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Kentucky’s Victorian Theatres

Marilyn Casto

The fortunate location of railroad lines made Kentucky towns regular stops on nineteenth century theatrical circuits. Kentucky theatre builders hit their most prolific period from the late nineteenth century into the early years of the twentieth century. Louisville theatre-goers enjoyed plays and vaudeville performances in structures designed to reflect the grandeur of theatres in eastern cities. Small town opera houses could not compare with the opulence of New York playhouses, but they existed in large numbers.

By the late nineteenth century, Louisville theatres offered a considerable range of entertainment. In 1897 the Courier-Journal fretted over the number of theatres in the city, contending that the intense competition for a small pool of customers damaged all theatrical enterprises. While Louisville theatres continued to draw audiences and to present a diverse range of entertainment, Lexington theatre declined through the 1840s and 1850s. Sporadic attempts at resuscitation were made, but none met with particular 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 the economic growth of Louisville. Also, Lexington suffered from persistent fundamentalist religious opposition to the 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. 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 recover sufficiently to draw major performers into the new opera house.

As the century advanced, theatres began an escalating trend toward complex design with considerable stress on fashionable
interior decoration. By the late-nineteenth century, theatre architecture reached its zenith in fanciful swirls of velvet, gilt, mahogany and marble.

Theatre facades lacked distinctly theatrical quality. Apart from the marquees, facades resembled other commercial buildings. In fact, retail establishments might be housed on the ground level of the theatre building.

Builders favored classical motifs in one form or another. First Italianate, and then Beaux Arts facades, imparted a touch of class to the buildings. Long associated with intellectual refinement, Greco-Roman designs suggested the cultural value of activities within. Use of familiar architectural guideposts created an aura of respectability in an era when the morality of theatre-going was still questioned and proponents stressed cultural and educational attributes of plays.

Some theatres reflected other architectural trends current at the time of their construction, but 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.

Theatre names changed frequently. A new name thoroughly signified a change in ownership or use, but constantly shifting identification complicates the life of a researcher. Anyone investigating the history of theatres soon becomes uncomfortably familiar with the fact that theatres recycled names common in other areas, such as Bijou or Rialto, and that later theatres may bear the name of predecessors, as in the case of the two Buckinghams and the two Macauleys in Louisville. Furthermore, theatrical chains often imposed their names as they bought and sold buildings. B. F. Keith used the company name for Louisville’s Mary Anderson and later the National. As the name changed, so did the marquees, sometimes with striking effects on the facades. The Walnut/Drury Lane/Scoop ran through everything from a curvilinear shelter to a large globe above the entrance.

Performance types affected the layout of theatres. Legitimate drama was hardly the only entertainment housed in the nineteenth-century theatres of Kentucky. Patrons of Louisville’s City Theatre witnessed in 1814 a presentation of “Arabian Transparencies or artificial fireworks, representing the Temples, Monument, 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,;;[sic] 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 which managed to combine satire, moral instruction, comedy and patriotism must have been quite a tour de force. The extensive emphasis of words typifies nineteenth century overwrought emotions which found other outlet in melodrama.

A bemused Louisville heard Oscar Wilde speak in 1882 at the Masonic Temple Theatre. His lackadaisical talk, partially addressed toward the cherubs on the ceiling, left the audience more impressed with the rosettes on his shoes.

Accommodation of such lectures was no problem for any theatre. Assuming adequate acoustics, the sole remaining requirement was a stage for the speaker. As the century progressed and panoramas and spectacles became fashionable, the apparatus gained in complexity. In 1830, the Melodramatic in Louisville had a panoramic view on twenty-five hundred square feet of canvas.

Even performances of Shakespeare emphasized the more 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. An 1836 presentation of Jeanne d'Arc or The Maid of Orleans specified King Charles and Jean on "war chargers." Most likely, the "chargers" were those horses deemed relatively placid and therefore least likely to cause problems in their public appearance.

Of an 1887 performance of Uncle Tom's Cabin, 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 presentation of optical illusions included Roman processions, Washington crowned by the Graces, and the birth of Cupid. The Washington scene was typical of an era in which theatre-goers hero-worshipped the father of their country.

As the public demanded more spectacular effects and managers eagerly supplied the demand, theatres began to change. The more elaborate scenic effects became, the more space they required. Fly lofts became essential, together with wider spaces in the wings to accommodate scenery. Scene painters held positions important
enough to warrant printing their names in directories and theatre reviews. Keeping pace with flamboyance on stage, auditoriums acquired greater ornament as the century progressed.

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. Vampire traps, like the one at Macauley’s Theatre, originated in 1820 with the play, *The Vampire*. The Gem Opera House in Somerset had a Hamlet trap.9

In the middle-nineteenth century, audiences had a wide selection of entertainment, but plays generally fell into standard categories. Shakespeare comprised one of those categories. Melodrama was ubiquitous. Variety acts, such as the equestrian shows, burlesque, and spectacles, composed a third group.

All legitimate theatres housed frequent performers of Shakespeare, not necessarily because he was lauded as a great poet and playwright, but for other reasons. Leading actors specialized in particular Shakespearean roles, which they expected to play during any engagement. Further, the Shakespearian canon’s status as educational plays counteracted moralistic opposition to drama, a sometimes potent force in the nineteenth century.

