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A survey of professional operatic entertainment in Little Rock, Arkansas: 1870-1900

Jenna M. Tucker

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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**A SURVEY OF PROFESSIONAL OPERATIC ENTERTAINMENT
IN LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS: 1870-1900**

A Monograph
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
In
The School of Music

by
Jenna Tucker
B.M., Ouachita Baptist University, 2002
M.M., Louisiana State University, 2004
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ABSTRACT

The late nineteenth century was a time of great political, economic, and social change in the state of Arkansas. The population of Little Rock, the state capital, nearly tripled in the last thirty years of the century. As more people settled in Little Rock, the demand for entertainment grew. Poor transportation was an initial obstacle; but as railroads gradually linked Little Rock to larger cities, traveling professional theatrical troupes began to include Little Rock on their itineraries.

The purpose of this project is to document the history of professional operatic entertainment in Little Rock, Arkansas, from 1870—when the first professional opera troupe visited the city—until the end of the century. The first chapter is a brief historical sketch of the state of Arkansas, the city of Little Rock, and the early professional theatrical performances in Little Rock. Chapters two through four present a chronology of Little Rock's operatic stage from February 1870 through December 1899. These chapters record the performers that visited the city, the operas they presented, and the reception that was tendered them by Little Rock theatre-goers.

INTRODUCTION

The late nineteenth century was a time of great political, economic, and social change in the state of Arkansas. What had long been regarded as a frontier state was now struggling for a position within the “New South”, and was faced with such challenges as urbanization and competition in the national economic market.¹ Little Rock, the state capital, experienced a population surge--from 12,380 residents in 1870 to 38,307 residents in 1900.² As more people settled in Little Rock, the demand for entertainment grew. Poor transportation was an initial obstacle; but as railroads gradually linked Little Rock to larger cities, traveling professional theatrical troupes began to include Little Rock on their itineraries.

The purpose of this project is to document the history of professional operatic entertainment in Little Rock, Arkansas, from 1870—when the first professional opera troupe visited the city—until the end of the century. For the purposes of this study, professional operatic entertainment will be defined as opera, operetta, or concerts whose programs featured fully staged excerpts from opera or operetta. While many traveling troupes called themselves “opera companies,” some presented popular genres that were not truly opera, rich in spectacle but lacking musical and dramatic substance; therefore, any performance labeled as a spectacle, extravaganza, or burlesque is excluded from the scope of this study.

The first chapter is a brief historical sketch of the state of Arkansas, the city of Little Rock, and the early professional theatrical performances in Little Rock. The chapter focuses on

¹ Carl H. Moneyhon, *Arkansas and the New South 1874-1929* (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1997), xi.

² James W. Bell, “Little Rock (Pulaski County)” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*; available <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>; Internet; accessed 10 April 2008.

the political, economic, and social forces at work in Arkansas from its territory days through the end of the century, and the impact of these forces on Little Rock and on its theatrical life.

Chapters two through four present a chronology of Little Rock's operatic stage from February 1870 through December 1899. These chapters record the performers that visited the city, the operas they presented, and the reception that was tendered them by Little Rock theatre-goers. An attempt is made to provide detailed information on the professional troupes, notable individuals, and lesser-known operas, when such information is available.

The largest sources of information for this project are the newspapers from this time period. The *Arkansas Gazette* serves as the primary source, as it is the only newspaper that ran the entire length of the study period. The *Gazette* also covered the city's theatrical life with the most detail and consistency. When possible, parallel accounts from other newspapers are taken into consideration. Issues of the *Morning Republican* are available through 1875; and the *Arkansas Democrat* is available beginning in October 1878, but the issues from June 1892 through January 1898 are missing. There are many contemporary accounts of performances and information about individual performers available in the form of musical periodicals, encyclopedias, and personal memoirs; these sources are referenced as often as they are available. Other sources include secondary sources in the form of books and journal articles on Arkansas history, opera and musical theater history, and Arkansas theatrical history.

Like any study, this project is limited by the information that is available. None of the Little Rock theatres at the center of this study or any of the theatres' records detailing their theatrical seasons have survived. The only source of information for constructing the city's theatrical chronology comes from the newspapers; therefore the study is limited to only those performances the newspapers chose to cover.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Beginnings

The land that would become the state of Arkansas was acquired by the United States in October 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase.³ In March 1804, the United States divided the Louisiana Purchase along the thirty-third parallel, which remains the current division between the states of Arkansas and Louisiana. The United States called the southern region the territory of Orleans, and the northern portion (which included present-day Arkansas) the District of Louisiana. The area first bore the name “Arkansas” in 1806 when it was designated as the District of Arkansas within the Louisiana Territory.⁴ In 1812, the Orleans territory became the State of Louisiana, and the “old” Louisiana Territory was absorbed by the newly-created Missouri Territory. When Missouri applied for statehood in 1818, Arkansas petitioned for territory status, which was granted by Congress on March 2, 1819 with the capital located at Arkansas Post, a trading settlement near the junction of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers.⁵

Arkansas Post was most likely chosen as the territorial capital since it was the oldest settlement in the region. It became clear, however, that the location of Arkansas Post was not an ideal site for the capital of the newly-formed territory. Its location at the mouth of the Arkansas River put the capital on the eastern perimeter of the territory and made it susceptible to flooding.

³Frederick Hampton Roy, Charles Witsell and Cheryl Griffith Nichols, *How We Lived: Little Rock as an American City* (Little Rock: August House, 1984), 11-12.

⁴S. Charles Bolton, “Louisiana Purchase through Early Statehood,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*; available from <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>; Internet; accessed 18 August 2009.

⁵Ira Don Richards, *Story of a Rivertown: Little Rock in the Nineteenth Century* (Benton, Ark., 1969), 5.

In an effort to establish a more centrally-located capital, the territorial government began considering a budding settlement farther west situated near a bluff of rocks on the Arkansas River.⁶

The Birth of a Capital

In a 1721-22 expedition up the Arkansas River from Arkansas Post, Bernard de la Harpe noted an outcropping of rock on the south bank, the first such formation that he encountered on his journey up-river. The area was often referred to early on as the “point of rocks”; but was also referred to as “little rock” when compared to a larger rock formation, “big rock”, approximately fifty miles upriver. From its earliest stages of discovery, its potential as a future town site was evident, and it later attracted the attention of territory leaders seeking a new site for the capital. Not only was it centrally located in the territory, it was also located on the only two routes through the territory—the Arkansas River and the Southwest trail, a land trail linking St. Louis with the Southwest. Unlike Arkansas Post, its higher elevation safeguarded it from any real threat of flooding.⁷

As early as 1819, speculators began laying claims to large parcels of land. A dispute soon arose between two groups of speculators, both claiming to have legal rights over the area. The first group was in possession of “New Madrid Certificates”, issued by the United States government to those who had lost land in the earthquake that struck Arkansas in 1811-12. Holders of such certificates were authorized to claim public land equal to the amount that was lost in the earthquakes. The other group claimed to have the right of pre-emption, the privilege of “first-pick” granted by the United States to squatters in the area when the land on which they

⁶ Roy, Witsell and Nichols, *How We Lived*, 14.

⁷ Ibid., 11-12, 17.

lived was made available to the public. Williams Russell had purchased such rights from a number of squatters, and thus argued that his rights superseded the New Madrid Certificates. This dispute lasted for two years, during which time the territorial legislature voted to make Little Rock the territory capital. By November 1821, the two speculators had reached a compromise, and the town of Little Rock was born.⁸

Because of its central location and a lack of any other urban centers in the area, the fledgling capital experienced growth that can best be described as “unspectacular but steady.”⁹ In 1820, the “town” consisted of twelve or thirteen white male residents, one frame building, and three or four log huts. By 1833, the population had increased to 665; and by the time Arkansas achieved statehood in June 1836, the capital boasted 726 residents.¹⁰

The establishment of transportation to and from Little Rock was crucial to ensuring the city’s developmental success. At the city’s founding in 1821, the only transportation options were the Southwest Trail and the Arkansas River, both of which posed difficulties for travelers.¹¹ River transportation was greatly limited at first, the only crafts navigating the Arkansas River being keelboats and pirogues. A great boon to transportation occurred on March 16, 1822, when *The Eagle* became the first steamboat to dock in Little Rock. Throughout the 1830’s at least one steamer docked in the city, bringing with it supplies necessary for civilization.¹² In 1824,

⁸ Ibid., 17, 19.

⁹ Jim Lester and Judy Lester, *Greater Little Rock* (Norfolk, Va: Donning, 1986.), 20.

¹⁰ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 12-13.

¹¹ Roy, Witsell and Nichols, *How We Lived*, 19.

¹² Lester, *Greater Little Rock*, 20.

Congress released \$15,000 for the construction of a road from Little Rock to Memphis--the closest urban center--which was completed in 1827.

In spite of the city's limited contact with other urban centers, citizens exhibited an interest in culture and entertainment. The 1820's saw the formation of The Little Rock Debating Club; and the Arkansas Gazette, Arkansas's oldest and longest-running newspaper, began circulation. Further diversions were introduced in the 1830's: the Little Rock Jockey Club for horseracing opened in 1834, and in 1835, the Little Rock Thalian Society produced the first amateur theatrical production.¹³

The First Theatrical Season

In July 1838, a group of prominent Little Rock citizens met to discuss the construction of a theatre. Those present at the meeting believed that the construction of a theatre would "increase the importance of the city in the eyes of strangers ...increase the population, and add to the prosperity of the place."¹⁴ To finance the venture, the committee recommended the formation of a joint stock company, with 150 shares of stock available for subscription. By August, most of the stock had been subscribed and the project seemed to be underway. For whatever reason, however, the project must have been abandoned, for no further mention of the theatre or the joint stock company can be found in the newspapers after September 26th.¹⁵

Despite lacking a proper theatre, the citizens of Little Rock enjoyed their first professional theatrical performance in December 1838. Manager Sam Waters brought his troupe

¹³ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 12, 15.

¹⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 25 July 1838.

¹⁵ D. Allen Stokes, "The First Theatrical Season in Arkansas: Little Rock, 1838-1839," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1964), 166-168.

from Nashville, TN, and occupied McLane and Badgett's warehouse, located in Shell Alley between Main and Louisiana Streets. This early performing space was quite rudimentary, lacking both a curtain and scenery.¹⁶ A lack of an elegant setting did not seem to dampen the enthusiasm of the audiences. The *Times and Advocate* pronounced that the "company altogether, is not inferior to many of those in large cities." The *Arkansas Gazette* agreed, saying that the company "afforded much satisfaction and amusement to a crowded audience."¹⁷

Encouraged by his success, Manager Waters chose to remain in the city and present a full season of drama. He rented the Arcade building on Elm Street and remodeled it into a theatre, expanding the building back to the riverbank in order to accommodate an audience of 400-500. The new theatre featured a drop scene painted by a local artist, as well as boxes, "comfortably arranged for the accommodation of the ladies, who may now venture to lend the light of their countenance to the first attempt to introduce the drama into our infant, without the fear of personal inconvenience or discomfort."¹⁸ In his article detailing the first season of drama in Little Rock, D. Allen Stokes explains that respectable women refused to be seen on the main floor of a theatre, as they ran the risk of being mistaken for prostitutes. The construction of theatrical boxes provided the ladies of the Little Rock elite with a measure of privacy and protection from the lower classes of society.¹⁹

The Little Rock Theatre opened on January 16, 1839, to a large audience. The construction of boxes must have been a hit, as the *Arkansas Gazette* took pleasure in noting that

¹⁶Denham Wooten, "The History of the Theater in Arkansas," *Arkansas Gazette Magazine*, 17 November 1935, 1.

¹⁷ Quoted in Stokes, "The First Theatrical Season," 170-171.

¹⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 16 January 1839, quoted in Stokes, "The First Theatrical Season," 172.

¹⁹Stokes, "First Theatrical Season," 172-173.

the “dress circle” was filled with a great share of the beauty and fashion of the city, which will vie with any in the Union, for appearance and proportionate numbers.” The pieces presented were *Charles the Second* and *The Young Widow*; and once again the Waters Company was well received. “For a small company,” noted the *Gazette*, “the performers are very effective, and combine considerable dramatic talent—sufficient, at all events, to render their acting highly amusing, and frequently intensely interesting, as the tearful eyes of a portion of the audience sometimes testify.”²⁰

The Waters Company remained in Little Rock until early May, when the impending summer heat forced the theatre to close its doors. Overall, the company was well-received, though the season was not without its difficulties and the critics not without complaints. On May 8, the editor of the *Gazette* offered a critique of the season, printed below in its entirety.

The Theatre is closed for the season. The performances, latterly, from various causes, have been dull, and the houses thin. Most of the performers have left town. We hope when it is opened again, that the performances may be of a somewhat different cast, than many which have been got up for the amusement of our population. The attempts at tragedy and spectacle have sometimes been ludicrous. When we went with the expectation of being interested with a fine display of the loftier and subtler passions incident to our nature, we were often amused and convulsed with laughter. Not but that those who enacted the principal characters in tragedy, were very respectable, and even talented, and in some instances well supported, yet the bad reading, and wretched supplying of forgotten passages, by those sustaining the lower characters, threw an air of ridicule over the whole performance, which not the finest acting in the world by those who performed the principal and secondary parts of the piece could redeem.

As to the attempts which have been made to astonish us with displays of splendid spectacles, the money expended in them would generally have been better applied to the replenishment of the wardrobe of the establishment, and to procuring new scenery for giving effect to the pieces most proper to be performed on a small stage and by a limited company. Pieces of this description are not worth witnessing, unless in a large house, and with everything working well, so as to make the illusion complete; which can never

²⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 23 January 1839.

be the case when the supernumeraries employed are every day familiar with the whole audience in the ordinary occupations of life.

Let the manager hereafter select some of the older legitimate comedies, for the principal piece, and wind up with a light farce, with a dance or song between, and the theatre will be popular; but we, in common with a good many others, hope never to see Shakespeare murdered again, or birds made to fly when we can see the wires which support them.

On the whole, however, the performances at our theatre have been very respectable for a new country, and better than could be expected for a first regular attempt to establish the drama in the wilderness; and it should not be forgotten that its practical effect has been to draw a portion of our population from the haunts of vice and dissipation, to attend representations of a comparatively innocent and moral tendency.²¹

Discouraging Times

According to Michael Dougan, in his book *Arkansas Odyssey*, “Arkansas history can best be viewed as a tug of war between two polar opposites, modernizers on one side and traditionalists on the other.” According to Dougan, the “modernizers” were marked by “a strong commitment to education, agriculture and industrial development, a belief in the equality of all persons before the law, an active state government, and taxation as necessary.” “Traditionalists”, on the other hand, demonstrated a “weak commitment to education”, preferred “agricultural self-sufficiency”, and showed “little interest in industry”. Traditionalists generally opposed change, supported white male supremacy, and preferred a “passive role for the state marked by a strong commitment to local self government and a persistent opposition to taxes.”²²

This conflict between modernity and tradition was apparent even during the infancy years of statehood, which were economically prosperous. In 1837, the state boasted a \$50,000 surplus.

²¹*Arkansas Gazette*, 8 May 1839.

²² Michael B. Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey: The Saga of Arkansas from Prehistoric Times to Present: A History*, (Little Rock, Ark: Rose Publishing Co., 1994), 7.

While modernizers wanted to establish a state university, traditionalists instead legislated a tax cut.²³ The state made another attempt at modernization by chartering two banks: the Real Estate Bank, servicing the farmers and planters, and the State Bank, servicing the merchant community. The banks were funded by state bonds, with the Real Estate bank receiving two million dollars, and the State bank receiving approximately half a million dollars.²⁴ According to Arkansas historian Carl Moneyhon, Arkansas' first banking experiment was a short-lived failure: "Through mismanagement, bad loans, and criminal malfeasance, all in the face of a national banking panic, the managers of these banks destroyed both institutions within five years. When the state attempted to recoup its losses, it found that many of the loans were made with inadequate or no collateral and that the state would have to pay off the bonds on its own."²⁵

The banking failure prompted the state legislature in 1844 to adopt the first amendment to the state constitution which read "No bank or banking institution shall be hereafter incorporated or established in the State."²⁶ The fall of the banks was another win for the traditionalists, and the economic hard times that followed gave credence to the traditional views in the eyes of many citizens. As Dougan aptly stated, "progress had been tried, and it had failed."²⁷

In the 1840's, Little Rock's rate of growth slowed significantly from the population surge of 1819-1840. In the twenty years from 1840 to 1860, Little Rock's population doubled in size; which seems impressive until compared with Memphis, whose population increased

²³ Ibid., 89.

²⁴ Ibid., 89; Carl H. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994.), 83.

²⁵ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 83.

²⁶ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 92.

²⁷ Ibid., 93.

approximately fifteen times from its 1840 population.²⁸ One reason for this slow growth was that the state of Arkansas was still a frontier state, a jumping-off point for those headed west. While many people poured into the city in the 1840's, very few stayed. Some passed through Little Rock on the Southwest Trail from St. Louis, while others utilized the Memphis-Little Rock Road on their way to the gold fields of California.²⁹

Another reason for the city's lagging population was that Arkansas was still predominantly rural, with most of its residents tied to the farm. In 1860, only four Arkansas cities contained over 1000 people: Camden, Fort Smith, Pine Bluff, and Little Rock; and their combined population of 6811 comprised only 1.5 percent of the state's population.³⁰ However, it was the state's agrarian interests that would lead to an economic boom in the 1850's, and help change the state's image from a frontier state to a Southern state.

The discouraging economic conditions of the 1840's and the lagging population most likely stunted the theatrical growth in the city as well. In December of 1839, Sam Waters returned to Little Rock with another dramatic troupe. The theatre opened on December 10, and the *Gazette* noted several improvements made to the theatre, including a new drop curtain.³¹ The Waters troupe remained in the city for less than three months, playing their final engagement on Feb. 25th. In the next morning's *Gazette*, hope was expressed "that a more suitable building will be erected... the present one being exceedingly inconvenient and badly adapted for the purpose. It was originally constructed for a stable, then converted into a grocery, before it was devoted to

²⁸ Ibid., 116.

²⁹ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 30.

³⁰ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 53.

³¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 11 December 1839.

the drama.”³² Ironically, the theatre burned to the ground the very next day on Feb. 27th, 1840. Local investors were unwilling to finance a new theatre due to poor returns on the recent season. In fact, the troupe had to leave town without receiving their last month’s pay. A less than favorable economic climate, a population of people resistant to change, and no theatre space prevented Little Rock from having any professional theatre for the next eighteen years.³³

Prosperous Times

By the 1850’s, many Arkansas farmers had abandoned their small-scale subsistence farming methods in favor of plantation agriculture and the cultivation of cotton as a cash crop. Cotton became the driving force of the state’s economy in the 1850’s. In 1850, the state produced 20,000,000 pounds of cotton; and by the end of the decade, that amount had increased to 150,000,000 pounds.³⁴ This rise of plantation agriculture was a result of land incentives offered by both federal and state governments, which gave the opportunity for new settlement, but moreover for existing farmers to increase their holdings.

While cotton did bring a greater degree of economic prosperity to the state, it did not bring economic independence. The state was fettered economically to institutions outside of the state due to the wide-spread use of credit. Planters and farmers relied heavily on credit, the source of which existed primarily in New Orleans. Carl Moneyhon described the economic hold that New Orleans had over Arkansas farmers:

Factors and commission merchants of that city [New Orleans] often purchased and forwarded supplies to Arkansas planters and farmers on credit extended

³²*Gazette*, 26 February 1840.

³³ Wooten, “The History of the Theatre in Arkansas,” 14.

³⁴ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 175.

against the next year's crop. The factor or merchant then took that crop on consignment, sold it, took a percentage of the sale price for his marketing services, and then charged the planter for the supplies and interest that had been advanced.³⁵

Because most of the cotton money was leaving the state, there was little capital available for the development of other economic opportunities. Those who sought to grow something other than cotton, or those who wished to pursue retail or industry in the state found that those who supported their endeavors did not have the money to back them. Those who had the money were only interested in investing in more cotton.³⁶

While the 1850's was a time of economic prosperity for the state, its economic dependence on cotton meant that success depended upon largely uncontrollable factors such as weather and cotton market prices. While these factors worked favorably for the state during this decade, the very same factors would prove disastrous for the state in the years following the Civil War.³⁷

The development of plantation agriculture impacted the social climate of the state. Many still regarded the state as a rugged frontier inhabited by the "dregs of the older sections of the nation"³⁸, a perception that would regrettably remain with the state into the twentieth century. Yet the cotton boom had attracted new settlers, many of whom were literate and professed church affiliation. As they settled in Arkansas, they brought with them higher standards of

³⁵Moneyhon, *Impact*, 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

conduct from the areas they had left.³⁹ Further, many existing inhabitants increased their wealth, thus establishing the earliest determinant of class in antebellum Arkansas: wealth.

Except for wealth, there were few social or cultural differences among the social classes in antebellum Arkansas. Members of the elite class in 1860 received limited schooling, though they began setting themselves apart from other social classes by providing formal education—which often included college—for their children. Because they did have more money and leisure time than the lower classes, they often pursued cultural interests as well. These distinctions were still in the developmental stage in the antebellum period, but would later help set the elite class apart from the rest of society in the years after the Civil War.⁴⁰

The flush times of the 1850's and the rise of an elite class interested in cultural pursuits created a favorable climate for theatre to return once again to Little Rock. In February 1858, John Robbins constructed a building for theatrical purposes. The bottom floor served as a mercantile, while the upper story for a theatre and town meeting hall. In July 1858, Robbins leased the theatre to Nick Moroney of the Memphis Theatrical Company. The theatre opened on October 28, 1858, and enjoyed a highly successful season. Over the summer, the theatre was remodeled in anticipation of another good season. The stage was enlarged and the rear seats in the audience were elevated so as to provide everyone with a good view of the stage. The theatre opened for the 1859-60 season on October 1, with a large stock company consisting of twelve men and six women.⁴¹

³⁹ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 177.

⁴⁰ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 36, 39-40, 42.

⁴¹ Denham Wooten, "The History of the Theater in Arkansas," *The Arkansas Gazette Magazine*, 24 November 1935.

In August of 1860, a member of the previous season's troupe returned to Little Rock in hopes of forming another company for the next dramatic season. By this time, however, Little Rock was too embroiled in the talk of war and secession to think too much about theatre.⁴² When the war broke out in the spring of 1861, the ladies of Little Rock met at the theatre each morning to make uniforms for the Confederate soldiers.⁴³ The theatre remained open during the war, playing host to lower class variety entertainment and minstrel shows. Little Rock would not see any legitimate theatre again until well after the end of the war.

