



ETHEL BARRYMORE. In 1902 she received billing at Keith's in a short dramatic sketch.

EDWIN BOOTH as Iago. Play house was Low's Opera House when he trod boards there in 1882.

MRS. PAT CAMPBELL resented the Oriental snake charmer in adjoining dressing room.

OSCAR WILDE brought his limp sunflower and sharp epigrams to Low's Opera House in 1883.

SOPHIE TUCKER. Popular variety star at Keith's Theater in early 1900's. Early photo shows her in blackface.

JOE JEFFERSON. Beloved as Rip Van Winkle, he came to Low's in 1882, to Keith's in 1890.

HELEN REIMER. Grand old lady of Albee Stock Company, which was born at Keith's in 1901.

LILLIAN RUSSELL captivated audiences at Keith's when she appeared there in 1911.

SARAH BERNHARDT. The "Divine One" made Low's Opera House stop on first U.S. tour, 1881.



HEYDAY. As the 70-year-old Empire looked in the days when a generation of showgoers knew it as the home of vaudeville and drama. Still embedded in the sidewalk is the word, Keith's.

MR. LOW'S 'HALL' COMES DOWN

Wreckers Invade the Empire, City's Oldest Theater, Where Legit Gave Way to Variety and Albee Stock; Movies Ended the Show

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

MRS. PAT CAMPBELL had a peeve. It concerned the Princess Rajah. Mrs. Pat Campbell was a great lady of the stage, condescending to a one-act dramatic sketch at Keith's Gaiety in Providence. The Princess was an Oriental Snake Charmer from Brooklyn, supported by a Whirling Dervish, a python and trained rats. Mrs. Campbell had No. 1 dressing room, the Princess had No. 2. Mrs. Pat Campbell sent for the manager. She said:

"Mr. Lovenberg, you must change my dressing room at once."
"Why, Mrs. Campbell? Do you object to the Princess Rajah's python?"

"Mr. Lovenberg, the Princess Rajah's python does not bother me in the slightest degree."

"Is it the Princess Rajah's rats, then?"

"Mr. Lovenberg, it is neither the Princess Rajah's python nor the Princess Rajah's rats. It is that — woman, the Princess Rajah!"

THE week before Pat Rooney II and Marion Bent brought their act to town the little orchestra drummer was tipped off to look out for trouble.

"The drummer doesn't live that can suit him," they said.

After the first show Rooney sought the drummer out.

"Where have you been all my life?" he demanded. "You're playing the act better at the beginning of the week than my last New York drummer did on Saturday night—and I fought with him from Monday on! How come?"

Allie Alers grinned.

"I used to play for your father, the Original Pat Rooney, at the Westminster burlesque. Same style."

MISS HELEN REIMER of the Albee Stock Company was asleep in her hotel. Amid understandable tension backstage the trial scene proceeded. It looked bad for the heroine in the dock and worse for the third act of *Common Clay*, for the moment was approaching when Miss Reimer, playing the heroine's mother, was supposed to come rushing in with testimony clearing her daughter of the charge of murder most foul.

The Old Albee Stock was resourceful. Hastily cast as a court attendant, an usher entered the courtroom and handed a rolled-up manuscript to the judge. Stock Troupier John Doyle glanced at it and without an instant's hesitation rapped for order.

"I have just received," he extemporized, "testimony of a highly important nature. It is in the form of a sworn deposition." And he read Miss Reimer's lines. The heroine did not hang. The third act of *Common Clay* did not flop. Miss Reimer had her sleep out.

ON Saturday night the chimpanzee's master, a moody Pole, beat him with a chain. Tender-hearted wire walkers and contralto

vocalists winced as the chim howled beneath the blows but could not deny that he had in some measure earned what he was getting.

As early as Monday it had become apparent that the chim, while an artist of supreme talent, was going to take a bit of getting used to. Barely had the other acts become used to the sight of him sitting backstage eating charlotte russes uneasily when he took to romping among the footlights, occasionally making a playful grab at Henry Langevin's trombone. Later in the week he acquired a dislike for Mr. Lovenberg, the manager, and chased him around the theater a couple of times. By Saturday he had exhausted all the possibilities Keith's Gaiety offered in the way of monkey business. Emerging craftily by way of the baggage entrance, he sought new fields.

A few minutes later there rushed into the theater a young man pallid with terror. The news he bore became a cry which, endlessly repeated, echoed through the house until it reached the ears of the moody Pole.

"Go git yer ape! He's wreckin' a lingerie store!"

They found him trying on a pair of lace panties.

NOW it was Sunday and the actor cast for the lead in *Arms and the Man* sat studying his lines in the dressing room. He found it hard to keep his mind on them. Buoyed up by the hope of a reconciliation with his estranged wife, he had stopped drinking, promised the manager to be good and undertaken to be all set for the special rehearsal that evening. Two fellow actors, Gene Revere and Burton Churchill, had spent all Saturday night cueing him in the part.

