tons of ice." In this popular technique, fans blew air over the ice to produce a cool, if somewhat moist, breeze. The whole idea would have been impossible before the availability of electricity to power the fans. Pipes filled with ice water offered another option for at least lowering the temperature a few degrees. The Lexington Opera House put their system to the test immediately, opening on a day when the thermometer reached one hundred and two degrees Fahrenheit. The opening date choice reveals a great deal about the advancement of technology. In the previous generation, no theater entrepreneur in his right mind would have planned a summer opening. A local reporter was quite impressed and provided a vivid picture of the situation:

> Probably no night is likely to occur again in years that would so thoroughly test the ventilating capacity. . . . when the doors opened in the evening there was not a breath of air stirring. Some persons were deterred from going by the fear of excessive heat, and gentlemen took palm leaves and extra handkerchiefs for a regular melting mood, but ladies and gentlemen soon forgot the thermal conditions outside. . . . Whether the delightful climate in there is simply the result of skillful architecture, or whether enterprising Mr. Winston, who is a large stock-holder in the ice factory as well as the Opera House, has run a six inch pipe from the factory to the Opera House and is turning on the cool air under a heavy pressure nobody knows, but everybody is satisfied with the general results without inquiring into detail.
The potential for fire concerned both the public and the theater owners. Theaters went to great lengths to allay audience fears, as can be seen in this 1911 program from Louisville's Gayety Theater. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

Heating systems also drew attention, although more for safety reasons than for comfort. In 1894, Louisville's Grand became the first theater in the city to install hot water heating, which was hailed as less dangerous than air or steam systems. A reporter noted that hot water systems eliminated the headaches commonly suffered by patrons as a result of fuel fumes. 101

Fire concerns, which had plagued the earliest theaters, continued to worry the public and theater managers. Gaslight may have been an improvement on candles, but it still used open flames. Even opening addresses sometimes dwelt on fire safety at the expense of aesthetics. Presumably there was little point in praising the ornament if audiences stayed away out of fear for their safety. New theaters commonly advertised themselves as "absolutely fireproof." Theaters used asbestos curtains to separate inflammable stage scenery from the audience, although the curtains could only
temporarily stem the spread of a blaze in wooden buildings. The matter was not left entirely in the hands of the theaters. Cities did use special theater ordinances to regulate safety features. Widely publicized disasters such as Chicago’s Iroquois Theatre fire (1904) fueled concerns for safety features. Louisville’s Board of Safety promptly decreed that the Avenue be closed and proposed that the Masonic widen aisles and place red exit lights over the doors. At a 1904 meeting, Louisville managers agreed to separate the stage and audience with fire walls (where these did not exist) and agreed to make scenery fireproof and to paint stage woodwork with fireproof paint. However, they balked at a provision for sprinklers. Fire safety occupied a prominent position in accounts of theater openings. Anticipating the audience’s memory of the October fire that destroyed the Louisville Theater, the newspaper carefully noted, in reporting the new building’s March opening, that it could be emptied in three minutes. In addition to the doors, windows close to the ground were called to readers’ attention.

The Mary Anderson opened in 1907 with wood restricted to the stage door and to window and door surrounds. Concrete and gravel topped a steel-reinforced roof. A main entrance two feet in excess of requirements, nine exits with the main entrance, five more in other locations, twelve windows, fire escapes, nineteen fire hoses, and six fire extinguishers protected the audience and enabled a full house of 1,475 patrons to exit the building in one and a half to two minutes. As a further precaution, the builder placed the heating apparatus on an adjoining building, rather than in the theater. Six years later, publicity for the Louisville National specified concrete, brick, and steel construction with numerous exits. The Walnut Street Theater in Louisville advertised itself as an “absolutely fireproof family theater.”

The fire hazard was very real. One late-nineteenth-century author calculated the average theater’s life at twelve to eighteen years, noting that many burned within a few years of construction. He considered the stage areas the greatest risk and listed as dangers open lights, lamps, gas, electric or heating apparatus installation defects, fireworks, guns, and explosives. Fireworks and explosives may sound unlikely inside a building, but spectacular shows relied on grandiose special effects. For example, stage directions for Taking the Veil included soldiers with torches, gunfire, explosions, and the burning Inquisition headquarters. Even minor props could start a blaze. The destruction of Bates’s Theater, in which the last play ironically closed with the words “Fire upon him” may have been caused by wadding from a gun used in the play. Scenery involved substantial quantities of
inflammable materials. The fire that destroyed Louisville’s Masonic Temple Theater in 1902 started in the fly loft ropes and scenery. A group of spectators, apparently regarding fire as worthy entertainment, tried to watch from the auditorium but were driven back by smoke. Most people had the good sense to exit fires promptly, and it was the potential for deadly panic-driven stampedes that stimulated concern for adequate exits.

Reporters gravitated to scrutiny of mechanical systems in almost equal proportion to their interest in fire escapes. The nineteenth century loved demonstrations of scientific and industrial advancement. According to critic Clarence Cook, Americans were “unreasonably in love with machinery and contrivances.” Their fascination with technology and its potential to control natural forces found ample scope in theaters, an interest that continued into the twentieth century. Edward Albee claimed that “in building a vaudeville theatre today, we go into every detail scientifically... The color scheme is selected upon scientific, as well as artistic grounds.” Descriptions of theater openings waxed eloquent on the subjects of electric plants, ventilators, and stage mechanics. Fascination with fresh air lingered as a legacy from the time when gas fumes and stuffy air from the lighting and inefficient stove heating gave the audience headaches. Epidemics exacerbated worries over enclosed spaces. Ventilation attracted steadily increasing notice by the early twentieth century. Concern with hygiene permeated the era, substantially impacting both home design and public spaces as greater knowledge of disease pinpointed the means by which contagion spread. Under orders from the Board of Health, Louisville’s theaters shut down for five weeks in 1918 at the height of a deadly influenza outbreak. The reopening of one theater noted “a spic and span appearance and a wholesome and healthful atmosphere.” By the twentieth century, theaters utilized machinery to circulate air, making a point of advertising water-washed air and frequent air changes. In 1907, Louisville’s Mary Anderson had a heating and cooling machine capable of changing the air every twenty minutes. Six years later the National in Louisville boasted a system by which air came into the auditorium beneath each seat, was pulled out by exhaust fans, water-washed to eliminate germs, and changed every three minutes. Today the public would probably be less than fascinated to read about the time required to change a building’s air, but information of that type, like the lists of fire exits, apparently soothed patrons.

Safe and stable construction also concerned audiences and critics, although it attracted less notice than environmental issues. At the 1851 Mozart
Hall opening, a newspaper stressed the structure's ability to bear weight, remarking that it had been tested for the weight of one thousand people. The audience was assured that a later gallery addition was securely supported on the building's walls. Whatever else might concern audiences, they could feel secure from any imminent collapse of the building.

The practical matters of viewing a performance also drew reporters' attention. Acoustics and sight lines understandably concerned the public. For that matter, they also concerned architects, many of whom experienced frequent acoustical failures. A journalist praised the Louisville Theatre in exhaustive detail for the ease of view. Of Mozart Hall, a newspaper recorded the architect's success in proper acoustical design. The very breadth of publicity that was given to the theaters' functional aspects suggests that many had problems. Had good design been a standard, it would not have attracted much mention. Operating with limited understanding of which auditorium configurations and materials enhanced sound, architects sometimes succeeded brilliantly and sometimes failed dismally. A traditional layout designed to accommodate social expectations did not always enhance acoustics. Boxes amounted to cavities in which sound disappeared. The extreme decoration of Victorian theater interiors, especially the drapery and dangling lighting fixtures, did not help matters.

Of course, the concept of a sounding board was known to builders, and theaters might employ an arch rising from the proscenium for that purpose. By 1896, when Louisville's Liederkranz Hall was built, architects understood that smooth, hard surfaces offered better acoustical potential. Architects such as J.B. McElfatrick, (Macauley's architect) who developed a reputation for good acoustics, could count on a favorable impression and numerous commissions. Alterations designed to correct acoustical deficiencies were common. A Ladies' Home Journal series on theaters resignedly noted that because sound was erratic and whimsical no architect could guarantee that theaters would not have soundless spots and areas with double sounds from the reverberations.

Shifts in building materials constituted a major technological change. Through most of the century, balconies had to be supported on posts. The advent of steel permitted cantilevering of balconies. The result was an aesthetic and practical improvement. From a purely visual standpoint, interiors became less cluttered. Audiences no longer had to worry about sight lines blocked by piers.

Early theater opening reviews paid little heed to actors' facilities, but
by the turn of the century, theater descriptions commonly recounted dressing room locations. Increased notice of actors’ accommodations coincided with growing public adulation of theatrical stars. Before the public became fascinated with the performers as individuals rather than characters, no one paid much attention to their comfort or the lack of it. Usually it had been lacking and continued to be less than ideal, but some theaters did improve backstage areas. In the Mary Anderson in Louisville, dressing rooms were represented as large (the star’s dressing room had its own bathroom), located on both stage level and below, and heated and cooled in the same manner as the auditorium. Harris’s Theatre, also in Louisville, toward the end of the century furnished dressing rooms with Brussels carpet and electric lights.

Backstage areas remained largely out of sight and out of mind for the audience. Small theaters had few supporting facilities, but larger buildings included a carpenter’s shop for scenery production and property rooms for storage. Builders located the unmarked stage-door entrances at the back or side. They could not have been more different from the marquee-sheltered main entrances or have distinguished more clearly between work and glamour. Most people had little idea of what went on behind the scenes, and theatrical magic lay largely in that ignorance. In an area where no need to impress existed, theater owners did not waste money on elaboration or lights. Accounts of functional areas are few in comparison to those of auditoriums and other public areas. Actors sometimes commented on their surroundings and occasionally a reporter described the theatrical hinterland. Such accounts tended to emphasize dust and dimness. Backstage areas could look mysterious and confusing to outsiders. One account described “serried ranks of scenery, tall and vague. Overhead loose canvases flap softly, like the great black wings of gigantic birds.” The writer concluded that it was “massive and sinister.” The audience saw nothing and knew little of the supers (extras) idling in the wings as they waited for their cues, the dancers rushing to change costume in confined quarters, or the stagehands poised to shift scenery. The worlds of actor and audience met only at the stage.

**Renovations**

In the audience’s realm, facilities were subject to constant improvement and alteration. The multitude of theater remodeling projects were the answer to a decorator’s prayer. During the summer, when most theaters closed,
owners seized the opportunity to refurbish. Managers understood that box office receipts would repay a modest investment in paint, carpet, and fabric. Much decoration was as ephemeral as the play, frequently redone and leaving no trace, other than descriptions. The extent of alterations varied widely from structural changes to superficial painting or, perhaps, a new drop curtain. Similar to later theaters that would advertise the coming film attraction, comments on alterations heralded theater openings and offered tantalizing hints of the splendors to come. Changes made in Louisville’s Hopkins Theatre (called Liederkranz Hall in 1872; Music Hall in 1886) typify the summer renovations frequently undertaken by theater owners.127

As the opening date neared, the newspaper’s theatrical column maintained a stream of bulletins on the work’s progress. Constant rumors built up anticipation, highlighting the fact that theaters constituted visual experiences for patrons and were important in their own right, not just as envelopes to contain performances. The emphasis on visual excitement echoed the original Greek meaning of the word theater—to see. Theater has been described as appealing more to emotion than to rational thought. Like the plays, buildings engendered excitement. Before film and television, people looked within their communities for stimulation. Extreme theater elaboration is often envisioned as a movie-palace phenomenon, but the tendency started well before Thomas Edison invented moving pictures. Theaters were products of an age that favored visual experiences. Photographs, stereopticans, chromolithographs, panoramas, and theaters all manifested the nineteenth-century interest in visual expression as a means of both experiencing and representing oneself to the world.

The auditorium, which was central to a theater building’s purpose and the area where patrons spent the most time, received the greatest elaboration. The audience had plenty of time to examine its surroundings while waiting for the play to begin and between acts. Even while it watched the play, the proscenium was clearly in view. Theater owners, hoping for favorable gossip to lure additional audiences, wanted to be sure that the auditorium offered something worth talking about. As the century progressed, other areas, such as the lobbies and parlors, which provided space to stroll in before and after the play, expanded and acquired considerable ornament. Still, the auditorium remained the theatrical experience’s core.