The Birth of the Railroad

From the time of Little Rock's birth until the Civil War, the river was the primary means of transportation, followed by roads, whose usefulness were dependent solely upon the weather. Many Little Rock citizens recognized that the growth of the city hinged upon the implementation of vital internal improvements such as railroads. Little Rock lagged behind its closest urban neighbor, Memphis, in railroad development. By 1861, Memphis had rail access to the Atlantic Ocean, as well as to the cities of Louisville and New Orleans.⁴⁴

The primary hindrance to Arkansas railroad development was a spirit of "localism" that dominated the state during the antebellum period.⁴⁵ Because Arkansas was still predominantly rural, many families lived in isolation. This provincialism prevented many citizens from being overly concerned with internal improvement projects that would benefit the state as a whole. On

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Margaret Ross, "Some Memories of the Old Robbins Theater: A True Little Rock Landmark," *Arkansas Gazette*, 26 June 1960.

⁴⁴Edward A. Johnson, "Railroads," in *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*; available <http://www.tennesseeencyclopedia.net>; Internet; accessed 18 August 2009.

⁴⁵Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 179.

several occasions, the federal government granted land and money to the state for internal improvements such as roads, levees, and railroads. Very little improvements resulted, however, as each town and county fought for their share of the funds rather than supporting the use of the funds for one major project.⁴⁶

The first operational railroad in the state was the Memphis and Little Rock Railroad, which was chartered by the state in January 1853, at an estimated cost of 3.2 million dollars. The 133-mile line was to run from Hopefield--located on the west bank of the Arkansas River across from Memphis--to Little Rock.⁴⁷ Memphis began construction of its end of the line first, raising \$350,000 in bonds and hiring 400 laborers to lay tracks from Hopefield to Madison, located in St. Francis County in the northeast corner of Arkansas. In 1857, the locomotive *Little Rock* traveled along the new track, making it the first “iron horse” in the state. In the same year, heavy flooding from the Mississippi River damaged the new track, forcing repairs that were completed by November 1858. Construction of the Little Rock end of the line was slower starting, and ceased altogether due to the national Panic of 1857.⁴⁸

By the time that Arkansas seceded from the Union in May, 1861, the Hopefield-Madison portion of the Memphis and Little Rock line was the only operational track in the state. A functioning railroad—all thirty-nine miles of it⁴⁹—had finally come to Arkansas. Yet the state would have to wait until after the Civil War to be connected to the rest of the nation.

⁴⁶ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 53, 86.

⁴⁷ Van Zbinden, “Memphis and Little Rock Railroad,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*; available <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>; Internet; accessed 18 August 2009.

⁴⁸ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 180.

⁴⁹ Zbinden, “Memphis and Little Rock Railroad;” Moneyhon, *Impact*, 89.

Secession and War

When Arkansas was admitted to the Union in 1836, Little Rock citizens held high hopes for their city. In their book *Greater Little Rock*, Jim and Judy Lester describes a spirit of optimism held by many Little Rock residents who “envisioned their tiny frontier metropolis blossoming into a thriving urban center that would be the gateway to the West.”⁵⁰ Unfortunately, these dreams remained unrealized on the eve of the Civil War. The state’s lagging transportation system isolated the state from the rest of the South. Little Rock, the state’s largest urban center, was hardly urban with fewer than 4000 residents.⁵¹ The state was still overwhelmingly rural with a rural mentality favoring tradition over progress. According to Ira Don Richards in *Story of a Rivertown*, “few American cities have stood on the threshold of greatness for so long and emerged with so little as antebellum Little Rock.”⁵² It would take the Civil War and the social and economic changes of Reconstruction to bring Arkansas out of isolation and into a new, more progressive era.

From the beginning of statehood until the start of the Civil War, Arkansas’ political scene had been dominated by “The Family”, a powerful group of Democrats. Throughout the 1850’s, the Democratic party dominated all statewide elections and consistently maintained at least seventy-five percent control of the General Assembly.⁵³ According to Carl Moneyhon, Arkansas Democrats reflected the beliefs of the national party.

⁵⁰ Lester, *Greater Little Rock*, 32.

⁵¹ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 33.

⁵² Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 30.

⁵³ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 76.

At the heart of the national ideology was the premise that all men were equal and possessed the right to govern their own destinies. Party thought reasoned that government existed to ensure individual equality and self-fulfillment, and that the chief means to that end was to interfere as little as possible in citizens' lives. Laissez-faire was the Democratic Party's guiding principle, especially for the central government. Limited spending, economy with public funds, and minimum taxation were the best policy. Free of the burden of government, citizens could turn their efforts into economic and social success.⁵⁴

"Economic and social success" had been achieved primarily through the cotton boom of the 1850's, which would not have happened without slave labor. In 1860, there were over 110,000 slaves in Arkansas. Twenty percent of the state's white citizens were slave owners; of this group, twelve percent owned twenty or more slaves.⁵⁵ Of this small group of planters, many were members of the political "Family", whose agenda was often directed at protecting the interests of the elite landowners. The emergence of the Republican Party and the growth of anti-slavery sentiment in the north were viewed by Arkansas Democrats as a threat to their very way of life.

According to Richards, "To find a fire-eating secessionist in town [Little Rock] in 1860 was about as unlikely as being able to navigate the Arkansas in August."⁵⁶ While some of the landowning elite were outspoken supporters of secession, the majority of Little Rock citizens were in favor of maintaining their position within the Union. While most supported slavery and

⁵⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁵ Thomas A. DeBlack, "Civil War through Reconstruction," in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*; available <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>; Internet; accessed 18 August 2009.

⁵⁶ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 59.

state's rights, they knew that secession would ultimately lead to war. By remaining in the Union, they hoped that their rights would be protected by existing federal laws.⁵⁷

In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act was introduced to the United States Senate. The Act would form the Nebraska territory, but also had implications for the future of slavery in the Union. The bill proposed that the decision whether or not to allow slavery in US territories be left to the residents of the territory. Southerners supported the bill since it would limit the national government against local sovereignty. Northerners vehemently opposed the bill, thus the battle lines were drawn. While Arkansas hoped that they could retain their current rights while remaining in the Union, the north's reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act dimmed that hope.⁵⁸

Another blow came in 1860, when Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected president. Between December 1860 and February 1861, seven Southern states seceded from the Union while Arkansas' hold on pro-Union moderation became increasingly tenuous.⁵⁹ In a speech to the General Assembly in 1860, governor Henry Rector recognized that secession was more than likely inevitable. Lincoln's abolitionist platform posed a threat to Arkansas' economy. In his speech, Rector stated, "without it [slavery], her fertile fields are deserts, and her people penniless and impoverished." Because of this very issue, "sooner or later dissolution must come."⁶⁰

In March 1861, Arkansas citizens voted to hold a convention to consider the possibility of secession. After much heated debate, secession did not pass, but delegates did agree to revisit

⁵⁷ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 94-96.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁹ DeBlack, "Civil War through Reconstruction".

⁶⁰ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 94.

the issue in August. In his book *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin*, Carl Moneyhon states “Arkansas Unionists were not for the Union at all costs,” a statement that would be proven the very next month of 1861.⁶¹ On April 12, Confederate forces opened fire on the federal Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. On April 15, President Lincoln called for 75,000 militia—780 from Arkansas—to suppress the conflict and to coerce states that had seceded from the Union. Arkansas had finally been forced to choose sides; and in a state convention held on May 6, 1861, Arkansas seceded from the Union with only one dissenting vote.⁶²

The War in Little Rock

Though Arkansas would not host any military battles on its soil during 1861, Little Rock felt the economic effects of war almost immediately. As a new member of the Confederacy, Arkansas expended most of its available resources—manpower and cash—on preparing for war. With the exception of Tennessee, no other southern state supplied more troops to the Confederacy than Arkansas.⁶³ Since only a small percentage of Arkansans owned more than twenty slaves, many men still tended their crops largely on their own. When these men were called to battle, many fields were neglected. Most available cash was spent on arming the troops which caused massive cash shortage in the state. Arkansas’ joining of the war effort came at the same time that planters would have used their available cash for settling planting debts and purchasing supplies for the next planting season. Because most of the state’s cash had been poured into the war effort, many planting debts went unsettled. Because merchants had no way

⁶¹ Ibid., 96.

⁶² Ibid., 97; DeBlack, “Civil War through Reconstruction”.

⁶³ DeBlack, “Civil War through Reconstruction”.

to collect old debts, they stopped issuing further credit and began dealing on a cash-only basis. Because citizens had no cash and could procure no credit, this created an immediate shortage of supplies. When supplies could be found, they were often at inflated prices.⁶⁴

In 1862, Little Rock began to feel the full impact of war when the Confederate army suffered a loss at the battle of Pea Ridge, the largest Civil War battle fought in Arkansas. Following the conflict in March, wounded men began pouring into the city; and many buildings in the city—including churches and private dwellings—were converted into hospitals.⁶⁵

Ironically, the biggest detriment to the state—economically and socially—came at the hands of the institution meant to protect the state—the Confederate army. The Confederacy demanded all available resources, often at the expense of private property. In May 1862, Little Rock was placed under martial law under the leadership of Thomas Hindman. Hindman created many enemies in his own camp when he ordered the burning of cotton to prevent its seizure by the Federal troops. By early 1863, many basic supplies could not be found. Those that were available were offered at such inflated prices as to make them virtually unattainable. Flour was sold for \$200 per barrel, leather boots at \$106 per pair, and tea at \$10 per pound. A local newspaper took to describing beans, soap, turnips, starch, and bacon, “not that they are now to be obtained, but to prevent the people from forgetting that such articles have heretofore existed.”⁶⁶

At the outset of the war, Little Rock had done very little to build its defenses. The city relied on its three bordering Confederate states as well as the low waters of the Arkansas River to

⁶⁴ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 103-104.

⁶⁵ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 64.

⁶⁶ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 110; Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 67.

provide protection against Federal forces.⁶⁷ Most of the arms, supplies, and men that the state contributed to the Confederate cause were sent east, thus leaving Arkansas and the city of Little Rock with little defense. In July 1862, the city of Helena, AR was seized by Federal troops. In January 1863, 50,000 Union soldiers defeated 5,000 Confederate troops to take Arkansas Post, located a mere 120 miles from Little Rock.⁶⁸

The first four days of July 1863 proved to be disastrous to the Confederacy as a whole, as well as to its interests in the Trans-Mississippi District. Under the leadership of Theophilus Holmes, Confederate forces attempted to re-take Helena, only to be summarily defeated. Troop morale decreased even further with the news of Robert E. Lee's defeat at Gettysburg. The final blow came with the surrender of Vicksburg, one of the last strong Confederate posts on the Mississippi.⁶⁹

With the fall of Vicksburg, Little Rock realized its inevitable fate. Under the command of General Fredrick Steele, the Union army met "a meager force of boys, ill and disabled soldiers, and old men" who were attempting to defend the city.⁷⁰ By 4:30 that afternoon, Union troops marched into the city, which would remain under Union control for the rest of the war.⁷¹

The Federal invasion of Little Rock was both positive and negative for the city. The arrival of the Union troops did create a more favorable economic climate; business increased and supplies became more readily available. Entertainments such as horse racing and theatre

⁶⁷ Ibid., 62-63.

⁶⁸ DeBlack, "Civil War through Reconstruction".

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Lester, *Greater Little Rock*, 54.

⁷¹ Bell, "Little Rock," in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*.

resumed as well.⁷² One contemporary observer noted the following improvements to the city as a result of the Yankee occupation:

One does not see as many carriages as formerly...[but] the streets are filled with a restless, quick motioned business people, who seem to have come and made themselves at home at once. Newsboys are met at every block, apple venders have stalls on each corner; daguerrian artists improve buildings on vacant lots...; every store and storehouse is full, drays and wagons crowd the streets; two theatres are in full blast and all is bustle and business. The Provost Marshal is having the streets cleaned and repaired, and is otherwise improving the city.⁷³

General Frederick Steele's command of the city was, according to Richards, "in line with Lincoln's Reconstruction philosophy, to create genuine Union sentiment among those people not hard-shell Rebels."⁷⁴ By January 1864, a loyalist state government had been established with a new governor and a new state constitution outlawing slavery.⁷⁵

War-Time Theatre

The theatrical climate of the city during the war and subsequent Federal occupation was rather wild, valuing entertainment over refinement. In his history of the theatre in Arkansas, Denham Wooten suggests that Little Rock during this time "was a much too dangerous place for any real theatrical troupe to venture into."⁷⁶ Theatre did still exist, but primarily in the form of varieties, minstrel shows, and plays produced by "barnstormers," travelling companies who

⁷²Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 75.

⁷³ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ DeBlack, "Civil War through Reconstruction".

⁷⁶Wooten, "The History of the Theater in Arkansas," *Arkansas Gazette Magazine*, 24 November 1935.

valued quick profit over artistic integrity. The theatrical climate of the city is best described in an interview printed in the *Arkansas Gazette* on October 29, 1888. In the interview, former actor-turned-manager Gus Mortimer recounted his experience as an actor in Federal-occupied Little Rock:

Being in Little Rock reminds me of my theatrical experience in Little Rock in 1863. ...I organized a dramatic company, and receiving General Steele's permission, I brought it to Little Rock. It was composed mostly of "barnstormers," but just then anything went, and we secured an old carriage factory and did an immense business. We all made money and spent it faster than we made it. Those were flush times, and the soldiers, of whom many thousands were here in camp, crowded the old rookery every night. Really, there wasn't but one good actor in the company. As for me, I was a devilish bad actor...

I remember one night, the accidental discharge of a pistol in the audience killed some one [sic]—I believe a paroled "Confed" soldier. All was excitement and I went to the footlights and suggested that probably the audience didn't under the circumstances want to proceed. "Carry out the corpse and go on with yer show," shouted some Federal soldier; and it was soon apparent that a row would follow dismissing the audience. So the corpse went out and the show went on.⁷⁷

Celebrating Surrender

Little Rock residents greeted the end of the war with gladness in spite of being defeated. The *National Democrat*, a Little Rock paper, printed the following editorial when news reached the city that Richmond, VA had fallen to the Union:

Yesterday was a day long to be remembered in the city of Little Rock. It was agreed by common consent, that it should be a jubilee—no one objected, and everybody was in perfect good humor—not a difficulty was known, or angry

⁷⁷*Arkansas Gazette*, 29 October 1888, quoted in Wooten, "The History of the Theater in Arkansas," *Arkansas Gazette Magazine*, 24 November 1935.

word heard...All were merry with thankfulness that the great Babylon of rebellion had fallen.⁷⁸

The Civil War brought unprecedented economic and social change to Arkansas.

Arkansas Confederate soldiers returned to a land of untended farmland, destroyed buildings, and depleted livestock. The abolition of slavery meant that they would have to pay for laborers if they wanted to restore their farms to their pre-war condition.⁷⁹ Ira Don Richards took a more positive view, noting a population increase of 300 in Little Rock during the war years. Many Federal soldiers, having spent over a year in the city, decided to remain after completing their military service in hopes of benefitting from post-war Little Rock's economic potential.⁸⁰

Reconstruction

Arkansas entered Reconstruction under the governorship of Isaac Murphy and a Unionist Republican government. The Republicans believed in the equality of man regardless of race, and advocated a larger role for government in economic development and public education. They saw themselves as the champions of the lower class, believing that government should represent the majority rather than the powerful. There was, however, already a group mobilizing to oppose the new Republican government; this group of people saw the Republicans as a threat to their very way of life.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Little Rock *National Democrat*, 8 April 1865, quoted in Ira Don Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 79.

⁷⁹ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 175.

⁸⁰ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 80.

⁸¹ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 263; Moneyhon, *Impact*, 190.

All Arkansans, regardless of class, suffered heavy losses during the Civil War. The great economic losses, however, failed to alter the class system that had been firmly implemented during the antebellum period. The elite class, those who had been in power before the war, emerged from the war with their elite status intact. The loss of slavery had indeed caused them great economic loss and drastically affected their quality of living; yet since they had more to begin with, they still were considered wealthy compared to their lower class neighbors who had lost everything.⁸²

In many respects, the elite were resistant to the changes brought about by the war. In *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, Carl Moneyhon quoted Judge J.S. Hornor as saying “we may ere long get the old order of things properly resumed.”⁸³ The large landowners saw the Republican government as a threat to their way of life. Their heavy taxation would place a burden on the elite during a time when they were trying to regain their economic footing. Further, the Republican’s support of black equality and public education would reduce the number of people willing to work in the elite’s extensive cotton fields.⁸⁴

In order to resume “the old order of things”, the elite quickly mobilized themselves—even partnering with former Whig opponents—to challenge the Republicans for political control of the state. Running on a platform of white supremacy and opposition to Republican taxation, the new Conservative party swept the elections of summer 1866.

⁸²Moneyhon, *Impact*, 185.

⁸³ J.S. Hornor to W.E. Woodruff, 21 September 1865, William E. Woodruff Papers, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock, quoted in Carl Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction in Arkansas*, 189.

⁸⁴Moneyhon, *Impact*, 245.

The Conservatives were in power for less than a year before Congress intervened in the spring of 1867. Many northerners favored stricter policies toward the South than those of President Johnson, and in March 1867 Congress passed a reconstruction act that divided all of the seceded states into five military districts. Each state would be required to write a new constitution that supported black suffrage, and to ratify the fourteenth amendment to the United States Constitution which extended the privileges of citizenship to all people regardless of race.⁸⁵ Ira Don Richards suggests that “the new regime was launched on a note of fraud”; when the new constitution was brought before the voters in March 1868, it was approved in spite of its categorical rejection by Conservatives and their supporters. In the election, 3,746 votes were cast in the city of Little Rock alone while the entire county reported only 3,896 registered voters.⁸⁶

Although Reconstruction Republicans’ promotion of equality was what Dougan described as “enlightened views”—views that would come to be widely accepted in the twentieth century—they often resorted to less than honorable methods to implement their goals. According to Dougan, “For the sake of Party, leading men tolerated, then embraced and finally practiced graft, fraud, bribery, embezzlement and other dishonesty.” While claiming equality of all men regardless of race, political affiliation was another matter as many former Confederates were denied many rights of citizenship.⁸⁷ In the election of 1869, Republicans won by a narrow 800 vote margin; and the Conservatives accused the party of voter fraud. According to a Conservative newspaper, “Boys voted, non-residents voted, the same parties voted repeatedly,

⁸⁵ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 205; DeBlack, “Civil War through Reconstruction”.

⁸⁶ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 83.

⁸⁷ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 263.

the law was disregarded, and there is conclusive evidence of attempted ballot-box stuffing of the grossest character.”⁸⁸

Although Arkansas experienced a less than favorable political climate during Reconstruction, it does not mean that the state was devoid of progress. The city of Little Rock experienced a population boom, growing from 3727 residents in 1860 to 12380 in 1870. The increased spending of the government resulted in city improvements, with \$38578 being spent on roads alone in 1871.⁸⁹ There was an increase in construction in the years immediately following the war; and in May 1869, the *Arkansas Gazette* noted one hundred buildings currently under construction, twenty-five of which were brick.⁹⁰

The days of larger stock companies occupying a theatre for an entire season—like the Waters troupe of the late 1830’s-- were slowly dying away. With the increase of railroad travel, the better theatrical troupes were beginning to tour the country, playing engagements in the largest cities across the country. Unfortunately, Little Rock still lacked sufficient railroad access, so the city had to make do with whoever was willing to come to the city. For nearly eight years, Little Rock citizens were without a type of amusement “to which they could take their wives and children without fear of mortification or insult.”⁹¹ In 1868, a company under the management of T.L. Connor rescued the Robbins theatre from variety entertainment, remodeled it into “a most respectable place of amusement”, and occupied it from March until June. The theatre was leased

⁸⁸ *Arkansas Daily Gazette*, 5 January 1869, quoted in Ira Don Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 84.

⁸⁹ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 282.

⁹⁰ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 90.

⁹¹ Quoted in Wooten, 24 November 1935.

again in September by S.H. Hubbard; and according to Wooten, the company was forced to disband by the third week “for lack of funds, and truly, for lack of talent.”⁹²

In November 1868, the Bella Golden combination came to the city for an engagement that lasted a little over a month. They did not lease the Robbins theatre; but instead opted to rent the city hall and equip it with lights, seating, and scenery. And it would be in this space that Little Rock would get its first taste of professional opera a little over a year later.⁹³

The most significant improvement made to the state during this time was the construction of railroads. A significant portion of the Memphis and Little Rock line had been completed prior to the Civil War, but by the end of the war it was heavily damaged.⁹⁴ In April 1871, the Memphis and Little Rock was completed, thus providing the citizens of Little Rock with their first functional railroad. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported on the completion of the road as well as on the spirit of optimism that the railroad brought to the citizens of Little Rock. On April 12, the *Gazette* reported that the last spike had been driven into the line the previous evening. The author’s optimism was evident in the final line of the article: “It is the dawn of a new era in Arkansas. One complete railroad in the state is sufficient to make an enthusiastic individual rejoice.”⁹⁵ The following day’s paper reported on the first engine to cross the entire line, noting

⁹² Denham Wooten, “The History of the Theater in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Gazette Magazine*, 31 November 1935.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 231.

⁹⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 12 April 1871.

that it “is but the beginning of the grand future which awaits us.”⁹⁶ By 1875, the city boasted rail connections with Memphis, St. Louis, and the Arkansas cities of Texarkana and Van Buren.⁹⁷

Since the elite had lost the battle for political power, they turned their attention to economic recovery. Lured by extremely high cotton prices in 1865, they once again turned to cotton to regain their lost wealth. The biggest obstacle facing landowners was the loss of slave labor, so the landowners turned to tenant farming or sharecropping to cultivate their fields. In this system, a tenant rented forty acres from the landowner, cultivated the land with his own supplies and labor, and received three-fourths of the harvest. In more extreme cases, however, the tenant could not furnish his own supplies and capital. He was forced to use capital supplied by the landowner and to buy his supplies from the landowner as well, often at inflated prices and interest rates ranging from 25 to 300 percent. The tenant usually received only fifty percent of the harvest, and after it was sold had to use what little cash he received to pay for the supplies he had purchased from the landowner. As a result, many tenant farmers were merely getting by rather than getting ahead.⁹⁸

In the end, the elite did not benefit from the sharecropping system any more than their tenants. The optimism of 1865 soon gave way to despair in 1866 and 1867 when crops were drastically affected by flooding and drought. Furthermore, in 1867 the cotton market collapsed, and cotton prices steadily decreased for the remainder of the century, from 12-18 cents per pound

⁹⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 13 April 1871.

⁹⁷ Carl H. Moneyhon, “Post-Reconstruction through the Gilded Age,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*; available <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>; Internet; accessed August 18, 2009.

