

# THE THEATRE IN SAINT JOHN\*

1789 — 1817

By J. RUSSELL HARPER

**T**HE buxom smiling actress, Madame La Tour, was one of the 17th Century toasts of Paris. Her portrait shows her in the role of Bellona, Goddess of War. She abandoned the French stage in the 1640's to join her husband at his fort built where the waters of the St. John River meet the Bay of Fundy. Here she played only the dramatic real life role of a primitive New World settlement's first lady. Many years later when Loyalists from the American colonies migrated to the same spot in 1783, the settlement which they founded was dignified with the imposing title "City of Saint John" becoming the first "city" in Canada. Its new residents brought with them a certain air of sophistication. Theatricals in the English and American style were a part of the community's new life. The following is a chronicle of the young actors and their praiseworthy if inadequate productions during the early years of this New Brunswick city.

An advertisement, two letters, and a critic's review describe the first dramatic performance in Saint John. They give the bare bald facts, omitting those little human touches which must have made the occasion warm and alive. However in honour of the historical event, the following quotations are inserted since they give all of the known details. The newspaper announcement reads:

For Public Charity  
On Saturday, 28th of February, 1789  
At Mallard's Long Room, King Street  
will be performed  
THE COMEDY OF  
THE BUSY BODY  
to which will be added  
WHO'S THE DUPE

The doors to be opened at half past Five. To  
begin precisely at half past Six O'clock.

Tickets at three shillings each, to be had at Mallard's. No money will be received at the door, nor any person admitted without a Ticket.

\*Material used in this article has been obtained from the files of the Archives of the New Brunswick Museum.

Colonel Edward Winslow, later a Judge and President of the Council of New Brunswick, came all of the way from Kingsclear near Fredericton to attend. It was a strenuous two-day journey. He brought with him a friend and the two men stayed with the Honourable Ward Chipman who was at the time Solicitor-General of the Province. Chipman was unable to go to the play on the 28th but went to a second presentation to which he refers in writing to Winslow on the 3rd of March:

Dear Winslow:

We were highly pleased with your theatrical jaunt—the description reached us just as we were setting off for the entertainment given us last evening by Miss Doyley and Company. Everything went off exceedingly well, and will, I hope from the success of it, be a prelude to other exhibitions of the same kind. You will get a particular description of everything from Murray Clopper & Co. who were present—The bottle of Sarsparilla Cherry for Ben's comfort upon the road, was sent to Sand's when you set off. It now goes by Clopper but as he knows how good it is, I have some doubts if it will reach you safe. In promise fair, however, he will also take your pen knife, case, razor, shoe buckles, &c which you left.

To which Winslow replied:

Dear Chip:

I wrote you that the remainder of our journey from Golders was perfectly pleasant. Ben and I have agreed and determined that we will live a few years longer for the jaunt. My belly is getting to its normal old size.

I am gratifyd at hearing that the play went off so well—& feel a little tickled that the prologue is as well received. It convinces me of the truth of an observation I made very seriously to Mr. Grady—That nonsense never fails to please if it is civil.

A local critic wrote of the performance in "The Royal Gazette":

Editorial—Saturday evening last, was presented before the most numerous and polite assembly which has appeared in this Town "The Busy Body" and "Who's the Dupe?" by a company of gentlemen. Mallard's Long Room on this occasion was converted into a pretty Theatre. The scenes, the decorations and the dresses were entirely new, and in general, well cast, and the characters supported with great life and humor. Some of the company displayed comic talents which would have done honor to the British theatre and it is justice to say that all exceeded the expectations of the most favorable of their friends. The applause of the assembly manifested the highest gratification in this the first dramatic exhibition in this Province.

So a "season" which lasted for three evenings, was launched in the Long Room of Mallard's Tavern. This was the building

bought them with  
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### Brunswick

il in answer to  
 act, 1795.

SIR CARSTON  
 Governor and  
 the Province of  
 &c. &c.  
 His Majesty's  
 Assembly.

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## THEATRE, KING-STREET.

For Public Charity.