Precise content varied, but theater decor incorporated predictable features. Nineteenth-century homes adhered to a theory of education through visual exposure. Prominent decorator Candace Wheeler expressed those
sentiments when she said: “A beautiful home is undoubtedly a great means of education, and of that best of all education which is unconscious.” More specifically, an advice manual cited an aquarium as “both beautiful, and, in a house full of children, a useful object to interest them in natural things. . . . A home without books argues at once a lack of educative influences.” Another writer mused that “even a contemplation of art will educate. . . . before long [children’s] dawning powers are gradually being strengthened by these silent educators.” 128 Old Master prints on parlor walls and collections of seashells on the whatnot constituted education by osmosis. Adults as well as children read meanings into their environments. The same approach is evident in public buildings. Design offered an opportunity to incorporate easily interpreted allegorical symbols. Much of it is meaningless to modern eyes, but the more classically oriented education of that era and the widespread use of symbolism gave motifs significance to at least the better-educated audience members. Mozart Hall, in addition to an arched, frescoed ceiling by a local artisan, had a ceiling frieze and arch ornament composed of flower wreaths entwined with musical instruments, possibly a reference to the concerts for which the building was intended. 129 The latter probably derived from Louis XV Revival, which strongly affected design at mid-century. Theaters tended to mirror current aesthetic taste. Other theaters also incorporated symbolic motifs. Liederkranz Hall’s eight large stained-glass windows paid tribute to great composers in the form of top medallions celebrating Wagner, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Haydn. 130 Macauley’s auditorium called attention to its purpose as a showcase for the arts by incorporating representations of tragedy, comedy, poetry, and music. 131 In so doing, the architect followed a trend of the late nineteenth century. To Americans, who viewed themselves as the forefront of a new Renaissance, classical allegorical figures seemed logical adjuncts of public buildings. Macauley’s symbols were diverse. Fairly conventional choices, Shakespeare stood for poetry and Mozart for music. Actors Charlotte Cushman, Edwin Booth, and Rachael Macauley represented tragedy. Joseph Jefferson and Charlotte Crabtree personified comedy. All the actors enjoyed national reputations, with the exception of Rachael Macauley, Bernard Macauley’s wife and an actress hardly in a class with Cushman and Booth. Still, the tribute to his wife was a nice personal touch. Continuing the personalization, the proscenium featured Macauley’s monogram supported by two cupids, above a circular panel containing another set of cupids with a dove. Cupids and doves floated through many compositions of that
Fabrics and three-dimensional decoration detracted from the acoustics, but audiences and theater owners loved ornament. (Ladies' Home Journal, April 1900.)

era. Shakespeare's bust was an understandably popular ornament. He decorated the stages of many small opera houses, including Bowling Green's Odeon Hall.

Just as Victorians abhorred a bare parlor, they expected theaters to be filled with draped fabrics, painted designs, gilded columns, fancy ceilings, and crystal chandeliers. To the nineteenth century, bareness indicated lack of concern with others' opinions, unawareness of social expectations, inability to use visual symbols, and low social status. Any theater with concern for its economic welfare tried to incorporate at least some grandiose decoration. Some type of painted ornament, such as that which decorated the front panels of boxes in Bates's Theater, was common. The same theater later featured a decor of blue, red, and gold, including a blue arch painted with stars and clouds. On a white-and-gold field, red panels brightened the pillars and balcony fronts. Stage or proscenium boxes might be richly adorned with relief designs, gilding, and paint. Fabric swags softened the sides and provided partial interior screening, despite their deleterious effects on acoustics.

Nineteenth-century theaters usually did not go in for the exotic atmo-
sphere that would later characterize movie palaces. Ornament might en-
crust most surfaces, producing a hectic impression, but it leaned heavily to
the classical. Greco-Roman association with culture was too important to
risk experiments with less-familiar aesthetic sources. The closest most the-
aaters came to the exotic was an occasional touch of Moorish influence ex-
pressed in such features as the Lexington Opera House's horseshoe arches
and filigree ornament. Moorish was a minor revival style familiar to
homeowners.

Elaborate drop curtains gave the audience something to look at while
they waited for the stage action to begin and something to talk about when
they got home. Artistic quality varied as widely as the subject matter, often
depending on the local scene painter's ability. Kentucky was not alone in
acquiring curtains of questionable artistic value. Actor Joseph Jefferson re-
corded a Chicago theater with "a medallion of Shakspere [sic], suffering
from a severe pain in his stomach." Portraits of Beethoven and Handel
were "upon unfriendly terms, glaring at each other." Pictorial themes
adorned many curtains. The artistic realism beloved of Victorians demanded
representational paintings. The audience expected to be moved by the
picture's content, rather than exclusively by colors, textures, or other design
elements. Both American and foreign subjects found their way onto cur-
tains. One Bates's Theater curtain featured the United States Capitol. Of a
curtain at Harris's Museum and Theater portraying a view near Venice a
reporter mildly remarked that although it might not be the greatest paint-
ing ever, it was "a vast improvement on the old one." Mozart Hall audi-
ences saw a curtain adorned with a view of the Upper Mississippi River
showing American Indians marveling at their first view of a steamboat. Ma-
culey's initially used a Swiss landscape with a lake and mountains. A
later renovation switched to one called "Trysting Lane," which illustrated a
gray marble platform supporting a framed landscape of a New England
lane. An elaborate silver-and-gold-painted frame flanked by deep-red vel-
et curtains surrounded the landscape. This bit of trompe l'oeil was executed
by Howard Tuttle from Milwaukee. Many curtains were done by local
painters, but occasionally the theater hired an outside firm. A curtain whose
subject, Lake Maggiore, derived in a circuitous manner from "an old mas-
ter" to an engraving, which was in turn copied by the painters, pleased a
journalist. He castigated the previous theater for its "cheap-John" adver-
sing curtain. As the name implies, the popular advertising curtains pro-
claimed the availability of goods and services to a captive audience of
theatergoers. As they waited for the performance, customers perused these nineteenth-century versions of the yellow pages. Apart from aesthetics, the journalist bore a grudge against the curtain for having nearly collapsed on him during the fire that destroyed the previous theater. He was not the only observer to view advertising curtains with distaste. A *Courier-Journal* reporter expressed pleasure when Macauley’s removed its “incongruous advertisement.” Nevertheless, many theaters continued to hang such curtains.

Renovations often focused on surface treatments. The Hopkins acquired white lacquered woodwork, gold trim, new wallpaper and frescoes, new carpets, and new paint on the chairs. A newspaper reporter carried the tendency to count features into enumerating twenty-five to thirty gallons of white paint and enamel, and one thousand sheets of gold leaf. This was combined with bright red, the white and gold being primarily on the boxes and the red on walls and the ceiling. To reduce heat levels in the first few weeks of the season, decorative electric fans had been placed around the parquette and gallery walls. Most of these changes were purely aesthetic, appealing to the age’s quest for novelty, although the fans must have been a welcome bit of practicality. Alterations often replaced older materials with more recent technology for visual or structural reasons. Some viewers saw it as both. A 1907 Macauley’s renovation installed a pressed-metal ceiling that a reporter noted eliminated the potential for plaster striking the audience’s heads.

Louisville’s Harris’s Theatre changed its identity and its decor in 1894. The new name was the Avenue. The new vestibule and foyer colors were white and gold. At the same time, the management installed a new electrolier in the foyer and made a more substantive change by widening the aisles. Three years later the theater was again renovated, and again in 1903, 1907, and 1910. During the latter work, the theater acquired new seats, new decorations, and a glass hood projecting over the entrance. In renovating Louisville’s Harris’s Museum and Theatre in 1886, the management added new carpets and cushions, raised the balcony seats, and rearranged private boxes. In addition, it incorporated a late-Victorian enthusiasm. Rooms next to the theater became curio halls exhibiting all manner of odd items. Such displays appealed to the insatiable public appetite for sensation and esoteric bits of knowledge. A decade later, this theater was renovated to reopen as the Bijou with Louisville’s first Vitascope presentation.

When the Louisville Opera House went through an 1880 renovation, the use of wallpaper was singled out for special note. Observing that Madi-
son Square, Wallack's Abby's Park, and Daly's (New York theaters) were papered, a reporter said the Opera House would be modeled after them and that “the old, dingy, forbidding look about the house will yield to a bright new aspect.” In addition to papering the walls, the decorator combined wallpaper patterns on the ceiling, a favorite 1880s technique popular in both residences and public buildings. New Brussels carpet, reupholstered chairs, and repainted woodwork brightened the interior. None of this affected the theater's structure, but it substantially altered the appearance, and that was enough to draw curious patrons.

Alterations could involve more drastic changes. In the late nineteenth century, Macauley's followed current trends and removed the raked stage to permit use of box sets. A quest for greater dramatic realism had made this “removal of the fourth wall” method standard, and it was obviously impractical on a sloped stage. The Whallen brothers' original Buckingham Theatre, or the Buck, underwent an 1889 renovation involving both decorative and structural alterations. Even the outside was painted and the entrance freshened up. At the Jefferson Street box office, regilding and the addition of colored glass imparted a more glittering appearance. The enlarged Green Street entrance acquired its own box office. Inside, brown and old gold frescoes and wainscoting in unspecified hardwoods covered the corridor walls. The auditorium shone with new electric lights. Decoration included red and old gold frescoes and some type of ceiling “groups” with frescoes in the dome over the orchestra chairs. Walls were papered in old gold and red. Glossy white paint “used to such an extent in interior steamboat cabin work” covered the posts and columns. Pale blue, red, and yellow Bohemian glass filled the areas above the proscenium boxes, which were screened by lace curtains. The box interiors, done in gilt, silver, and plush, were given new furniture. New upholstery and carpets enlivened the rest of the house, now cooled by electric fans.

Lengthening the stage by twenty-two feet allowed more space for productions. In addition, a baggage room and a green room (a lounge for actors) and reception room equipped with double full-length mirrors, carpets, and furniture improved performers' conditions. Dressing rooms and washrooms occupied the space where a café had been located. The remainder of the former café became a bar, open both night and day. The Whallen's did not entirely discard the café. They moved it upstairs. The front portion of the second floor, reached by two house entrances and one entrance from Jefferson Street, held an orchestra stand on the rear wall and
two rooms opening from that area. The latter were frescoed, carpeted, and given new furniture.

In 1886, the proprietors of Louisville’s Masonic Temple dressed up the interior by hanging lace curtains in the boxes. New scenery and a new tormentor set (curtains behind the main curtain used to frame the opening) brightened the stage in 1889. In 1893, new paint, wallpaper, carpets, and hangings updated the theater’s interior. A year later, new electric stage lights provided the option of using colored illumination. The 1897 renovation used light gray paint. Again in 1899 the theater was repainted and new hangings placed in the boxes.145

The 1921 Louisville Schubert remodeling earned a reporter’s praise for its silhouette paintings. It would appear that the writer had seen one too many classical compositions, as he lauded the replacement of cherubs and “frightful garlands.”146 That remodeling removed mezzanine boxes while installing more comfortable chairs and an elevator from the second floor to the gallery.

