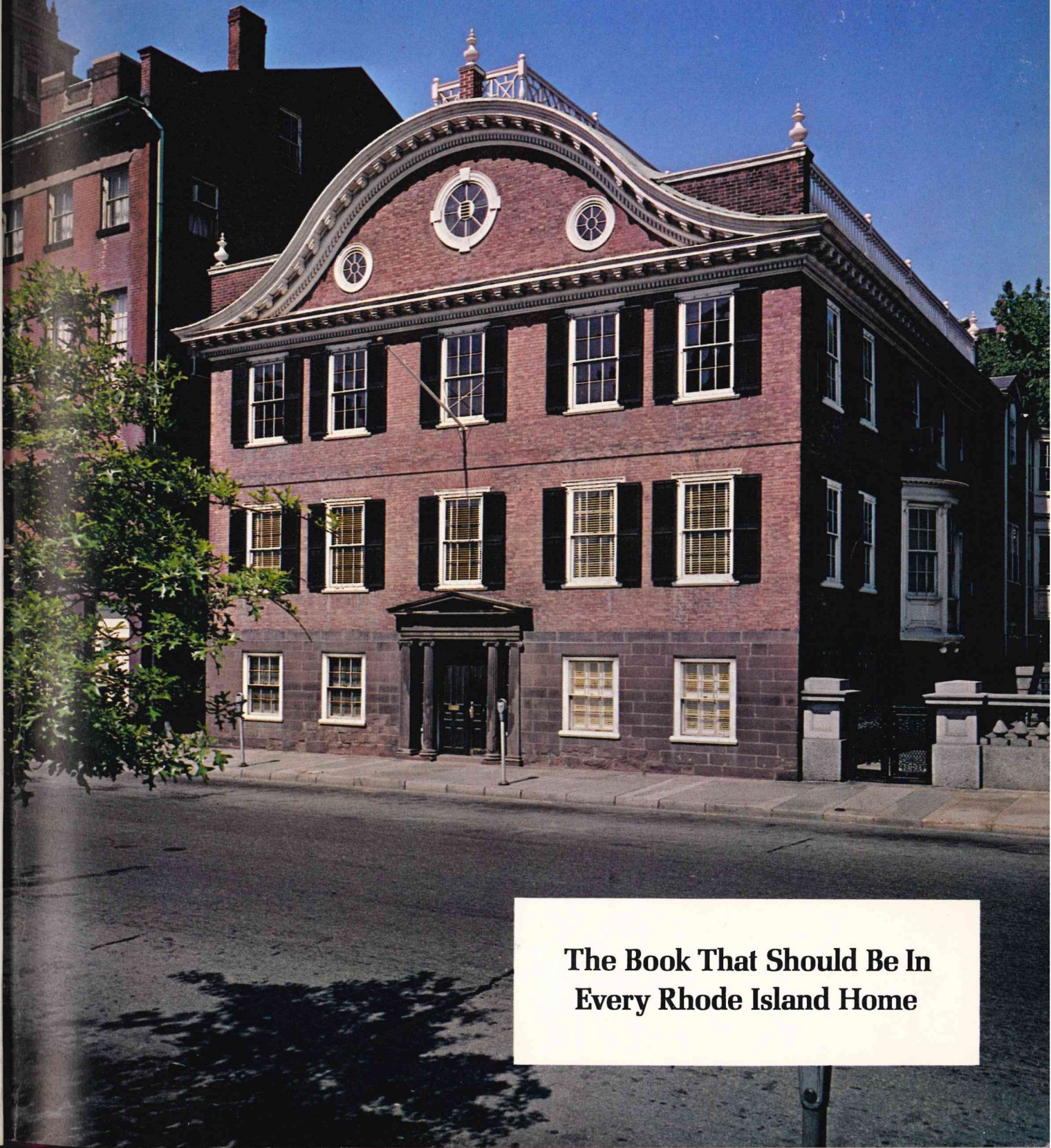


RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



**The Book That Should Be In
Every Rhode Island Home**

Providence was a Great Show Town

BY VIRGINIA CONROY

WHATEVER the tribulations of theatrical folk in the early days of the colony of Rhode Island, by 1884 they had a champion in Frederic A. Hinckley, Minister of the Free Religious Society of Providence.

