

*J. Linden Best*

## **BOX, PIT, AND GALLERY:**

### **THE THEATRE ROYAL AT SPRING GARDENS**

With the revival of theatrical activity in Halifax during the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in the importance of the theatre in the city's past. A number of studies<sup>1</sup> have focused on particular periods in order to compile calendars of productions, and in every case these have revealed an astounding amount of activity dating back almost to the city's founding. But very little attention has been devoted to tracing the histories of the many theatres which have operated in Halifax. For the earliest period, beginning with the New Grand Theatre which opened on Argyle Street in 1789, little documentation exists. From about the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the newspapers devote regular columns to theatre, and it becomes possible to get a fairly clear and complete picture of the individual theatres and the types of fare which they offered to Haligonians. Among the houses, the Theatre Royal at Spring Gardens was the most important legitimate playhouse during the twenty years from 1846 to 1867, and an examination of its history reveals much about the general theatrical conditions in the city at that time.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, and almost from the very founding of the town, the officers and enlisted men of the British garrison at Halifax had been active in the theatrical life of the city. Amateur companies drawn from the ranks of the military organized performances at intervals and these often supplied the only dramatic entertainment available to the townspeople.

In 1846 there existed a particularly active group, composed mostly of officers and calling itself the Garrison Amateurs, which sought to establish its own theatre. A large hay barn situated in the area of the city then known as Spring Gardens, actually fronting on the west side of Queen Street just a few steps north from Spring Garden Road, was acquired. The building had been owned by two men named Hunter and Chambers who had formerly held the contract for the supply of forage to the military.<sup>2</sup> After considerable work it was transformed into the Theatre Royal, also to be called the Garrison Amateur Theatre and the Spring Garden Theatre. This was the first theatre building Halifax had known in some years and its opening on 2 December 1846 was greeted with enthusiasm by the newspapers and by a large portion of the public. For their first performance in the new theatre the Garrison Amateurs presented the single act burletta *The Sentinel* which was followed by the two-act comedy *You Can't Marry Your Grandmother!* The first night was open to the general public and a second performance, open only to those who had subscribed to the entire season's productions, was given two nights later. *The Morning Post* reported at length:

The first performance at the New Garrison Theatre, recently fitted up on the margin of Spring Garden Road, took place this week, both before public and select audiences.

The Thespian Temple for this occasion was one of very fair dimensions and tastefully fitted up. The Boxes are extensive enough to seat over 160 people--the benches in this part of the house being covered with red baize--and each seat being numbered. On entering, a soldier silently conducted each person to the seat numbered on his ticket--an arrangement that has a touch of politeness in it, and prevents confusion. At the left of the Boxes is a separate apartment or "private box"--understood to be intended for His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief. It is of tolerable dimensions, capable of seating, we suppose, some half-a-dozen people. We were not in a position to get a glance of the Pit, which part of the theatre has not been forgotten. Gallery, there is none--so much the better. The walls of the building were nicely washed with pink colouring, and the house was lighted with gas--being a very evident improvement upon the old "dim and shadowy" lamps and chandeliers.

Above, and in front of the Stage, as the presiding genius of the place, a bold portrait of the Immortal Shakespeare, smiled benignantly--and over the side entrances were busts of other dramatists. A green curtain answered also for a drop scene. The Stage Paintings were excellent .... This part of the house gave evidence of a good deal of labour and taste, and, if painted, as it is said to have been, by the Lady of an officer of the Garrison, it says much for the kindness of Military families, in putting forth such efforts to enliven society in our little metropolis.<sup>3</sup>

The *Sun* is less complimentary to the theatre but, although repetitive on some points, adds details to the picture:

The Gentlemen of the Garrison, having procured the use of a Barn at Spring Gardens, succeeded in transmogrifying it into a tolerable Thespian Temple. We were surprised and pleased on our entrance, at the whole arrangements. The pit is small-and the Boxes, though sufficiently large for the accommodation of any Halifax audience which is likely to be drawn, is scarcely inclined enough. The back seats, for *sitters*, are not likely to be coveted on any occasion. The private Box on the left, is rough outside, but well enough for a common affair, on the inside. Glazed cotton curtains, however, have a cold and "starched up" appearance.... The seats in the aristocratic part of the House, yeleft the boxes, are covered with red baize, each seat being numbered. The House is lit with gas, and warmed--oh, no! we cannot say warmed, for on the contrary it is confoundedly cold,--but there is a stove in one corner of the Pit.... The House, on Wednesday night was literally as cold as a Barn.