Remodeling could be more serious than applying new paint and touching up the gilding. When architect D.X. Murphy’s firm undertook to improve the Strand’s acoustics in 1924, the alterations included redesigning the existing floor in order to change the slope. At the same time, new chairs were installed.147 New seats at Macauley’s, larger and more widely spaced, also had their practical side. An enthusiastic journalist pointed out that fat men who filled the old orchestra chairs and “oozed into the aisles” would be very happy.148 Renovations of theaters often continued throughout their lives. When the Walnut Street was renamed Drury Lane in 1933, the management advertised it with notable lack of modesty as “Sumptuous in New Dress, Luxurious in Seating, Modern in Lighting, Resplendent in Color, A Revelation in Acoustical Perfection, An Architectural Triumph for Visibility.” This paragon of a theater opened with a new stock company in Candle Light, an adaptation by P.G. Wodehouse involving typical Wodehouse traits—a butler and mistaken identity.149

Smalltown opera houses shared the passion for renovation and updating. A remodeling of Pikeville’s New Gaines, ca. 1926, replaced boxes regarded as old-fashioned with new loges flanking the balcony. Sleek new materials—white marble wainscoting in the lobby and tile flooring—and a new stage floor dressed up the facility. A letterhead illustration of Bowling Green’s Odeon Hall, ca. 1880s, boasted of new boxes, opera chairs, balcony, scenery, and two drop curtains.150
Unfortunately, no amount of redecoration could hold audiences as the novelty of movies and television began to compete for a fickle public's money. The number of traveling troupes dropped drastically and quickly from around three hundred and forty in 1900 to less than fifty in 1920. In 1916, Macauley's was barely forty-three years old, but was often referred to as an aged relic of the past with "dignity of age, associations which are almost sacred and an intimate atmosphere akin to home." Dignified and sacred or not, it was torn down in 1925. The Lexington Opera House hit a low point in the 1920s when a gas station operated in front of the entrance. In some theaters, the entertainment followed a depressing downward slope from legitimate theater to burlesque to pornographic films. The Buckingham/Jefferson/Savoy was painted pink inside and out during its later years as a burlesque house. Many theaters tried and failed at conversion to movies, finally succumbing to the wrecker's ball. Some theaters disappeared quietly, but the demise of a number attracted considerable attention. A great many details of scenery and decoration in Norton’s Auditorium can be abstracted from reports of the 1904 sale. More publicity attended the demolition than had heralded the construction or any of the performances. Large advertisements specified dimensions, types of structures, and the electrical plant machinery. Among the numerous advertised props were a set of dueling pistols used by Joseph Jefferson in *The Rivals*. Regardless of who used them, muskets, swords, helmets, and old supers' costumes aroused little interest from anyone other than junk dealers. A few items found better homes. Norton had owned a bronze bust of Edwin Booth, given to him by Lawrence Barrett. As Barrett requested, the bust went to the Player’s Club in New York City. John T. Macauley bought a gilded throne chair and some scenery. Although the scenery was estimated at forty thousand dollars, it sold for four hundred dollars. Gentle regret and nostalgia was often expressed at the time of such demolitions, but there was little serious effort to preserve old theaters. Most observers saw the buildings as inevitable casualties, drowned in the tide of progress.

Theater construction continued, but with significant changes of purpose. In the period between stage and screen, several theaters were built as combination houses. These maintained the conventional stages of legitimate theater but were intended from the beginning to show movies. In addition to including the necessary stage apparatus for live performances, they retained from earlier theaters an emphasis on decor. These were the last of the truly grand theaters.
Movie theaters as separate entities lie beyond the book's scope, but early in their history live acts composed part of the evening's entertainment. Therefore, builders equipped such theaters with stages and followed in the layout and decoration the traditions established by legitimate theaters. Even structures primarily intended for movies kept their options open. Lexington's 1922 Kentucky Theater boasted a rail siding in the event that they decided to present plays. It is these hybrid buildings, dedicated to a new art and a new technology but clinging to old forms, with which this chapter is concerned. Kentucky built a cross section of movie theater types, but some of the finest, unfortunately, have been demolished. When the buildings passed out of favor, critics tended to view movie palaces as flamboyantly overblown confections, not to be taken seriously and certainly not worth saving. Some did survive, albeit in altered form and/or decrepit condition. Several extant theater buildings have been renovated. Following national trends, these conversions lean heavily to use by performing arts groups or mixed use by a variety of community organizations.

Purpose

At the time of their construction, movie palaces received short shrift from architectural critics. Moving pictures lacked legitimate theater's cultural connotations. With the films they were meant to house regarded more as curiosities than art, the theaters were either ignored or derided by the architectural establishment. One observer referred to them as "gaudy horror" and "mammoth sinks of movie imbecility." A British writer complained that "in America . . . the meaningless parade of garish glitter has likewise been carried as far as the almighty dollar can carry it." He went on to decry
the popular atmospheric theaters as "nauseating stick-jaw candy, so fulsomey flavoured with the syrupy romanticism of popular novels." These dazzling fantasy lands held little appeal for the more conservative elements in the architectural or theatrical worlds. Still, predetermined disapproval left architects free to experiment with styles. After all, there was little point in trying to conform to high architectural principles if the results were going to be regarded as frivolous. Fortunately for the owners, the public did not share architectural critics' disdain. Theatergoers tended to view the new building styles as wonderful entertainment sources, even better than the performances. That point was not lost on entrepreneurs. The Loew's chain held to a policy of selling "tickets to theaters, not movies." Various people expressed a dichotomy of viewpoints with regard to theater architecture. Theater owners cited elaborate structures as refining influences, while critics called them bad influences on taste.

Architects needed all the assemblage of skills that had always been required for effective theater design. Essential knowledge involved architectural styles, engineering, acoustics, mechanical systems, and interior design. Whatever the critics might think of external appearances, theater designers never had easy jobs. The purpose and melange of activities within the buildings meant designing partially for stunning aesthetic effects without creating such an avalanche of ornament that customers became simply bewildered, while simultaneously ensuring that stage equipment worked and that the audience could see and hear clearly. Stylistically, architects walked an uneasy line between the expected traditional theatrical symbolism and a realization that new technology might imply a need for new architectural forms. For the most part, they gave owners and customers the easily interpreted forms and symbols with which they were familiar. That determined clinging to the architectural past while seeking to exploit a totally new technology struck some observers as retrograde. However, theater owners knew that the old architectural formula worked and were in no mood to tamper with an economically successful building type. Repetition of a familiar format offered audiences the comfort of known surroundings and smoothed the new entertainment's path.

Because movie palaces were generally owned by the big national chains, Marcus Loew's being the largest, their architects often provided the designs. Studio policies of hiring house architects meant that many small towns obtained theaters created by the designers of major city theaters. Nevertheless, some movie theaters were built by local firms. The Joseph
and Joseph firm of Louisville designed a number of theaters. D.X. Murphy's office served as architects of Louisville’s Alamo. Hopkinsville’s Alhambra was planned by local architect John T. Waller. John Eberson, once primarily associated with opera houses, had reached the height of his profession by the time he designed Louisville’s Loew’s Theater. William H. (W.H.) McElfatrick of New York served as architect of Lexington’s Ben Ali. His father, early in his career, had done the Macauley Theater, and the son continued his father’s profitable theater design business. Thomas W. Lamb did the Louisville Rialto renovations. In 1924, he was a busy man with an established reputation as a theater architect and numerous structures to his credit, some of them original designs and others renovations.

Movie palace formats included the Renaissance-inspired and exotic models. One of the latter, Loew’s, still stands in Louisville as a fine example of the atmospheric theaters designed by Eberson, the foremost architect of that form. Although such truly grandiose structures were the most publicized movie theaters, many builders continued to base their designs on commercial buildings. Several theaters still occupied the second story of commercial structures, a condition forced on most that converted from opera houses. Structures such as Bowling Green’s Princess Theater (1914) were as modest as most smalltown opera houses. Lancaster’s Grand Theater, topped with a metal cornice and gable on the exterior, and with its pressed-metal ceiling, proscenium arch, and boxes, adhered closely to the opera house model. During the 1930s a number of theaters based on the Art Deco style opened. The stress on established cultural connections that had characterized earlier theaters’ architectural style diminished during the twentieth century. As moral opposition lessened, the need for such reminders decreased.

Early buildings blended moving pictures with vaudeville. Unfortunately for the theatrical profession, interest in legitimate theater dropped sharply. Plays staggered on, but the age of grandiose buildings designed for live actors was gone. Ironically, one of the major motion picture producers, D.W. Griffith, began as an actor, appearing with the stock company in Louisville’s Temple Theater.

Theater suffered a devastating blow with the introduction of moving pictures, although the new medium had begun with relative innocuousness. In 1889, Thomas Edison of light bulb fame invented the Kinetoscope. Patrons, one at a time, peered into a box in which a flickering sequence of movement could be seen by turning a handle. Thespians took little heed of
Some movie theater facades were modest. Sometimes only the presence of a box office indicated theatrical use, such as here at the Princess Theater in Bowling Green. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

the new solitary toy. Edison followed up his invention in 1896 with the Vitascope, capable of projecting pictures onto a wall and, consequently, capable of entertaining several people at once. At that point, moving pictures remained simply a novelty, which was of no concern to theatrical managers. A play without sound certainly did not seem like a serious threat to traditional theater venues. Acknowledging their origins, movies often bore the label of photoplays. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Kentucky managers advertised these new creations as electric theaters.

Traditional theaters might have been well advised to pay more attention. In 1905, two Pennsylvania men joined the cost of a ticket with the Greek word for “theater” to produce “nickelodeon,” a term much associated with the twentieth century’s first decade. From this small beginning grew a wealthy industry. The Great Train Robbery, released in 1903, was the first feature-length film, and it ran in many legitimate theaters. Many early films
followed entertainment patterns laid down by popular nineteenth-century performers. *The Mark of Zorro*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, was advertised in 1921 as “a wholesome, gingery mixture of melodrama and vigorous comedy, crammed with whirl-wind action, thrills, suspense and . . . funny angles.” Like many plays, it had something for everyone. The concern for respectability, which had so worried nineteenth-century managers, continued. Paducah’s Kozy Theater sign specifying “Strictly a Moral Entertainment” typified many theaters. Silent movies remained dependent on at least some human intervention, in the form of piano players, to set the mood. Live acts often took place between films. However, introduction of the talkies in 1927 removed the need for any aid from a live performer. The importance of talking films was not immediately recognized. A United Artists spokesman indicated that Louisville’s Loew’s would use talkies that season, but dismissed them as an uninteresting fad.

Motion pictures’ effects reached far into American life. Mass audiences gained exposure to ideas and places many would not otherwise have encountered. Nineteenth-century managers produced popular plays all over the country, but regional favorites developed and interpretations differed. With movies, everyone saw exactly the same thing. Furthermore, audience behavior differed from that of live theater. Actors often speak today of sensing the mood and participation of the audience. Movie audiences tend to be more intellectually passive, lacking the vitality of an exchange with live actors. Movie palaces were short on live performance’s excitement, but tried to make up for it with architectural splendor. For middle and upper classes nineteenth-century theater had been a social event, necessitating proper etiquette and attire. Going to the movies was a more individual activity, which may have contributed to the sometimes extreme building ornamentation. People, less focused on each other, had more attention to give to the structure.

Paradoxically, as entertainment reached new levels of simulated reality through movies, theaters plunged into escalating unreality through decor. Architects and decorators had a keen awareness of their audience and of the potential for altering behavior and attitudes through design. The comments of a theater owner’s representative are worth quoting at length:

> And then there is the psychological side. A moving picture theatre necessarily caters to a huge variety of people—people who know how to conduct themselves in public and others who do not. Entering a magnificent theater such as this almost anybody will be upon his good behavior. He will
The major movie theaters expended considerable effort and money in creating impressive decor. The elaborate interior drew audiences to the Rialto Theater in Louisville. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

comport himself with propriety and in full consideration of his neighbor’s rights. Majestic architecture and rich furnishings have a refining effect no matter where they may be employed. Go into a wonderful church or cathedral and immediately you become reverent regardless of the presence or absence of religious feeling. The architecture—the interior decorating scheme if you want to put it that way—influences and awes you.22

The reference to cathedrals is entirely typical of the way theaters were viewed. As in a church, the audience sat in rows facing center front. As in a church, they sat silently watching. As in a church, they were expected to be awed by the surroundings. No sacrilege was intended. The builders simply appreciated the dramatic potential of great cathedrals and put their spatial and decorative techniques to work for a new purpose. Auditorium spaces could be huge, but intimacy was not a desired trait. Unlike live performances,
movies offered no opportunity to bond with live performers through a shared event. Film's more detached atmosphere benefited from the awe-inspiring effect of vast spaces.