Now he was feeling a little shaky. Preoccupied with his own personal drama and its hoped-for denouement, he kept going out to the doorman and asking if there had been any message from his wife. There was none. He sent out for coffee and sandwiches, tried to think about *Arms and the Man*. The lines swam before his eyes. It cost him only a very slight effort of the will to convince himself that a drink would do him good. So he stepped out and had one and on the way back he asked the doorman the same question and the doorman shook his head.

Resuming his study of *Arms and the Man* and remembering his promise to the manager, the actor decided that it would be only fair to sharpen his powers of concentration with a couple more. On the way out he paused and looked inquiringly at the doorman. A shrug answered him. That time the actor did not come back at all. Burton Churchill spent all that night cueing Gene Revere for the lead in *Arms and the Man*.

BACK in 1878 W. H. Low had not wanted the building he erected at Westminster and Union Streets called an Opera House. But the people insisted that was what it was and so Low's Opera House it became and after that it was the Gaiety Theater and after that it

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DOOMSDAY. To the wreckers goes a theater whose stage has for the head of some of the greatest actors and actresses in all their history. Photo shows wrecked stage, saved in 1901.

Low's 'Hall' Comes Down

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was Keith's Gaiety Opera House and when the Albee Stock Company moved into the new Albee Theater in 1919 it was unprophetically rechristened the Victory. And finally it became the Empire—the down-at-heels second-run movie house now being wrecked and gutted for the W. T. Grant Co.

In the 1870's the monstrous bat wings of Satan still cast a sable shadow over the stage. It is significant that Mayor Thomas A. Doyle, in his speech at the opening of the house, Mar. 4, 1878, repeatedly referred to it as a "hall" and hinted at the refined and cultural uses to which it might be put. "And now," he concluded, "I know you are all waiting to hear the concert by Mr. Reeves' American Band." Down came the baton of D. W. Reeves as his brasses followed the opening strains of *Der Freischutz* overture and the "hall" launched its career of three-score years and 10. At the close of the inaugural program a Miss Dora H. Wiley sang *Now I Lay Me*.

The main entrance of Mr. Low's new "hall" was on Union Street and was flanked by two stairways leading to the balcony. In later vaudeville and stock company years this was the side entrance; to left and right of it were the restaurants of the Brothers Shedley, Joe and Bill, famous for good things to eat and drink. The baggage entrance and stage door opened, as now, on Pie Alley. During performances of the great Civil War drama *Sherandoah*, stagehands holding Sheridan's horse waited there for the cue to belabor his rump with baseball bats and send Sheridan in to save the day at Cedar Creek.

The house Mr. Low built was 130 by 100 feet and was of brick and iron construction with trim of olive stone. The thunderings of Mr. Reeves' band, the silver notes of the cornet of Master Bowen R. Church ("whose precocious brilliance upon the instrument," wrote the reporter covering the opening, "is familiar to all") echoed from a ceiling decorated in the Japanese style.

MAYOR DOYLE might talk coyly of "halls" but it soon became plain that another op'ry house was what Providence had. The next attraction, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (Wilkinson's New England Troupe) could still possibly class as a great moral entertainment 13 years after the Civil War, but what shall be said of the Evening of Refined Minstrelsy booked for Mar. 9, featuring the Screaming Farce, *Liza Jane's Lovers*? But unquestionably Mr. Low's hall was a hall when Col. Bob Ingersoll the Damned came there to express blasphemous disbelief in Hell.

The theater's first season forecast its vaudeville future. Most of the bookings were from the Infinite Variety, and it was infinite even then—Zera the Great Corsican Conjurer, the Berger Family in Society Sketches and Flirtation Duets, Balbregga the Boy Magician, Naoni the Parisian Juggler in Knife Juggling, Plate Spinning and a Wonderful Performance With Live Goldfish.

By next season Low's was booking the big names of the day—Mrs. Scott Siddons, Fanny Davenport, Annie Pixley. Sarah Bernhardt—young and vivacious then—appeared at Low's in *Camille* during her first American tour in 1881; Edwin Booth, Dion Boucicault and Joe Jefferson played there in 1882-1883; Henry Irving in 1884.

Now and then Colonel Ingersoll reappeared to let people know he hadn't changed his views on hell and in 1883 Oscar Wilde brought his horse face, his limp sunflower and his epigrams to a theater which in its last stages was a pretty good flophouse for fuzzy gentlemen who were sometimes disturbed by the blating of the talking photographs but never by the ghostly voices of great actors long dead or the phantom melodies of such forgotten operettas as *Fatinitza* and *Olivette*.