When one of his associates compared the theater to the gate of hell, proclaiming that it was "ruinous and deadening to the conscience, destructive to health and happiness in young and old," the Reverend Hinckley was moved to publish a discourse denying these accusations.

Rather, he believed that the drama arose from the natural love of imitation in man as it is seen in childhood, in the childhood of races and even in some of the lower animal orders, notably the parrot, the mocking bird and the monkey.

The drama, he maintained, was much older than the Christian church. And quoting Carlyle, who said of Goethe that, "He caught the music of the universe, and unfolded it into clearness and in authentic celestial tones brought it home to the hearts of men," Hinckley pointed out that this is what the truly great are trying to do. Sometimes it is done best in the pulpit, sometimes in the school, sometimes in the home, sometimes on the stage.

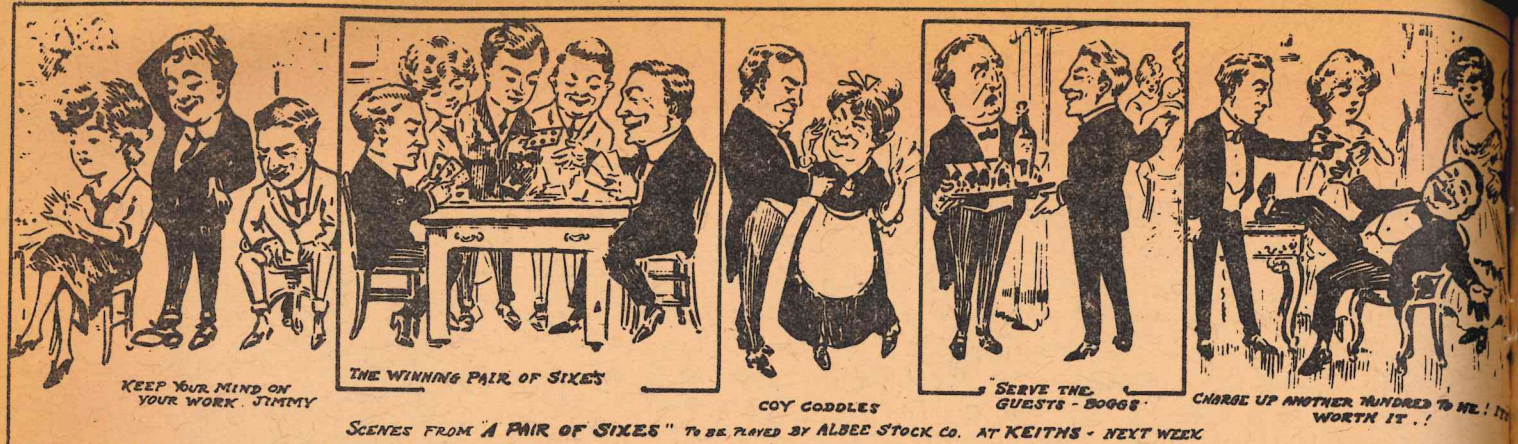
It would have warmed the courageous heart of the good reverend to witness the change in attitude toward the stage, which had taken place in Rhode Island by 1900. Providence had become a great show town and would remain so for almost thirty years.

There were other causes beside that of a more liberal moral climate. Stage lighting, which had gone from candles to kerosene to gas and then electricity, not only contributed to the technique of play presentation, but now made the theater much safer to attend. Transportation had improved so that elaborate productions could be put on the road and people from all over Rhode Island could support them when

The Nickle Theatre, on site of present Albee Theatre entrance.

B. F. Keith Theatre, Westminster Street, later the "Victory".





Cartoon from an Albee Stock Company program, May 1916.



Julia Marlowe



Ann Harding

they came to town. Theatrical ads carried the reminder that seats could be reserved by telegraph and prices were cheap.

At B. F. Keith's new theater you could sit in the second balcony for fifteen cents, the first for twenty-five and the orchestra for only ten cents more. The luxury of relaxing in a box seat was only a dollar.