⁹⁸ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 267; Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 293; Van Hawkins, “Sharecropping and Tenant Farming,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*; available <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>; Internet; accessed August 18, 2009.

in the years following the collapse, to 11.1 cents in 1874, to 5.8 cents in 1894-1897.⁹⁹ After the initial disaster in 1866, many encouraged economic diversity and a break with the reliance on cotton, yet farmers continued to turn to cotton. Nature and the cotton market caused many farmers to fall deep into debt, and their creditors demanded that they be paid in cotton thus forcing the state into enslavement to the crop. According to Moneyhon, "...the decision of Arkansans in 1866 to emphasize cotton culture helped tie their farms to a crop that languished for the next hundred years and left Arkansas a legacy of poverty."¹⁰⁰

In light of the failing cotton economy, Radical Reconstruction could not have come at a worse time for the landowning elite. The Republicans' increased spending drove the city budget to an all-time high and increased taxes by as much as seven fold.¹⁰¹ If the landowners were going to survive, they were going to have to regain political control of the state.

Ironically, they were aided in their cause by the Republican Party itself and the division that developed in 1869. In the spring of that year, a group of Republicans organized under the name Liberal Republicans, speaking out against the corruption of the current government, advocating greater fiscal responsibility in the government, and opposing the voting restrictions imposed on former Confederates. In 1872, the Liberal Republicans nominated Joseph Brooks to run for governor against the other Republican candidate Elisha Baxter. After an election and numerous accusations of fraud, Elisha Baxter was declared the winner. Joseph Brooks and his supporters did not accept the result, however, and filed a complaint in the courts. His complaints went largely ignored until 1874, when Brooks supporters convinced a judge to revisit the claim.

⁹⁹ Moneyhon, *Impact*, 239.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁰¹ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 85-86.

On April 15th 1874, the judge ruled in his favor; and Brooks together with armed supporters stormed the State House, physically removed Baxter from the governor's office, and barricaded the doors to the State House. Each side armed themselves and the "Brooks-Baxter War" was on. For thirty-four days, Little Rock became a battleground as the two sides exchanged fire. President Ulysses S. Grant was forced to intervene on May 15th, and declared Elisha Baxter the rightful governor.¹⁰²

The statewide elections of 1874 were the first since the voting restrictions on former Confederates had been lifted, and the Democrats once again swept into power. The results of the 1874 election marked the end of Reconstruction for the state, and meant that many of those who had controlled the state during the antebellum period were once again in power.¹⁰³

Post- Reconstruction

The economic condition of Arkansas in the middle of the 1870's was bleak. In a time where most of the nation was turning increasingly to industry, Arkansas was still clinging desperately to a one-crop agricultural economy, in spite of low cotton prices. In response to excessive Republican spending, and to protect their own agricultural interests, the new Democratic government initiated a program of fiscal retrenchment. Taxes were drastically cut and governmental support of internal improvements and education all but stopped.¹⁰⁴

The economic hard time of the 1870's halted growth in Little Rock. According to Ira Don Richards, banks failed and city money dropped so low that even saloons refused to accept

¹⁰² DeBlack, "Civil War through Reconstruction"; Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 89.

¹⁰³ DeBlack, "Civil War through Reconstruction"; Moneyhon, *Impact*, 262.

¹⁰⁴ Carl H. Moneyhon, *Arkansas and the New South: 1874-1929* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997.), 4, 19, 21.

it.¹⁰⁵ By as late as 1881, the city still had the feel of a rural village, with livestock roaming the downtown streets.¹⁰⁶ In all actuality, the streets were not fit for much better than livestock. In

1876, the city spent only \$437 on street repairs, compared to the \$38578 spent in 1871.¹⁰⁷

During this period, a bill was introduced to the General Assembly that would designate Main and Markham streets as “navigable streams.” The local newspaper concurred, saying “when a wise man comes to a street crossing in Little Rock, he pauses at the brink until some other pedestrian, actuated more by haste than caution, wades in to test the depth of the tide. If he crosses safely and without drowning, the w.m. [wise man] proceeds on his way.”¹⁰⁸

In spite of these discouraging conditions, Arkansas’ economy did experience growth throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century. The key to this growth was the railroad. In 1870, Arkansas had a mere 256 miles of track; but that figure rose to over 2000 miles by the end of the century.¹⁰⁹ The advent of the railroad helped give Arkansas a place in the national market, stirring interest in resources other than cotton, such as lumber and minerals. The city of Little Rock saw an increase in manufacturing, boasting foundries, lumber mills, flour mills, and cottonseed-oil mills. Manufacturing and industry created better-paying jobs than what the farm could offer. Between 1880 and 1900, the number of people holding non-agricultural jobs rose twelve percent from 17 to 29 percent.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 91.

¹⁰⁶ Lester, *Greater Little Rock*, 90.

¹⁰⁷ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 282.

¹⁰⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, Centennial Edition, 7 November 1931, quoted in Ira Don Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 99-100.

¹⁰⁹ Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 282.

¹¹⁰ Moneyhon, *Arkansas and the New South*, 39.

The railroads were a key factor in the slow but steady urbanization of the state. In 1870, over 97 percent of the state's population was rural. By 1880, four percent of the population was classified as urban, meaning they lived in a town with more than 2500 residents. By 1900, urban residents comprised nine percent of the state's total population.¹¹¹ While these figures seem unimpressive at first, they are quite remarkable in light of the fact that Arkansas' economy was still overwhelmingly agricultural; in 1880 the state ranked fifth in cotton production and sixth in total acreage devoted to the cultivation of cotton.¹¹²

Little Rock did not go untouched by urbanization. From 1880 to 1900, Little Rock's population more than tripled from 13138 to 38307.¹¹³ Utilities of the modern age made their appearance in Little Rock beginning in 1879 with the first telephone exchange, followed by a modern water system in 1880 and electricity in 1886. In 1885, the city changed its government structure to a system that limited the power of the city council and increased the power of the mayor. In 1887, newly-elected mayor William G. Whipple exercised his new power to initiate a number of improvements such as street repairs, street light installation, and the banning of livestock from the streets of the business district.¹¹⁴

The city of Little Rock at the close of the nineteenth century was a far cry from the small town that was born almost eighty years earlier. What had begun as a settlement of twelve to thirteen white male residents occupying one frame building and three or four log cabins blossomed into a thriving city that covered eleven square miles with thirteen miles of paved

¹¹¹ Ibid., 5, 41.

¹¹² Dougan, *Arkansas Odyssey*, 281.

¹¹³ Moneyhon, *Arkansas and the New South*, 41.

¹¹⁴ Lester, *Greater Little Rock*, 90.

streets by the end of the century. The business district boasted a seven story building; the public library contained 3200 volumes; and twenty seven different newspapers and periodicals were being published in the city. The cultural life of the city thrived with over sixty social clubs, seventy-five churches, and numerous entertainments such as racing, baseball, and theater.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 107.

CHAPTER 2

OPERA IN LITTLE ROCK: 1870-1879

Pasquilino Brignoli

The citizens of Little Rock got their first taste of opera in February 1870. The question of why opera had not visited the city earlier is best answered by a newspaper writer of the time, in an article promoting Little Rock's first opera:

It is unusual for an opera troupe to visit cities less in population than St. Louis, except perhaps their route by railroad makes it convenient for them to tarry a few nights in small cities. Little Rock is neither a small nor a large city, and we ought to expect these entertainments the same as Memphis, but then we are not quite as accessible as the Bluff City. A troupe coming to Little Rock deserves great commendation and a liberal patronage, for it is out of their way to come here. Their expenses are great, to and from, and when they do visit us we ought to feel grateful for the honor they confer upon us. We believe our people are capable of appreciating this honor, and will express their appreciation in a satisfactory manner.¹¹⁶

At this time, Little Rock was not yet on any railroad route; so any company willing to venture to the city had to do so by riverboat. Travel up the Arkansas River was often a risk due to low water, snags, and sandbars, all of which posed a threat to boats.¹¹⁷ In February 1870, an Italian opera troupe led by tenor Pasquilino Brignoli had just completed an engagement in Memphis, and decided to take the risk of steaming down the Mississippi River then up the Arkansas River to bring Little Rock citizens their first operatic season.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ *Morning Republican*, 5 February 1870.

¹¹⁷ Richards, *Story of a Rivertown*, 16-17.

¹¹⁸ Michael B. Dougan, "Bravo Brignoli! The First Opera Season in Arkansas," *Pulaski County Historical Review* 30, 74.

Pasquilino Brignoli was one of the most popular tenors in nineteenth century America. According to biographer Michael Dougan, “not until Enrico Caruso early in the twentieth century did another tenor assume such nationwide fame.” He was born and educated in Naples, Italy, and received further musical instruction in Paris. It was while he was singing in Paris that he was recruited by American manager Maurice Strakosch to join an American tour led by famed violinist Ole Bull. Except for a few brief singing engagements in Europe, the remainder of his career was spent touring the United States.¹¹⁹

Brignoli participated in several historic moments in American operatic history. He sang the tenor leads in the American premiers of several Verdi operas, including *Il Trovatore*, *La traviata*, *I vespri siciliani*, and *Un ballo in maschera*. In November of 1859, he sang the lead in *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the New York Academy of Music. Singing the part of Lucia was sixteen year old Adelina Patti, making her professional debut.¹²⁰

Brignoli was known for his beautiful voice, of which he took extreme care. In his memoirs, Chicago critic George Upton remembers Brignoli’s singing:

His tones had a silvery quality and were exquisitely pure. He never forced his voice beyond the limit of a sweet musical tone, and rarely expended much effort except in reaching a climax, or in closing an aria with one of those marvelously beautiful sforzandos which other tenors tried in vain to imitate. He never sang the high C, that stock in trade of sensational tenors, though he could reach it with ease, for he had a great range and power of voice. He used to say that “screaming is not singing; let those fellows wear their throats out if they will; Brignoli will keep his.” And he did. His highest ambition was tonal loveliness, and in this quality he had few equals. To hear him

¹¹⁹ Michael B. Dougan, “Brignoli, Pasquilino,” in *American National Biography*.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

sing...was to listen to vocalization of absolute beauty, to an exposition of *bel canto* of the Italian romantic school as perfect for a tenor as was Adelina Patti's for a soprano.¹²¹

American soprano Clara Louise Kellogg sang alongside Brignoli many times throughout her career. In her memoirs, she recalls the extreme care that Brignoli took with his voice:

Brignoli lived for his voice. He adored it as if it were some phenomenon for which he was in no sense responsible. And I am not at all sure that this is not the right point of view for a singer. He always took tremendous pains with his voice and the greatest possible care of himself in every way, always eating huge quantities of raw oysters each night before he sang. The story is told of him that one day he fell off a train. People rushed to pick him up, solicitous lest the great tenor's bones were broken. But Brignoli had only one fear. Without waiting even to rise to his feet, he sat up, on the ground where he had fallen, and solemnly sang a bar or two. Finding his voice uninjured, he burst into heartfelt prayers of thanksgiving, and climbed back into the car.¹²²

Early in his career, Brignoli was especially popular with his female fans due to his good looks. There are accounts of women lining the streets of New York to catch a glimpse of him driving by in his carriage. Adoring female fans sent him slews of love letters, and to his credit he initially attempted to respond to all of them. He eventually became overwhelmed by the task, though, and began filing them away while humming Leporello's "Catalogue Aria" from *Don Giovanni*.¹²³

For all of his good looks and beautiful voice, Brignoli had the reputation of being a terrible actor. His acting skills were most likely due to his severe stage fright. Once during a

¹²¹ George P. Upton, *Musical Memories: My Recollections of Celebrities of the Half Century, 1850-1900* (Chicago, A.C. McClurg, 1908), 122.

¹²² Clara Louise Kellogg, *Memoirs of an American Prima Donna* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 24-25.

¹²³ Dougan, "Brignoli" in *American National Biography*; Michael B. Dougan, "Pasquino Brignoli: Tenor of the Golden West," in *Opera and the Golden West: The Past, Present, and Future of Opera in the U.S.A.*, ed. John Louis Di Gaetani and Josef P. Sirefman (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994), 101.

performance of *I Puritani*, he remained rooted in one spot, raising his arms alternately twenty-three times. Another strange habit was his aversion to being touched on stage, which often made love scenes difficult. Most of his on-stage love interests probably did not mind this idiosyncrasy, though; because it is reported that his particular vocal technique was accompanied by copious amounts of saliva.¹²⁴

Perhaps in an effort to control his stage fright, Brignoli was extremely superstitious. He was extremely afraid of the number thirteen, and avoided traveling or signing contracts on Fridays. One of Brignoli's rivals once attended one of his performances wearing extremely large glasses, causing Brignoli to fear that the evil eye was pursing him. One of his most peculiar superstitions was his keeping of a mascot of sorts, a stuffed deer head that accompanied him to all performances and hung in his dressing room. Clara Kellogg recalled that when things were going well for Brignoli, he would pat the deer's head in approval; but when things were going poorly, he would hit it while yelling Italian obscenities.¹²⁵

Brignoli made his career touring all over the United States and performing with many well-known nineteenth century musical figures, including pianist Louis Moreau Gottschalk. By the end of the 1860s, though, his career had begun to decline.¹²⁶ His charming good looks had given way to a more portly figure, and critics were using terms such as "somewhat faded" to

¹²⁴ Dougan, "Brignoli" in *American National Biography*; Dougan, "Pasquilino Brignoli," in *Opera and the Golden West*, 102.

¹²⁵ Upton, *Musical Memories*, 122; Dougan, *Opera and the Golden West*, 101-102; Kellogg, *Memoirs*, 24.

¹²⁶ Dougan, *American National Biography*.

describe his performances.¹²⁷ Following a failed farewell tour, he turned his attention to the South, where opera was still in its infancy.¹²⁸

In 1870 Brignoli teamed with Isabella McCulloch, a soprano of Southern breeding who had apparently lost her family fortune in the Civil War. Her tragic past usually succeeded in winning her the favor of Southern white Democrat audiences.¹²⁹ It was this team consisting of a declining tenor and a Southern belle soprano who visited Little Rock in February 1870. Both the *Arkansas Gazette* and the *Morning Republican* printed notices in advance of the company's arrival and predicted a "pleasant entertainment" that was "certain to attract a large and fashionable audience."¹³⁰ The company opened its season at Little Rock City Hall with Flotow's *Martha* to a crowded house. The *Morning Republican* praised the performance of all the principal singers, calling Miss McCulloch "thoroughly charming" and claiming Brignoli to be "among, if not far beyond, the foremost tenors." They encouraged the public support the company by securing their seats early for subsequent performances.¹³¹ The *Arkansas Gazette* did not bother to attend the premier of professional opera in their city, and only printed a brief notice of the previous night's performance. Most of their comments were aimed at what they believed to be a too-high admission price: "We think it a mistake that the admission price is set at such high figures...many who would be glad to go are deterred by the high price charged."¹³²

¹²⁷ *Cleveland Leader*, 18 October 1869; quoted in Dougan, *Opera and the Golden West*, 106.

¹²⁸ Dougan, *Opera and the Golden West*, 106.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹³⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 1 February 1870; *Morning Republican* 2 February 1870.

¹³¹ *Republican*, 4 February 1870.

¹³² *Gazette*, 4 February 1870.

The next evening the troupe presented Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. While the *Morning Republican* did not review the performance, the *Gazette* turned a proverbial 180 degrees in their attitude toward the troupe. The *Gazette* typically represented the pro-Southern, white, Democratic point-of-view, and one has to wonder if their discovery of Miss McCulloch's background changed their attitude from ambivalent to enthusiastic.

We did not attend the presentation of "Martha," on the first night of the appearance of Miss McCullough, and Signor Brignoli and troupe, in this city. We regret that we did not. Critics pronounce the entertainment one which far surpasses any we have had in this city for years. We were carried away by "Lucia de Lammermoor" last night. The singing was in the highest style of art, the acting charming. Miss Henne, the charming contralto, did not appear last night, as there is no character for her in Lucia. But Miss McCullough is superb. What force, what elegance, what intellect is developed in voice, look and manner! This lady was reared in the lap of luxury, at her magnificent home near Columbia, South Carolina. Immensely wealthy, she and two brothers, in 1860, lost all by the war. She studied a short while for the opera, and appeared but to succeed, to carry the musical world by storm. Signor Brignoli has a world-wide fame. The other members of the troupe are worthy of the association.¹³³

This time, instead of complaining about the ticket prices, they encouraged the public to skip a few trips to the lower variety entertainment offered elsewhere in the city, and instead purchase a ticket to the opera, "the most elevated of human diversions."¹³⁴

Saturday night's program was a performance of Verdi's *Il trovatore*, an opera that seems to have been presented on virtually all of Brignoli's tours. Having premiered the role of Manrico to American audiences, Brignoli likely considered the part to be one of his signature roles.¹³⁵ Ironically, his performance received only a polite mention from both newspapers. The *Morning Republican* said that Brignoli "had every reason to feel proud of his cordial reception. He sang

¹³³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 5 February 1870.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Dugan, "Brignoli," in *American National Biography*.

the music of his role superbly.”¹³⁶ The *Gazette* said only that Brignoli “was in fine voice”, and devoted a majority of the column to praising Miss McCulloch, even going so far as to compare her to Adelina Patti.¹³⁷

Following an afternoon sacred concert on Sunday, the troupe took the stage again on Monday night, presenting the garden scene from *Faust* and the second act of *Lucretia Borgia*. Both newspapers printed positive reviews of the performance, but the *Gazette* devoted most of its space to damage control. In a previous issue, the *Gazette* had quoted the city’s German-language newspaper, the *Staats Zeitung*, as referring to Brignoli as “the much sung out Brignoli.” In response, the *Gazette* had said, “Considering that Brignoli’s reputation is world wide [sic], and that gray hairs are coming to him, there may be some truth in the assertion. But what we have heard from him makes us think he is a regular old music box yet.”¹³⁸ Brignoli must not have appreciated the references to his gray hair or to being called “old”, for in the issue following the *Faust/Lucretia Borgia* performance, the *Gazette* printed the following:

Brignoli’s reputation is sustained and well deserved. Such singing as he gave us in *Il Trovatore*, *Faust*, and *Lucretia Borgia*, could be afforded by none but a master. He is “immense” in these operas, and so far from being even “somewhat sung out”, is, by reason of experience, master of his art and the more thorough in any role he may assume. He is by no means an *old* man.¹³⁹

The Brignoli troupe concluded its engagement in Little Rock by presenting the first act of Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* followed by the tower scene from *Il Trovatore*. Sometime during the performance, Brignoli managed to interpolate the sentimental ballad “Goodbye,

¹³⁶ *Morning Republican*, 7 February 1870.

¹³⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 February 1870.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Gazette*, 8 February 1870.

Sweetheart, Goodbye” which from all contemporary accounts seems to have been his signature song; but according to Henry Krehbiel, sounded more like “Coot boy, sweetheart, c-o-o-o-t boy!”¹⁴⁰

The engagement of the Brignoli opera troupe was “a decided success,” and seemed to create a sense of optimism among some that Little Rock would begin seeing more artists of this caliber. The *Gazette* expressed the hope that Adelina Patti might visit the city when her engagement in Memphis concluded, but this must not have materialized as no further mention of it could be found in subsequent issues.¹⁴¹

A New Opera House

After the departure of the Brignoli troupe, Little Rock was devoid of opera for the next eight years. During these years, however, a new opera house would rise, fall, and then rise again—a theatre which would house the opera troupes that would begin visiting the city regularly beginning in 1878. On August 13, 1872, the *Gazette* mentioned that “Mr. Luper Robins will commence the erection of his new opera-house next week.”¹⁴² By September, the foundation was finished, and by October the walls of the first story were nearly completed.¹⁴³ The hall was leased by Col. J.H. Wood, who had previously enjoyed much success as the proprietor of a varieties theater in town. In November, it was reported that Col. Wood had engaged an English opera troupe under the management of Mr. John A. Templeton to open the

¹⁴⁰ *Morning Republican*, 8 February 1870; Henry E. Krehbiel, *Chapters of Opera...* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1909), 83; quoted in Dougan, *Opera and the Golden West*, 104.

¹⁴¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 9 February 1870.

¹⁴² *Gazette*, 13 August 1872.

¹⁴³ *Gazette*, 21 September 1872; 20 October 1872.

new opera house which was “now nearly completed.”¹⁴⁴ One week later, the *Gazette* announced that Wood’s grand opera house—promising “legitimate drama”-- would open on January 6th, 1873. One month later, however, it was reported that progress on the opera house was slow due to bad weather, and that the opening had been delayed until January 9th. This delay may have conflicted with the itinerary of Templeton’s English opera troupe, though, for it was now advertised that Duprez and Benedict’s Minstrels would open the opera house.¹⁴⁵

Delays continued to plague the opera house, and Col. Wood was forced to host Duprez and Benedict’s Minstrels in the old city hall, “owing to the non-completion of the opera house.”¹⁴⁶ From mid-January to mid-February, the *Gazette* reported on the progress of the opera house, including reports of work on the roof, stage, and façade of the building. On February 19, a *Gazette* reporter visited the opera house and reported his findings in the next day’s paper.

A *Gazette* representative dropped around to the new opera house building last evening. It is situated on the west side of Main Street, between third and Fourth streets, and is rapidly approaching completion. The hall has been leased by Col. Wood, of this city, who will, as soon as it is completed, open with a first-class theatrical troupe.

The hall has all the modern conveniences, and cannot be surpassed in point of excellence by any of similar character in the southern states. At the right hand, at the head of the stairway of the main entrance, is the general business office and day box office. Directly in front is the general ticket office, which is convenient, cozy and comfortable. The galleries are capable of seating a large number of persons, extending, as they do, nearly the full length, and occupying the whole front of the building. There will be ample accommodation in the house for the seating of fifteen hundred persons. The stage is very large, and has all the necessary “traps” for the rendering of any play presented in New York or any other city. The “flats” used on the stage are light, thus making them easily moved, and will be a great help to the effect of the plays. Under the stage is a perfect network of machinery, and on each side of the “trap room” are dressing

¹⁴⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 December 1872; 17 November 1872.

¹⁴⁵ *Gazette*, 20 December 1872.

¹⁴⁶ *Gazette*, 7 January 1873.

rooms and rooms for the general use of the performers. The scenery is already being designed by a competent artist brought from Cincinnati, who will paint the scenery.

We are assured that the house will be opened to the public one week from next Monday [March 3rd]. Col. Wood has not yet decided upon the company he will open with. He is in correspondence with a number of first-class troupes, who desire to open the new opera house.¹⁴⁷

On February 25th, Col. Wood sent the following card to the *Gazette* office:

The undersigned, manager of this beautiful temple of amusement, would call the attention of the public to the fact that he has spared no expense in making the opera-house, as it now stands, the only first-class theatre in the state, and for which he has procured the finest and most able stars that Europe and America can produce, and it is his purpose and determination to place before the public a rare, chaste and novel entertainment, such as cannot fail to elicit the patronage of the most fastidious. The entertainment will consist of drama, comedy, tragedy, pantomimes, burlesques, combinations, operas, vaudevilles, specialties, etc. Stars of magnitude will appear in our firmament of genius in rapid succession, so the public can, at all times, witness something new and startling. The opera-house will be opened to the public on Monday, March 3d, with Mr. and Mrs. Charles L. Howard, supported by a large and efficient corps of artists.