It becomes apparent that the interior layout of the theatre was much like that of English playhouses of the Georgian period. The pit, that central area of the main floor immediately in front of the stage, was probably flat and seated with plain benches. These were the cheapest seats in the house. Along the back and side walls of the auditorium were the boxes, raised perhaps several feet above the level of the pit and separated from it by a rail. The seating here was also of the bench type but cloth coverings and perhaps some padding added to the comfort. The box seats seem also to have been on an inclined floor, although the slope was not enough to suit the writer for the *Sun*. These boxes, it must be understood, were not completely divided from one another at this time but were probably only partially separated, following the English pattern, by rails placed at intervals. Only one private box, entirely railed off from the others and fitted with curtains, was provided. If the boxes could accommodate over 160 persons as the reporter for the *Morning Post* suggests, it is fair to assume that the pit would also provide room for at least that number, making the capacity of the house perhaps 400 or 500. There are indications that the house may have been equipped with an orchestra pit, as a band was almost always featured at the performances.<sup>5</sup>

It is only possible to speculate about the exterior of the theatre at its opening. It is said that the frame building stood back from Queen Street, with a kind of yard in front of the entrance, but if this is so the front was extended to the sidewalk at some later date, possibly by Sothern in 1857.<sup>6</sup> This change made the exterior measurements of the building approximately 37 feet by 110 feet. The only known picture of the building, a photograph dating from about 1878, reveals a classic facade providing three evenly spaced entrance doors with three shuttered windows above on the second floor, and a low-pitched gable roof topping the building. The stage entrance was probably from Buckingham Street at the rear.

The Garrison Amateurs presented two more productions in their theatre before the end of December 1846, although the problem of heating the building sufficiently had already aroused some complaints. Nevertheless, the first season of the Theatre Royal seems to have been both popular and profitable, and with the opening of a new series of productions in early August 1847 came the announcement that the company had been able to refit their theatre with entirely new scenery and that the stage had been enlarged. The same pattern of success continued throughout 1848, 1849, and the early 50's. Occasionally a professional performer appeared with the Garrison Amateurs, but the Theatre Royal was primarily an amateur dramatic house during these years. As such, it was so popular as to spawn a number of other groups of dramatic performers in the city, all of whom used its stage; the Amateurs of the Mechanics' Institute, the City Amateurs, and the Amateurs of the 38th or 1st Staffordshire Regiment. Haligonians of the period seem to have looked forward eagerly to the beginning of the annual fall and winter season at the Theatre Royal:

Halifax does not ordinarily abound in sources of public amusement--and we can readily hail with satisfaction the announcement that the Amateurs of the Garrison propose to re-open their Theatre, Spring Gardens. It is intended to give six monthly entertainments consecutively. A considerable sum has been expended in fitting up the building...and in the preparation of new scenery and other appliances, which may conduce generally to the comfort and amusement of the public. We may, therefore, bespeak for the Managers some grateful evidences of public patronage.<sup>7</sup>

Improvements in the building seem to have been made regularly. By January of 1850 the advertisements mention stall seats, probably occupying the forward section of the main floor, and private boxes

are available by December of the same year. These replaced the old raised box seats at the sides of the auditorium, probably creating four completely separated boxes along each side of the theatre.

Theatre Royal had become an established place of entertainment for the citizens of Halifax. And during these same years, in other parts of the town, which in 1851 had fewer than 21,000 people, the Masonic Hall and later the Temperance Hall were offering touring vaudeville shows and other theatricals of a similar nature.

By the late 1850's, the touring professional dramatic companies from Boston and New York were being attracted to Halifax, and the Theatre Royal was the logical place for them to perform. On 19 June 1856 Isherwood and Stewart's Company of Wallack's Theatre in New York began a season which was to run for nearly two months and which included productions of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Lady of Lyons*, and *The Corsican Brothers*. The managers of the company had first attempted to engage Temperance Hall but had been refused permission to perform there (the Sons of Temperance frowned on the drama) and had leased, instead, the building at Spring Gardens which the *Sun* at the time writes of as "our miserable apology for a Theatre".<sup>8</sup> There is a suggestion that the theatre may have changed hands before this,<sup>9</sup> and it is possible that the policies of the new owner or manager, a Michael Pourr or Power, may have provoked the *Sun's* comments. On the other hand, the reference may simply have been intended to compare the Theatre Royal to the newer, larger, and probably more elegant Temperance Hall. In either case there is little doubt that the Theatre Royal was the better equipped as a theatre, and in spite of the possible change in ownership it continued to house the amateur companies as well as visiting professionals.