Theatrical producers of the time considered Providence an enigma of show business. Cultural events available to the surrounding community of college towns precluded their being good show towns. Providence was the exception.

In January of 1900 there was ample fare for all tastes, from Paderewski to Hurly Burly burlesque, the latter a form of entertainment that brought forth such alliterative descriptions as "Big, Bright and Breezy" or "Deviltry Daintily Disguised." The Empire presented the Jubilee Singers one week and Morrison in "Faust" the next.

Dramatic license taken with the play version of "Barbara Frietchie" resulted in a starring performance by the young and beautiful Julia Marlowe without a grey hair in her head. An ecstatic critic proclaimed that her acting revealed "sincerity of feeling, depth of emotion, brilliant flashes of passion and tender touches of pathos." A clever advance man posted the sign, "Wanted 300 men to assist Julia Marlowe in her greatest success", thus involving a sizeable part of the community with friends and relatives who would come to see them perform at the Providence Opera House as Lee's Army.

At Keith's there was a great variety of acts and no inhibitions about ethnic humour. Advertising featured an Irish comedian and black-faced comedy. A typical bill would also include an illustrated travel lecture, a fancy dancing act, female vocalists, acrobats, a society entertainer, a "rapid-fire" talking act, banjo playing, a "change" act, modelling in clay, and wire walking in addition to biograph and stereoptican.

Under the leadership of Tony Pastor this kind of entertainment was first known as Refined Vaudeville (later the adjective was dropped) — to distinguish it from a former type of show considered unsuitable for women and children. And it was given tone by the appearance of such dramatic stars as Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew.

At the July 4th matinee in the summer of 1900, Richard Harlow, the famous female impersonator, who had been packing them in at the Opera House as he warbled through the role of Little Buttercup in "Pinafore", no doubt saw a thin house, since most of the town flocked to Roger Williams Park to witness the balloon ascension of the Providence Aeronauts, Professor James K. Allen and his daughter, Lillian.

There were during the first third of the century, a great many assembly halls and parlors such as the Eloise on Franklin Street, rented out for entertainments and talks on a variety of subjects. At Churchill House, for instance, on December 1,

Poor old melodeon, for all
the music we get out of it
it might just as well be
a folding bed."

Mr Fernon - "In Muggan's"
Helen Reimer

"For Miss, that's
what I want"
Crawshaw
Raffles
Berton Churchill

Autographs of Helen Reimer and Berton Churchill, long-time Albee Stock Company favorites, from souvenir booklet, July 1907.

1925, an audience of metaphysically minded Rhode Islanders gathered to learn from Irene Case how their sleeping powers could be awakened, a laudable theme, no doubt, advertised under the macabre title of "Living Corpses."

In that same month two pretty girls, Daisy and Violet, cavorted on the stage of the Emery. Perhaps their act, advertised as the most phenomenal attraction in America, played to crowded houses less in recognition of their talents than the fact that they were joined together. At the Elk's Hall Tony Sarg's marionettes enacted a number of spectacles, including a special children's matinee of "The Three Wishes" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." And for those who preferred higher forms of artistic expression than lady inspirational lecturers, Siamese twins and little actors on the end of a string there was to be heard the golden voice of John McCormack at the Majestic and at the Albee the Boston Symphony with Serge Koussevitsky.

Perhaps the happiest memories of the Rhode Island theatergoer of that era are concerned with the stock companies that flourished here. These resident companies, presenting a different play each week, returning season after season, evoked in the hearts of their loyal patrons a feeling of warmth and intimacy engendered by no other form of entertainment. At openings and closings of the season there were always flowers and speeches. A lighted birthday cake might be borne down the aisle by a grinning young usher when, on occasion, the natal date of a favorite player leaked out. Probably the most popular of all — a man truly beloved by his fans — was Berton Churchill of the Albee Company.