Hoping to receive a share of public patronage, I am, very respectfully, J.H. Wood, Lessee and Manager Grand Opera-House.¹⁴⁸

After one final delay “owing to unavoidable circumstances”, the Grand Opera House—“the hopes of Little Rock realized”—was opened to the public on March 5, 1873. The physical trappings of the new opera house must have been more entertaining than the actual performance as the *Gazette* devoted much of its review to the lighting and scenery. As for the performance, it “was such as to give general satisfaction.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 20 February 1873.

¹⁴⁸ *Gazette*, 25 February 1873.

¹⁴⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 2, 5, 6 March 1873.

Such lukewarm entertainment must have occupied the opera house for the next two months, for when the Selden Irwin troupe was scheduled to perform *Our Irish Cousin* on May 12, the *Gazette* considered this to be the “official” opening of the opera house.

The Grand opera-house has been opened a number of times by troupes and companies pretending to play the legitimate drama, and each time received full houses, and the audience has each time been disappointed in the performance. The performance has always been heretofore vaudeville or varieties...

The Selden Irwin combination was announced by Col. Mayer, the agent, as a dramatic troupe, and their performances carry out his statements.¹⁵⁰

At this point, it is necessary to point out a minor discrepancy found in another publication on the history of Little Rock theatre. Very little has been written detailing Little Rock’s theatrical history, so Denham Lee Wooten’s thesis *Annals of the Stage in Little Rock, Arkansas: 1834-1890* stands out as an exhaustive chronology of the Little Rock stage, with much of his information gleaned from newspapers of the time. He did, however, make a statement that does not seem to have supporting evidence from news accounts of the time. When mentioning the new opera house and its leasing by Col. Wood, Wooten states the following: “...Woods leased Robbins New Opera House on Main Street. The building wasn’t really new. It was the old house first used in 1858 by the Moroney Troupe.”¹⁵¹ Unfortunately, Wooten gives no footnote stating what source led him to believe that Woods’ new opera house was not new, but a renovation of the old theater built by John Robbins in 1858.¹⁵² Based upon the following

¹⁵⁰ *Gazette*, 14 May 1873.

¹⁵¹ Denham Lee Wooten, “Annals of the Stage in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1834-1890” (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1935), 48.

¹⁵² Wooten’s erroneous statement is cited in one of the other rare publications on Little Rock’s theatrical history, Larry T. Menefee’s dissertation “The Death of a Road Show Town: Little Rock, Arkansas, 1899-1921.

evidence, it is the opinion of this author that the “new” opera house of 1873 and the “old” opera house of 1858 were two separate buildings.

First, the physical description of each building differs considerably. In the announcement printed in the *Gazette* in February 1858, it was stated that the soon-to-be theatre would be two stories, 40 feet wide and 97 feet deep.¹⁵³ According to the May 17, 1872 *Gazette*, the plans for the new opera house called for a structure that would be three stories high, 75 feet wide and 140 feet deep.¹⁵⁴ The most compelling evidence, however, is a November 1888 fire that destroyed a series of buildings in the 200 block of Main Street. According to news accounts, several of these buildings were owned by John G. Fletcher and Peter Hotze; and included in this property was a “two-story, slate roofed brick building which had housed the delicatessen. Built in 1856¹⁵⁵ by John Robbins, it had been the town’s opera house for many years.”¹⁵⁶ In the May 17, 1872 *Gazette* announcement, it was mentioned that the new opera house was to be built “just east of Fletcher and Hotze block;”¹⁵⁷ and the 1880 Little Rock City Directory listed the address of Woods’ Grand Opera House as the 300 block of Main Street.¹⁵⁸ It is understandable why Wooten would have assumed that they were the same building; after all, they both were built by a man named Robbins and both were located on Main Street. However, it is the opinion of this author that they were two separate buildings located one block apart.

¹⁵³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 February 1858.

¹⁵⁴ *Gazette*, 17 May 1872.

¹⁵⁵ There is no reference made in the *Gazette* in 1856 to a theatre constructed by Robbins. It is the opinion of this author that this was a misprint and that the date should have read 1858.

¹⁵⁶ *Gazette*, 18 November 1888.

¹⁵⁷ *Gazette*, 17 May 1872.

¹⁵⁸ *City Directories of the United States Little Rock, AR Segments II-*. (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1980).

The Grand Opera House was open for less than two years when the proprietors received discouraging news: their building had been declared unsafe. The following description of the structural damage was printed in the *Gazette* on January 15, 1875:

The top of the walls supporting the roof has been forced outward on the north side about eight inches, and on the south side about six inches—the greatest displacement being along the middle of the walls, on each side of the dome. The framework of the roof is too weak to resist the outward thrust of the principals upon the walls, the collar-beams and principals being composed of ordinary joint timber nailed together, all the intersections of the various members being secured generally with but one small bolt. The collar beams, upon which the safety of the roof depends, are badly constructed, and are opening and sinking, and liable to be ruptured at any moment. Should a rupture occur, the walls would immediately yield, and the whole roof fall in. Such a catastrophe is liable to occur at any moment of unusual pressure, such as a heavy fall of snow, or a high wind. We, therefore, recommend the employment of a competent architect to design and supervise the work of repair, as in its present condition we consider the roof unsafe and dangerous.¹⁵⁹

This news must have been particularly dispiriting for the city's opera lovers, as it meant that theater managers were forced to cancel an engagement with the Adelaide Phillips Italian Opera Company, which would have been the first opera company to visit the city since Brignoli in 1870.¹⁶⁰

A contractor was engaged to oversee the rebuilding of the Grand, but two months later there were still no signs of progress. “Let the Grand Opera house be repaired, or an amusement hall opened,” said the *Gazette*, “first-class companies all around, and none in Little Rock.”¹⁶¹ The process of rebuilding finally began in August with a team of twenty-five men. The theater

¹⁵⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 15 January 1875.

¹⁶⁰ *Gazette*, 16 January 1875.

¹⁶¹ *Gazette*, 10-11 March 1875

was projected to reopen in October with “a brilliant season in the way of amusements.” True to their word, the theater reopened on October 25th with the Fay Templeton Combination.¹⁶²

Less than a year later, the Grand underwent more renovation, this time the work was cosmetic rather than structural. The stage was enlarged and improved, and chandeliers were placed on either side. Existing scenery was improved, and new scenic drops were added, including a palace and arch, garden, parlor, wood scene, kitchen, and chamber.¹⁶³

Alice Oates

In January 1878, almost eight years after the Brignoli troupe visited the city, Little Rock was once again visited by an opera company. Unlike Brignoli, who specialized in grand opera, the Oates English Comic Opera Company specialized in light opera, particularly English translations of French *opera-bouffe*. Singer Alice Oates was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and received musical training in Louisville and New Orleans.¹⁶⁴ In the 1870's, she and her company traveled quite literally from coast to coast with their English adaptations of French *opera-bouffe*. In 1870, she introduced an English version of Hervé's *Le Petit Faust* in New York; and throughout the 1870's she brought adaptations of *La Perichole*, *Le Petit Duc*, *La Fille de Mme. Angot* and *Girofle-Girofla* to San Francisco audiences.¹⁶⁵ In his dissertation titled *French Comic*

¹⁶² *Arkansas Gazette*, 27, 5 August 1875; 19 October 1875.

¹⁶³ *Little Rock Daily Herald*, 13 August 1876; *Gazette* 21 September 1876.

¹⁶⁴ *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, s.v. “Oates, Alice”.

¹⁶⁵ Deane L. Root, *American Popular Stage Music 1860-1880*, Studies in Musicology, ed. George Buelow, no. 44 (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981), 129.

Opera in New York: 1855-1890, James Morgan says that “Mrs. Oates produced every popular work of the French *opera-bouffe* repertory in acceptable English version...”¹⁶⁶

Alice Oates found much favor and popularity on tour, but she was often criticized by New York critics, who often looked down upon both her acting and singing. The *Spirit of the Times* said:

Mrs. Oates is a sprightly and energetic little woman, independent enough not to care much, apparently, whether she is an artist or not. She has a powerful voice and seems to think its most pleasing quality is its strength, for she appears generally to try to shake things with it...Little that is suave or graceful appears in her vocalism. And the same may be said of her acting. She is full of “snap,” but staccato movements soon become monotonous and unpleasant...She is admired elsewhere for doing things in a boisterous, rough, and angular way... She is a specimen of the “rough diamond” which may be often seen on our stage, and which are mostly found in the Western valleys.¹⁶⁷

On January 20, 1878, the *Gazette* first announced that Alice Oates and her troupe would visit the city on Monday evening the 28th. In an advertisement that appeared three days later, the Oates troupe claimed to be “the largest organization in the world, and the only one making a specialty of performing in English the operas of Offenbach, Lecocq and other French composers.” The piece performed would be *Giroflé-Girofla* by Charles Lecocq, an operetta about mistaken identity involving twin sisters. *Giroflé-Girofla* premiered in Brussels in March 1874 and was brought to the United States in February 1875.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ James Oliver Morgan, “French Comic Opera in New York, 1855-1890” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois, 1959), 191.

¹⁶⁷ *Spirit of the Times* (New York), 8 June 1872; quoted in Morgan, “French Comic Opera in New York,” 190-191.

¹⁶⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 23 January 1878; Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1983), 81.

In its Little Rock premiere, the principal role of the twin sisters was to be played by Mrs. Oates, with supporting roles filled by Gustavus Hall, Henri Laurent, and Harry Allen. The *Gazette* was enthusiastic in its coverage of the impending arrival of the troupe, making five mentions of the upcoming performance over the course of seven days. Due to previous engagements, Oates and her troupe would perform one night only, so the *Gazette* urged the public to reserve their seats early. By the 26th, it was reported that nearly all of the reserved seats had already been claimed; and by the next day the *Gazette* reported that such was the demand for tickets that “part of the gallery will have to be laid off in secured seats to accommodate the rush that will be made tomorrow by those who delayed securing choice seats below at an earlier date.”¹⁶⁹

In light of the extensive coverage prior to the performance, the review that appeared in the next’s morning’s *Gazette* seemed oddly succinct:

Mrs. Oates, with her fine opera troupe, played GG to a very large audience at the Grand Opera House, last night. From the manner in which the excellent performance was received, and the rapidity with which the seats were taken at the advanced rates, the inference is plain that really good companies, comprising first-class performers and stars, can always do a good business in Little Rock.¹⁷⁰

The lack of a detailed review is most likely not a reflection of the merits of the Oates troupe. The coverage that the Oates troupe received was not uncommon for the time. At this time, the *Gazette* did not have a professional drama critic on staff and would not get one until 1902 with the arrival of T.A. Wright. In his dissertation *The Death of a Road Show Town: Little Rock 1899-1921*, Larry Menefee points out that, “Prior to the beginning of the 1902-03 season,

¹⁶⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 January 1878.

¹⁷⁰ *Gazette*, 29 January 1878.

the reviews gave little more than general audience reactions, and demonstrated a marked lack of dramatic analysis.”¹⁷¹ Those responsible for writing the theatrical reviews prior to 1902 tended to be overly enthusiastic offering very little, if any, criticism. It was not uncommon for the reviewer to refer to a performance as “the finest ever given in this city” and to use positive, albeit rather generic, language to praise the acting and singing. Writers from this time relied heavily on the opinions of others, often printing reviews of a troupe’s performance in a larger city that most likely contained an able dramatic critic such as New Orleans, St. Louis, Dallas, or Memphis. These reviews were often printed in the *Gazette* prior to a troupe’s arrival in the city as a means of publicity.

Ilma de Murska

In June 1878, Little Rock was visited by a famous name in grand opera: Ilma de Murska. Murska was born in Croatia in 1839 and was an early pupil of Mathilde Marchesi. She made her debut in Florence in 1862; and in 1865 she debuted in London under Colonel Mapleson at Her Majesty’s Theatre, singing the title role in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. She enjoyed a successful European career under Mapleson for the rest of the decade, having arrived on the scene at just the right time, after Adelina Patti but before Christine Nilsson. In 1870, she sang the role of Senta in the London premier of Wagner’s *Der fliegende Holländer* at Drury Lane.¹⁷²

By 1871, her star was beginning to fade in Europe, and she spent the 1870’s touring Australia and the United States. During her time in America, she briefly joined “The Three

¹⁷¹ Larry T. Menefee, “The Death of a Road Show Town: Little Rock, Arkansas, 1899-1921” (Ph.D. diss., University of Denver, 1977), 50.

¹⁷² Harold Rosenthal, ed., “A Selective Biographical Index,” in *The Mapleson Memoirs: The Career of an Operatic Impresario 1858-1888* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), 320; *Mapleson Memoirs*, 60; Hermann Klein, *Great Women-Singers of my Time* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1968), 80.

Graces” tour of America featuring the American divas Clara Louise Kellogg, Marie Roze, and Annie Louise Cary. By 1880, her career had dwindled and she accepted a teaching position at the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. Unfortunately, her capability as a teacher was not equal to her brilliant singing abilities, and her tenure at the conservatory was short-lived.¹⁷³

Murska was remembered by her contemporaries as being an extremely talented coloratura soprano. In his memoirs, Luigi Arditi recalled Murska’s voice:

[She]...was a soprano of nearly three octaves, with great executive powers. Although her dramatic talent sometimes bordered on the extravagant, she was a remarkable actress as well as a brilliant singer. She would, however, with the greatest *sangfroid* introduce all sorts of cadenzas of her own while rehearsing, and even during the actual performance of her parts, and it was often said of her that when she reached a high note she was with difficulty induced to let it go again.¹⁷⁴

She was also well-known for her musicianship, possessing a brilliant musical memory that enabled her to learn music quickly and easily. According to one anecdote, she could learn a part just by looking at the score, and would sometimes do so while in bed.¹⁷⁵

Ilma de Murska was “brilliant but eccentric.”¹⁷⁶ She was known for travelling with a large collection of pets. In his memoirs, Colonel Mapleson recalled Murska’s “menagerie”:

Ilma di Murska...travelled with an entire menagerie. Her immense Newfoundland, Pluto, dined with her every day. A cover was laid for him as for her, and he had learned to eat a fowl from a plate without dropping any of the meat or bones on the floor or even on the

¹⁷³ Klein, 87; Kellogg, *Memoirs*, 289, 296.

¹⁷⁴ Luigi Arditi, *My Reminiscences* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1896), 128.

¹⁷⁵ Henry Charles Lahee, *Famous Singers of Today and Yesterday* (Boston: Longwood Press, 1978), 153.

¹⁷⁶ Klein, 80.

table cloth. Pluto was a good-natured dog, or he would have made short work of the monkey, the two parrots, and the Angora cat, who were his constant associates.¹⁷⁷

Her parrots were reportedly a costly nuisance to many a hotel manager, as they “had a decided antipathy to silk or damask upholstery, particularly to flowered patterns, but Madame di Murska always seemed pleased when the bills for the depredations of her pets were presented to her.”¹⁷⁸

Among her other eccentricities was a gold belt¹⁷⁹ that she wore for every performance and a severe sensitivity about her age. One of her colleagues, Charles Santley, recalled finding Murska in the wings of a performance of *The Magic Flute* sobbing because one of the other company members had claimed that she was forty-five when she was actually “little more than thirty.”¹⁸⁰

It was during the twilight of her career that she came to Little Rock, shortly after her stint with “The Three Graces.” This time she was headlining her own company, The De Murska Opera Company. The company was presumably small, as their engagement in Little Rock was to consist of a mixed concert on the first night, and *Don Pasquale* on the following night. Ironically, Murska was joined by another singer whose current career was a dim reflection of their brilliant yesteryears: tenor Pasquale Brignoli who had visited Little Rock in 1870.

The *Gazette* writer attended only part of the first night’s performance, but reported that Murska sang “The Carnival of Venice” “most artistically” and that the audience was “spell-bound” by her encore “The Sweet Bye and Bye.” Brignoli performed his signature song

¹⁷⁷ Rosenthal, *Mapleson Memoirs*, 100.

¹⁷⁸ Lahee, *Famous Singers*, 156.

¹⁷⁹ Arditi, *My Reminiscences*, 129.

¹⁸⁰ Klein, *Great Women-Singers*, 80.

“Goodbye, Sweetheart, Goodbye” to “tumultuous applause.”¹⁸¹ On the following night, the company presented *Don Pasquale*, with Signor Susini singing the title role and Brignoli managing to interpolate “Goodbye, Sweetheart” into the second act. As per usual, the *Gazette* critic did not attempt any extensive criticism, claiming “A certain amount of musical education is necessary to enable one to appreciate any kind of music, and nowhere is this more necessary than in opera, where the finest passages fall ‘flat’ on an uncultivated ear.” He was, however, aware of the talk surrounding Ilma de Murska’s age; and in a polite gesture claimed, “Mlle. De Murska has been “accused” of being old, but this seems to be an advantage, as she certainly has learned to conceal the imperfections of voice, if any exist.”¹⁸²

Adah Richmond

Little Rock’s next taste of opera came shortly after the opening of the 1878-79 season. The Adah Richmond Opera Company presented four *opera bouffe* during their three day engagement October 28-30, 1878. While Adah Richmond is frequently mentioned in many publications detailing America’s musical theatre history, very little biographical information can be found. She is frequently mentioned in conjunction with burlesque, vaudeville, and *opera bouffe*; and she is listed as a performer in the annals of many American theatres. The most detailed biography is supplied perhaps by Ms. Richmond herself, in what is presumed to be an interview given to a writer for the *Arkansas Democrat*, printed during her engagement in Little Rock:

There are few actresses on the American stage that stand higher off the boards than Miss Adah Richmond. She is a lady in every respect, and as an opera bouffe singer, is the possessor of an enviable reputation. She first appeared on the stage at the old St.

¹⁸¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 June 1878.

¹⁸² *Gazette*, 8 June 1878.

Charles, New Orleans, in 1867, in the stock company. Her progress was rapid. She was a close student, and soon became in demand. Managers were loth [sic] to part with her.

From New Orleans she traveled over the country winning praise on every hand, but it was not until the past three or four years she found herself famous. In New York she first appeared at the Olympic as “Kathleen Kavanaugh,” and as “Black Eyed Susan,” “Colleen Bawn,” and other characters. Here she won a position in the front rank of her profession. Afterward, under the tutorship of Max Maretzek, she devoted months to the study of music. She then emerged in opera bouffe, and since has been the queen of its wild, extravagant glories.¹⁸³

The company was advertised as being comprised of forty stars—some of whom had previously performed with Ilma de Murska and Alice Oates--chorus, and orchestra.¹⁸⁴ The company’s arrival in the city was not without calamity. On their journey south on the Iron Mountain Railroad, the train carrying the Richmond company encountered a broken rail and derailed, all but three cars going into the ditch.¹⁸⁵ No one was injured, but their arrival was delayed and some of the company’s costumes were damaged thus forcing them to open their Little Rock engagement with *Les Cloches de Corneville* rather than *La Perichole* as had originally been planned.¹⁸⁶

Les Cloches de Corneville, composed by Robert Planquette, was one of the most popular operettas in America during the 1870’s.¹⁸⁷ It was “a romantic story about a set of Norman bells that would ring when the Marquis Henri de Corneville, the rightful owner of a château, returned to his home.” It premiered in Paris at Folies-Dramatiques in April 1877, and was performed over

¹⁸³ *Arkansas Democrat*, 30 October 1878.

¹⁸⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 29 October 1878.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Democrat*, 29 October 1878.

¹⁸⁷ Root, *American Popular Stage Music*, 129.

five hundred times in its initial run.¹⁸⁸ It appeared in English translation—usually called *The Chimes of Normandy*—in October of the same year.¹⁸⁹

In spite of trying circumstances, the Adah Richmond Company found favor with Little Rock audiences for their production of *Les Cloches de Cornville*. Even though they were advertised as being a company with chorus and orchestra, the *Gazette* reported a lack of orchestra, perhaps due to the train accident though this is never confirmed. Nevertheless, the *Gazette* praised the company's musical director, Mr. Edwin Hassa, for supplying piano accompaniment for the performance. Even though this was the first time *Les Cloches* was presented in Little Rock, neither the *Gazette* nor the *Democrat* say anything about the opera itself. The *Democrat* praised Richmond's "pretty face", "elegant figure", and "sweet voice", and offered polite commendations to the remaining members of the company. The *Gazette* was particularly drawn to Richmond's interpolation of the popular song "My Grandfather's Clock," which "won all hearts by its sweetness and pathos."¹⁹⁰

The next night's bill contained Lecocq's *Giroflé-Girofla*, which Little Rock audiences would have recognized, having heard it the previous January by Alice Oates. Perhaps because it was a show with which many were now familiar, the *Gazette* had little to say about the performance, calling the cast "very strong" and the acting "remarkably good."¹⁹¹ In the same article it was mentioned that the audience was even larger than opening night, and readers were

¹⁸⁸ Traubner, *Operetta*, 87-88.

¹⁸⁹ Alfred Loewenberg, *Annals of Opera: 1597-1940* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), 1063.

¹⁹⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 29 October 1878; *Arkansas Democrat*, 29 October 1878.

¹⁹¹ *Gazette*, 30 October 1878.

encouraged to patronize the company's remaining performances, a matinee performance of *The Chimes of Normandy* and *La Perichole* in the evening.

Jacques Offenbach's *La Perichole* premiered in Paris at the Variétés in October 1868 and in New York in January 1869. The title role is based upon Micaëla Villegas, an eighteenth-century Peruvian actress who was the mistress of the Peruvian viceroy. In the libretto by Meilhac and Halévy, the title character is a street singer who is involved in a love triangle with the Viceroy and Piquillo, a poor artist.¹⁹²

The subject matter of *La Perichole* must have been a point of objection to some Little Rock citizens, as the *Democrat* praised the company for their tasteful production: "The objectionable features in this opera were overcome by the refinement of the star, who as 'La Perichole,' avoided wholly and absolutely the vulgarity so noticeable in others." Interestingly, the role of Piquillo—usually a tenor role—was sung by Miss Jennie Winston, a feat which the *Democrat* praised as "admirable."¹⁹³

Perhaps as a form of rebuttal against the *Democrat's* more detailed review of the opera, the *Gazette* offered no critique of the show whatsoever, choosing instead to devote much of its column to defending its lack of critique:

Superior plays should be handled by superior critics—superior books reviewed by superior reviewers. But the critic, if he be other than good, would fall far short of the marks of musical philosophy, if the soul of sounds can be called philosophy, if he were to attempt the picking of flaws in certain parts of last night's performance. There is so much in music to some and so little to others, that the critic, if there be any, is lost somewhere, he doesn't know where. To accept what we feel to be good, though more musical ears shut it out, is a kind of honesty. Music is a study. The man who pays the

¹⁹² Traubner, *Operetta*, 60,63.