On THURSDAY the 19th Instant,

WILL BE PERFORMED,

A COMEDY in Two Acts, called

### The Citizen;

To which will be added,

A FARCE, called

### The Upholsterer.

☞ The Doors to be opened at Half  
 past Five—To begin precisely at Half  
 past Six o'Clock.

N. B. The want of sufficient height  
 in the Theatre to allow the back Seats  
 a proper elevation; obliges the Mana-  
 gers to request of the Ladies, that they  
 will come with their heads as low dressed  
 as possible.

It is to be observed that the Seats are  
 all numbered, and the Tickets are not  
 generally for any Seat; but only for the  
 Seat of the same Number with the  
 Ticket.

☞ NO PERSON CAN, ON ANY  
 ACCOUNT, BE ADMITTED BE-  
 HIND THE SCENES.

No Money will be received at the  
 door, nor any Person admitted without  
 a Ticket.

TICKETS to be had at the Theatre.  
 St. John, Feb. 17. 1795.

### Artillery Bills,

Purposed to be drawn for between Two  
 and Three Hundred Pounds.

where New Brunswick's first legislature had met in 1786, where the first City Councils met until 1797, and where the province's first election riot took place in 1785. You might ask the names of the young gentlemen actors who added this theatrical incident to the somewhat imposing array of Mallard House firsts. To date, only those of Jonathan and Stephen Sewell have been traced. Funloving Jonathan who had written Winslow a befuddled letter after dancing all night at a New Year's ball a couple of months before, had just completed his apprenticeship with Ward Chipman. He was to become later Chief Justice of Quebec. He and his brother attended the Bristol Grammar School at which time their father wrote to Chipman:

You seem pleased with Jonathan's drawings, but if you are fond of music, his astounding proficiency on the violin, the best musical instrument in my opinion, would raise your admiration greatly. He now plays the overtures of the first masters with great correctness; but though I am pleased with his proficiency in these flimsy parts of education, which if they answer my intention, will serve as amusements to keep him out of mischief when he is from under my eye, I am much more pleased with his progress in the more estimable branches of literature. He is now at the head of the Grammar School, and acts as a kind of usher to his master, with whom he is a great favorite. . . Jonathan's powers are impetuous and penetrating, Stephen's are calm and solid—one submits judgment to rules, the other trusts to the quickness of his apprehension. Should they both be bred to the bar, Jonathan will turn out a most captivating orator and Stephen the most thorough lawyer.

Jonathan acted in the Grammar School plays. The great Sarah Siddons was a guest during an evening of his acting after which, for his extraordinary performance, she wrote a poem lauding the "young Heaven-taught Sewell."

Six years later a similar group of Saint John citizens presented more plays for public charity in the same Mallard House room. On this later occasion, we are told that "the want of sufficient height in the theatre to allow the back seats to be raised to a proper elevation" obliged the Manager to issue a strict warning that Ladies come with "their hair dressed as low as possible." Seats were all reserved (with detailed instructions on the meaning, since the idea was evidently unknown to most of the patrons), and no person, on any account, was to be admitted behind the Scenes. Two plays an evening were given in the very first performance in the city, and the fashion continued for many years. On January 12th, 1795, the comedy of "The Impostor" was billed with the farce of "All the World's a Stage"; on February 19th "The Citizen" and "The Upholsterer" ap-

peared together, and on March 10th "Everyone Has His Faults" with, once more, "All the World's a Stage." The latter play must have caught the local imagination—spicy letters punning on the title were written to the editors on the pros and cons of the theatre. Incidentally, "a new scene with Partridge Island and the Light House as a backdrop for the singing of 'Heaving the Lead'" was introduced on the night of the 10th between the Fourth and Fifth Act, and "by popular request previous to the farce was spoken Mr. Garrick's celebrated Prologue to *Barbarossa* in the character of a country boy." Mr. Ebenezer Putnam who was a young store keeper and Judge Putnam's delicate son, spoke most of the prologues and epilogues in that year. Some are printed in full in the newspaper. One, with an obvious eye to local appeal, tells of Saint John's birth:

What rais's this City on a dreary coast,  
 Alternately presenting rocks and frost,  
 Where torpid shell-fish hardly found a bed,  
 Where scarce a pine durst show a stunted head?