Architecture

As a fledgling industry, moving pictures operated without an established architectural tradition. The only buildings specifically intended to house the new novelties were nickelodeons, and these frequently consisted of no more than a store's back room equipped with benches or chairs. Louisville's Dreamland (1904) was typical of this type of building. Any dreams connected with it had nothing to do with the banal architecture. As the audience for films widened, legitimate theater and vaudeville managers began to book pictures as a segment of an evening's entertainment. Theater managers still could not bring themselves to regard moving pictures as stand alone entertainment. They could not have been more wrong. In time, the live performers and the film switched places, with vaudeville becoming the filler between films. Many theaters eventually converted to a fare composed totally of movies. Lexington's Ben Ali, having opened with the avowed intention of weaning audiences away from motion pictures, shortly succumbed to movies.

The first elaborate theater designed specifically for movies was the 1913 Regent Theater in New York. Others quickly followed, but a number of standing theaters simply adjusted to accommodate the new medium. Since some living performers did appear in conjunction with the movies, a stage remained necessary, and initially theaters that were designed for films incorporated the traditional theatrical layout and appurtenances of stage, proscenium arch, boxes, and galleries. Apart from the continued necessity for some of those features, the builders simply did not know how to approach a structure for a totally new phenomenon. Following the closest tradition seemed to make sense.

In fact, the builders elected to enlarge upon tradition. In the golden years of motion pictures, theater buildings enclosed rooms as unrealistic as many movie plots. The larger and fancier theaters suggest self-indulgence on the part of owners and patrons. Decoration verged on the incredible. Victorian legitimate theaters may have been ornamentally unrestrained, but movie palaces made them look like models of reticence. The grander movie palaces expressed the power of the major motion picture studios and
often carried their names. The fact that they were referred to as "palaces" says a great deal about their builders' ambitions. Architectural styles varied considerably, sometimes sticking to one source of inspiration but often mingling disparate styles. Historical verisimilitude was rarely a concern. The results could be regarded as vulgar or wonderful, depending on one's point of view. Decorator Harold W. Rambusch, whose firm designed several theater interiors, wrote rather paradoxically that:

 Many of the big producers today feel that it is necessary to be gaudy and vulgar in taste in order to satisfy the cravings of the public. The best architects and theatre decorators disagree with them and believe that the public is fully satisfied with good taste provided it is sufficiently pompous and ostentatious. It is agreed that the theatre is not the place to demonstrate reserve and refinement in its most constrained form, but there is no objection to having it rich and in good taste.... And let us all remember that the showman insists on the spectacular; he insists on the gorgeous and the rich, but he does not insist that it be done in bad taste. He does not always recognize the bad taste, but it becomes a problem for the architect and the decorator to fulfill the showman's requirements and still keep within the bounds of good taste, because the public has no objection to beauty or good taste provided they satisfy the yearning for luxurious surroundings.27

 European palaces and churches provided design sources.28 Lacking Europe's aristocratic architectural tradition, American theater designers were forced to look overseas for ideas, just as architects to such wealthy families as the Vanderbilts borrowed European ideas. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the Old World as the font of all culture. The ostentatious grandeur of movie palaces was born of the same mind set that produced the pseudo-reality of William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon. Such settings existed on a plane far removed from everyday life. What they all had in common was pseudo-cultural ambiance and lavish displays of the trappings associated with patrician affluence. The American aristocracy of wealth sought to appropriate the Old World's cultural aristocracy, draping its homes in tapestries, panels, and furniture purchased or copied from the Europe it so desired to become. Houses of the nouveau riches functioned as theatrical sets for pretend hereditary backgrounds. Theater owners offered those from the lower social classes momentary immersion in similar settings. In a consumer culture, escape from the mundane could be purchased. Anyone could be a temporary aristocrat. Theater buildings swept
Interiors could be flamboyantly decorative. Fancy corridors and lobbies created an escapist mood in Loew’s Theater in Louisville. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)
audiences from their humdrum lives into a glittering dream world where wars and depressions need not intrude. As long as they remained inside, disasters, everyday problems, and petty annoyances receded from memory. For a while, life was wonderful.

Contemporary observers and theater builders alike consciously recognized the escapism element. When Louisville’s Loew's opened in 1928 a reporter pointed out that the admission ticket constituted a right to view the building as much as the movie. In a prescient moment, he speculated that future generations might look back to movie palaces as expressive of their era’s search for escape and glamour. Recalling an earlier analogy of the Louisville Rialto to a cathedral, the reference to Loew’s as an “amusement temple” indicates something of the status such structures enjoyed. In their own way, these structures might be considered exemplars of democracy at work. Palaces were available to anyone who could afford a ticket. Vast assemblages of cultural heritage laid out for inspection and judgment, they made every patron a connoisseur. In the days before mass tourism, historically based buildings were as close as most people got to European architecture. There was never any question but that these buildings were artifice. Observers did not so much suspend disbelief as glory in it, much as a contemporary visitor to Disneyland knows he is not on a real Main Street, but enjoys the imitation precisely because it is a faux setting.

Technology

Technological features of movie theaters were almost entirely hidden from the audiences’ sight, although climate control machinery, projection systems, and the machines to raise organs took up a great deal of space. Nineteenth-century theatergoers would have been captivated by the details of such machinery, but early twentieth-century patrons seemed content to admire the effects without delving into the methods. For the twentieth century, several years removed from the first innovations of the Industrial Revolution, mechanics was less a marvel and more a practical matter. Reports on new theaters evidenced that slackening of public interest in technological features, perhaps partially because grandiose stage spectacles were giving way to movies and vaudeville. Neither required the ingenious staging effects that had so engrossed nineteenth-century patrons. As steel beams became more familiar, audiences came to take for granted sight lines
unblocked by support piers. Familiarity with comfort and convenience bred disinterest in the means by which they were accomplished.

Theater builders could not take technology for granted. It required too much attention in designing buildings. Architects found that they not only had to design for the usual stage mechanisms, but an array of new devices aimed at comfort and security for the theater patrons. New building codes specified spacing for seats, detailed applications of materials, and addressed structural issues.

As tougher building codes mandated safety features, newspapers lessened their previous tendency to enumerate exits and fire hoses. Nevertheless, audiences had long memories for theater fires. They had not forgotten the dangers of blazes in highly populated spaces. Nor had they lost interest in other health concerns. The Diamond Theater in Bowling Green announced that “correct effects are never accidental. It’s no accident that our pictures are steady, clear and free from eye strain. It’s simply because we have the latest and most modern machinery made, and the most approved type of screen. We have a Theatre that could not be more sanitary or better ventilated. Our projection machines are absolutely fire proof, installed in a cement and steel room making our patrons absolutely safe from this source. Our entire building is fire proof, with plenty of large, roomy exits in both front and rear of the auditorium.”

Attracting the Audience

Owners had always seen new theater openings as grand publicity blitz opportunities, but that habit reached its zenith with movie palaces. At the very least, large newspaper advertisements, an open house, and demonstrations of lighting and musical devices heralded openings. Events at the Louisville Rialto’s 1921 opening were typical: “After compliments to the management and the public and to the capital that built the theater the ceremonies faded into thin air and the programme was on. And it was a very long programme consisting of solos, quartettes, manipulation of the switch board, changing the illumination in the theater to various hues and degrees of light, and organ and symphony concerts. It is hardly to be expected that such an elaborate programme will be given during the daily continuous performances.” As in the case of earlier theaters, movie palaces were regarded as ornaments to the cities. Of the Louisville Rialto, the
Courier-Journal noted that “the Rialto is really the most palatial and substantial-looking theater in Louisville. It is handsome, rich in appearance and extremely artistic. It represents care and taste in every appointment and personal supervision of not only architect and decorator but the hand of one extremely interesting in building a theater which would be a credit to the Commonwealth and a showplace one might exhibit to visitors with pride.” When Ashland’s Paramount (built specifically for movies) opened in 1931, a reporter said, “In days gone by, residents showed their out-of-town guests their post office, city hall and other public buildings, but now it is their theaters.”

As with legitimate theaters, local newspapers printed detailed descriptions that provided far more information and measurements than most present-day readers would want. Numerous and sizable advertisements by firms involved in the construction often ran on the opening day. Several firms advertised their contributions in the six newspaper pages devoted to the Lexington Kentucky Theater’s 1922 opening. Even the Tuec Vacuum Cleaning System figured in the Ben Ali’s (Lexington) opening description. Obviously, any firm with even the slightest connection to such an attention-getting edifice wanted to press its claim. The contribution might be as inconspicuous as the foundations or as unavoidable as the marquee, but everyone trumpeted his/her work. Rival theater managers generally sent flowers to be displayed in the foyer. Congratulatory telegrams arrived from Hollywood celebrities. If possible, a politician was lined up to attend the first production amid great fanfare. If the result literally stopped traffic, so much the better. Any publicity meant potential income. The governor and the Louisville mayor attended the Rialto’s opening, both giving speeches. Politicians liked publicity, too, and the large number of people in attendance blocked traffic near the theater. The singing of “My Old Kentucky Home,” accompanied by a model of Federal Hill, the house associated with the song, gave a note of local pride. The state song featured in other theater openings, highlighting the building’s importance to not only the town, but the commonwealth. Even smalltown theaters opened in style. Bowling Green’s Diamond Theater opened in 1921 “sparing no expense, as the real object is to show our appreciation of the loyal support accorded our Theatre, and we feel that it is only our duty to give our patrons something extra, something they will surely appreciate, something they will remember us by. . . . We do not claim to have the best Theatre, but we do claim to have one among the best.” The Harrodsburg Harrod celebrated its opening by in-
introducing the presidents of nearly every organization in the county, from
the library board to the Daughters of the American Revolution and the
school principals.40 Such events demonstrated the role that theaters con-
tinued to play as community centers and sources of civic pride.

Those who attended the Louisville Loew’s opening heard the first play-
ing of its Wurlitzer organ. Between the opening films—Excess Baggage,
The Old Grey Horse, and Fox Movietone News—Jan Garber and his band
provided musical entertainment.41 Admiring crowds on the first morning
listened to a piano located in a balcony over the first foyer, admired a ma-
caw, and observed the cadet-uniformed ushers. If the visual effects were
not enough, the theater advertised a cool seventy-degree temperature. In
the days before home air-conditioning a cool theater offered considerable
inducement to escape hot city streets.42

Regardless of architectural style, prominent entrances led the way to all
theaters. Owners were not given to modest understatement. Marquees,
designed as significant parts of new movie palaces and attached to older
theaters, sometimes overshadowed the facade’s architectural details. Canopy
marquees stretched across the first-floor facades, often supplemented by a
vertical marquee. Stud lights outlined both. When the management de-
sired more spectacular effects, klieg lights crisscrossed the night skies. It
was an architecture designed for the backdrop of darkness.43 Light had
been used to attract attention even on early nickelodeons, and its impor-
tance grew steadily. Faced with wartime restrictions, Morehead theater
owners even hatched a plan to outline the marquees with kerosene lan-
terns. The idea fell victim to rationing.44 Marquees did not always enhance
the architecture. At one time, Louisville’s Rialto sported a vertical illumi-
nated sign whose flashiness was at considerable variance with its classical
backdrop. A projecting canopy cut in half the original opening’s height. In
the 1930s a sign obscured the theater’s name. Architectural writers some-
times stressed the visual importance of integrating signs with facades and
the potential for ruining the building’s appearance with an ill-conceived
sign. However, many theaters disregarded that advice.

Strolling down the street, a viewer would probably see the marquee
first, but signs were not the only features meant to attract patrons. A book
on theater design called attention to the ticket booth and entrance: “Psy-
chology enters into the placing of the ticket booth at the center of the
entrance near the street. It must never be necessary to pass through doors
or by any other obstructions to purchase a ticket. . . . The whole appeal of
Marquees sometimes overshadowed the architecture. The idea was to attract attention. Capitol Theater, Bowling Green. (Courtesy of Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.)

the exterior design is to sell the passerby a ticket. The entrance lures him, but the booth must sell him." Even ticket booths in otherwise modest buildings flouted their purpose. Theater owners took no chances on losing a potential customer by forcing him/her to hunt for ticket sellers. A prominent center position attracted notice, but builders liberally bestowed ornament on the booths as well. In part, that was an aesthetic necessity. A plain booth could never hold its own against wide elaborate entrances. However, it also put customers in the proper frame of mind to view the theater's other wonders.