¹⁹³ *Arkansas Democrat*, 31 October 1878.

proper amount of attention to its cultivation has little time left for newspaper work. These annotations will introduce to you the fact that we do not attempt a scientific criticism, but merely to give our convictions. The performance last night was magnificent. Wherever the troupe goes, it will be remembered by Little Rock people as one of the best they ever saw.¹⁹⁴

Alice Oates

Little Rock audiences had to wait a full year before opera returned to the city. In October 1879, the Alice Oates troupe returned to Little Rock, this time for a three-night engagement. (They appeared in Little Rock for one night only in January 1878) It was originally advertised that they would open their engagement with Offenbach's *The Pretty Perfumer* (*La Jolie Parfumeuse*); but several days before the company's arrival, the opera house received a telegram from the company stating that the production would not be ready for the first night. Instead, they offered *Giroflé-Girofla* the first night and promised a bonus matinee performance of *The Pretty Perfumer* on the third day of their engagement.¹⁹⁵

Giroflé-Girofla opened on October 20 to positive reviews from both newspapers. The next night, Little Rock was introduced to another new operetta, Lecocq's *The Little Duke* (*Le Petit Duc*), which premiered in Paris in January 1878. The libretto for *The Little Duke* was provided by Meilhac and Halévy, the same duo who had provided Offenbach with many of his libretti. Set in the Versailles court of Louis XIV, the Duke of Parthenay (a pants role) is forbidden from consummating his marriage and is ordered into training while his bride is sent to

¹⁹⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 31 October 1878.

¹⁹⁵ *Gazette*, 18 October 1879.

a convent. The Duke, however, disguises himself to gain entrance to the convent to be with his bride.¹⁹⁶

According to Richard Traubner in his book *Operetta: A Theatrical History*, *Le Petit Duc* never achieved the same degree of popularity in America as in Paris. The reason being, perhaps, that the score was “too French.” Around the same time of *Le Petit Duc*, Lecocq arranged the first piano-vocal score of Rameau’s *Castor et Pollux*. As a result, *Le Petit Duc* is peppered with gavottes and an eighteenth-century flavor which was perhaps “too elegant, too mannered for Anglo-Saxon tastes.”¹⁹⁷

It is difficult to discern whether or not Little Rock audiences received *The Little Duke* in the same way that Traubner mentioned, as neither newspaper had much to say about the performance. The *Gazette* called it “highly appreciated” while the *Democrat* described it as “bewitching.” One thing that is certain is that this performance was highly anticipated—both newspapers reported that the theatre sold out to standing room only thirty minutes before curtain. The *Democrat* went so far as to report that several hundred patrons were turned away due to lack of space.¹⁹⁸

The Pretty Perfumer was presented as a matinee the following day, but nothing was said about it; the newspapers were far too occupied discussing the evening’s performance: Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

¹⁹⁶ Traubner, *Operetta*, 83.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 83-84.

¹⁹⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 22 October 1879; *Arkansas Democrat*, 22 October 1879.

H.M.S. Pinafore tells the story of love between different social classes: the daughter of a ship captain falls in love with a member of her father's crew. *Pinafore* was the fourth collaboration between W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan; it premiered in London at the Opera Comique on May 25, 1878.¹⁹⁹ Exactly six months later, *Pinafore* came ashore in the United States, premiering at the Boston Museum on November 25, 1878. By spring 1879, *Pinafore* fever had swept the entire country.²⁰⁰

The first year of *Pinafore* performances in the United States were given by troupes using pirated versions of the opera. At this time, there was no copyright agreement between the United States and Britain; and many of these pirated versions deviated greatly from the original version. In some unauthorized versions, the character of Ralph Rackstraw was played by a woman.²⁰¹ Richard D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert and Sullivan's business partner, observed an American production where the role of Little Buttercup was played by a seven-foot-tall man "with all the dainty coyness of a woman."²⁰² Additional musical numbers were also freely interpolated; one version incorporated Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus."²⁰³ In order to put an end to the piracy and to present an authentic version of *Pinafore*, Gilbert and Sullivan traveled to the United States in November of 1879. The "official" premiere of an authorized version of *Pinafore* occurred in New York on December 1, 1879.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ David Russell Hulme, "H.M.S. Pinafore," in *Oxford Music Online*; available <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>; Internet; accessed 18 January 2010.

²⁰⁰ Traubner, *Operetta*, 158.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 158-159.

²⁰² Leslie Baily, *Gilbert & Sullivan and Their World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 58; quoted in Root, *American Popular Stage Music*, 167.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Root, *American Popular Stage Music*, 168.

The performance of *Pinafore* in the United States was a real turning point on the musical stages of many cities. The broad popularity of the operetta led to the formation of many professional and amateur organizations whose primary purpose was to perform *H.M.S. Pinafore*. In the book *American Popular Stage Music: 1860-1880*, Deane L. Root describes the sweeping effect that *Pinafore* had on the country:

For the first time, the forces of professional, semiprofessional, and amateur theater were directed toward performing one operetta, in turn prompting an increased interest in stage music, the formation of new troupes, the composition of new operettas, and the expansion of musical-theater activity throughout the country. The *Pinafore* effect was to confirm operetta as the major form of popular stage music for the next generation of Americans.²⁰⁵

The Alice Oates troupe brought *Pinafore* fever to Little Rock on the final night of its engagement. On the day of the performance, the *Gazette* said that, *Pinafore* “the agitator of the comic operatic world, will be played. It is useless to advertise this. The house will be crowded before the performance begins.” Their prediction was correct; by 7:30 the house had sold to standing room only.²⁰⁶

The *Gazette* referred to the performance as the “genuine” *Pinafore*²⁰⁷, but it was anything but genuine. As this performance occurred approximately a month-and-a-half prior to Gilbert and Sullivan’s authorized New York version, the version that Little Rock audiences saw that night was undoubtedly a bastardized version. This is further proven in the reports by both newspapers that the character of Ralph Rackstraw was played by Alice Oates, a choice of which both newspapers were critical. According to the *Gazette*:

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 170-171.

²⁰⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 22-23 October 1879.

²⁰⁷ *Gazette*, 23 October 1879.

Alice embraced the character of Ralph Rackstraw. This is the only mistake Alice makes. She is good—immense, but, er, the—well, Alice is a trifle to “heavy” for the character. Her plumpness of person does not suggest a Rack, or any other kind of a straw, but she is good—good in anything.²⁰⁸

The *Democrat* agreed:

While we admire Oates’ acting and singing, we must protest against her make up as “Ralph Rackstraw.” She has too much flesh and looks no more like the sailor than a terrapin would in soldier’s clothes. She makes a squatty man, and all her swaggering won’t make her a good Rackstraw. Another thing against her is that as “Rackstraw” she is shorter than her sweetheart, the captain’s daughter.²⁰⁹

Little Rock audiences had no problem with the lack of authenticity, being especially pleased by Mrs. Oates’ interpolation of the popular ballad “Goodbye, Sweetheart, Goodbye.” They were probably unaware that what they witnessed was a gross deviation from Gilbert and Sullivan’s original concept. Both newspapers praised the efforts of all of the main characters, with the exception of Mrs. Oates’ choice of character. This did not seem to dampen their overall opinion though; the *Democrat* called the performance “fully up to standard”²¹⁰ and the *Gazette* declared the entire engagement to be a success.

Saville-Lee English Opera Company

In December 1879, Little Rock was favored with two opera companies in the same month: The Saville-Lee English Opera Company followed by a return of the Adah Richmond Company. There is little information available about the Saville-Lee company, other than newspaper references to the company’s visit to a particular city. According to playbills from the time, two of the company’s members—Flora Barry and Percy J.J. Cooper—were previously

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ *Arkansas Democrat*, 23 October 1879.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

associated with the Boston Lyceum Opera Co.²¹¹ Based on the number of other references found, the most notable name in the company was baritone Digby V. Bell. Bell studied opera in Italy for five years and made his professional debut there in 1876 as the Count in *La Sonnambula*. He began his American career in oratorio and Italian opera but soon moved into English opera. His later professional associations in comic opera included the McCaull Comedians and Lillian Russell.²¹² According to playbills from 1893, Bell was headlining his own company, performing *Jupiter*, a light opera by Julian Edwards.²¹³ By 1900, Digby Bell had moved away from opera and established himself as a well-liked performer of vaudeville.²¹⁴

The Saville-Lee English Opera Company's engagement in Little Rock consisted of three performances over a span of two days. They opened their engagement with a performance of *The Bohemian Girl*, composed in 1843 by Michael Balfe, known as the "British Bellini" due to his Italian style of writing.²¹⁵ Little Rock audiences were especially delighted by the beautiful choruses which, according to the *Democrat*, "were strong and delightful, sweeping out upon the audience with the power of a whirlwind and dying away in gasps like the sighing of wind in a

²¹¹ Mechanics Hall (Worcester, MA), *Mechanics Hall, Worcester...November 27th, 1876. The Entertainment of the Season! Boston Lyceum Opera Co. in Flotow's Charming Opera of "Martha."* (Worcester, MA: s.n., 1876). WorldCat, OCLC FirstSearch, Accession No. 438517735.

²¹² Lewis Clinton Strang, *Famous Stars of Light Opera* (Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1900), 227, 230, 233; Walter Browne and E. De Roy Koch, *Who's Who on the Stage, 1908: The Dramatic Reference Book and Biographical Dictionary of the Theatre: Containing Careers of Actors, Actresses, Managers, and Playwrights of the American Stage* (New York: B.W. Dodge, 1908), 33.

²¹³ Grand Opera House (London, Ont.), *Grand Opera House, London, Ont. Wednesday and Thursday, Feb. 8 & 9, 1893: Programme, Mr. Digby Bell and His Comic Opera Company, in the Big Operatic Success of the Season "Jupiter," by Harry B. Smith and Julian Edwards.* (London, Ont.: s.n., 1893), WorldCat, OCLC FirstSearch, Accession No. 17846372.

²¹⁴ Strang, *Famous Stars of Light Opera*, 225.

²¹⁵ Traubner, *Operetta*, 13.

pine forest.”²¹⁶ The *Gazette* devoted a large portion of their column to chiding their readers for the poor turnout:

The audience was not large. This does not speak well for the Little Rock “dilettantes.” The house should have been crowded, for surely the company is an excellent one. The “Bohemian Girl” was never before rendered in this state more truthfully, and we were surprised that our musical people were not all present.²¹⁷

The *Gazette* encouraged their readers to attend the afternoon matinee of *H.M.S. Pinafore* by comparing the Saville’s reputation for performing a great *Pinafore* against the lackluster performance of Alice Oates. “The fact that Alice Oates butchered Ralph Rackstraw, should stimulate a desire to see a genuine “H.M.S.” Go, by all means go.”²¹⁸ There was no review given of the matinee, as both newspapers rarely reviewed matinees. It is safe to say, however, that this performance was probably not genuine, if by genuine one means close to the original. In light of the fact that this matinee took place a mere three days after the New York premiere of the Gilbert and Sullivan sanctioned version, it is likely that this was yet another pirated version.

The Saville troupe’s final performance consisted of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Sorcerer*, a burlesque of Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore*.²¹⁹ The *Gazette* reported that *The Sorcerer* was “magnificently given” and “almost transcendent in its excellence.” Unfortunately, attendance was once again slim, much to the disappointment of the *Gazette* writer:

We have in our city a great many people who study music. Little Rock has the name of being a musical city, but yet, and strangely so too, many of our musical people prefer to see an exciting “slap bang” affair. This is not in accordance with a musical idea... We

²¹⁶ *Arkansas Democrat*, 4 December 1879.

²¹⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 4 December 1879.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Traubner, *Operetta*, 156.

are sorry that the Saville troupe did not receive larger audiences. The fact is discouraging.²²⁰

Adah Richmond

Two weeks later Adah Richmond returned to Little Rock for a two night engagement. The first night and second day matinee were performances of Franz von Suppé's *Fatinitza*, the final night's performance *Giroflé-Girofla*. Franz von Suppé was one of the first important composers of Viennese operetta, but would later be eclipsed by Johann Strauss II.²²¹ According to *Annals of Opera*, *Fatinitza* was Suppé's first international success, premiering in Vienna on January 5, 1876 and in New York on April 14, 1879.²²² The libretto of *Fatinitza* was supplied by F. Zell and Richard Genée, the same duo who supplied Johann Strauss II with his libretto for *Die Fledermaus*.²²³ *Fatinitza* is the name of a young woman who attracts the eye of a Russian general during the Crimean War. The plot is based around the fact that *Fatinitza* is actually a young lieutenant, Wladimir, in disguise.²²⁴

The pants-role of *Fatinitza* was assumed by Adah Richmond, and was well-received by the Little Rock audience who managed to fill the opera house despite bad weather. The *Gazette* was quite taken with the costumes "which, in dangling tassels and dancing fringe, intimate that Solomon, in all his glory, was not dressed—like one of these girls." Both newspapers agreed that Richmond's voice was sweet, while the *Democrat* admitted that it lacked power. The

²²⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 5 December 1879.

²²¹ Traubner, 103.

²²² Loewenberg, *Annals of Opera*, 1049-1050.

²²³ Traubner, 108.

²²⁴ Andrew Lamb, "Fatinitza," in *Oxford Music Online*; available from <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>; Internet; accessed 18 January 2010.

Gazette called the music “thrilling”, and the *Democrat* reported that the marching trio “March Forward Fearlessly” was encored three times.²²⁵

Unfortunately, attendance dropped for the subsequent performances of the Richmond troupe, and the city’s two newspapers offered different opinions as to the cause. The *Gazette* once again blamed the “musical elite” of the city, accusing them of hypocrisy:

In the fat men’s club of estimation, the audience at the opera house last night would have been considered too slim for membership. We are sorry for this. Adah Richmond is a charming little singer-actress, and deserved a crowded house; *Girofle-Girofla* was never presented more perfectly in this city. Little Rock boasts of being a musical city. We have our “note” societies, where whiskered men and fair women determine just what there is in a musical composition. They meet, sing and compliment each other. They discuss the merits of opera singers in New York, and wonder why such artists never visit Little Rock, and yet when the very same company comes here, they stay away and complain that they “have heard it before.” Because you have heard a song before, is that a reason why you do not wish to hear it again? Can you learn and appreciate the beauties of a piece of music amply by hearing it once? Is it music you like, or is it the flash of new costume? Are our musical societies organizations of musical admiration? Have they an actual appreciation of music? Are they jealous of professional troupes? It seems to be very much some way; we don’t exactly know which way it is. They are always humming and talking about music, but somehow prefer to attend a “Texas Jack” performance. Our opera-house men are becoming discouraged. Effort after effort has been made. The best troupes traveling have been engaged but yet your musical people wait until the “hip, hip, hurrah” show comes along. Adah Richmond has the best opera troupe on the road, and met with the poorest encouragement at our hands. Close you music books and rehearse some “slap bang” drama.²²⁶

The *Democrat* took a more rational stance, citing the repetition of operas they had already seen—by this point, many Little Rock citizens had likely seen *Giroflé-Girofla* multiple times—as well as the simultaneous occurrence of the Catholic bazaar. The *Democrat* did

²²⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 December 1879; *Arkansas Democrat*, 18 December 1879.

²²⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 December 1879.

intimate, however, that the reason for poor attendance could have also been due to poor behavior from some troupe members. “Certain members of the company...broadcast on the streets, silly, shameful ridiculous rumors that they are not paid, etc. They talk it in the street-cars, stores, or anywhere strangers can hear it.” While the troupe was in town, the *Democrat* received a note from a disgruntled member of the company offering to share “points of interest” about Miss Richmond. The meeting never materialized, and the *Democrat* expressed relief to hear that that company would soon be reorganized, hopefully ridding the company of those who attempting to tarnish Adah Richmond’s reputation.²²⁷

²²⁷ *Arkansas Democrat*, 19 December 1879.

CHAPTER 3

OPERA IN LITTLE ROCK: 1880-1889

Miles' Juvenile Opera Company

The month of October ushered in Little Rock's next decade of operatic entertainment, though it began on a rather unconventional note. In the latter part of the month, Miles' Juvenile Opera Company occupied the opera house for three performances: *The Little Duke*, *Chimes of Normandy*, and *H.M.S. Pinafore*. While this company presented well-known and established pieces from the light opera repertoire, what made their performance unconventional was the fact that all of the performers were children. The company marketed itself as being "the most perfect operatic organization in the country, consisting of 40 talented children," and "the only Juvenile Opera Company now before the public."²²⁸

Little Rock was enchanted by the children's presentations. The *Gazette* praised their polished performance, saying "the standard criticisms for professionals must be applied to the boys and girls composing the troupe, and where judged purely on their merits are deserving of as much praise as can be given." The *Democrat* simply said "the Juveniles are daisies...the audience was delighted."²²⁹

Questions of Safety

During the Juveniles' engagement in the city, an episode occurred which caused the public to question the safety of its opera house. During the matinee performance of *Pinafore*, a boy in the audience suffered a seizure. Those nearby attempted to move away from the boy thus

²²⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 22 October 1880.

²²⁹ *Gazette*, 23 October 1880; *Arkansas Democrat*, 23 October 1880.

creating a disturbance. To add to the panic, someone in the audience shouted “fire!” and the crowd began to surge toward the exits. The panic was quelled without any injury and the performance resumed²³⁰, but the pieces that appeared in both newspapers three weeks later showed that the incident had not been forgotten. In a piece titled “Public Opinion,” the *Gazette* quoted several prominent citizens who claimed that they did not attend performances at the opera house due to the lack of sufficient exits in the case of a fire. The *Democrat* printed a letter from “Wide-Awake Citizen” who urged the creation of rear exits for such a situation.²³¹ Even though there were those who refused to set foot in the opera house, it cannot be ascertained from the newspaper accounts just how much this safety concern impacted the attendance at performances, if at all.

Tagliapietra Italian Opera Troupe

In December, the Italian Opera Troupe headlined by baritone Giovanni Tagliapietra played a short engagement at the Grand Opera House. The troupe must have come at great cost to Manager Little, as the *Gazette* was careful to mention that Little would “make very little, if anything, by the contract, and the citizens of the city should thank him heartily for furnishing them such a treat.”²³²

Very little biographical information could be found about Tagliapietra; but he seemed to be very popular during his time. In *Forty Years Observation of Music and the Drama*, Robert Grau said that Tagliapietra “was perhaps the handsomest and most dashing baritone that ever appeared in Grand Opera,” and claimed that he was “indeed prominent” during the reign of

²³⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 24 October 1880.

²³¹ *Gazette*, 13 November 1880; *Democrat*, 13 November 1880.

²³² *Gazette*, 4 December 1880.

Adelina Patti and Christine Nilsson.²³³ Tagliapietra was born in Venice in 1850, and studied naval architecture at the University of Padua. He studied singing with Giovanni Corsi, and performed in Italy, South America, and the United States.²³⁴ As a performer in America, he was associated with such names as impresario Max Strakosch and divas Clara Kellogg, Ilma de Murska, and Emma Abbott. He is most often remembered today as the second husband of famous concert pianist Teresa Carreño, whom he met in 1875. They were married from 1876 to 1887, during which time she tried her hand at singing, producing and performing in operas with her husband.²³⁵

The Italian Opera Troupe was scheduled to open their engagement on December 8th with Donizetti's *La Favorita*. That same day, Manager Little received a telegram from Tagliapietra stating that the train had gone off the track and that they would not make it in time for the performance that evening in spite of being offered a special train by the Iron Mountain railroad. So as not to disappoint ticketholders, the company agreed to present *La Favorita* in a matinee performance the following day along with an evening performance of *Faust*.²³⁶

Neither the *Gazette* nor the *Democrat* reviewed the matinee; but the evening performance of *Faust* produced differing opinions from the city's two main newspapers. The *Gazette* remained positive in its overall assessment of the performance, calling it "thoroughly liked."

²³³ Robert Grau, *Forty Years Observation of Music and the Drama* (New York and Baltimore: Broadway Publishing Company, 1909), 255.

²³⁴ *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Centennial Edition, s.v. "Giovanni Tagliapietra," reproduced in *Biography Resource Center* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2010), Internet Database, available: <http://galenet.galegroup.com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/servlet/BioRC>.

²³⁵ Robert Stevenson, "Teresa Carreño (1853-1917): Remembered on Her 150th Anniversary," *Latin American Music Review* 25 (Autumn-Winter 2004): 168, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3598726>.

²³⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 9 December 1880.

The tone of the *Democrat* review was decidedly negative: “The troupe did not come up to the standard which is claimed for that class of amusements.” While the *Gazette* conceded that the troupe was “not as complete a troupe as advertised,” it was very complimentary of all of the principal singers. The *Gazette* writer praised Signor Talbo’s performance of the title role, claiming that his portrayal demonstrated “considerable breadth of acting. He was in good voice and was encored.” The *Democrat* agreed that Talbo “exhibited some fine acting and made some good points,” but made a point to state that he was “not in good voice.” The performance of the chorus was another point of departure for the two newspapers. The *Gazette* called the choruses “a feature of the entertainment;” and in spite of the small number of singers, found the choruses to be “well sung.” The *Democrat* was much more critical: “The chorus singers were not “well up” in their parts. Their acting was quite indifferent, and they did not give the principal characters the support necessary to make a decided success.” The one point upon which both parties agreed was the performance of Signor Tagliapietra. The *Gazette* praised his “great power as an actor” while the *Democrat* stated, “as a baritone we have not seen his equal.”²³⁷

Fay Templeton

Little Rock was favored with only one operatic performance for the year in December 1881. The Fay Templeton Star Opera Company introduced two new French *opera bouffes* to Little Rock: *La Mascotte* and *Olivette*, both by Edmond Audran. *Olivette* premiered at the Bouffes-Parisiens on November 13, 1879 to a decent reception. It was much more successful in its English version, which ran in London for 466 performances beginning in September 1880. *Olivette* is the story of a girl who is to be wed to an old sea captain, but is in love with the captain’s nephew, who happens to be the love interest of a Countess. *La Mascotte* premiered at

²³⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 10 December 1880; *Arkansas Democrat*, 10 December 1880.