Twentieth-century audiences would find the nineteenth-century versions of Shakespeare oddly awry. Victorians preferred clear cut division of good and bad characters, sentimental simplified stories, and happy endings. Hence the plays were often rewritten to suit the prevailing taste. What audiences did like in Shakespeare were the opportunities for melodramatic confrontations and dramatic speeches.

Melodrama, in which virtue persistently triumphs over evil, became a staple of Victorian playhouses. Such plays mirrored the sentimental idolatry of family and home so apparent in nineteenth-century interior design. Set back into the proscenium arch, the plays clearly portrayed fantasy, not aimed at engaging the audience’s intellect or deeply touching their emotions. Emotional they were, but in a superficial way.

Robertson Davies has pithily described the popularity of melodrama. “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.”10

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In 1907, Louisville audiences at the Avenue thrilled to the adventures of a persecuted heroine pursued by a villain and rescued by a hero in *The Phantom Detective*. Among other trials and tribulations, the unfortunate girl had to be extracted from a den of lions.¹¹

The late-nineteenth century version of reality programming called for sometimes bizarre performances. In 1889, patrons of the Louisville Temple Theatre observed a full-rigged yacht on stage with "A REAL VESSEL, WITH REAL SAILS, Real Masts, and Real Sailors."¹² If that provided insufficient thrills, there was always the burglary scene showing robbery of a real safe by real burglars, whom the advertisement carefully noted as reformed. Safe cracking required no extreme amount 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 theatres. Extremely small theatres simply could not cope. The 1889 stage renovations at the Buckingham undoubtably were intended to allow more flamboyant productions.¹³

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 to produce ghostly apparitions on stage fascinated observers.¹⁴ 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 of this sometimes necessitated rewiring of theatres.

Theatre layout reflected social conditions, as well as performance demands. The elite, middle class, blacks, and prostitutes all kept to their own areas. Separate entrances made this possible. Patrons could sit in boxes adjacent to the stage for the maximum personal visibility and the poorest sight lines, in chairs at lower levels, or on benches in the highest gallery. Seating ranged in order of desirability from padded opera chairs to wooden seats to benches.

The local press enthusiastically described, sometimes in minute detail, new theatres or those extensively remodeled. Almost invariably, the question of safety features merited analysis. Such reviews leaned heavily toward fulsome praise and a tone of boosterism with little or no mention of perceived defects. The role of architectural critic did not require searching analysis, but merely
a list of features accompanied by Chamber of Commerce style remarks on the new ornament to the community.

While 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. Remarks by outsiders and later developments in the use of the structure reveal more about relative position.

Accounts of theatre 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 Victorians, knowledge of the investment probably did enhance the appeal. An account of Daniel Quilp’s 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 got new decorations and seats, a new lobby of marble and concrete, and a glass hood over the sidewalk.

Entrepreneurs associated with theatre 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 they 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 (1913) advertising featured painting, electrical work, plumbing and heating, and construction. Other local businesses also saw new theatres as unparalleled chances for publicity. Dewhurst Garage advertised on every page of the Ben Ali program.

At the turn of the century, vast numbers of electric lights in theatres captivated the public. Such enthusiasm for lights presaged the era of glittering movie palaces awash with all types of illumination and the close identification of Broadway and the Times Square theatre district with lights. Large quantities of bulbs made up for low wattage. A report on a renovation of Louisville’s Harris Theatre estimated that there were nearly five hundred lights with almost three hundred just on the stage. A reporter enthusiastically listed the amphitheatre of the Auditorium in Louisville as having hundreds of electric lights of various colors and dozens of arc lights. All kinds of scenic lighting effects became possible. In 1911, Kliegle Brothers advertised a machine to produce
illusions of snow, water ripples, fire, rain, rainbows, flying butterflies, falling flowers, lightning, and a volcano.  
Managers routinely invited the public to visit new theatres or extensively remodeled facilities for a preview of the architectural splendor awaiting those who attended performances. At the opening of the Lexington Opera House (1887), all “well-behaved persons” were let in free to see a demonstration of the lighting and of the curtain.
Again predating movie palaces, which advertised cool interiors as a summer attraction, theatres of an earlier date advertised pre-air-conditioning cooling methods. In 1889 one was boasting of cooling by “tons of ice.” In this popular technique, fans blew air over the ice to produce a cool, if somewhat moist, breeze.
Heating systems also drew attention. In 1894 the Grand in Louisville became the first theatre in the city to install hot water heating, hailed as less dangerous than air or steam systems.
Fire safety occupied a prominent position in accounts of theatre openings. Anticipating the audience’s memory of the October fire which destroyed the Louisville Theatre, the newspaper carefully noted in its report of the new building’s March opening, that it could be emptied in three minutes. In addition to the doors, five windows on one side and three on the other, all within a few feet of the ground, were called to the attention of readers.
Cities did use special theatre ordinances to regulate safety features. At a 1904 meeting, Louisville managers agreed to put in fire walls separating the stage and audience (where these did not exist), and agreed to make scenery fireproof and paint stage woodwork with fireproof paint, but balked at a provision for sprinklers.
When the Mary Anderson opened in 1907, it was announced that wood had been used only for the stage door and for windows and door surrounds. Concrete and gravel topped a roof reinforced with steel. A main entrance in excess of width 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 the potential patrons to promptly and safely exit the building. As a further precaution, the builder placed the heating apparatus on an adjoining building, rather than in the theatre.
News of major disasters, such as the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago, 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. The fire hazard was very real. One late nineteenth-century author calculated the average life of theatres at twelve to eighteen years, noting that many burned within a few years of construction. He considered the stage areas the greatest risk, listing open lights, lamps, defects in gas installation, defects in electric installation, fireworks, guns, explosives, and defects in the heating apparatus as dangers. Fireworks and explosives may sound unlikely inside a building, but spectacular shows relied on grandiose special effects.