Annie Pixley was a popular actress at Low's. Following her New York debut in *M'liss*, she was there four times between 1880 and 1888, when B. F. Keith took over the theater on a lease.

Re-christened the Gaiety Opera House, it opened—after Important Alterations—in May with the operetta *Giroffe-Giroffa* and several variety acts, including some jolly Viennese Lady Fencers. Mr. Low's elegant "hall" was off on the second leg of its career, a phase which might almost be called the Lovenberg-Albee era.

Charles Lovenberg, born in New Orleans in 1864, musical prodigy, child trouper with Cole's Circus, manager, stage manager, composer, impresario of burlesques and ensemble numbers, came to Keith's in 1890 as musical director. In those days a theater orchestra amounted to something. I pluck from a pile of old Keith's folders the one for Dec. 4, 1893, and find that the musical program for that date included a Serio-Comic Fantasia by Charles Lovenberg entitled *The Advent of Spring*, which was supposed to convey to the customers' ears the following impressions:

"Approach of Spring, birds in the trees, thunderstorm, April shower, the brook flows, the mill wheel turns, boys whistling on their way to school, the village blacksmith, the jolly carpenters, an old-style country dance. In the city—appearance of organ grinder, an Italian orchestra, passing a variety theater where a young lady is singing *After the Ball*, the little German band, the scissors grinder, an amateur practicing the trombone at an open window, on the roof garden, the Spanish troubadors."

After that, *In Old Kentucky* must have seemed a little anti-climactic, even if that sterling drama did have a cast including "over a hundred auxiliaries, including Spectators, Jockeys, Bookmakers, Touts, Stable Boys and Hostlers." To say nothing of Col. Sandusky Doolittle, a Great Speculator and Horseman.

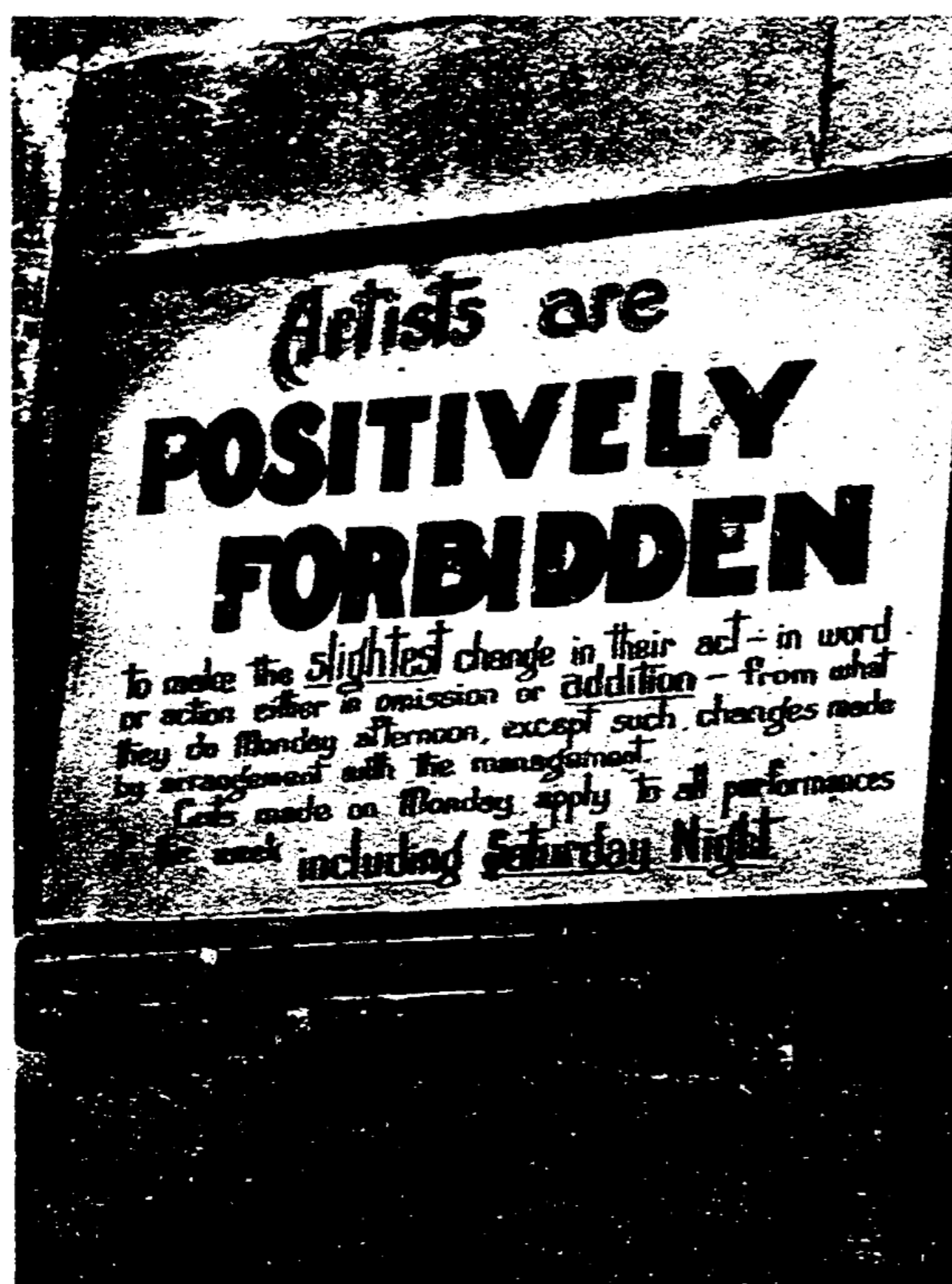
Thumbing the old programs one comes upon the names of such forgotten plays as *A Flag of Truce*, *McKenna's Flirtation*, *A Mad Bargain*, *The Canuck*. They were the native corn-of-the 90's, these