Bouffes-Parisiens little over a year after *Olivette* and was much more successful, enjoying one thousand performances over the next five years. *La Mascotte* is about a farm girl, Bettina, who brings luck to whoever claims her heart, the catch being that she must remain a virgin or else her power is lost.²³⁸

Fay Templeton was raised on the stage, the daughter of performers John Templeton and Alice Vane. At age eight, she appeared as Puck in Augustin Daly's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at New York's Grand Opera House.²³⁹ She toured as a child star with her father's company, the Fay Templeton Combination, which opened Little Rock's Grand Opera House after it was rebuilt in 1875. As a teenager, she became a star of the light opera stage, appearing in such operas as *Les Cloches de Corneville*, *Giroflé-Girofla*, *Patience*, and *H.M.S. Pinafore*, in addition to the above mentioned operas.²⁴⁰ By the 1890's, she had abandoned light opera in favor of burlesque and vaudeville, frequently appearing with well-known burlesque performers Joe Weber and Lew Fields. In the early twentieth century, she made her mark on Broadway, creating the role of Mary Jane Jenkins in George M. Cohan's *Forty-five Minutes from Broadway*. Her last appearance was in 1933, creating the role of Aunt Minnie in Jerome Kern's *Roberta*, which also starred the young Bob Hope.²⁴¹

²³⁸ Traubner, *Operetta*, 91; W.L. Hubbard, ed., *The American History and Encyclopedia of Music*, vol. 2 (Toledo, New York, Chicago: Irving Squire, 1908), 117-118.

²³⁹ James Fisher, "Templeton, Fay," in *American National Biography*, vol. 21.

²⁴⁰ Kurt Gänzl, *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1994), 1436.

²⁴¹ Fisher, "Templeton," in *American National Biography*.

Although the exact year of her birth is unknown²⁴², Fay Templeton was in her late teens and still in the light opera stage of her career when she visited Little Rock in December 1881. She was a special favorite of Little Rock audiences because she was born on Christmas Day in Little Rock, “a Christmas present to Little Rock that all our lovers of art may well be proud of.”²⁴³ She appeared on December 19th as Bettina in *La Mascotte*, a role which she reportedly created in the United States.²⁴⁴ Both newspapers praised Templeton’s mezzo-soprano voice for its clarity and sweetness, and the *Democrat* reported that the popular “Gobble Song” was encored twice. The next night, the company presented *Olivette* with equal success, though the *Democrat* had expressed hope that the company would decide to present *La Mascotte* again instead, due to its favor with the audience. All of the principal members of the company, including Fay’s own parents John Templeton and Alice Vane were well received. In fact, neither newspaper had anything negative to say about the company. The *Democrat*, which seems to be the more critical of the two newspapers, was effusive in its praise of Fay Templeton, calling her “a leader in her profession.” “She imitates no one—is wholly original—hence her success.”²⁴⁵

John A. Stevens Comic Opera Company

The 1882-1883 season at the Grand Opera House was opened by the John A. Stevens Comic Opera Company for a two night engagement. The star of the company was Jeannie Winston, who was a familiar name to Little Rock audiences; she had appeared in the city with

²⁴² Most sources cite 1865 as the year of her birth, though *American National Biography* gives a year range of 1863-1866. In its coverage of Templeton’s visit to the city in December 1881, the *Arkansas Democrat* claimed that she was about to be seventeen, which would make her birth year 1864.

²⁴³ *Arkansas Democrat*, 20 December 1881.

²⁴⁴ Brown and Koch, *Who’s Who on the Stage*, 423.

²⁴⁵ *Democrat*, 20 December 1881.

Adah Richmond's company in October 1878. She was raised in Aberdeen, Scotland, and spent seven years singing in Australia before coming to the United States, first as support for Alice Oates and Adah Richmond then as star of her own company. She created the title roles in the American premieres of Suppé's operettas *Fatinitza*, *Boccaccio*, and *Donna Juanita*.²⁴⁶

John A. Stevens was an actor as well as a theatrical manager. As an actor, he was most well-known for his starring role in the play *The Unknown*. As a manager, he managed two theaters in New York. He first leased the old Stadt Theatre and managed it for nine years under the name Windsor Theatre. He later served a brief stint as manager of the New York Theatre, which would later be known as the Herald Square Theatre.²⁴⁷ Along with E.I. Darling, he was the composer of the first piece presented by the company in Little Rock, a comic operetta called *The Jolly Bachelors*.²⁴⁸

From all accounts, *The Jolly Bachelors* was a popular piece during its time, but it has not survived into the modern operetta repertory; therefore little is known about it. Based upon reviews from both Little Rock and New York City, *The Jolly Bachelors* was likely more of a musical extravaganza than an operetta in the vein of Offenbach or Gilbert and Sullivan. Though billed as a comic operetta, the *Democrat* in its review of the performance referred to *The Jolly Bachelors* as both an "extravaganza" as well as a "burlesque."²⁴⁹ According to Root in *American Popular Stage Music*, an "extravaganza" was a stage genre whose emphasis was on visual

²⁴⁶ T.D. Tooker, A.M., ed., *Folio: A Journal of Music, Drama, Art, and Literature*, vol. 20 (Boston: White, Smith, and Co., 1881), 455.

²⁴⁷ *The New York Times*, 18 June 1916.

²⁴⁸ *The New York Times*, 14 March 1882. An alternate title for this piece is *The Twelve Jolly Bachelors*.

²⁴⁹ *Arkansas Democrat*, 16 September 1882.

effects, with music and plot development taking a subordinate role.²⁵⁰ In reviewing the premiere of *The Jolly Bachelors*, the *New York Times* described the piece in the following way: “Lively action, bright costumes, and light, catching music of the popular order are its characteristics. Plot, there is none to speak of, and there is nothing strikingly new in the music.”²⁵¹

Though the company presented a rather flimsy piece of operetta on its first night, it ended the engagement on a solid note, Offenbach’s *La Perichole*. The *Gazette* lauded the production as “a signal triumph,” adding that “the performance, as a whole, was far better than *The Jolly Bachelors*.” The *Gazette* was particularly complimentary of Jeannie Winston, who “threw her whole soul into the songs,” and reported that her drinking song received a double encore.²⁵²

Emma Abbott

Five days after the Stevens Company ended its engagement, the *Gazette* excitedly reported that Little Rock was to be favored by the visit of Emma Abbott and her English opera company. Emma Abbott was the biggest name to visit the city to date, and the *Gazette* was well aware of this: “Miss Abbott has not attained the heights of divinest song, where warble in the temple of immortality Patti, Gerster, and Nilsson; but between her and them only ‘their partitions do divide’ the heights.”²⁵³ It was reported that she would perform in the city for four nights, and the *Gazette* writer predicted that tickets would be difficult to come by due to the popularity of Miss Abbott.

²⁵⁰ Root, *American Popular Stage Music*, 112-113.

²⁵¹ *The New York Times*, 14 March 1882.

²⁵² *Arkansas Gazette*, 17 September 1882.

²⁵³ *Gazette*, 21 September 1882.

Emma Abbott was one of the most popular American-born sopranos of the late nineteenth century. From 1878 until her death on 1890, she toured the United States, presenting grand opera in English—and often sanitized—versions. John Dizikes described her as “a home-gown diva, presenting opera for Americans in ways they could appreciate.”²⁵⁴

Abbott was born in Chicago in 1850 to a family of modest means, and from an early age her potential for a musical career was recognized. In 1867, she introduced herself to soprano Clara Louise Kellogg, who allowed Abbott to sing for her. Upon hearing Abbott’s desire to go to New York, Kellogg assisted her in making connections there, including with the voice teacher Errani.²⁵⁵ While studying in New York, Abbott sang in the choir at the church of the Divine Paternity. While there, she made the acquaintance of several influential families, who provided financial assistance for her to go to Europe in 1872. In 1876, she was engaged by Mapleson and made her Covent Garden debut as Marie in *La fille du Regiment*.²⁵⁶

Emma Abbott’s career was shaped by her pious beliefs. Before her career blossomed, she vowed “not to sing in operas which were improper, never to appear in a page’s costume, never to sing on Sundays, and above all not to appear in the wicked “*Traviata*.”²⁵⁷ That final vow killed her European career before it had a chance to develop. While under the management of Mapleson in London, she was assigned the role of Violetta in *La Traviata*. Believing that Violetta was “a wanton who was wicked simply because she loved sin,” Abbott refused to sing

²⁵⁴ John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 266.

²⁵⁵ Sadie M. Martin, *The Life and Professional Career of Emma Abbott* (Minneapolis: L. Kimball Printing Company, 1891), 22.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 25, 32; Mary A. Livermore and Frances E. Willard, eds., *American Women: Fifteen Hundred Biographies with over 1400 Portraits*, revised edition (New York, Chicago, and Springfield, OH: Mast. Crowell and Kirkpatrick, 1897), 3.

²⁵⁷ Upton, *Musical Memories*, 117.

the role.²⁵⁸ In response to her refusal, Mapleson reportedly said, “If you are so good, so very good, you should have taken the veil, and ought to be a Mother Superior in some nunnery instead of trying to acquire a position in opera.”²⁵⁹ As a result, her three year contract with Mapleson was cancelled, and she returned to the United States a short time later.²⁶⁰

In addition to performing opera in English, Abbott was known for interpolating numerous popular songs into her operas. This practice endeared her to her American audiences, but subjected her to criticism in Europe. During a performance of *La Sonnambula* at La Scala in Milan, she was hissed by the audience for interpolating “Nearer My God to Thee” into one of the scenes. Before the opera could continue, the manager had to come out and apologize, and Abbott sang some Italian songs as a peace offering.²⁶¹

Emma Abbott was often referred to as “the people’s prima donna” because she did not limit her singing to large metropolitan centers. According to James Burton Pond, “her value was in smaller cities and country opera houses, where she drew large crowds with light expenses.”²⁶² In addition to making her operas accessible to the ordinary citizen, she also endeavored to give them a good show. According to her biographer Sadie Martin, Emma Abbott often remarked, “The public patronize me liberally. They pay good prices to hear my operas, and expect something in return that is worth their money. Hence I consider it my duty to stage and costume

²⁵⁸ Martin, *Life and Professional Career of Emma Abbott*, 37.

²⁵⁹ Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 265.

²⁶⁰ Martin, 37.

²⁶¹ Dizikes, 265.

²⁶² James Burton Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius: Memories of Famous Men and Women of the Platform and Stage* (New York: G.W. Dillingham and Company, 1900), 167.

my operas handsomely.” She reportedly spent over one hundred thousand dollars in costumes for her final season in 1890.²⁶³

The Emma Abbott English Opera Company opened its Little Rock engagement with Flotow’s *Martha*, the first performance of this opera in Little Rock since the Brignoli troupe presented it in 1870. The *Gazette* critic was not present at the opening, but the *Democrat* offered high praise:

It was certainly a grand performance and a treat that is very seldom witnessed in Little Rock. Miss Abbott was in very fine voice last night and no doubt did her best to please her audience. “The Last Rose of Summer,” in the third act was the gem of the evening. She did great credit to herself both as an actress as well as a songstress during its rendition.²⁶⁴

The next night’s performance was originally billed to be Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, but a change in program was made for reasons described by the *Democrat*:

Owing to the incompetency of the stage and scenery at the opera house for the successful presentation of the tragic opera *Rigoletto*, and inasmuch as our citizens, as a rule, prefer the comic opera to the tragic, the management of the Emma Abbott company have decided in the interest of the audience to present to-night the highly amusing and interesting opera, “*Fra Diavolo*,” instead of the former.²⁶⁵

On the second night, Abbott and her company presented *Fra Diavolo*, an *opera comique* in three acts by Auber, followed by the “Miserere” from *Il Trovatore*. Both newspapers were highly complimentary of Abbott’s portrayal of Zerlina as well as Gustavus Hall and John Gilbert’s comical portrayals of the brigands Beppo and Giacomo.

²⁶³ Martin, *Emma Abbott*, 92-93.

²⁶⁴ *Arkansas Democrat*, 17 October 1882.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

The following afternoon, the company presented *La Sonnambula*, and the *Gazette* reported that the theatre was filled with “one of the largest and most fashionable audiences ever seen at a matinee in the Grand Opera house.” Emma Abbott did not appear in this performance, but the efforts of the other singers, particularly Julie Rosewald as Amina and Marie Hindle as Lisa, made the audience “forget her [Abbott’s] absence in their appreciation of what they saw and heard.”²⁶⁶

The third night’s presentation was to be *King for a Day*, an English adaptation of Adolphe Adam’s *Si J’Etais Roi*; but owing to the illness of company tenor William Castle, the Abbott company presented instead *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Lucia, Bride of Lammermoor) followed by a scene from *L’elisir d’amore*. According to the *Gazette*, “though there was at first a temporary disappointment, when the audience realized that they were to have Donizetti’s greatest work, and have Abbott, Stoddard, Fabrini and Hall, this grand quartette, in that celebrated opera, and also that Julie Rosewald would appear with Mr. Hall in a scene from the opera ‘Elixir of Love,’ there was a general smile of approval.” The performance of Miss Abbott was once again highly praised: “the full beauties of Miss Abbott’s rare voice, its wondrous clearness, freshness and great dramatic power were shown to their best advantage in the trying role of Lucia.” The *Gazette* went on to say that in the Mad Scene, Miss Abbott “fairly sung [sic] the people out of their seats.”²⁶⁷

The Abbott troupe closed their engagement with Balfe’s opera *The Bohemian Girl*. The *Democrat* reported that the theatre was so crowded that ladies had to resort to sitting in the gallery rather than in the lower part of the house where they customarily sat. The performance

²⁶⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 October 1882.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

was well-received, and both newspapers singled out specific musical numbers for praise. Emma Abbott and her troupe made a lasting impression on the city; and of Miss Abbott, the *Democrat* said she “can be deservedly styled our favorite, no actress having ever before received such an ovation in our city as she.” Emma Abbott told a reporter for the *Democrat* that she would stop again in Little Rock if she were in the area later in the season.²⁶⁸

Such was the city’s interest in Emma Abbott, that the *Gazette* published two interviews with Miss Abbott during her stay in Little Rock. In the second, more extensive interview, she discussed her role as an “originator of fashions,” being the creator of the “Abbott sleeve” and the “Abbott sweeper” in women’s dresses. She also reiterated her desire to give her audience a good show through extravagant costumes.

No, I don’t think I am an inventor...of fashion. I earn my money by pleasing the people, and I study to give them satisfaction. On the stage I give them expensive and often extravagant and gorgeous dressing. I show them costumes that cost outrageously. Don’t understand now that I’m fond of show or have a vulgar taste. The people who patronize me want to see pretty pictures and the costumes, and I simply try to give them the best that I can obtain. Wearing costly clothes on the stage, I naturally try to make them as attractive as possible and at the same time to save them from damage. The sleeve they now call the “Abbott,” I worked out one night after a performance, thinking it would make the arm look prettier. And so it does. It is a puffed sleeve, and very narrow at the top of the shoulder and broad under the arm. The ends of the upper and lower portions are tied with a satin ribbon, which shows the arm above the ribbon and the effect is very pleasing. The Abbot sweeper is merely a little device to save trained skirts. I make mine of linen, torchon lace, ruffles, etc. They are pretty with the trains, and at the same time prove a great saving in the wear and tear of costly dresses.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ *Arkansas Democrat*, 20 October 1882.

²⁶⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 20 October 1882.

Fay Templeton

The first operatic performance of 1883 came in January, with a return visit of the Fay Templeton Troupe. Templeton had last visited the city in December 1881, introducing two new operettas, *La Mascotte* and *Olivette*. This time, “Fay the Favorite” was scheduled to appear for one night only, in *La Mascotte*. Both newspapers commented that she had “improved wonderfully” since her last visit; the *Gazette* claimed that she infused her acting with “abandon”, even going so far as to compare her to Aimee, one of the great stars of French *opera bouffe*.²⁷⁰

At the conclusion of the second act, a gentleman appeared before the curtain with an announcement. Owing to the demand at the box office, Fay Templeton consented to remain in the city one more day, giving a matinee performance of *Patience* followed by an evening presentation of *Olivette*. The news was received with much applause, and the *Gazette* predicted a crowded house at both performances.

The matinee performance of *Patience* was not reviewed, but a *Gazette* writer was present for the evening performance of *Olivette*, which was crowded despite inclement weather. This performance received as high praise as the previous evening, and Templeton was commended for her performance in spite of suffering from a severe headache, which “she successfully concealed from her friends in front.”²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 January 1883.

²⁷¹ *Gazette*, 7 January 1883.

Marie Geistinger

On January 11, the *Gazette* excitedly reported that Manager Little was in negotiations to secure a date with celebrated soprano Marie Geistinger and her company of over seventy performers. On the 14th, it was confirmed that the Geistinger company would appear in Little Rock that same month following the completion of its tour of Texas.²⁷²

Marie Geistinger was an Austrian born soprano who performed throughout Germany and Austria in the 1850's and 1860's. She achieved her fame, though, as prima donna—and later manager—of the Theater an der Wien in Vienna in the early 1870's. While at the Theater an der Wien, she starred in Offenbach's *La belle Hélène*, *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*, and *Barbebleu*. After assuming management of the theater, she sang leading roles in Strauss' *Indigo* and *Carneval in Rom*, culminating in the creation of the role of Rosalinda in *Die Fledermaus* in 1874.²⁷³

Marie Geistinger toured the United States four times, and it was during her first tour that she visited Little Rock. She was to appear for one night only, in Suppé's *Boccaccio*, a three-act comic opera about the novelist/poet whose writings have incurred the wrath of many Florentines who see themselves all too accurately portrayed in his stories. Geistinger's appearance in the city was highly anticipated; Little Rock citizens had read of her success in other cities, and the *Gazette* said, "The people are to be congratulated for the advent of such a rare avis in the singing line, as Geistinger; it is rarely we have such."²⁷⁴

²⁷² *Arkansas Gazette*, 11 January 1883; 14 January 1883.

²⁷³ Andrew Lamb, "Geistinger, Marie," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

²⁷⁴ *Gazette*, 25 January 1883.

On the day of her scheduled performance, the *Gazette* reported that Geistinger and her company had, in fact, arrived in the city, on a special train of two sleepers, one coach, and two baggage cars. An interview with the company's manager revealed that the company had just arrived from San Antonio; and being exhausted from its tour of Texas, decided to skip its engagement in nearby Hot Springs and come to Little Rock early to recuperate.²⁷⁵

Not every member of the company succeeded in recuperating sufficiently. In a review of the Geistinger Company's performance, the *Gazette* reported that Marie Geistinger did not appear in the title role of *Boccaccio* as billed. Shortly before the curtain went up, an announcement was made that Geistinger was too ill to perform, and that her role would be sung by Miss Millner, another member of the company. Refunds were promised after the first act to those who wished to leave. The *Gazette* reported that "but few left," and went on to publish a glowing review of the performance. Geistinger's substitute, Miss Millner, was lauded as a "large, handsome woman" who was an "admirable actress." The large chorus was impressive, leading the *Gazette* to believe that this was the largest company ever to visit Little Rock. According to the *Gazette*, "The stage was frequently completely filled, in fact having 'standing room only.'" In spite of Geistinger's absence and the fact that the opera was performed in German, "there was not one that did not leave the opera house well pleased with the night's performance."²⁷⁶

There must have been fear among the Geistinger camp that Little Rock would not believe that Geistinger was truly too ill to perform, because the *Gazette* printed the following note from her attending physician as "sufficient evidence of her inability to appear last night":

²⁷⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 26 January 1883.

²⁷⁶ *Gazette*, 27 January 1883.

Little Rock, January 26—I hereby certify that Mrs. Geistinger is suffering with acute laryngitis and bronchial catarrh of the lungs, is troubled with cough and hoarseness and is therefore unfit to appear this evening on the stage. Jacob Deutsch, M.D.—attending physician²⁷⁷

Kellogg-Brignoli

In February, a concert company headed by soprano Fanny Kellogg and the well-known tenor Brignoli visited the city for a one night engagement. While there are numerous reports of Fanny Kellogg's performing throughout the United States (particularly with Brignoli in the 1880's), there is no biography available. It must be noted, though, that Fanny Kellogg, should not be confused with fellow American soprano Clara Louise Kellogg. In advance of the company's arrival, the *Gazette* published reviews from Austin and Louisville that praised Miss Kellogg's voice. One day before the performance, the *Gazette* reported that a large number of seats had been sold, and Manager Little assured the public that "the curtain will not go up if either Kellogg or Brignoli fail to appear on account of sickness or for any other reason. No...Geistinger business will be allowed."²⁷⁸

Both artists did indeed appear as promised in a concert that featured vocal, piano, and violin solos followed by the first and fourth act of *Il Trovatore*. Fanny Kellogg failed to impress Little Rock as much as she had Austin or Louisville. The *Gazette* reported that her voice "was at times rather thin in the high tones." The critic was gracious enough to suggest that "perhaps the cold house is to blame." The *Democrat* said that Miss Kellogg "displayed her ability for acting, which is superior to her power as a songstress. Although her voice is highly cultivated, and under good control, in order to display the deep feeling in the plot, it was harsh now and then,

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 4 February 1883.

and she was not received with that hearty applause that was bestowed upon Miss Dickerson.” (another member of the company) The *Democrat* praised Brignoli’s tenor as being “full and sweet,” though the *Gazette* pointed out that it was “not near so rich and full as formerly.”²⁷⁹ Another notable member of the company was baritone L.G. Gottschalk, who was the youngest brother of American composer/pianist Louis Moreau Gottschalk.²⁸⁰

A few days after the performance, the *Gazette* published a brief interview with Kellogg, in which she states that her company had been on the road for four months, and “during all this time not a single member of our company has once disappointed an audience.”²⁸¹ Little Rock was polite enough to wait until Miss Kellogg had left town to reveal their disappointment. In a review of the previous week’s performances, the *Gazette* called the Kellogg-Brignoli concert “a rather flat affair.”²⁸²

A New Opera House?

In January and February of 1883, there was much talk in the *Gazette* about the possibility of constructing a new opera house. On January 26th, the *Gazette* reported that “arrangements are being perfected for starting the Grand Opera house building association, the capital stock of which is to be \$100,000.” It was proposed that the two-story structure would be built on either Main or Markham Street, with the auditorium occupying the ground floor.²⁸³

²⁷⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 February 1883; *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 February 1883.

²⁸⁰ Richard Jackson, “More Notes of a Pianist: A Gottschalk Collection Surveyed and a Scandal Revisited” *Notes*, Second Series 46, no. 2 (December 1989): 352, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/941074>.

²⁸¹ *Gazette*, 8 February 1883.

²⁸² *Gazette*, 11 February 1883.

²⁸³ *Gazette*, 26 January 1883.

By mid-February, the plan had gained momentum, and an informational meeting was held for all those interested in being financial contributors. The push to construct a new opera house was led by Little Rock jeweler Louis C. Bernays, and the stockholders meetings were held in his jewelry shop. It was decided that the opera house would be owned by a building association, aptly named Bernays' Grand Opera House Company, and articles of association were drafted.²⁸⁴ The *Gazette* was an enthusiastic supporter of this new venture:

This house is a public necessity as well as a move in the right direction. It provides our people with a beautiful and more than all a *safe* public building. While our wives and children are there we can rest easy that they are in no danger. Not only this, but a handsome building of this class will add to the fame of the city and enhance generally the value of real estate.²⁸⁵

The last mention of the opera house building association was on February 16th, a report that \$25,000 had already been subscribed. There is no more mention of the new opera house venture after this, and it is to be assumed that the association ceased to exist. The *Gazette* never explains, though, why the plans for a new opera house were halted.