Choosing a Style

Initially, theater styles ranged from Moorish, Baroque, Babylonian, and Tudor to Renaissance. Few could be said to exhibit much unity of design. Architects happily mixed disparate stylistic elements. Often, they went for
Ticket booths could be every bit as elaborate as the rest of the building. They were designed to attract a pedestrian's attention and to make a sale. Majestic Theater, Louisville. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)
Architectural styles were often eclectic, but classical details remained in favor. Columbia Theater, Paducah. (Photograph by author.)
the sort of whimsical or playful effects one might expect in structures dedicated to entertainment. Paducah’s Columbia, in which terra-cotta twisted columns and classical figures mingle on the facade, typified the eclectic approach favored by many architects. Theaters of classic derivation remained relatively sedate in comparison to the ornamental riot that often adorned Moorish movie palaces. Apart from marquees twinkling with light bulbs, the new Renaissance theaters differed little from the previous use of the style for legitimate theaters. Classical building facades carried the same cultural connotations that had long applied to legitimate theaters. Early movie theater managers liked to talk about cultural value in their products. Theaters inspired by the Beaux-Arts style went by the monikers of “standard” or “hard-top.” The other type, more exotic and more memorable, was dubbed “atmospheric” for its simulation of an outdoor setting. Architect Thomas W. Lamb championed the Beaux-Arts and John Eberson the atmospheric.

Several Kentucky theaters opted for the Renaissance model, drawing their inspiration from the Beaux-Arts style so popular for cultural monuments. Louisville’s Rialto offered moving picture architecture in a Renaissance mood featuring an impressively large entry, both wide and tall. This would have served well to draw the attention of passersby. Exterior ornament was composed of a classically inspired wave motif, cartouches, cornucopia, a decorative frieze, and “wrought-iron bracket lanterns in the urn design of the Italian Renaissance . . . finished in Pompeian antique verde and imported alabaster glass.” 46 It was a basic format common to many such buildings. Exteriors might have been relatively sedate in comparison to the atmospherics, but interiors went all out to impress. The Rialto’s interior was immediately decreed “palatial . . . handsome, rich . . . and extremely artistic.” 47 The designers meant to dazzle patrons with surface finishes. Rookwood Pottery of Cincinnati, eminent ceramic producers, created the decorative tiles. Bronze capitals and bases gleamed from the columns. Theaters liked to emphasize the expense of imported furnishings. The three chandeliers boasted Czechoslovakian cut glass. Velour drapes and silk wall hangings conveyed an added touch of luxury. Bronze-framed mirrors, Japanese vases, statues, and a fountain adorned with lion’s heads contributed to an overwhelming richness of detail. Above the auditorium rose a dome ornamented with gold leaf. The interior could be further enhanced by the play of colored lights. 48 Both Lexington and Louisville had Kentucky The-
Actors, Audiences, & Historic Theaters

The Rialto in Louisville sported a profusion of detail. As was common, the facade featured a broad and high entrance arch. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

aters, which opened a year apart from each other and were designed by the Louisville firm of Joseph and Joseph for Michael Switlow, who operated several other theaters.49 One of the Lexington Kentucky’s most notable features was the auditorium’s stained-glass dome. The interior, which was designed by the local firm of Leiber Brothers and described at the time as Italian Renaissance, sported marble vestibule walls, oil paintings, tapestries, carved woodwork, and gold-colored gauze curtains flanking the stage. Shifting colors in the overhead lights gave the space added allure.50 All of this may sound ostentatiously ornate, but this decor was actually quite mild when compared to theaters designed in the atmospheric style. In those, the architects really let their imaginations run riot.

Atmospherics held true to their name on exteriors as well as interiors. They certainly generated a theatrical atmosphere far in excess of anything previously created. Designers threw cultural connotations to the wind and
Atmospheric theaters, on both exteriors and interiors, displayed eclectic and profuse decoration. Loew's Theater, Louisville. (Photograph by author.)

set their aims for attention and flamboyance. The nineteenth century's actor-managers would never have dared an architectural style so far removed from respectable tradition. Atmospherics had the ambiance of designs created by architects possessing a spirit of enormous enthusiasm and having a great deal of fun. Louisville's Loew's drew primarily from Spanish Baroque
Actors, Audiences, & Historic Theaters

with an agitated surface movement. Swirling lines swept the eye across a fantastic assemblage of motifs. A tall polychrome spire marking the center facade was joined by smaller versions bristling around the roofline. Ceramic tile contributed color and texture to the facade. It would have been nearly impossible to walk by such a structure without noticing it. Naturally, that was exactly what profit-minded owners hoped to achieve.

In all theater styles, marquees and box offices featured designs aimed at grabbing the attention of a passerby and pulling him/her into the theater. Even relatively conventional Beaux-Arts facades might, like the Rialto, sport a flashy illuminated sign at considerable variance with their classical backdrops. Electricity's greater availability resulted in dramatic increases in theater lights, which were liberally applied to exterior surfaces. Audiences received their first dose of flamboyance with the marquee, and it was immediately followed by the box office. No mere utilitarian facilities, these featured lights and masses of adornment designed to follow the building's style.

Atmospherics turned up even in small towns. Sometimes the name suggested the style. Hopkinsville's Moorish atmospheric, designed by local architect John T. Waller and housed in a Georgian Revival building, was known as the Alhambra. Styles and names might imply far locales, but buildings made little or no attempt at historical verisimilitude. In Maysville, the Russell Theater combined its Spanish features into a confection of twisted columns, urns, statues, arches, balconies, and tiled roofs. The proprietor advertised clouds rolling by, the moon rising, twinkling stars, and a rainbow. Sounding almost like an afterthought, the list of attractions concluded with "the best pictures." Loew's and United Artists' State Theater in Louisville sprang from the imagination of America's foremost atmospheric theater designer, John Eberson. Opened in 1928, the theater was a prime example of the type. Atmospheric theaters varied in design sources, but all simulated a courtyard environment. Architecture turned inside out, they gave patrons a tamed environment devoid of mosquitoes, cold, or rain. The one in Louisville aimed at a Baroque Mediterranean feeling, with touches of Moorish, Byzantine, and Renaissance. Since the goal focused on sweeping the audience off its feet through a swirl of ornament and lights, any stylistic oddities were regarded as irrelevant. The idea was that patrons should feel transported to another time and place where they could relax under the night sky's stars while watching the Hollywood stars.

Eberson was an Austrian by birth and a theater specialist by choice. Trained in Vienna as an electrical engineer, he left for the United States in
As the name implied, atmospheric theaters sought to create an escapist interior. Light and color simulated an out-of-doors environment. Loew's Theater, Louisville. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

1901. In St. Louis, where he operated an electrical supply and contracting shop, he met theater promoter, scene designer, and contractor-architect George Johnson. Through Johnson's influence, he began to work with theater plans and to superintend site construction. Following a move to Chicago in 1910, Eberson rapidly acquired a reputation as a theater design specialist, becoming known as "Opera House John."53 Louisville's Loew's followed five years after Eberson's first atmospheric theater, created in 1923 for Houston. The atmospheric was his invention, although others copied the concept. These theaters constituted movie palaces' only unique contribution to architectural development. All others derived directly from theatrical predecessors. Atmospherics maintained the visual complexity traditional in theater interiors but departed from formula in their simulation of outdoor environments and application of colorful wall lighting for
emotional effects. The results, especially those created by the illumination, surpassed anything devised by previous theater architects.

Eberson's firm designed more than one hundred theaters nationwide. The profuse polychrome plaster ornament that was characteristic of Eberson's atmospheric theaters was manufactured to his own specifications, giving him greater control over the design. Using different combinations of the abundance of ornament produced by his Michelangelo Studios, he produced a number of theaters resembling each other but each unique. For example, Florida's Tampa Theater carried interior ornament much like that of the Louisville Loew's. Interiors were meant to be visually intriguing, with unmatched side walls and numerous recesses. The contents suggest a mentality similar to that which produced eighteenth-century cabinets of curiosities. Bizarre assemblages of artifacts from architectural and decorative arts history were laid out for the inspection and delectation of modern-day viewers. Interiors abounded with niches, statues, vases, balconies, stuffed birds, and artificial flowers. Written down in black and white, the description sounds rather awful, but viewed in dim lights, as intended, the results were surprisingly effective. The desired effect was that of richly filled environments, but inexpensive and easily cast materials kept the cost under control. Eberson's statues were not hand-carved marble but mass produced in a plaster mold. His exotic styles included Spanish patio, Egyptian temple, Persian court, and Italian garden, all of which sought to evoke a feeling for the chosen style without literally copying any particular building or sticking to any one era or location. A viewer would be hard pressed to name a specific inspiration for any theater. While most people think of the interiors as the most fantastic part of the buildings, Eberson's exteriors were almost as elaborate.

Eberson adhered to a policy of "Prepare Practical Plans for Pretty Playhouses—Please Patrons—Pay Profits." The visually stimulating environments certainly pleased the patrons, helping to pay profits. The cost of constructing his atmospherics actually came in lower than that of most conventional types, making them practical and also helping with the profits. Stone though they might appear, plaster formed not only the decorative elements but the bulk of the interior. Basic construction consisted of a steel frame filled in with brick walls and concrete floors. Ceilings were merely smooth concrete suspended from cables and studded with stars simulated by lightbulbs. Through a simple procedure of moving a strip of negatives before a bulb, clouds in a night sky were projected onto the ceiling, along
with the occasional airplane. Eberson believed that blue ceilings exerted a soothing influence on viewers. Lighting was dim but intensely colored, and it was one of the most striking characteristics of the auditorium. Deep blue and red lights washed the walls.

Movie theater seating followed the long-established pattern of balconies rising above the lower level. Improved structural methods and materials enabled builders to eliminate some piers that had long been the bane of architects and audiences because they blocked sight lines. The Louisville Rialto's mammoth cantilevered balcony drew a reporter's attention for its lack of supporting columns. Theaters continued the nineteenth-century practice of racial stratification, restricting blacks to the upper balcony with separate entrances, except for the few instances in which blacks were admitted to the entire theater for a performance considered of special interest to them. Lexington's Opera House occasionally did this, but such a practice was not common. Most of the time blacks were able to enjoy the theater's grandeur only from the remote reaches of the balconies, and they could not enter the main lobbies.

Legitimate theaters had already established a precedent for fancy and diverse lobbies. Movie palaces continued the trend. Grand hallways and lobbies set the mood for Hollywood glamour. As one book on theater design put it: "The modern theatre makes a particular appeal through its lobby. A large lobby is not merely to create a good first impression, but in the more congested districts, especially, crowds are frequently kept waiting, and it is necessary to consider their comfort. . . . The big problem is to so design this part of the house that instead of a pushing, complaining mob the crowd becomes a throng of joyous, contented people. This is accomplished by giving such interest to the design that the minds of the people are kept off the fact that they are waiting."

Building on the tradition inherited from the Victorians, movie house interiors surpassed anything the previous generation had devised. Designers favored wide impressive staircases. Broad welcoming stairs invited theatergoers to explore the wonders of lounges and lobbies. Gilt, paint, and plaster ornament covered most surfaces. Antique furniture stood on carpeted or marble floors. Sumptuous entryways and halls led to spectacular auditoriums and to impressive lounges. There was nothing new in the idea of theater lounges, but the luxurious appointments were a movie industry innovation, designed to maintain an illusory world both in and out of the auditorium. Owners did not skimp on space allotted to halls and lobbies.
Audiences were drawn to atmospheric theaters by the decor, making the movie almost secondary to the interior decoration. Loew’s Theater, Louisville. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

Wide halls and promenades gave audiences space to admire the furnishings, socialize, and work up anticipation of the movie. Entering Loew’s lobby, visitors tilted their heads sharply back and gazed up—way up—at the barrel-vaulted coffered ceiling studded with bas-relief busts of famous cultural figures. The eclectic mix included Socrates, Dante, Beethoven, and John Eberson. One can only wonder how Socrates would feel about finding himself adorning an atmospheric theater. Wall niches held full-sized statues, among them a copy of Donatello’s David. Virtually no surface was devoid of ornament, swirling across cornices and climbing up piers. Originally, red-and-gold carpet and patterned tiles covered the floors, making their own contributions to sensory overload. A grand staircase swept up beneath a gilded baldachino to the mezzanine.59

In the foyer as well as at mezzanine level, reached from two sets of
Wide staircases gave patrons the illusion of occupying a grand palace. Fancy theaters made an aristocrat of every ticket purchaser. Rialto Theater, Louisville. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)
lobby stairs, iron railings fronted small balconies. Niches interspersed with balcony entrances contributed to a deeply recessed and lively surface. Gilded mirrors, velvet hangings, and a shell-shaped imitation-marble fountain encouraged patrons to believe they dwelt in marble halls. Dim lighting provided by sconces, candelabra, hanging opaque lanterns, and a chandelier obscured any imperfections in the illusion.