In May of 1857 E. A. Sothern arrived to take possession of the theatre for the summer and to begin extensive renovations in preparation for the later arrival of his company to open a dramatic season at Halifax. He was accompanied by his scene painter named Selwyn, who was to act as designer for the new interior of the building which was to be renamed Sothern's Lyceum. On 2 June the *British Colonist* commented on the plans:

...the building is conveniently planned and will doubtless afford sufficient accommodation for the theatre going public of Halifax. The provision made for a limited number of reserved chairs, instead of the private boxes usual in other theatres, is a novelty in its internal arrangements..[providing] comfortable seats situated in the very best part of the building.<sup>10</sup>

The private boxes, installed only seven years earlier, were removed and new seating, probably of the stall variety, was placed in the raised and inclined positions of the house. The seating on the main floor seems to have remained unchanged, and both front stalls and parquette places likely continued to be available. But the advertisements following the opening of the Lyceum indicate that a gallery had been erected furnishing some of the cheapest seats in the house and raising its capacity to perhaps 700. This gallery probably covered the slightly raised area containing the reserved stalls, and extended along the sides of the auditorium as well as across the back. Subsequent newspaper references indicate that the patrons of Sothern's Lyceum who secured seats in this part of the house were a rowdy and highly critical lot who quickly won for themselves the traditional title of "the gods".

No mention is made of any changes to the stage area of the Theatre Royal, other than the acquisition of new scenery, but it is possible that some improvements were made. F.H.D. Vieth's personal recollections of the theatre at this time and immediately after suggest that it was well equipped. His discussion of some of the lighting effects achieved, for example, makes it almost certain that calcium lights were in use. In addition, his anecdotes concerning his participation in amateur performances indicate that the stage had a deep apron extending well forward from the curtain, perhaps somewhat after the design of the Georgian fore-stage. The mention of side entrances associated with the stage at the time of first opening reinforces the impression that this was very much the typical Georgian stage, complete with proscenium doors. There is evidence that the stage was fitted with several sets of grooves for the mounting of scenery. There seems also to have been adequate wing space although the theatre at no time had sufficient above-stage area to fly scenery.<sup>11</sup>

By 20 June all the arrangements were completed, and two days later Sothern's Lyceum opened with *The Willow Copse* and *The Mummy*. The press was again enthusiastic:

"Sothorn's Lyceum" began its career last night. The house was crowded from floor to ceiling, yet such are the excellent arrangements for ventilation, etc., that all was comfort and ease. We cannot compliment Mr. Sothorn too highly for the exquisite taste he has displayed in the interior decorations. Everything is chaste, elegant and costly, and in our opinion, as a dramatic temple, it is equal in every respect--except in size--to anything we have seen. There is a perfect absence of the usual vulgar glitter. All being in harmony before and behind the curtain.<sup>12</sup>

Although, of course, not got up with that large expenditure which is usual in the construction and decoration of large theatres, in wealthy cities, this edifice is really, with respect to the appearance of its interior, a little gem. The decorations and scenery are the handiwork of Mr. Selwyn; and...they reflect great credit, both upon his diligence and his taste and talent as an artist. Most of the scenery is quite new and of a beautiful description. No less pains have been taken to make the place convenient and comfortable, than to render it attractive to the public. We noticed that particular care had been taken to provide for the ventilation of the building, a precaution which seems more particularly necessary as it has been constructed with the special view of being a Summer Theatre.<sup>13</sup>

Sothorn's 1857 season was highly successful and he returned to Halifax to re-open the Lyceum during the winter of 1857-58. But the perennial problem of insufficient heat in the building tended to keep many Halifaxians away during the severe winter weather, and the season was such a financial disaster that in the early spring the Garrison Amateurs had to arrange a series of benefit productions to enable the company to return to the United States. Nonetheless, Sothorn again occupied the Lyceum for successful summer runs later in 1858 and again in 1859.