Reporters gravitated to scrutiny of mechanical systems in almost equal proportion to their interest in fire escapes. 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. Under orders from the Board of Health, Louisville’s theatres shut down for five weeks in 1918 at the height of an influenza outbreak. Louisville’s Mary Anderson (1907) had a machine to both heat and cool air capable of changing the air every twenty minutes. The National (1913) boasted a system by which air came into the auditorium through mushrooms beneath each seat, was pulled out by exhaust fans, water washed to eliminate germs, and changed every three minutes.

At the 1851 opening of Mozart Hall, the newspaper stressed the structure’s ability to bear weight, remarking that it had been tested for the weight of one thousand people. Audiences could then feel secure from imminent collapse of the building.

Acoustics and sight lines also concerned the public. A journalist praised the Louisville Theatre in exhaustive detail for the ease of view. Of Mozart Hall, the newspaper recorded the architect’s successful accomplishment of a difficult task in designing for proper acoustics.

Early reviews of theatre openings paid little heed to facilities for actors, but by the turn of the century, theatre descriptions commonly recounted dressing room locations. The 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.
In the Mary Anderson, dressing rooms were represented as large (the star's dressing room having its own bathroom), located on both stage level and below, and heated and cooled in the same manner as the auditorium. Harris's Theatre, toward the end of the century, installed Brussels carpet and electric lights in the dressing rooms.

The multitude of theatre redecorating projects were the answer to a decorator's prayer. During the summer, when most theatres went dark, owners seized the opportunity for refurbishing. 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. Much as later theatres would advertise the coming film attraction, comments on alterations heralded nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatre openings.

Changes made in Louisville's Hopkins Theatre typify the summer renovations frequently undertaken by theatre owners. As the opening date advanced, the newspaper's theatrical column maintained a stream of bulletins on the work's progress. Constant rumors built up anticipation, highlighting the fact that theatres of that time 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 theatre—to see. Theatre has been described as holding more appeal to emotion than to rational thought. Like the plays, buildings engendered excitement. Before film and television, people looked within their community for stimulation. Extreme theatre elaboration is often thought of as a movie palace phenomenon, but the tendency started well before Edison invented moving pictures.

The Hopkins acquired white lacquered woodwork, gold trim, new wallpaper and frescoes, new carpets, and new paint on the chairs. The twenty-five to thirty gallons of white paint and enamel and one thousand sheets of gold leaf were combined with bright red walls, the white and gold being particularly used on the boxes and the red on walls and ceiling. To reduce heat levels in the first few weeks of the season, decorative electric fans had been placed around the walls of the parquette and gallery.

In renovating Louisville's Harris's Museum and Theatre in 1886, the management added new carpets, new chair cushions, raised the balcony seats, and rearranged private boxes. In addition, they
incorporated a late-Victorian enthusiasm. Rooms next to the theatre 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 theatre 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 Madison Square, Wallack’s Abby’s Park, and Daly’s were papered, the reporter said the Opera House would be modeled after them and “The old, dingy, forbidding look about the house will yield to a bright modern aspect.” In addition to papering the walls, the decorator used a favorite 1880s technique of combining wallpaper patterns on the ceiling. New Brussels carpet, reupholstered chairs, and repainted woodwork brightened the interior.

The Whallen brothers’ original Buckingham Theatre, or The Buck, as it was called, underwent renovation in 1889 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 contributed to a more glittering appearance. The enlarged Green Street entrance acquired its own box office.

Inside, frescoes in brown and old gold 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 “groups” on the ceiling 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 interiors of the boxes, 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 and reception room equipped with double full length mirrors, carpets, and furniture improved conditions for the performers. 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.

Attempts to retain audiences through improved interiors continued into the twentieth century. Remodeling of the Louisville Schubert in 1921 earned praise from a reporter for its silhouette paintings used instead of cherubs with “frightful garlands.”

The 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 an application of new paint and a touch of gilding. When the firm of D. X. Murphy undertook to improve the acoustics of the Strand in 1924, the alterations included a redesigning of the existing floor in order to change the pitch.

Unfortunately, no amount of redecoration could hold audiences as the novelty of movies and television began to compete for a fickle public’s money. Many theatres tried and failed at conversion to movies, finally succumbing to the wrecker’s ball.

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