Within the auditorium, still more niches filled with vases and statues lined the side walls. Patrons could even enter the deep niche to the right of the stage, the better to inspect the fountain, dried trees, and stuffed parrot within. Turrets and minarets contributed to the textured impression and Baroque play of light and shadow. Twisted columns, horseshoe arches, and small balconies further enlivened the surfaces. Deep-blue lighting washed with a twilight ambiance the artificial flowers and vines drooping down across the wall. The wonder is that anyone cared to focus on the movie while surrounded by such a cornucopia of visual competition.

The musical accompaniment of silent films depended on the available budget. Many theaters made do with a piano. If funds permitted, the owners often invested in a Wurlitzer organ. The Wurlitzer, which was the prince of theater organs, produced not just ordinary music but orchestral effects and a variety of other sounds. Nearly any noise related to the screen action could be produced by the Wurlitzer, and the versatility alone attracted admiring audiences. No mere piano ever sang like a bird. Nor could any pianist send forth sirens, sleigh bells, steamboat whistles, or train whistles. In keeping with its surroundings, an organ surpassed even the fanciest piano in decorative elements. The invention of hydraulic lifts made it possible to raise the instrument from below stage level, vastly expanding the dramatic potential of its arrival before the audience. Placed on a mechanically-operated platform, organ and organist slowly and majestically rose from the pit into full view.60

To allow for vaudeville performances in conjunction with the movies, Eberson provided a proscenium stage for the Loew's Theater. Slightly plainer than the walls because use of niches was more restrained, the arch did not stint on motifs. Topped by a simulated tile roof, it was adorned with trailing vines and flanked by clustered piers. Like traditional theaters, an orchestra pit fronted the stage.

Atmospherics were not the only ornament-filled combination houses, and the adornment was not necessarily produced by obscure warehouses. Tiffany Studios created the interior decoration for Lexington's Ben Ali
Halls and lobbies were comfortably furnished, sometimes with antiques. Theater builders always sought to impress. Rialto Theater, Louisville. (Courtesy of Special Collections, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.)

Theater, including the drop curtain, hangings, draperies, and rugs. "They . . . put into wonderful execution the beauty and brilliancy of the handsome peacock design." The bird occupied the center of a white velvet curtain. Most people associate the Tiffany name with glass, but Louis Comfort Tiffany also operated a very successful decorating business that, among other commissions, did Samuel Clemens's house. In hiring a major firm with strong connections to leading Aesthetic Movement figures, the Ben Ali signaled its interest in attracting patrons through decor. The peacock design on the Ben Ali curtain had become a favorite decorative device during the late nineteenth century and was undeniably striking.

Whether exotic or classical, theaters offered an array of auxiliary rooms. Customers expected to find impressive sitting rooms and even restrooms. Like the rest of the building, these spaces sometimes came close to sensory overload. A 1928 Ben Ali remodeling strove to impress with a crystal chandelier. The gray, ivory, and blue decor with hand-decorated furniture was
described as French. “Roman striped upholstery” and a “bizarre effect of orange, blue, and black” in the draperies further enlivened the color scheme. Men had the use of a smoking room. In 1928 such a term would never have been applied to an equivalent space for women. Ladies did not smoke, although fast women did. For the gentlemen, a stronger color scheme of green walls, red and black furnishings, draperies in black and gold, and a red, green, and yellow terra-cotta floor sounded the masculine note deemed appropriate in the 1920s. Whereas French furnishings filled the ladies’ space, the gentlemen had the usually heavier Italian style. Treatment of auxiliary spaces often displayed gender differences, not only in decor, but in purpose. The Louisville Masonic’s promenade foyer, intended for women who became tired from sitting, reflects the prevalent view of a “weaker sex.”

As in the case of earlier theaters, combination houses often underwent renovations as the management shifted, and for much the same reasons that previous theaters had engaged in alterations. Some refurbishing might be necessary to mend wear and tear, but the attendant publicity also helped to draw audiences. Plans to continue showing motion pictures during a renovation of the Louisville Rialto did not entirely work out, but a considerable amount of work was accomplished with the theater still open. Perhaps audiences regarded the stage carpentry and the digging of an orchestra pit as free sideshows. In a period when many theaters moved from live performances to motion pictures, the Rialto was going in reverse and converting to vaudeville.

As long as live performances continued, stage apparatus, dressing rooms, and related spaces remained necessary. Actors appearing at the Rialto gained from its renovations. They acquired a billiard room, green room, children’s room, and a laundry. Even the animals common in vaudeville acts got a room of their own. Theaters designed solely for movies could dispense with such facilities, either saving on the building lot cost or using the extra space for grand auditoriums and lobbies. Lack of backstage areas can present problems to communities today that want to convert such structures to house live performances, but at the time it was thought that movies had largely killed the need for live events.

**Last of the Theaters**

As the heyday of Hollywood glamour passed, studios ceased to see movie palaces as worthwhile investments. When live performance disappeared
from entertainment, theaters no longer needed stage facilities. Large irrelevant spaces began to seem like liabilities. Many theaters were demolished. Others stood vacant, suffering the consequences of neglect. The degeneration of movie palaces into today's uninspiring concrete boxes has been attributed to a number of causes. When talking pictures transformed the industry, the high cost of sound conversion spelled the end for some theaters. Escapism into exotic surroundings might have appealed to Depression-era audiences, but few could afford the luxury of tickets. Radio and then television made entertainment cheaply available in the home, further eroding theater audiences. Printed mass media helped nineteenth-century theaters by offering publicity. Electronic mass media competed for the theater audience. The growth of suburbs diminished theater attendance because going back into the city for an evening or weekend performance just seemed like too much trouble. The very design that once drew admirers worked against the structures. To architects trained in the Bauhaus International Style philosophy, movie palaces were outrageous exhibits of poor taste and unacceptable social divisions. The buildings found few defenders among the architectural establishment. Nor did the public protest the loss. As the twentieth century began to pride itself on function and practicality above all, people lost interest in the magic of the old theatrical environment. Writers pointed to the desirability of modern architecture for a modern art form:

I think, however, that we will see in the next decade a tendency to discard the elaborate period theatre. I think that the people will shortly begin to show that they go to the theatre to see a good picture or a good show and not to give them the opportunity to kid themselves for the time being that they are millionaires. . . . when the producers and owners realize this and allow their architects to design logical theatres for them,—theatres that center the interest of the audience on the screen and the stage rather than on the walls and ceiling,—then our architects will design houses for the showing of pictures that will be truly modern as are our skyscrapers today.66

These sentiments were echoed by architect Armand D. Carroll: "In the auditorium of the modern theatre we will find meaningless applied ornament and costly trimmings practically eliminated. The screen will be the only focal point. . . . For logical architecture is a simple architecture because it is so easily understood. The modern theatre, then, will be designed in a style of architecture that needs no explanation."67
Entertainment’s very popularity worked against the buildings. Both the vaudeville acts and the movies were seen as popular culture rather than high culture, and few people took an interest in that aspect of society. In time they would—popular culture is now an established academic area of study—but many theaters vanished before the pendulum of public interest swung back in their direction.

The Louisville Rialto suffered a fate common to many theaters. As a vaudeville and movie theater, the Rialto operated until 1968, when its owners decided the structure was not worth the approximately fifteen hundred dollars in property taxes. As bidders poked about with flashlights in the cold, dark building the contents were auctioned. The marble staircase went for four hundred and fifty dollars. Crystal chandeliers that had so impressed viewers at the opening sold for seventy-five dollars to three hundred and fifty dollars. One five-foot statue disappeared during the night, apparently spirited away by someone who hid in the building. Finally, the site became a parking lot.68

A contributing factor to lessened interest in old theater forms was the development of outdoor theater. It was not the first time that entrepreneurs had flirted with a similar concept, but this was on a new level. Facilities like the Auditorium did use buildings, albeit with plenty of free-flowing air, and atmospherics tried for a great out-of-doors impression, but other theater forms developed in the early twentieth century largely dispensed with structures. Outdoor theaters surged into popularity on a wave of enthusiasm for natural settings. Their approach was far removed from that of roof gardens or Norton's Auditorium facility and about as far as it was possible to get from atmospherics. Those were entirely artificial settings dependent on lighting technology and departing little from traditional theater layout. Outdoor theater proponents stressed the importance of rustic design with earth stages, rough seats, and limited scenery.69 Outdoor theaters had an intellectual and philosophical basis utterly lacking in other theaters. Shakespeare and the Greek plays were considered best suited to outdoor performances, on the grounds that nature had been the first performance area.70 The zeal with which advocates championed Shakespeare stemmed from a belief that his plays had originally been staged outdoors.71 To enthusiasts, the new theater forms represented a return to drama’s roots paired with escape from an industrialized world. The Arts and Crafts Movement, with its stress on naturalism, also encouraged the new simplified settings. Gustave Stickley’s influential magazine, The Craftsman, ran ar-
articles on outdoor theater. The interest in natural settings for plays coincided with the era when Isadora Duncan shocked audiences with her interpretive “free” dance forms. One author wrote of outdoor theaters as corrective measures for over-sophistication and artificiality and of their democratic seating and the “spiritual effect” produced by the environment. The number of such theaters was not great, but their existence and the philosophy they espoused explain some of the disinterest in older grandiose theater forms. Outdoor theaters did have a lasting heritage. In the mid-twentieth century, Kentucky began to build theaters for outdoor dramas. Eventually there would be several such facilities offering summer seasons of predominantly historical plays. These have a different orientation from the early twentieth-century idealistic outdoor theaters. The usual fare is popularist and aimed at tourists, a different audience from that which usually attends plays in conventional theaters. Nevertheless, today’s outdoor dramas have their roots in early twentieth-century attempts to look at drama from a different perspective than that of standard theaters.

Indoor theaters shifted largely to concrete boxes. The current bland and meaningless structures suffer from absence of the symbolism that marked their predecessors. Every inch of the older theaters conveyed messages. Apart from cultural connotations embodied in frequently used classical components, the old buildings communicated to their users a clear message that the public mattered. An effort was made to impress them and to provide visual delight. Ironically, now that the mass media exerts a far more pervasive effect on our culture than it did early in the century, the architecture that shelters films has retreated into anonymous design.
It would be pleasant to be able to report that all of the theaters mentioned in this book are still standing. Pleasant, but untrue. Kentucky has lost many of its old theaters, some to fire and others to demolition. A number ended up as parking lots. Some remaining buildings have been converted to other uses and show little or no trace of their previous purpose. Bowling Green’s old opera house facade, for example, lurks beneath its later conversion to a bank. To look at it now, one would never imagine that there ever was a theatrical use for the building. Versailles lost its opera house in 1935 when it was converted to an office building.¹ Elizabethtown’s Stewart Opera House became insurance offices. Russellville’s opera house metamorphosed into a car agency and later a furniture store.² Perhaps most bizarre, the Bardstown Grand Opera House turned into an automobile repair shop. Still, reminders of the theater may sometimes be found in the upper levels of these structures. Horse Cave Theater occupies the former opera house site, and the previous stage survives upstairs, although space and safety code constraints make it unsuitable for performances. Even though the buildings are gone or drastically altered, their history remains.

Most of these converted structures will never again see use as theaters, but knowledge of their past enhances the community’s heritage. Once upon a time, even if briefly, many now-anonymous buildings carried the banner of culture for small towns. The fact that most Kentucky theaters were of little national significance does not diminish their importance. The history of these theaters has much to say about how Kentucky saw itself in relation to national cultural trends and much to reveal about what people considered important and the manner in which they chose to develop their towns and their lives. Theaters may have boasted about their fashionable audiences, but most patrons were average people visiting average theaters. The larger portion
of both the state's and the nation's history lies not in large events or structures, but in small ones, which day by day and action by action form the aggregate of heritage.