During the early years of the 1860's the theatre continued to be in frequent use, usually under its original name of Theatre Royal. No major changes seem to have been made in the building during this period, and most of the productions were presented by the various amateur groups, one of which, interestingly, called itself the E. A. Sothorn Dramatic Club. The general lack of visiting professional companies during these years is probably accounted for by the fact that the American Civil War was in progress, thus interrupting the annual summer flow of actors from New York and Boston.

With the end of the war, however, the stream of American dramatic companies was renewed and the stage of the Theatre Royal was again in demand. Among the first to lease the theatre was M. W. Fiske, arriving from Boston, whose company opened its engagement on 4 August 1865 with *The Ticket of Leave Man*. Fiske's

company was to become well known in Halifax, returning in 1866 and again in 1867. But although Fiske complained of the lack of a proper theatre in the city<sup>14</sup> he seems to have made no alterations in the Theatre Royal. The newspaper advertisements suggest that the seating was still arranged as Sothorn had designed, and there are no references to any other changes.

After 1868 the popularity of the Theatre Royal rapidly diminished. In that year T. Charles Howard, arriving in Halifax for the first time, took his company to Temperance Hall and renovated that building to make its stage suitable for dramatic performances. The result was that the other touring companies followed his example and chose what was now the larger, newer, and probably equally well equipped theatre. By 1870 the old theatre at Spring Gardens was seldom being used and when the Grace Egerton and George Case Company engaged it in July of that year they found it necessary to apologize to the theatre going public in their advertisement:

The permanent occupation of the Temperance Hall has compelled them to secure the Lyceum Theatre: their utmost attention will be given to make it clean and comfortable. <sup>15</sup>

The building had, of course, now served nearly twenty-five years as a theatre and had not been thoroughly renovated for thirteen years. It was probably in poor repair and undoubtedly as difficult to heat as ever, although the latter should not have provided any great problem during the summer months. Perhaps most important, it could only accommodate approximately one-half the audience of Temperance Hall. This important consideration was enough to sway the decision of any profit-conscious company manager.

The Theatre Royal building continued to exist throughout the 1870's and well into the 80's. It is possible that it might have been used from time to time by amateur groups during the early 70's. A surviving handbill (in the Nova Scotia Museum) gives notice of a Garrison Charity Benefit probably held there in December of 1873, but no newspaper advertisements for performances have been found between 1870 and 1874, and certainly no professional companies engaged it during this period. On 12 and 14 February 1874, however,



the old Theatre Royal re-opened its doors for what were probably its final performances. On these dates the Amateurs of the 60th Rifles presented the plays *Self-Accusation* and *Charles XII* followed by the burlesque *Black-Eyed Susan*. But the group does not appear to have used the theatre again. Their performances in December of the same year were presented in Temperance Hall, which was by now the site of all amateur, as well as professional theatricals.

The Theatre Royal at Spring Gardens was torn down, probably sometime in the fall of 1885, after a decade of "dark nights". The theatrical activity of Halifax was now centred at the new Academy of Music and the refurbished Temperance Hall, now known as the Lyceum Theatre.

#### NOTES

1. Most notable are those by Janet A. Maybee, "Theatre in Halifax, 1850-1880", M. A. Diss. Dalhousie 1965, and Sidney M. Oland, "Materials for a History of the Theatre in Early Halifax", M. A. Diss. Dalhousie 1966.
2. George Mullane, "The Professional Drama of Yesterday in Halifax", Unpublished paper of the Nova Scotia Historical Society, 1926, p. 18.
3. *Morning Post*, 5 Dec. 1846, p. 3, col. 1.
4. *Sun*, 4 Dec. 1846, p. 3, col. 1.
5. E. A. Saunders, "Old Halifax Theatres", *Commercial News*, May 1953, p. 20.
6. The front of the building is shown as extending to the sidewalk in H. W. Hopkins, *City Atlas of Halifax*, 1878.
7. *Sun*, 4 Aug. 1848, p. 2, col. 3.
8. *Sun*, 30 June 1856, p. 2, col. 3.
9. Mullane, p. 18.
10. *British Colonist*, 2 June 1857, p. 2, col. 4.
11. Vieth, *Recollections of the Crimean Campaign* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1907), pp. 124-131.
12. *British Colonist*, 23 June 1857, p. 2, col. 3.
13. *Acadian Recorder*, 20 June 1857, p. 3, col. 2.
14. *Evening Reporter*, 9 March 1867, p. 1, col. 6.
15. *Acadian Recorder*, 5 July 1870, p. 3, col. 7.