RA. As theater looked in its twilight days as second-run movie house. Ornate plaster Cupids and chaste murals, was typical of theater interiors of old.



May 11, 1891. Drama starring McKee Rankin.



SIGN of vaudeville period still in place when wrecking started warned against monkeyshines.



led by Torteoni, an Italian artist, date from 1898 when "important alterations" made. Modestly voluptuous figures looked down upon changed show world.

old plays, and they entertained a naive world forever gone. Or was it any more naive than the one today? We put up with an awful lot from Hollywood.

Edward F. Albee was the manager of Keith's Gaiety in the 1890's. When it became rumored that he was thinking of leaving for other fields, Lovenberg went to B. F. Keith with the following suggestion:

"Why not give Rhode Island to Albee to keep him in the organization?" So Albee got Keith's Gaiety Opera House as a gift. And Lovenberg became manager. And Ed Fay, for a while, led the band.

It was in 1898 that the theater entered upon its Golden Age of Vaudeville. Again Mr. Low's "hall" underwent Important Alterations and it was at this time that the ceiling and the space above the proscenium arch acquired the chastely voluptuous murals, painted by an Italian artist, one Torteoni, which for years have wasted their beauties on people who like second-run movies. From this period, also, date the plaster cupids of the boxes, many of which have been riven from their places by people who like plaster cupids.

Always a strong variety house, the Gaiety embarked on a policy of continuous vaudeville. The list of acts that played there from 1900 on is spangled with the names of radio and night club headliners of today. They include Sophie Tucker, Fannie Brice, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, Walter Winchell (all three with Gus Edwards' *School Days*), Fred Allen (then Juggling Freddie James), Jack and Flo Hughes (Jack Hughes is now recreational director at the Rhode Island State Institutions), Bob Burns, Joe E. Brown, Olson and Johnson. Not forgetting the Four Cohans and

"Absolutely, Mr. Gallagher!"

"Positively, Mr. Shean!"

The historic Albee Stock Company had its inception at the old Gaiety in 1901. The initial play was Belasco-DeMille tear-jerker, *The Charity Ball*, and the company was made up of Valerie Berger, Helen Reimer, Lisle Leigh, Sadie Handy, Helaine Hadley, Clara Blaney, Roy Fairchild, Percy Winter, Jay P. Leland, Albert March and Malcolm Arthur. And stock went booming down the years, while all unnoticed, little hole-in-the-wall theaters bid for children's nickels with pictures which had nothing interesting about them but motion.

In 1919 the new Albee Theater opened. And presently the Gaiety became the Victory. If they meant the Victory of the Movies, they had something.

The name "Keith's" is still cemented into the sidewalk in front of the main entrance. And in 1936 when it was renamed the Empire—in honor of the theater where Abe Spitz got his start—the old house had a brief Indian Summer of legitimate plays. Cornelia Otis Skinner was there in *Candida* and Walter Hampden in *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*. But in 1937 the Empire gave up and settled back to drowse out its twilight years in a coma of shopworn cinemas. Nobody mourned when they caved in the roof a few days ago.

But a few people remembered. About the time they started ripping out the seats a middle-aged Providence hotel clerk who used to be a wire walker, came and stood on the dark and lonely stage and gazed up at the second balcony.

"I didn't stay there," Dan Valadon said later. "I couldn't stand it. Too many memories. I got to thinking of my wife standing up there poised to make that slide to the stage. Mile-a-Minute Lora they used to call her."

Staff photos by Scheer and Hanson; old pictures from Acme, NANA, Brown Brothers, Saronny; program from Lovenberg Collection.