For a while it appeared that the old combination houses had gone with their era, but those that escaped demolition have often come back to delight new audiences. Conversion to wide-ranging purposes has saved many. A national revival of enthusiasm for old theaters turned them into symphony halls, churches, restaurants, stores, bowling alleys, and convention centers. Salvation of an old theater has often been hailed as the linchpin in the revival of downtown areas. The theaters draw people into spaces that might otherwise be deserted after night falls, concomitantly creating a demand for restaurants and stores. Restoration or adaptive use makes good economic sense. The profusion of coffered ceilings, pilastered walls, and ornamented boxes characteristic of so many old theaters would be phenomenally expensive to produce today. Every time an old building falls, materials and past work are lost. Ironically, the performing arts, which suffered badly from the loss of audiences to moving pictures, have frequently saved old palaces from demolition by converting them for live performances. The fact that movie palaces followed traditional theater layout makes them suitable for stage acts. The facilities are there. That is not to say that adaptive use is always easy. The large size of many, which so impressed earlier audiences, can be a liability in finding a suitable use today. Stage facilities may be inadequate for many grandiose productions. If the structures are not to be used for performance, removal of seats drastically alters the appearance. A badly done adaptive-use project can end by winning the battle to save the building but losing the war to preserve its character.

The character of old theaters lies partially in their physical attributes and partially in how we interpret those features. Our view of any old building is affected by seeing it in hindsight from history's perspective. Industriously analyzing building design for revelation of social behavior, we sometimes overlook the meanings that the structures actually held for the audience. Our own aesthetic tastes impinge on our perception of their artistic products, leading us to regard as gaudy what they considered quite tasteful, just as we tend to call melodramatic that which they thought was the height of artistic sensitivity. Their semiotic communications differed from ours. We can pick up on some but not all. A bust of Shakespeare seems a fairly obvious evocation of dramatic history, but many of the classical allusions are lost on today's viewers. Try as we might, we can never experience these buildings as did
people of their era. We can appreciate them as reflections of aspirations met and unmet, values admirable and sometimes reprehensible, aesthetics tasteful or misguided, and functions fulfilled or frustrated. Historic theaters stand as testaments to their builders’ conception of community.
Notes

List of Abbreviations

CJ Courier-Journal
DC Daily Courier
DJ Daily Journal
KG Kentucky Gazette
KL Kentucky Leader
KP Kentucky Post
KR Kentucky Recorder
LDC Louisville Daily Courier
LDJ Louisville Daily Journal
LH Lexington Herald
LHCG Lexington Herald and Commercial Gazette
LKR Lexington Kentucky Recorder
LL Lexington Leader
LMC Louisville Morning Courier
LOR Lexington Observer and Recorder
LP Louisville Post
LPA Louisville Public Advertiser
LT Lexington Transcript
MH Morning Herald
WS Woodford Sun

Introduction

1. The audience for participatory twentieth-century theater, such as plays staged by the Living Theater, is clearly an exception.
3. KG, 19, 26 April 1790. Following the practice of the day, their entertainment consisted of both a tragedy and a farce with “several masterly strokes of Elocution.”
4. Ludlow, Dramatic Life, 45. Ludlow’s account, as several other researchers
have noted, is inaccurate in some places, particularly with respect to dates. There is also a distinctly bitter tone to his comments regarding Smith. However, it remains the best and most thorough record of Ludlow’s and Smith’s activities.

7. McNamara, *The American Playhouse*; Wilson, *History of American Acting*. The Virginia play was *Ye Bare and Ye Cubbe*.
11. Mullin, *Development*.
16. Ibid., 90, 407.

1. Rough but Substantial

1. Dorman, *Theater*.
7. Stock theaters—either permanently based or traveling—performed a series of plays in repertory (in turn). See Bowman and Ball, *Theatre Language*, 361.
8. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*.
12. Ibid., 29.
14. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, 517; Smith, *Theatrical Management*. Smith, in favor of the Union, believed that Ludlow was a Confederate sympathizer who disliked him, in part, for his political views.


17. Bernard, *Retrospectives*, 336. A super was an extra or walk-on.

18. KG, 26 May 1812.


20. KG, 25 December, 1810; KG, 29 January 1811; KG, 18 February 1812; KG, 24 August 1813.


25. KG, 2 April 1811.

26. KG, 2 July 1811.

27. KG, 16 April 1811.

28. KG, 11 September 1810.


33. KG, 9, 16 April, 1819.

34. Kentuckians were frequently rather defensive about this characterization, defending plays and players as equal to those in eastern cities.

35. *LHCG*, 31 October 1833.


37. KG, 19 February 1811.

38. KG, 26 February 1811.


40. Ibid., 90.


42. Ibid., 86.

43. Ibid., 96.


45. KG, 18 October 1808, 3.

46. KG, 18 September 1810.

47. Positive statements printed in newspapers without attribution sometimes were produced by the theater manager.

48. *Argus of Western America*, 20 November 1818.
49. LPA, 20 December 1832.
50. KG, 21 August 1818.
51. Melish, Travels, 182.
52. Ibid., 187.
53. Casseday, History of Louisville, 155.
54. McMurtrie, Sketches of Louisville, 137–38.
55. Quoted in Mielziner, Shapes of Our Theatre, 10.
56. Cowell, Thirty Years Passed, 90.
57. Ibid. Ludlow disagreed with Cowell’s comments, declaring that while the theater had imperfections, neither it nor the actors were as bad as Cowell claimed.
58. Smith, Theatrical Management, 80.
59. Graham, Showboats; 6; Ludlow, Dramatic Life, 568; Smith, Theatrical Management, 89.
60. Ludlow, Dramatic Life, 17.
61. Leman, Memories of an Old Actor, 6.
62. Ludlow, Dramatic Life, 568.
63. Hill, Theatre in Early Kentucky, 5.
64. Ibid., 23.
65. Ibid., 4. The latter became an actor’s boarding house in 1810 according to Ranck, History of Lexington Kentucky.
66. Ludlow, Dramatic Life, 94.
67. Ibid., 109–10.
68. Smith, Theatrical Management, 23.
69. Ludlow, Dramatic Life, 13. Several authors have addressed issues related to women and theater. Johnson, “Enter the Harlot,”; McArthur, Actors and American Culture.
70. Holloway, Playing, 34; Mullin, Development, 117.
72. KG, 31 May, 1797; Ranck, History of Lexington, 203.
73. KG, 1 January 1802.
74. Dorman, Theater, 54; KG, 11 October 1808, 3; KG, 18 October 1808, 3.
75. McNamara, American Playhouse, 29.
76. KG, 13 March 1810.
77. KG, 5 September 1825, quoted in Hill, Theatre in Early Kentucky, 157.
78. Hill, Theatre in Early Kentucky, 27.
79. Ludlow, Dramatic Life, 90.
80. KG, 23 August 1817.
82. KG, 18 February 1812.
83. Trollope, Domestic Manners. The problem did not go away. In 1900, the Paris Opera House was prohibiting whistling. (Theater Programs, Univ. of Kentucky Library).
Near the turn of the century, a Lexington ordinance prohibited feet stamping, cat calls, hissing, hallooing, or anything else noisy, except clapping. (Opera House program, 28 September 1893, Univ. of Kentucky Library).

84. *LKR*, 31 October 1809, also quoted in Dorman, *Theater*, 54; *KG*, 10 July, quoted in Meek, "Record of the Theater."


88. *KG*, 18 October 1808, 3.
89. *KG*, 18 October 1808.
91. *KG*, 18 October 1808.
93. Ibid., 90.
94. *KG*, 11 October 1808.
95. *KG*, 2 April 1811.
96. *KG*, 11 September 1810; *KR*, 15 September 1810; *KG*, 23 August 1817.
97. *KG*, 10 July 1810.
100. *KG*, 29 January 1811.
102. *KG*, 9, 16 April 1819.
103. *KG*, 18 February 1812.
110. *KG*, 5 December 1835.
111. Dorman, *Theater*.
117. Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*, 88. Vos was not the only actor to double as a painter. Even Ludlow, at one point in his life, tried his hand at decorative painting.
118. McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville*, 126. This description turned up persistently in late-nineteenth century histories, such as Collins, *Historical Sketches of Kentucky*. Drake was also altering the Frankfort Theater. It occupied the second floor (above a store) of a three-story building. Noting that bars had previously been behind the pit, Drake instigated their removal to a parlor beneath the pit, accessible through a new flight of stairs. Access could be obtained following the performance. To increase seating, the pit was extended under the boxes. Since the announcement of the alterations noted that the gallery had previously been “insufficient” and was newly supported by “four strong columns” it must have been enlarged enough to need additional bracing. Space to the sides of the gallery was opened for additional seating. *Argus of Western America*, 20 November 1818.
120. Cowell, *Thirty Years*, 90.
137. *Louisville Directory*, 139.
139. Logan, *Before the Footlights*, 386.
142. New York Spirit of the Times, 11 March 1837, quoted in Dorman, Theater, 203.
143. Casseday, History of Louisville, 117; CJ, 14 October 1873; LDJ, 15 October 1866.
144. CJ, 14 October 1873.
145. Newspapers had been criticizing the theater for some time. CJ, 5 February 1922; LMC, 13 June 1844.
146. LHCG, 31 January 1834, quoted in Weisert, “An End”; LPA, 29 December 1832; LPA, 6 April 1833 quoted in Weisert, The Curtain Rose.
147. LPA, 14 May 1840, 26, 27 March 1841, 19 February 1842, quoted in Weisert, The Curtain Rose; Hill, Theatre in Early Kentucky; Dorman, Theater. See also Weisert, “Golden Days,” 264–85.
148. Ludlow, Dramatic Life.
151. Ludlow, Dramatic Life, 342.
152. Ibid., 340.
153. Ibid., 359; Cowell, Thirty Years, 90.

2. Neat and Commodious Halls

1. Graham, Showboats, 83.
7. Case and Case, We Called It Culture, 196; Morrison, Chautauqua, 176.
8. Horner, Strike the Tents, 77.
9. LT, 2, 6, 17 July 1887.
10. Morrison, Chautauqua, 184; Slout, Theatre in a Tent, 78.
11. Morrison, Chautauqua, 186.
12. CJ, 3 August, 1907.
15. *LT*, 7 July 1887.
17. Cf, 3 August 1907.
19. Cf, 20 August 1922.
24. Harrison, *Culture under Canvas*, 98.
25. Ibid., 94.
31. *LT*, 8 July 1887.
32. Harrison, *Culture under Canvas*, 100.
34. Harrison, *Culture under Canvas*, 199.
40. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 79.
43. Ibid., 114.
44. Slout, *Theatre in a Tent*, 44; *LT*, 1, 6, 7, 8, 10 July 1887.
46. *LT*, 12, 19 July 1887.
55. Lexington’s Woodland Park Auditorium, once used for Chautauqua assemblies, also staged a variety of activities including John Philip Sousa, Otis Skinner, and Irene Castle. See *LT*, 19 July 1887; Ranck, *Ranck’s Guide to Lexington Kentucky; LT*, 8, 10, 17, 1877; *LH*, 1 October 1905; Waller, “Situating Motion Pictures,” 12–28. Fontaine Ferry Park in Louisville was developed as a summer garden about 1887. Within a few years, the owners built a vaudeville theater. See *CJ*, 5 August 1894, 4 August 1907, 2 May 1909, 28 August 1903, 18 July 1906, 5, 18 August 1907, 2 May 1909, 8, 15 May 1921.
56. *CJ*, 15 May 1904, 20 May 1894; *The City of Louisville and a Glimpse of Kentucky*.
57. *CJ*, 10 June 1900.
58. *Illustrated Louisville*.
60. *CJ*, 7 May 1904.
64. *Illustrated Louisville*, 1891; *CJ*, 2 March 1897.
68. *CJ*, 15 May 1904, 6 February, 1897, 2 March 1897, 24 April 1904.
71. *LMC*, 13 June 1844.
75. *WS*, 14 February 1935.
77. Cosgrave, *Theater Tonight*; Hoyt, *Town Hall Tonight*.