Haverly's English Opera

The next operatic attraction to appear at the Grand Opera House was Haverly's English Opera Troupe in early April. The name attached to the company was that of J.H. Haverly, not a performer but a well-known and successful manager. Haverly began his career in minstrelsy, but later branched out to include other types of travelling troupes. He established a large theatrical

²⁸⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 11 February 1883.

²⁸⁵ *Gazette*, 13 February 1883.

circuit, managing theaters in Philadelphia, San Francisco, Chicago, New York City, and Brooklyn.²⁸⁶

The company was booked for two nights, first presenting the well-known favorite *La Mascotte* followed by Strauss' new operetta *The Merry War* (*Der lustige Krieg*). *The Merry War* was first produced at the Theater an der Wien in November 1881, and premiered in New York the following year.²⁸⁷ In *The Merry War*, a dispute arises between rival states Genoa and Massa Carrara over a dancer who was double-booked at both state theatres. The "war" is not one of combat, but of love. Umberto, the commander of the Genoese army, conspires to take revenge on the Countess Violetta by marrying her, in spite of her intentions to marry another.²⁸⁸

The Haverly troupe was not favored with a large house on their first night in the city. A large number of seats had been reserved and purchased, but many people failed to show up due to "very inclement weather."²⁸⁹ In spite of the bad weather, *La Mascotte* was well received by the small crowd who "made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in numbers."²⁹⁰ Dora Wiley's "Bettina" was hailed by both newspapers as a success, and the *Gazette* was pleased to note the appearance of Mr. Charles Drew as "Pippo." Drew had appeared in Little Rock previously with the Alice Oates troupe, and the *Democrat* hailed his performance as "far above the standard."²⁹¹

²⁸⁶ *Appleton's Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events of the Year*, Third Series, Vol. VI (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1902), 433.

²⁸⁷ Traubner, *Operetta*, 123-124.

²⁸⁸ Johann Strauss, *The Merry War*, libretto by F. Zell and Richard Genée, translated and adapted by Louis C. Elson (Boston, New York, and Chicago: White-Smith Publishing Co., 1882), 2.

²⁸⁹ *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 April 1883.

²⁹⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 April 1883.

²⁹¹ *Democrat*, 6 April 1883.

Thanks to an improvement in the weather, *The Merry War* was witnessed by a much larger audience. The *Democrat* said nothing of the opera itself; rather, it commented only on the performers, issuing compliments to the entire company. On the other hand, the *Gazette* had little to say about the performers, but had a definite opinion of the opera. Of *The Merry War*, the *Gazette* said, “The Merry War’ will never take so well as the “Mascot” and other like operas—there are none of the musical gems which are so frequent in the “Mascotte” and its twin, “Olivette,” which are so pleasing to all lovers of music, and which make those dramas live so long in the memories of all who hear them.” Also, “no company could have rendered a better or “merrier war” than Haverly’s, but the play itself was no match for the company.”²⁹²

The Capital Theatre

The summer of 1883 brought a big change to Little Rock’s theatrical scene. For the first time since its opening, the Grand Opera House was to have a competitor. In October 1881, a new theatre was built, Torrey’s Opera House.²⁹³ For the first year and a half, Torrey’s posed no threat to the Grand because it played host to variety entertainment only. In May 1883, though, the *Gazette* reported that George Hyde, the owner of Torrey’s, would convert his theatre “into a hall for legitimate amusements.”²⁹⁴ By the end of May, Hyde was advertising his theatre under a new name: The Capital Opera House, “suitable for theatrical troupes, balls, parties, festivals, etc.”²⁹⁵

²⁹² *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 April 1883.

²⁹³ *Gazette*, 16 October 1881.

²⁹⁴ *Gazette*, 18 May 1883.

²⁹⁵ *Gazette*, 29 May 1883.

The Capital underwent renovations throughout the month of June, and in July it opened to the public with an amateur production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*. Because it had previously been a theatre of lower-class entertainment, "Ladies were never before in the house, and they all agree that it is more attractive, prettier, larger and cooler than they had imagined."²⁹⁶ Not to be outdone, the Grand made improvements in preparation for the upcoming season. In addition to being painted inside and out, the auditorium was enlarged and new scenery was added.²⁹⁷

The advent of the Capital Theatre may have played a part in the dissolution of Bernays' Grand Opera House Company earlier in the year. The goal of Bernays' association was to provide a *safe* theatre with convenient means of egress in the event of a fire, and Hyde's new theatre fit the bill. In his May advertisement, Hyde describes his theatre as having "auditorium on ground floor, easy of ingress and egress."²⁹⁸ Louis Bernays must have endorsed Hyde's plans to convert the Torrey into the Capital, because the *Gazette* reported that tickets for the Capital's upcoming season would be available at Louis C. Bernays' jewelry store.²⁹⁹

Chicago Ideal Opera Company

The first opera company of the 1883-84 season was the Chicago Ideal Opera Company, who played a two night engagement at the Grand Opera House in September. The Ideals were managed by Will J. Davis, a well-known Chicago-based theatrical manager who began his career working under J.H. Haverly. During the course of his career, he managed numerous theatres in

²⁹⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 15 July 1883.

²⁹⁷ *Gazette*, 9 September 1883.

²⁹⁸ *Gazette*, 29 May 1883.

²⁹⁹ *Gazette*, 4 September 1883.

Chicago³⁰⁰; and in 1879, he organized the Chicago Church Choir Pinafore Company. This company was one of the numerous companies that was born during the “Pinafore craze” of the late 1870’s. One of the first members of this company was Jessie Bartlett, who would later move into Italian grand opera and perform with Patti, becoming one of America’s most famous contraltos. But before she became famous, she married her manager, Will J. Davis; and it was Davis who encouraged his wife to leave light opera in pursuit of grand opera.³⁰¹

The Chicago Ideal Opera Company was an outgrowth of the Chicago Church Choir Company.³⁰² They opened their Little Rock engagement on September 24th, with a production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Iolanthe*. The performance was well-received but not well attended. The *Democrat* reported, “At the usual hour for raising the curtain very few seats in the audience were occupied, and the audience continued to straggle in until 8:30, and when the orchestra struck up the thin house was not at all assuring to the company.” The *Gazette* observed that “those who are most prominent in all our home musical performances were conspicuous by their absence,” and offered the following “pointer”: “It would be to their everlasting benefit never to miss seeing operas when presented by companies of this character.”³⁰³

Both newspapers had kind words for each principal member of the company, and the *Gazette* was quite taken with “the lady-like and gentlemanly appearance of the artists.” “There is an undeniable air of gentility about the personnel of this company, that cannot be mistaken.”³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ John W. Leonard, ed., *Who’s Who in America: A Biographical Dictionary of Notable Living Men and Women of the United States*, third edition (Chicago: A.N. Marquis & Company, 1903), 369.

³⁰¹ *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, s.v. “Davis, Jessie Fremont (Bartlett)”.

³⁰² *Arkansas Gazette*, 16 October 1883.

³⁰³ *Arkansas Democrat*, 25 September 1883; *Gazette*, 25 September 1883.

³⁰⁴ *Gazette*, 25 September 1883.

During this time, it was not uncommon for traveling troupes to alter the lyrics of certain numbers to appeal to local taste. These altered lyrics often alluded to a local political situation, and were a big hit with the audience. The hit of the evening came from H.A. Cripps, who played the Lord Chancellor in *Iolanthe*. During his solo “Says I to Myself, Says I,” he interpolated the following verse, which “quite brought down the house” and was printed by the *Gazette* the following morning:

Our governor’s gone for a much needed rest, says I to myself, says I; We hope all will find that he’s one of the best, says I to myself, says I; But Senator Embry will quite fill the chair, He’s got the right record for doing things square, and will handle all government business fair, says I to myself, says I.³⁰⁵

The next night, the company presented another Gilbert and Sullivan piece, *The Sorcerer*. Once again, the attendance was slim. The *Gazette* suggested that Little Rock audiences were still disgusted from the “vile” performance of the company who had visited prior to the Ideals, or perhaps some were deterred from attending due to “unwarranted, adverse criticisms from a northern paper.”³⁰⁶ Both newspapers agreed, though, that “no better excuse can be given than the antipathy of our amusement seekers to paying an admission of a dollar and a half.”³⁰⁷

The company received another positive review from both newspapers, and the *Gazette* was especially appreciative of the integrity of the company’s management:

It is seldom the amusement going public find upon visiting an entertainment every promise of the management fulfilled. The Chicago Ideals proved a delightful surprise to us not only by reason of the decided superiority of their performances but because of the

³⁰⁵ Ibid. The current governor was James Barry, but a biennial report from the Secretary of State’s office reported that Ben T. Embry was acting governor Sept. 25-30, 1883.

³⁰⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 26 September 1883.

³⁰⁷ *Arkansas Democrat*, 26 September 1883.

reason that every promise made by the manager of the company was faithfully fulfilled. The singing was very fine, the chorus was full and complete, the orchestra was as represented, full and efficient, and the number of artists exactly as represented. With such good material and fair dealing the Ideals must achieve success.³⁰⁸

While both newspapers were completely satisfied with the performance of the Ideals, neither newspaper cared much for the opera itself. Of *The Sorcerer*, the *Gazette* said, “while it has many gems of beauty, [it] fades by comparison with “Iolanthe.” It lacks the brightness and sparkle.” The *Democrat* agreed: “...there is neither that vocal richness, beauty of costume, nor wealth of fun in the “Sorcerer” which were so enjoyed on the previous evening.”³⁰⁹

Three-and-a-half weeks later, the Ideals visited the city again after a tour through Texas that included the opening of the Dallas Opera House.³¹⁰ This time, they appeared for one night only, presenting the operetta that was responsible for their existence: Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore*. This time, though, the theatre was crowded with “one of the largest and most select audiences ever assembled in this city. Many were turned away and standing room was at a premium.” The performance was just as well-received as their previous performances had been. The *Gazette* praised John E. McWade’s performance of Captain Corcoran as “remarkable”; McWade had suffered an attack of vertigo at the end of act two and fainted. Dr. Watkins, a local doctor, was in the audience and was summoned backstage to attend McWade, who recovered enough to remain in the performance.³¹¹

³⁰⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 26 September 1883.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*; *Arkansas Democrat*, 26 September 1883.

³¹⁰ *Gazette*, 20 October 1883.

³¹¹ *Gazette*, 21 October 1883.

The St. Quinten Opera Company

The St. Quinten Opera Company arrived in November for a two-night season. There is no biographical information available for Miss St. Quinten—not even her first name. In an interview with the *Gazette* during her stay in Little Rock, Miss St. Quinten offered the following information about herself:

The reporter who interviewed her yesterday learned that she first appeared on the stage in company with a party of popular English amateurs in 1874, in “The Irrationals.” Her success from that time forth was assured. Afterwards she was introduced to Mr. Hess by Billy Florence, who heard her sing in the old country. Mr. Hess engaged her immediately on her arrival here, and she was with him until the present popular company was organized.³¹²

The *Democrat* also reported that the St. Quinten Company ran a summer season of opera at the Spanish Fort near New Orleans.³¹³

The St. Quinten Company presented *The Chimes of Normandy* to a very small crowd due to inclement weather. In spite of the small house, the company “entered into the spirit of the opera with a depth of feeling worthy a better house.”³¹⁴ Miss Quinten’s portrayal of Serpolette won accolades from both newspapers. The *Gazette* was particularly effusive in its praise:

The charming little prima donna, with her sweet, mezzo-soprano voice, seconded by her *chic*, her thousand and one pretty ways and her ability as an actress make it a great success. Her voice is one of compass, of strength and of sweetness, and from first to last she is completely the mistress of the score with a true appreciation of the character as well.³¹⁵

³¹² *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 November 1883.

³¹³ *Arkansas Democrat*, 5 November 1883.

³¹⁴ *Democrat*, 6 November 1883.

³¹⁵ *Gazette*, 6 November 1883.

The performance of William Wolff as Gaspard was also noted as a success. Wolff was a seasoned performer; prior to his engagement with the St. Quinten Company, he had toured with the Holman Sisters, The Chicago Church Choir Company, and the Hess Grand Opera Company.³¹⁶ The *Gazette* noted that Wolff “has evidently given the miser a careful study and backs his judgment by excellent acting.”³¹⁷

The next night, the company presented *Iolanthe* to a slightly larger house. Miss St. Quinten was encored frequently and received numerous bouquets of flowers at the conclusion of her performance. While the *Gazette* acknowledged that the role of Phyllis provided Miss St. Quinten a better opportunity to display her vocal prowess, it believed her Serpolette of the previous evening to be a more attractive character. The one criticism of the company came from the *Democrat*:

Many of our music-loving people found much to admire in each performance, while the ordinary pleasure seeker was not pleased on either occasion. Miss St. Quinten and several of her associates are good but the majority of the troupe drag through their parts in such a way that the general public is not extremely delighted.³¹⁸

At the conclusion of its engagement in Little Rock, the St. Quinten Company traveled to nearby Pine Bluff, where they were scheduled to open that city’s new opera house. One week later, the company returned to Little Rock, where they presented a concert that included the third act of *Bohemian Girl*. The company reorganized in Little Rock and headed north, taking with them two of Little Rock’s talented singers: Jennie Katzenberg and Belle Bogart.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Roy and Koch, *Who’s Who on the Stage*, 458.

³¹⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 November 1883.

³¹⁸ *Gazette*, 7 November 1883; *Arkansas Democrat*, 7 November 1883.

³¹⁹ *Gazette*, 7 November 1883; 14 November 1883.

Minnie Hauk

The next operatic entertainment to appear in Little Rock was to be one of the most prominent—and difficult—American prima donnas of the nineteenth century: Minnie Hauk. Hauk was currently touring at the head of her own concert company, and would appear at the Grand for one night only, presenting a program of concert pieces followed by the second act of Donizetti's *La Favorita*.

Minnie Hauk was born in New York City, and demonstrated an interest in the stage from an early age. According to Hauk, “all my dolls were named ‘Jenny Lind,’ and so were all those of my dogs and cats which I wished specially to honor. I possessed all the pictures of her I could find, and had read her biography at least once a week for as long as I could remember.”³²⁰

At the age of fifteen, Hauk auditioned for Max Maretzek, director of New York's Academy of Music. Hauk was sure that she would be hired by Maretzek to sing the role of Norma in his theatre, but he didn't allow her to get past the recitative of “Casta Diva.” Pronouncing that Hauk “must begin at the bottom of the ladder and not at the top,” Maretzek sent her to study with Achille Errani, the same teacher who would later train Emma Abbott.³²¹

The diva behavior that would characterize Hauk's career was evident even in her New York debut just shy of her fifteenth birthday. Hauk was engaged by Maretzek to sing Prascovia in Meyerbeer's *L'Étoile du Nord* opposite the well-established soprano Clara Louise Kellogg. At the close of a duet between Hauk and Kellogg, the stage was filled with flowers, all of which

³²⁰ Minnie Hauk, *Memories of a Singer* (New York, Arno Press, 1977), 40 ; quoted in Peter G. Davis, “Great Ball of Fire: The Sizzling Life and Times of Minnie Hauk, America's First International Opera Superstar,” *Opera News* 61 (March 1997): 15.

³²¹ Davis, “Great Ball of Fire,” 15.

Hauk swept up and kept for herself. In her memoirs, Kellogg said, “Minnie Hauck was very pushing and took advantage of everything to forward and help herself.”³²²

This episode began a pattern of animosity between Hauk and her colleagues. In his book *The American Singer: A Hundred Years of Success in Opera*, Oscar Thompson said that Minnie Hauk “slapped faces before or behind the curtain, she dictated what operas she should sing and who should sing with her, she spoke her mind about conductors, stage managers, tenors and sisterly sopranos.”³²³ In her autobiography *My Path through Life*, Lilli Lehmann said, “She [Hauk] was equally unamiable towards all her colleagues, whether men or women.”³²⁴

She later sailed for Europe under the patronage of publisher Gustav Schirmer, where she remained for nine years singing in all of the major European houses. During a performance of *Don Giovanni* at the Imperial Opera in Moscow, Hauk slapped the face of her costar Mariano Padilla at the conclusion of their duet. Hauk claimed that Padilla jerked her hand, intentionally causing her to break on her high note.³²⁵ According to Thompson, “The Russians applauded the slap and the duet was repeated.”³²⁶

Hauk’s antics continued when she returned to the United States with Mapleson’s company. In his memoirs, Mapleson wrote about “The great dressing-room disturbance” that occurred during the company’s performance of *Le Nozze di Figaro* in Chicago:

³²² Kellogg, *Memoirs*, 103.

³²³ Oscar Thompson, *The American Singer: A Hundred Years of Success in Opera* (New York: Dial Press, 1937), 93.

³²⁴ Lilli Lehmann and Alice Benedict Seligman, *My Path through Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1914), 253.

³²⁵ Davis, “Great Ball of Fire,” 16.

³²⁶ Thompson, *The American Singer*, 102.

On the right- and left-hand sides of the proscenium were two dressing rooms alike in every respect. Madame Gerster, however, selected the one on the right-hand, which at once gave the room the appellation of the prima donna's room. On the following evening *Le Nozze di Figaro* was to be performed, in which Marie Roze was to take the part of Susanna, and Minnie Hauk that of Cherubino. In order to secure the prima donna's room Minnie Hauk went to the theatre with her maid as early as three o'clock in the afternoon and placed her dresses in it, also her theatrical trunk.

At four o'clock Marie Roze's maid, thinking to be the first in the field, arrived for the purpose of placing Marie Roze's dresses and theatre trunks in the coveted apartment. Finding the room already occupied, she mentioned it to Marie's husband, who with a couple of stage men speedily removed the trunks and dresses, put them in the room opposite, and replaced them by Marie's. He then went back to his hotel, desiring Marie to be at the theatre as early as six o'clock.

At about 5:30 Minnie Hauk's agent passed by to see if all was in order and found Marie Roze's theatrical box and costumes where Minnie Hauk's were supposed to be. He consequently ordered the removal of Marie Roze's dresses and trunk, replaced those of Minnie Hauk, and affixed to the door a padlock which he had brought with him.

Punctually at six o'clock Marie Roze arrived, and found the door locked. By the aid of a locksmith the door was again opened, and Minnie Hauk's things again removed to the opposite room, whilst Marie Roze proceeded to dress herself in the 'prima donna's room. At 6:30 Minnie Hauk, wishing to steal a march on her rival, came to dress, and found the room occupied. She immediately returned to Palmer House, where she resided, declaring she would not sing that evening.

All persuasion was useless. I therefore had to commence the opera minus Cherubino; and it was not until the middle of the second act, after considerable persuasion by my lawyers, that Minnie Hauk appeared on the stage.³²⁷

All bad behavior aside, one cannot deny the contributions that Minnie Hauk made to her art. Her repertoire included approximately one hundred roles, many of which she could sing in four languages.³²⁸ She sang the title roles in the American premieres of *Roméo et Juliette* (1867), *Carmen* (1878), and *Manon* (1885).³²⁹ In a time of great singers, Minnie Hauk was known as a great singing actress, who "eagerly took on any part that offered opportunities for

³²⁷ Rosenthal, *The Mapleson Memoirs*, 122.

³²⁸ Davis, "Ball of Fire," 17.

³²⁹ H. Wiley Hitchcock, "Hauk, Minnie," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

dramatic display.”³³⁰ In a review of the American premiere of *Carmen*, a critic wrote that Hauk “opened the eyes of New Yorkers as to the merits of good acting combined with good singing.”³³¹

Regrettably—but perhaps not surprisingly—Minnie Hauk failed to arrive in Little Rock for her scheduled engagement. Both newspapers printed the contents of a telegram received by Manager Little from Hauk’s manager W.F. Falk:

Impossible to fill date. Tenor and baritone quite ill. Many regrets. Send immediately open dates for next week. W.F. Falk³³²

Both newspapers realized that the manager was lying, and that the company had simply decided to “jump” Little Rock for more lucrative engagements in Memphis. The *Democrat* was incensed:

As announced in yesterday’s *Democrat* the Minnie Hauk concert company gave Little Rock the shake. The telegram announcing the serious illness of the tenor and baritone, has been proven a base falsehood and the true cause of the failure to come seems to be the prospects of a good business in Memphis, without the expense of railroad travel. The untruth of the telegram from W.F. Falk, the manager, is proven by the fact that the company played Tuesday evening with their usual success and announced at the close of the performance that they would open the new Mozart hall Friday night. The *Memphis Ledger* yesterday stated that “the company have decided not to visit Little Rock or Jackson, Miss., and will rest here for a few days, at the same time appearing in concert tomorrow night to dedicate the Mozart Society’s new hall. The Minnie Hauk concert company are to give a concert tonight at Jackson, TN.” This shows that the management, for some reason unexplained, did not want to come here and had not the manhood to say so, but attempted to mislead by intimations that they would come later, Little Rock people wanted to hear Hauk sing, but will now feel indifferent since the management have acted in such a shameless manner. Manager Little should institute a suit for damages.³³³

³³⁰ Davis, “Ball of Fire,” 17.

³³¹ Source of quote unknown; quoted in Davis, 18.

³³² *Arkansas Democrat*, 7 November 1883; *Arkansas Gazette*, 8 November 1883.

³³³ *Democrat*, 8 November 1883.

Grau English Opera Company

Little Rock managed to recover sufficiently from the disappointment of not hearing Minnie Hauk to enjoy two more opera companies in the month of December. The first company was Grau's English Opera Company who presented four operas over a period of three nights. This was the first professional opera performed at Hyde's Capital Theatre.

The company was managed by Robert Grau, the brother of the famous impresario Maurice Grau, who managed the resident company at the Metropolitan Opera from 1898-1903 and who was responsible for bringing to the United States such famous singers as Nellie Melba and Enrico Caruso.³³⁴ Robert's early career in theatre was in association with his brother, for whom Robert acted as advance agent. Robert Grau eventually turned to managing the tours of successful singers such as French *opera bouffe* star Aimee. His most famous tour was the 1903-04 American farewell tour of Adelina Patti that covered forty-nine cities and thirty-one states. Upon retiring from management, Robert Grau became a prolific writer on subjects pertaining to the stage, including such titles as *Forty Years Observation of Music and Drama* and *The Business Man in the Amusement World*.³³⁵

The company opened at the Capital with a new opera to Little Rock audiences: *Billie Taylor*, a nautical-themed operetta by Edward Solomon with a libretto by H.P. Stephens.³³⁶ The curtain was late going up due to the company's train being late. The *Gazette* reported that the company came "direct from the cars to the boards tired and supperless"; but these circumstances did not seem to affect the company's performance. The *Democrat* praised the company as being

³³⁴ Dee Baily, "Grau, Maurice," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

³³⁵ *The New York Times*, 10 August 1916.