Twas commerce—commerce smooth'd the rugged strand,  
 Her streets and buildings overspread the land;  
 Her piers the mighty Fundy's tides control,  
 And navies ride secure within her mole.

Yet what are these without the muse's aid,  
 When swindlers circumvent, or thieves invade:  
 Or credit staggers with misfortunes stroke,  
 Or brightest speculation ends in smoke;  
 When toil on toil, on labor labor pours,  
 Or dire impends the task—of vacant hours!

The producer attached much importance to such openings and closings. The *Gazette* describes how Mr. Putnam was pushed forcibly on the stage amidst much humor, to begin:

No, no, I can't. By jove, I'd rather die  
 Than speak it now—It is so cursed dry!  
 Confound the Epilogue!

The theatrical young gentlemen had made a profit of \$60. by the 14th of February which they wished to expend on relief, and asked to be made aware of any needy cases. Letters and editorials appeared weekly, one instructing the "Assembly to stand thunderstruck" at the performance and others suggesting that "God help the Gentlemen of the Theatre". The theatre operated for a successful two and a half months. Mr. Hackley and Mr. Maginnis with their rival puppet shows of "Babes in the Wood" and "Whittington and the Cat" moved into the city

immediately following its close. They hoped to capitalize on the thirst for entertainment which seemed to have seized all in Saint John.

Excitement abated until Mr. Marriott came to Saint John late in 1798 and set about making a bid for a place in the city's history, dramatic and otherwise. The Saint John Gazette advertisement in December says:

Mr. Marriott—Begs leave to inform the Public of St. John that he sells Soups, Broths, Beef and Mutton Steaks at the lowest prices at a minute's warning—Dinners dressed and sent out at an hour's notice—Suppers &c. Turtles dressed in the English mode—Mock ditto—made by one day's notice—Mutton, Pork and Beef Sausages—Partridges, Ducks, Geese &c.—Spirits, Brandies, Gin, Purl, Wines, &c., at the Sign of the Red Cross, King Street.

N.B. Also, Shaving, Hair-dressing &c. on the most reasonable terms.

Business was not good. The irrepressible man announced that on March 6th he intended opening a school for the teaching of English and Latin grammar, fencing if required, art, writing, and cyphering. He undertook to teach young gentlemen to speak emphatically and "from a thorough knowledge of the English tongue, flatters himself with the idea of accomplishing his Pupils in a short time with those rudiments necessary for education." Concurrently he advertised a performance of "Douglas, The Noble Scotch Shepherd" by himself and Mrs. Marriott assisted by a Lady and Gentleman of the City and "A young Lady instructed for that purpose." After Scotch songs, the demonstration of a Bengal Light by which the audience should be able to discern 2,000 faces and persons in the dark, the whole was to conclude with a grand artificial Fire Work! The scenery was entirely new and several gentlemen had promised to form a band of music; they were obviously not unionized. Mr. Marriott engaged Mr. Munson Jarvis's store for the performance, found it too small, and after a postponement, took over the main room in the Exchange Coffee House for an evening.

"Douglas" was so popular in Saint John that it deserves special mention. The play was written by the Rev. John Home for which he received his fellow clerics' condemnation. It was based on the popular Scottish ballad "Childe Maurice", and acted first in 1756. Sheridan acclaimed while Dr. Samuel Johnson soundly berated the play. Peg Woffington's superb performance at Convent Garden won for the piece an established

place in the repertory theatre; later Sarah Siddons played its Lady Randolph many times. During Saint John's earlier days two different companies gave at least four productions. Mr. Marriott billed it in a second performance with Congreve's comedy, "Love for Love", as a companion presentation.