79. LL, 1, 2, January 1904.
81. KG, 25 May 1833; LOR, 27 October 1858.

83. LDC, 22 March 1867.
84. Quoted in Lancaster, Vestiges of the Venerable City, 129.
85. Handbook of Clark County and the City of Winchester (Winchester: City of Winchester, 1889), 25.

86. Historic Sites of Harrodsburg and Mercer County, Kentucky.
87. CJ, 5 February 1922; LMC, 13 June 1844.
88. LMC, 13 June 1844.

89. LDJ, 15 October 1866; CJ, 14 October 1873; Alice M. Robinson, Vera Roberts, and Barranger, Notable Women. Her career was damaged by a divorce, after which she became quite successful on the West Coast, but never again held a prominent national position.

90. LDC, 10 February 1851.
91. CJ, 23 November 1919.
92. CJ, 14 October 1873.
93. CJ, 25 August 1903.
94. Slout, Theatre in a Tent, 3.
95. Beckner, Handbook of Clark County and the City of Winchester, Kentucky, 25.
96. Greene, Green River Country.


98. National Register Nomination Form Campbellsville Historic Commercial District.
99. Hutchison, "History of Show Places."
100. Jennings, "Story of Calloway County."
101. Df, 1, 12, 18 January, 3 February 1895.
103. LDC, 10, 20 February 1851; Johnson, Memorial History. It was later the Academy of Music, Wood's Theatre, and Theater Comique.
104. Lancaster, *Vestiges*.
105. *CJ*, 8 July 1902; Deering, *Louisville*.
106. *German & Brother's Louisville City Guide and Business Directory for the Year 1869–70* (Louisville: German and Brother, 1869), 55.
107. *LDJ*, 16 October 1866.
110. Davis, “A Chronicle of the Savoy Theatre”.
111. *CJ*, 15 September 1896.
114. *CJ*, 4 September 1894.
115. They were not alone in stressing financial gain. An 1893 author wrote, “In the first place I would strongly impress on those interested in the Drama, that the private theatre . . . is mainly a money making concern, and that, as such, financial interests must dominate it, no matter whether the place of entertainment provided be of a high standard, or of the lowest,” Sachs and Woodrow, *Modern Opera Houses and Theatres*.
118. *CJ*, 16 August 1897.
123. *CJ*, 4 August 1907.
125. *LOR*, 20 April 1864.
126. *CJ*, 12 February 1882; Combs, “History of Macauley’s.”
128. *CJ*, 18, 25, 31 August, 1 September 1907.
132. CJ, 24 October 1903.
133. Oberwarth and Scott, History of the Profession, 10.
134. Lancaster, Vestiges.
135. LDC, 10, 15 February 1851.
139. CJ, 24 March, 2 April, 18 August 1907; “Atherton Building and Mary Anderson Theatre,” (Frankfort: Kentucky Historic Resources Inventory, 1986).
140. CJ, 1 September 1894; National Register, 1988.
141. CJ, 14 October 1873.
143. KL, 30 April 1893; LT, 14 July 1887.
145. LT, 20 July 1887.

3. Thrills, Spectacles, and Glittering Lights

1. Bowmar Collection, Special Collections, Univ. of Kentucky.


11. Cosgrove, 112.


17. *CJ*, 20 May 1894, 22.

18. *LT*, 10 September, 4 October, 11 November, 18, 20, 24 December 1887.

19. Theatre Programs Collection, Bowmar Collection, Univ. of Kentucky.


21. *LL*, 1 January 1904; *MH*, 21 February 1904; Bowmar Collection, Theatre Programs, Univ. of Kentucky.


24. Beckner Theatre programs, Harris's Theater, 11 June 1898.


29. Macauley's Theatre program, 5 December 1888, Lucien Beckner Collection of Theatre Programs, Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky.


31. *DC*, 20 February 1851.

32. Weisert, *The Curtain Rose*.

33. Ibid.

34. *LT*, 27 July 1887, 1.


37. Many, especially earlier buildings, did not have fly lofts. Harvey, *Recollections of a Scene Painter*.

38. *DJ*, 3 February 1895.


40. Ibid., 79–80.

41. *WS*, 14 February 1935.


43. *LDJ*, 14 March 1863.

44. Weisert, *The Curtain Rose*.

45. *LL*, 3 January 1904; *LL*, 4, 7, 14, 22 February 1904.

46. *MH*, 17, 21 February 1904.


49. *LMT*, 15 July 1887.


55. *CJ*, 4, 11 August 1889.


57. Theater program, 26 January 1900 in Theater Programs, Univ. of Kentucky.

58. *LMC*, 10 February 1846.

59. Opera House program, 28 September 1893, Theatre Programs, Univ. of Kentucky.

60. Logan, *Before the Footlights*.

61. Theater etiquette articles like that in the *CJ*, 31 January 1897 also appeared in newspapers. Similarly, the *Ladies Home Journal* article of July 1900 on “A Woman's Proper Dress at All Times” by a Mrs. Burton Kingsland addressed proper theater attire and the need to refrain from wearing hats.

62. Bijou Theater program, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.

63. *LDJ*, 1 January 1863; *LDJ*, 24 February 1863.

64. *LMC*, 3 February 1846.


67. *LT*, 20 July 1887; *KL*, 30 April 1893; National Register, 1975; *LT*, 1 July 1887; *LT*, 24 July 1887.

68. *LT*, 15, 16, 19 July 1887.


70. Slout, *Theatre in a Tent*.

71. Theatre Programs, Special Collections, Univ. of Kentucky.
73. *DC*, 21 February 1851.
75. *CJ*, 14 October 1873.
76. *CJ*, 25 August 1903. The shading was characteristic of color theories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
77. *DC*, 22 March 1867.
78. *LT*, 20 July 1887.
79. *CJ*, 1 September 1894.
81. *LMC*, 3 February 1846.
82. *CJ*, 26 February 1922; Weisert, *A Large and Fashionable Audience*; Combs, "History of Macauley’s."
83. *CJ*, 10 June 1900.
85. Theater Programs, Special Collections, Univ. of Kentucky
88. A typical comment was made by a reporter writing of Mozart Hall in *LDC*, 15 February 1851. Generally, it was the ladies’ complexions that were mentioned.
89. Typical of contemporary comments was the *LDJ*, 14 March 1863, article praising the overhead lighting at Wood’s Theatre for its natural effect.
91. Ibid.
92. Collins, "The Use of Gas in Theatres," *The Mask* (October 1924), 165. See also Held, "History of Stage Lighting."
93. *LT*, 21 December 1887.
95. *CJ*, 4 August 1889.
97. *LT*, 16 July 1887.
98. *CJ*, 4 August 1889.
100. *LT*, 20 July 1887.
103. *LL*, 1, 7 January 1904.
105. *LDC*, 22 March 1867.
106. CJ, 24 March 1907.
107. CJ, 23 November 1913.
110. LDf, 13, 15 October 1866; CJ, 14 October 1873.
111. CJ, 8 July 1902.
114. CJ, 10 November 1918.
115. CJ, 24 March 1907.
116. CJ, 16, 23 November 1913.
117. LDC, 10, 15 February 1851.
118. LDf, 16 February, 28 September 1854.
119. LDf, 22 March 1867.
120. LDC, 15 February 1851.
121. Birkmire, Planning and Construction, 84.
122. CJ, 23 April 1896.
124. CJ, 24 March 1907.
125. CJ, 4 August 1889.
127. CJ, 20, 24 August, 2, 5, 6, 7 September 1903.
128. Wheeler, Principles of Home Decoration, 151; Wright, Complete Home, 170, 192; Voyage of Life; Grier, Culture and Comfort, 1; Clark, American Family Home, 4.
129. LDC, 15 February 1851. The newspaper referred to the painter as Volkmar or Volkman, but he is listed as Volkman in Henry Tanner, Louisville Directory and Business Advertiser for 1856–60 (Louisville: Maxwell & Co., 1859).
130. CJ, 23 April 1896.
131. CJ, 14 October 1873.
133. LDf, 14 March 1863.
134. CJ, 14 October 1873.
135. CJ, 20 August 1893.
136. Weisert, Large and Fashionable.
137. CJ, 16 October 1916.
138. CJ, 20, 24 August 1903; CJ, 2, 5, 6, 7 September 1903.
139. CJ, 8 September 1907.
140. CJ, 8 August 1897; CJ, 2 August 1903; CJ, 19 August 1907; CJ, 28 August 1901. An electrolier was a lighting fixture. The term “electrolier” for early electric fixtures derived from the earlier term “gasolier” for gas fixtures.
144. *CJ*, 4, 11 August 1889.
145. *CJ*, 8 August 1886, 4 August 1889, 3 September 1893, 2 September 1894, 8 August 1897, 19 September 1899.
146. *CJ*, 16 October 1921.
147. *CJ*, 6, 7 April 1924.
149. *CJ*, 17 September 1933.
150. Letterhead, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.
152. *CJ*, 16 October 1916.

4. Tickets to Theaters

1. For a good discussion of entertainment in Lexington see Waller, "Situating," 12–28; Waller, "Introducing the Marvellous Invention," 223–34; Waller, *Main Street Amusements*.  
   2. *LH*, 1 October, 1922.
   10. Theater Programs, Special Collections, Univ. of Kentucky. The Theatre Beautiful, as it was advertised, took its name from the owner, James Ben Ali Haggin.
   11. *CJ*, 20, 31 January 1924. Lamb visited Louisville to see the theater.
   12. Gregory Waller in his history of Lexington entertainment has pointed out that while movie palaces have received much publicity, they were not necessarily the most common theater types; Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 195.
   15. Hall, *Best Remaining Seats*. The Vitascope was actually a refinement of the Kinetoscope by other inventors. It was marketed with Edison's name.
   16. *CJ*, 29 August 1920. One observer noted, "But efforts to photograph the
stage seem doomed to failure." Harold Edwards, "The Menace of the Movies,"
*Theatre Magazine* 22 (October 1915), 176–78.
19. Program, 3 January 1921, Ada Meade Theater, Lexington in Bowmar
Collection, Special Collections, Univ. of Kentucky.
21. However, Gregory Waller has pointed out that there was considerable variety
in just how movies were shown and that the moviegoing experience was not uniform.
Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 218.
51.
23. Sharp, *Picture Palace*, 7; *CJ*, 13 May 1921; Dimmick, *Our Theatres To-Day and
Yesterday*; Barry and Sargent, *Building Theatre Patronage*.
24. Martin, "Last Picture Show."
25. Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 102, 106.
26. Sharp, *Picture Palace*, 73; Valerio and Friedman, *Movie Palaces Renaissance and
Reuse*, 15.
Theatres of Today*, 25, 30.
31. *CJ*, 2, 1 September 1928, 8 May 1921.
33. Diamond Theater program, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.
34. *CJ*, 13 May 1921.
35. Ibid.; *Ashland Daily Independent* 3 September 1931, quoted in National
Register Nomination Form for Paramount Theater.
36. *LH*, 1 October 1922.
37. *LL*, 24, 26 September 1913; Theatre Programs, Special Collections, Univ. of
Kentucky
38. *CJ*, 8, 12, 13 May 1921; *LP*, 10, 13, May 1921.
39. Diamond Theater program, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University.
Resources Inventory.
42. Ibid.

44. *CJ*, 1, 3 February 1945.


46. *LH*, 1 May 1921.

47. *LT*, 7 May 1921; *LP*, 11 May 1921; *CJ*, 13, 15 May 1921.


49. *LH*, 1 October 1922; *CJ*, 19 August 1951.

50. *LH*, 1 October 1922.

51. Kentucky Historic Resources Inventory.


57. *Louisville Times*, 7 May 1921.


61. Theater Programs, Special Collections, Univ. of Kentucky. See also *LL*, 25, 26 September 1913; *Illustrated Lexington* (Lexington: Transylvania Publishing Company, 1919).

62. Clipping in Bowmar Collection, Univ. of Kentucky, ca. July 1928; *LL*, 1 July 1928.

63. *CJ*, 23 August 1903, 3.

64. *CJ*, 20 June, 7, 21, 22 September 1924.

65. Ibid.


*Afterword*

1. *WS*, 14 February, 28 March 1935
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