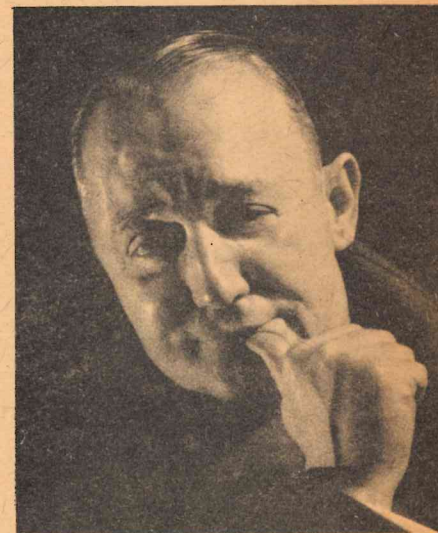
Stock actors had to be endowed with a strong mind in a strong body and demonstrate a miracle of versatility. Performing, rehearsing and learning new lines, necessitated carrying three plays in their heads at once. As Lady Windermere, a leading lady had to wield a fan gracefully one week and be prepared to be catapulted out a window on the end of a wire as Peter Pan the next.

Many successful moving picture stars acquired their early theatrical experience on Providence stages in stock. Among them was blonde Ann Harding with the Bonstelle Company, of the sculptured features and the classic hairdo of the bun at the back of the neck, which style she continued to affect even into her television career. And if Pawtucket maidens swooned over the handsome stock idol, George Neville, their judgment was vindicated when, as George Brent, he captured both Ruth Chatterton and Hollywood fame.

In February of 1926 a play that perfectly reflected the era of "Flaming Youth" was done by the Modern Players. Due to a sudden illness of the leading lady, Miss Mary Miner, a glamorous brunette from over the border in North Attleboro, Massachusetts, jumped into the lead. Miss Miner also appeared in "Ladies Night In A Turkish Bath" at the Modern, clad in a skin colored bathing suit which was considered quite daring. In contrast, on the Albee stage, she acted in a production of "The Fool" swathed in a gorgeous creation of skins, leopard with seal trimming, a huge collar, full skirted and narrow waisted, the most expensive coat ever to be



Helen Reimer



George M. Cohan

Theatre Great — Providence Native

Photographs in this article courtesy of
R. I. Historical Society, Providence Public
Library and the Providence Journal.



Nelson Eddy
Local boy who made good.

worn on a Providence stage, with the insurance man waiting in the wings to snatch it off her back.

Behind these actors were the playwrights turning out a steady stream of vehicles particularly suited for stock. The Albee management, which erected one of the finest dramatic theaters ever built in the United States in 1918, and was considered to have the best summer stock company in the country, brought to Providence over the twenty-five years of its existence more than four hundred plays. Although there was an occasional venture into such classics as Shakespeare or Dumas, most of the plays were contemporary dramas and comedies. If they carried a social message, that was all to the good, but the emphasis was on entertainment. ("I am always suspicious of a play with a message," says Professor Leslie Allen Jones.) In the early days of the American Biograph when, as a short novelty inserted between vaudeville acts, a view of Westminster Street from a trolley car was run, few people realized that the end of the golden era of show business in Providence was in sight, menaced by these feeble little flickers.

Providence attorney, Francis T. Brady, writes nostalgically in his *Recollections of the Theatre*, "But by the middle thirties it was all gone. All except a very few of our theatres had been turned into movie houses. Without theatres in which to play, the dramatic stock companies ceased to exist. Upon a glorious episode in the history of the American Theatre, the curtain fell."

From the stacks of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library one may take down yellowing old programs of the stock companies of Providence, the Albee, the Modern, the Bonstelle and the Carlton. And here one may find the names of the great stars who performed at the Opera House, Katharine Cornell, the Barrymores, George Arliss, Otis Skinner, Maude Adams and many, many more.

Such famous people have always been happy to visit John Brown House, presently when it is the headquarters of the Rhode Island Historical Society and in the past when it was a private home.

The following pencilled communication was discovered there by a workman, scribbled underneath the handsome marble mantelpiece of what is now the Champlin Room in the basement: "hello! a message to whom it may concern! Was here on Dec. 12, 1927 Sophie Tucker." There it remains to this day. For it is the purpose of the Rhode Island Historical Society to preserve the history of the state — and this includes that golden era which was such a wonderful part of its theatrical history.



Ruth Hussey
Providence Native — Movie Star