Undoubtedly Marriott's heart was in the theatre, even if he acted the hosteler or tonsorial artist in real life to make a living. He opened the Thespian Hotel on Tyng (now Princess) Street where he organized a Monday evening Spouting Club during the summer months. Here he invited club members to provide epilogues, prologues, and speeches as the gentlemen lingered over their drinks. Not content with McPherson's famous old Exchange Coffee House on the Market Square as a theatre, Marriott erected a stage in his own hotel and gave summer benefits for both himself and Mrs. Marriott where plays were supplemented with pantomimic interludes and country dances in character. But with the approach of autumn, he and Mrs. Marriott closed their business, packed their bags, and were heard of no more in the city.

Seeds sown in the Spouting Club may possibly have generated and borne fruit, for on October 3rd, 1800, there is the following entry in the City Council minutes:

Read a petition from William Botsford, William Simonds, George Leonard Jr. and Charles J. Peters, praying on behalf of themselves and other young gentlemen of the city, leave to fit up the city hall for the purpose of a theatre. Ordered: that the prayer of the same petition be granted, upon condition that they enter into security that no damages be done, and that if any is done, the same hall shall be restored to its original state in every respect, and that the condition of the same buildings shall be examined at the close of the season by Aldermans Haddon and Anderson and Asst. Alderman Schurman. And further that the said parties shall have the same building insured against the casualties of fire happening by reason of the theatre being erected therein, to the amount of one thousand pounds, and that proper instruments for the purpose be immediately made out as executed.

The City Hall was erected in the Market Square in 1797. A store and police lock-up was in the basement, the market on the ground floor, and a second floor, reached by an outside stairs and balcony, contained the Council Chambers and Court Room. Presumably the theatre was located in the upper storey.

The council could entertain no question of the petition not being granted—it was signed by the leading younger gentlemen of the "Snob Circle" who controlled contemporary political

affairs in contrast to the rather boorish, despised and somewhat noisy "Lower Cove" radicals. Genial and kindly William Botsford was a 27 year old lawyer, a graduate of Yale, and the son of Amos Botsford, first Speaker of the New Brunswick House of Assembly. He filled the same role as his father at a later date and then progressed to the Bench, dying at a ripe old age filled with honours. William Simonds was a young store-keeper of the prominent pre-Loyalist Simonds family who had started a trading post at the mouth of the Saint John River in 1763. George Leonard, Jr., an attorney, was the son of the influential Honourable George Leonard who was a Legislative Councillor and a potent force in Saint John and in his hometown, Sussex. The fourth of the aristocrats, Charles J. Peters, whose lovely old classic house stands still in the heart of the city, was another lawyer and Attorney-General of the province from 1828 to 1848. The young bloods advertised themselves as "The St. John Theatre", and ended their play bills patriotically with "Vivant Britannicorum Rex and Regina." The Latin phrasing is not inappropriate where the organization was so predominantly overcrowded with the legal profession. Two of the 1801 plays, Sheridan's "School for Scandal" and Goldsmith's "She Stoops to Conquer" are still headliners. Goldsmith's prestige stood particularly high at the time. People remembered that Johnston had been his personal friend, how Burke had burst into tears and Reynolds, a most beloved companion, had given up painting for a day at the news of his passing in 1774.

Travelling wax works museums, panoramic displays and the like were the only other entertainments in the city until Saint John's first exclusively theatrical building was erected in Drury Lane. Possibly this happened as early as 1805, but certainly before 1808, for in that year a ventriloquist gave a demonstration there. A hand bill a couple of years later lists the acts of a travelling entertainer:

For One Night Only  
Theatre, Drury-Lane, Saint John  
on Wed. May 16th  
Mr. Powell will give his Attick Entertainment  
THE EVENING BRUSH

For  
Rubbing Off the Rust of Care  
Subject for Laughter

Butchers in Heroicks—Tragedy Tailors—Wooden Actors—Blunderers  
and Bogglers—An Actor reading his part without Eyes, Etc.

To be interspersed with several appropriate  
Comic Songs, viz.



Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Human Life,  
 Darby Logan's Passage from Dublin to London,  
 The Coach Box,

The Golden Days of good Queen Bess  
 To which will be added a Whimsical and Critical  
 Dissertation on Noses:

The Ruby Nose,  
 Roman Nose of old Ben Blunderbuss,  
 The Prognosticating Snout of Goody Screech Owl, Etc. Etc.

The whole to conclude with a song  
 Modernized by Mr. Powell  
 Giving a whimsical description of the  
 BATTLE OF THE NILE,

To be sung in the character of a French officer.

Tickets and places for the Boxes to be taken of Mr. McCarthy  
 at Mr. Powell's Lodgings, on Monday next; and as the number  
 of tickets will be limited, if they should be sold, no more will  
 be issued nor any money admitted at the door.

Boxes 5/

Gallery 2/6

Other vaudeville performances were held in places like "Mr. John Steven's House next door to Mr. McKee's Cooperage"; expense there would be far less than if the company were obliged to pay the high rental of the Drury Lane Theatre. Such were the acts of Mr. Robertson, late of Mr. Astley's Amphitheatre, London, produced cheaply wherever the travelling company could arrange to make a stand. Robertson proclaims that he will imitate the blackbird, thrush, mocking bird and others to music, dance the hornpipe in the character of a British tar, do tumbling feats, and then Mrs. Robertson proposes to "dance among 20 eggs blindfolded without breaking any—being her FIRST appearance." One is constrained to query "and her last". The whole concludes with Mr. Robertson doing an astonishing feat called the Antipodean Caledonian whirligig in which he revolves upon his head on a table at the rate of 250 times a minute.

Saint John's legitimate theatre had to present colourful fare to compete with such striking vaudeville performances. A new player's group called "His Majesty's Servants" (local gentlemen), formed in 1815, produced "Zorinski", "Speed the Plough", "John Bull", "Brave Irishman" and other plays at Drury Lane. Tickets went on sale at the Green Room three days before the performance. At the same time the theatre was dignified with the elegant title of "His Majesty's", and the

gentlemen published their first actual *dramatis personae*. The actors were still drawn largely from the legal profession. Lord Randolph of that perennial favourite, "Douglas", was played by Mr. Allen son of Judge Allen, and Douglas by the Honourable Nathan Parker. Parker was then only 17 years old. He had been educated both in Devonshire and at the Saint John Grammar School and was just commencing his apprenticeship in Ward Chipman's office prior to his life as a lawyer and judge. Men played the women's roles—evidently it was not then considered quite nice for the daughters of the leading citizens of Saint John to appear on the stage and with a nice sense of decorum the young men sought assistance from no other strata of society.

But Drury Lane's days were becoming less balmy. This theatrical interlude is prolonged only to tell of its last years as a theatre. The building was sold by the Sheriff on July 8th, 1816, and the young gentlemen moved out. They put on their next plays, "The Magpie and the Maid" and "Raising the Wind" in Mr. Green's store. The new owners attempted to continue Drury Lane's theatrical life with the introduction of a professional company which, by the way, seems to have produced Saint John's first Shakespeare—"Romeo and Juliet." The manager possibly overplayed his hand in the resuscitation attempt, for plays of an allegedly ribald nature prompted another flood of letters to the paper, most of them demanding that the Mayor have the company suppressed. The editor published in all fairness a reply to the charges which suggests that

Honor and shame from no condition rise,  
Act well your part—there all the honor lies.

The letter, pointing to the talents of Shakespeare and the refined morality of a Garrick or a Kemble, is astonished at the crude reflections voiced already by others.

Even with such publicity to bring in patrons from a sense of curiosity if for no other reasons, finances did not improve, and Mr. West opened New Brunswick's first Madras School in the defunct "City Theatre, York Point", in July, 1818. The announcement strips away all of the splendour of "His Majesty's—Drury Lane", but in succeeding years this, Saint John's first real theatre, was followed by such well-known buildings as Hopley's, Lanegran's, the elegant Academy of Music, and the Saint John Opera House which still stands, boarded up, on Union Street, forgotten and unknown to the passerby