³³⁶ Traubner, *Operetta*, 188, 196.

“everything expected of them. They have more first class people than are usual in a traveling company...”; and the *Gazette* claimed that “the merit of the company was discernable and duly appreciated.” Of the opera *Billie Taylor*, not much was said. The *Gazette* said that there “wasn’t a great deal in the opera,” and the *Democrat* pointed out its resemblance to *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Both newspapers reported that a full orchestra had been promised for the following night’s performance of *La Mascotte*.³³⁷

La Mascotte was presented to a larger house than the previous night’s performance. Both newspapers were highly complimentary, particularly of the singing talents of the company. The *Democrat* claimed that the company “impressed the music lovers of this city with the fact of their excellence,” and the *Gazette* predicted packed houses for the matinee performance of *Pirates of Penzance* and closing performance of *Olivette*.³³⁸

Fatigue must have beset the members of the Grau Company, for the review of the matinee performance of *Pirates of Penzance* was not as favorable. The *Democrat* had so little to say that it is questionable if a representative from the paper even attended the performance: “The opera is very good, and the playing and singing well-executed.” The *Gazette* was unusually critical, pointing out several “disadvantages.” A “distressing cough” besieged Tillie McHenry who was playing Ruth, forcing her to leave the stage during one of her scenes. The same malady was also present among several members of the chorus, thus they “failed when they were most needed.” Another member of the company, Mr. Herman Waldaw, was singled out for his poor performance: “Mr. Herman Waldaw, who essayed the role of Frederic, had evidently left his voice in Texas, and was about as animated as a pair of tongs.” The *Gazette* also noticed a certain

³³⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 December 1883; *Arkansas Democrat* 7 December 1883.

³³⁸ *Arkansas Democrat*, 8 December 1883; *Arkansas Gazette*, 8 December 1883.

amount of “monkeying” on stage occurring among some members of the company, and claimed that such behavior should have “called down upon them the vengeance of the stage manager.”³³⁹

The company closed its engagement with a more successful performance of *Olivette* to a large audience. The *Gazette* had nothing but positive comments about the company, singling out each principal singer for praise. This time, it was the *Democrat*’s turn to be negative. While the paper did praise the performance of the chorus, and noted that the company “kept up the standard of the previous performances,” it did express disappointment over the lack of a promised orchestra: “An opera without a good orchestra smacks very much of an amateur effort.”³⁴⁰

Charles E. Ford Comic Opera Company

The final operatic entertainment for the year was a Christmas engagement by the Charles E. Ford Comic Opera Company at the Grand Opera House. The manager of the company was the son of the well-known theatrical manager John T. Ford, who managed theatres in Richmond, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, including the infamous Ford’s Theatre where President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. His son Charles followed in his footsteps, working with his father in several theatrical ventures, including the Ford Grand Opera House in Baltimore. John Ford leased the Fifth Avenue Theatre, which played host to the premier of *Pirates of Penzance*, a venture over which Charles served as manager.³⁴¹ Aside from

³³⁹ *Arkansas Democrat*, 10 December 1883; *Arkansas Gazette*, 9 December 1883.

³⁴⁰ *Democrat*, 10 December 1883.

³⁴¹ J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Baltimore City and County* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 696.

collaborating with his father, Charles worked with John A. McCaull to open the Bijou Opera House in New York in March 1880.³⁴²

The Ford Company introduced two new operas to Little Rock. First, *The Beggar Student* (*Der Bettelstudent*), Carl Millöcker's most successful operetta. The libretto was supplied by Richard Genée and F. Zell, the "Viennese equivalents of Meilhac and Halévy" who were the primary librettists for Strauss, Millöcker, and Suppé.³⁴³ The libretto is based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyon* and Victorien Sardou's *Les noces de Fernande*.³⁴⁴

The Beggar Student was presented on Christmas Day to a full house. Both newspapers were complimentary not only of the singers, but of the opera as well. The *Democrat* said, "Seldom have our people enjoyed an opportunity to see a comic opera so full of pretty music and enjoyable humor;" and the *Gazette* expressed relief that the opera "no absurd tendency to Wagnerian orchestration and the consequence is that the people of the cast are admitted to full fellowship with the audience." The *Gazette* found much to praise in the performance of the Alice May, who played the title role. Miss May was a seasoned performer, who was most well-known for creating the role of Aline in D'Oyly Carte's premiere of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer*. The *Gazette* praised May for her resonant voice as well as her dramatic capabilities. The newspaper tempered its praise, though, with some observations about her costume: "...there are minor points we would call her attention to—that tights may be too tight even for Christmas,

³⁴² T. Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage: From the First Performance in 1732 to 1901* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1903), 274.

³⁴³ Traubner, *Operetta*, 140.

³⁴⁴ Andrew Lamb, "Der Bettelstudent," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

and that a mustache is supposed to be part of a male personage, not simply a piece of hair stuck on a clear inch above the lip and turning up at such an acute angle as to threaten the ears.”³⁴⁵

The final performance of the Ford Company was Planquette’s setting of Washington Irving’s novel *Rip Van Winkle*. The house was once again crowded, and the performance of the company was well-received, particularly that of Alice May, who was encored several times. While both newspapers favorable reviewed the performance, the *Democrat* admitted a preference for *The Beggar Student*: “...the music and fun of the opera have not the spirit and richness brought out in “The Beggar Student,” which was one of the most enjoyable comic operas ever presented in the city.” The company departed for Memphis immediately after the performance, and the *Gazette* later noted that the performance consequently had been “rushed through to its injury.”³⁴⁶

Emma Abbott

1884 began on a grand note with the return of the Emma Abbott English Opera in January. Abbott had last visited the city in October 1882 and was an absolute sensation. The company was scheduled to be in Little Rock for four nights, presenting five operas: *King for a Day*, *Faust*, *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and *Mignon*.

The company began their engagement with the city’s first production of *King for a Day*, and English adaptation of Adolphe Adams’ *Si j’étais roi*. *King for a Day* is the story of

³⁴⁵ *Arkansas Democrat*, 26 December 1883; *Arkansas Gazette* 26 December 1883.

³⁴⁶ *Democrat*, 27 December 1883; *Gazette*, 27 December 1883; *Gazette*, 30 December 1883.

Zéphoris, a young fisherman who receives his wish of becoming king for a day so that he may win the heart of Princess Nemea.³⁴⁷

Both newspapers thought *King for a Day* was visually and musically pleasing, albeit a bit lengthy. The cast was praised as being “phenomenal”, the chorus “showed careful training,” and the orchestra “well-handled.” The only bit of criticism was in reference to the performance of Signor Campobello, who as Kandoor was “scarcely on speaking terms with his part.” The *Gazette* was gracious, though; Campobello had only joined the company approximately two weeks prior and had not had time to study the role.³⁴⁸

Emma Abbott’s appearance as Princess Nemea was the cause for much praise. Both newspapers noticed that her voice had gained strength, fullness, and roundness while at the same time retaining its delicacy and purity. The *Gazette* noted that it was not only her voice that had become full and round: “She is stouter than of yore. The then fairy waist now gives a substantial support for the encircling arm of the Zephoris or Faust, but his seeming exuberance only serves to remind us that with singers prosperity and plumpness are synonymous.”³⁴⁹

Contralto Zelda Seguin was also singled out for compliments. According to the *Democrat*, Seguin’s performance of Zelide “exhibited much of the versatility usually wanting in finished opera singers and stamps herself an actress as well as a musical artist.”³⁵⁰ Seguin’s twenty year career existed entirely in the realm of English opera. She began her career singing with Caroline Richings, one of the earliest English opera troupes on the road. In addition to

³⁴⁷ Elizabeth Forbes, “Si j’étais roi,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

³⁴⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 17 January 1884.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ *Arkansas Democrat*, 17 January 1884.

performing with Emma Abbott, she also performed with Parepa Rosa, Clara Louise Kellogg, and the Strakosch company, alternating with Minnie Hauk in the role of Carmen.³⁵¹ In an interview with the *New York Times* long after her retirement, Seguin had the following to say about Emma Abbott:

...I sang with Emma Abbott, who had a beautiful voice, but certain eccentricities, which in the end made it impossible for her to sing in New York. The critics were very severe with her. She had an extremely bad trill. You could throw your hat between the notes. And she was willing to gratify anybody's request to sing "Nearer, My God, to Thee" or "Comin' Through the Rye" in any opera which she might happen to be singing.³⁵²

Little Rock obviously did not share Seguin's opinion of Emma Abbott. The *Gazette* praised her trills for being "clear cut," and the *Democrat* said, "Every effort of the fair prima donna was but a signal for enthusiastic applause." As for her habit of interpolation, the audience was delighted by Abbott's performance of "Home, Sweet Home" in the second act. The entire performance was lauded as a success, and both newspapers looked forward to the upcoming performance of *Faust*.³⁵³

The next night, the company presented *Faust* to a standing room only crowd in spite of inclement weather. The *Democrat* reported that *Faust* "was put on the boards with all possible freshness and was made profoundly interesting throughout."³⁵⁴ The *Gazette* presented an unusually thoughtful critique:

The opera of Faust is a crucible in which the performers are unerringly tested. It retains enough of the idealism of Goethe to invest the chief characters with a mystical

³⁵¹ *The New York Times*, 26 June 1911.

³⁵² *The New York Times*, 26 June 1911.

³⁵³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 17 January 1884; *Arkansas Democrat* 17 January 1884.

³⁵⁴ *Democrat*, 18 January 1884.

interest that is not easy to sustain, and Gounod's score fills the measure of the difficulties that environ its production. The story is not merely the betrayal of a village maiden by a faithless lover, for the lover is a victim as well. He is rescued from the thrall of old age only to work the will of the Evil One, his master, and is torn away to pay the fearful penalty of a few days of youth and happiness, just as his horror-stricken soul realizes the ruin he has wrought. The development of the plot affords no scene where the auditor may forget for a time the end he foresees, and this emotional strain makes him more keenly conscious of the least incongruity in the stage work. A false note, a flippant tone or gesture or a lack of proper spirit, grates upon his nerves and dispels the illusion. A proper presentation of *Faust* therefore necessitates not only people of ability in the leading roles, but also a cast that is thoroughly trained and accurately balanced in voice.³⁵⁵

The *Gazette* happily reported that the Abbott troupe exceeded expectations: "Much was expected of such a cast, but it is no more than justice to say that expectation was far surpassed by the reality. It was a performance at once striking in individual excellence, symmetrical in its entirety and faultless in detail."³⁵⁶

On the same day that the *Faust* review appeared, the *Gazette* published an interview with Emma Abbott, in which one of the main topics of conversation was her weight. Below are the pertinent excerpts:

"You are looking as fine as a Derby winner," remarked the scribe[AG]... [Miss Abbott:] "Do you think so (with a little pout)? Then why did you say in your notice this morning that I was getting fat?"—"Not too fat," interjected the youth; "just fat enough you know." "It's well you put that in. Did you see that piece that wicked Eugene Field put in the Chicago News about me—no? Well, he said I had to hold up the rolls of flesh on my arms with clothes-pins. The idea! My fighting weight is 140 pounds and I have kept it at that figure for the last three seasons."

Miss Abbott continued her rant, which made the *Gazette* writer increasingly uncomfortable:

"The sole auditor of this little outburst had been gradually rising from his chair during its delivery, and the last words reached him as he fled down the corridor."³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 January 1884.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The third performance by the Abbott troupe was Verdi's *Rigoletto*, the first performance of this opera in Little Rock. The *Gazette* observed that in opera, "familiarity is largely necessary for appreciation,"³⁵⁸ and speculated that the theatre was packed due to the draw of the singer performing the title role: Sig. Tagliapietra. Tagliapietra had visited the city with this own company in December 1880, so the audience was well acquainted with his talent and anticipated a great performance of what was reported to be one his greatest roles.

Tagliapietra's performance must have been compelling, as both newspapers devoted most of their review to discussing it. According to the *Gazette*, "Tagliapietra's *Rigoletto* is a creation in which beauty and power are symmetrically welded. It delights the taste and holds the heart under a resistless sway. The dramatic presence reared by his skill as an actor, finds a soul in his voice." Interestingly, in Emma Abbott's *English* production of *Rigoletto*, the *Democrat* reported that Tagliapietra sang his part in Italian. This didn't seem to bother the *Democrat* writer: "though this part was sung in Italian, every word and sound was caught by the audience as fraught with great significance."³⁵⁹

The final day of the Abbott engagement included a matinee performance of *Il Trovatore* followed by the closing performance of *Mignon*. *Il Trovatore* was well-attended and well-received. The *Gazette* noted that this opera is often "butchered by incompetent singers," but reported that "it received worthy treatment at the hands of the Abbott Company." Miss Abbott

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 January 1884.

³⁵⁹ *Gazette*, 19 January 1884; *Arkansas Democrat*, 19 January 1884.

did not appear in *Il Trovatore*, but Zelda Seguin's portrayal of Azucena received praise from both newspapers.³⁶⁰

The closing performance of the Abbott troupe was Ambroise Thomas' *Mignon* with Abbott appearing in the title role. The performance was a success and all of the main characters received praise. Both newspapers agreed that in terms of character development, *Mignon* was Abbott's best work of the engagement. The performance of *Mignon* closed another successful engagement for Emma Abbott. According to the *Gazette*, "The 'City of Roses'[Little Rock] belongs to Emma Abbott now. Let her come when she will, a hearty welcome awaits her."³⁶¹

Minnie Hauk

In March, Minnie Hauk-- the prima donna who had skipped her engagement in Little Rock last November-- came to Little Rock, arriving one day early to demonstrate her desire to please the city she had so offended a few months prior. According to Hauk, her failure to appear previously had been the fault of her managers, and that the decision to remain in Memphis had been "misinterpreted."³⁶²

Hauk did indeed appear as promised at the Grand Opera House along with her company consisting of de Pasqualis, baritone; Paulina Sali, contralto; and Montegriffo, tenor. The first part of the program consisted of various concert numbers, including Hauk's renditions of Wagner's "Vision of Elsa" and "Echo Song" (composer not listed). Each piece was encored, to

³⁶⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 20 January 1884.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Gazette*, 28 March 1884.

which she responded with “Comin’ Through the Rye” and either “Old Folks at Home” or “Way Down on the Sewanee River” (the newspapers give differing accounts)

The highlight of the evening was the second act of *Carmen*, in which Hauk had the opportunity to play her most popular role. The *Gazette* was pleased with Hauk’s interpretation of the role: “Surely nothing could be more charming than her portrayal of the wayward Spanish beauty. Her acting is instinct with the dash and coquetry that distinguish the character...” The *Gazette* was not particularly impressed by the other members of the company: “The singers, with one exception [presumably Hauk], were not remarkable for individual merit, but they gave evidence of careful training and acquitted themselves handsomely.” Both newspapers announced that the Hauk Company had agreed to give another concert five days later with an entire change of program. This time, though, the concert would be held at the Capital Theatre.³⁶³

Following engagements in Hot Springs and Pine Bluff, the Hauk Company returned to Little Rock for a grand gala concert. Manager Hyde spared no expense adorning the theatre for Miss Hauk’s concert. Both the stage and front of house were adorned with “flowers and shrubbery, statuary, oil paintings and costly bric-a-brac.”³⁶⁴ The program followed a similar format as the last concert: assorted songs, arias, and duets followed by an opera excerpt, this time being the garden scene from *Faust*. The second concert was just as successful as the first; the *Gazette* reported that every number on the program was encored. According to the *Democrat*, “the only fault seems to be that the audience cannot get enough of their exquisite music.”³⁶⁵

³⁶³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 29 March 1884.

³⁶⁴ *Gazette*, 2 April 1884.

³⁶⁵ *Arkansas Democrat*, 3 April 1884.

Grau Opera Company

The final operatic performance of the year was in November with the return of the Grau Opera Company to the Grand Opera House. The performance occurred at a busy time politically, during the 1884 presidential election. So as not to deter people from attending, the Grau Company management arranged to have the election returns read from the stage between musical numbers.³⁶⁶

The opera presented was *The Queen's Lace Handkerchief*, an English adaptation of Johann Strauss' 1880 operetta *Der Spitzentuch der Königin*.³⁶⁷ The reviews of both the *Gazette* and *Democrat* were positive yet generic, the *Gazette* calling the opera "one of those bright, sparkling dramas which can never be other than popular with the public," and the *Democrat* calling the company "well balanced," giving "entire satisfaction to the entire audience." One of the most exciting features of the evening seemed to be the announcement of the election returns. According to the *Gazette*, "At one time, in the midst of the play, an unusually interesting return was sent up from The Gazette, the master stopped the play and read the good news, which was received with loud cheers."³⁶⁸

Emma Abbott

Little more than a year after her last visit, Emma Abbott and her English Opera Company returned to Little Rock, presenting four operas never before seen in Little Rock. Due to the high

³⁶⁶ *Arkansas Democrat*, 4 November 1884.

³⁶⁷ *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Strauss, Johann II".

³⁶⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 5 November 1884; *Democrat*, 5 November 1884.

production expenses incurred by the company, ticket prices were set at an unprecedented two dollars for an evening performance, one dollar for the matinee, or six dollar season tickets.³⁶⁹

The Abbott Company opened their engagement at the Grand with Lecocq's operetta *Heart and Hand (Le Coeur et la Main)*. Lecocq was the composer of the Little Rock favorite *Giroflé-Girofla* as well as *La Fille de Madame Angot* and *Le petit Duc*. *Heart and Hand* is the story of Don Gaetan, who is betrothed against his will to Princess Micaela. In spite of having never met Micaela, Don Gaetan swears that he will never love his betrothed. Micaela disguises herself as a peasant girl and wins Don Gaetan's heart, but doesn't reveal her trick until after they are married.³⁷⁰

Little Rock was pleased with *Heart and Hand*. The *Gazette* called the libretto "exceedingly unique and pleasing" while the *Democrat* called the music "vivacious and charming." Emma Abbott as Micaela was praised for her graceful acting as well as her sweetness of voice. The audience was pleased to see that Tagliapietra was still with the company, appearing in the role of Don Gaetan. Both newspapers praised his voice as well as his looks. The *Gazette* called his voice "ravishing" and referred to him as "handsome Tag." Tagliapietra interpolated a song that he composed in the last act that the *Gazette* referred to as charming. The newspaper added that it would have been nice to understand the words: "...if he had only sung it in Arkansas English instead of Italian we should have been in accord with the sentiment."³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 February 1885.

³⁷⁰ *Gazette*, 6 March 1885.

³⁷¹ *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 March 1885; *Gazette*, 6 March 1885.

The second performance was a surprising selection, Verdi's *La Traviata*. Emma Abbott appeared in the role of Violetta, the very same role she had refused to sing on moral grounds early in her career, thus losing a contract with Covent Garden. Abbott likely was less resistant to singing the role later in her career because, as the head of her own company, she had complete control in how the role was presented. Since all of her operas were presented in English, Miss Abbott likely sanitized the role to suit her piety. Abbott's biographer Sadie Martin remembers Abbott's Violetta as "always the woman who would be good, who appealed to society to aid her, and who sacrificed her love to save a heart-broken father from despair."³⁷² In 1881, *The New York Times* noted that Abbott was producing an English version of *Traviata* under the title *Cecilia's Love*, "Cecilia presumably being a more estimable female than the original Violetta..."³⁷³

Regardless of what version it was, *La Traviata* was a hit with the Little Rock audience. The *Gazette* called the performance "the grandest ever given in this city," and the *Democrat* said that Emma Abbott "had ample scope to test her capacity as an actress as well as display the sweet melody of her voice." A special feature of the performance was Miss Abbott's elaborate costumes, four dresses designed by four leading costumers in Paris. For the benefit of the ladies, a detailed description of each gown was included in the *Democrat*.³⁷⁴

³⁷² Martin, *Emma Abbott*, 38.

³⁷³ *The New York Times*, 18 September 1881.

³⁷⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 March 1885; *Arkansas Democrat*, 7 March 1885.

Miss Abbott's greatest performance came during the death scene in the final act. She was not applauded for her acting, though, but for her heroism. As Violetta lay dying, "a fireplace scene forgot itself and became a trifle too realistic:"³⁷⁵

The last scene of "La Traviata," which was played at the Grand Opera house last night, represented the death bed of Violetta, the room being furnished as an ordinary bedroom, with an open fire-place upon the right, in which the fire was represented by a candle burning behind a piece of red cloth. The extended scene allowed the candle to burn low and tumble over against the cloth, which flashed up like tinder. All in the room were engaged with the heroine who was struggling with death, but the nurse saw the danger, and quietly endeavored to tear the burning cloth away, but the fire had caught upon the woodwork of the scenery. The doctor looked around and left his patient to assist the maid. The flames mounted higher. He flung a large cushion upon them without effect. The attention of the audience was invited upon the flames. They began to get uneasy, and many in the immense audience stood up. A general stampede impended. Shouts of "fire!" and "keep your seats!" "don't rush!" resounded on all sides. The dying Violetta looked around and like lightning sprang up, snatched a large flannel blanket from the couch and in three seconds the leaping flames were subdued, and she stood before the audience with a smiling face and the remains of the burned and blackened blanket in her hands. For a moment the demoralizing throng stood breathless and then a roar of enthusiastic applause swelled forth like a tornado, which continued long after Miss Abbott had appeared before the curtain and bowed her acknowledgments. The audience was cheated out of the death scene, but witnessed in its stead one of the coolest, pluckiest pieces of work ever done on the stage. The grand opera house never had and never can have a more narrow escape from a disastrous death-dealing stampede.³⁷⁶

The matinee performance was *Maritana*, a grand opera by British composer Vincent Wallace. *Maritana* premiered in London at Drury Lane in 1845 and in New York in 1848. It was Wallace's most successful work, and was regularly performed by British touring companies through World War II.³⁷⁷ In spite of this being the opera's Little Rock premiere, the *Gazette* said very little about the opera, except that it contained "many artistic effects." The endeavors of

³⁷⁵ *Arkansas Democrat*, 7 March 1885.

³⁷⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 March 1885.

³⁷⁷ Nigel Burton, "Maritana" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

Abbot, William Castle, and Lizzie Annandale were singled out for praise in the *Gazette's* very brief review.³⁷⁸

The next night's performance was supposed to be Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix*, but at the request of many Little Rock theatre-goers, the program was changed to the ever-popular *Il Trovatore*. The star of the show was "the divine Tagliapietra" as the Count di Luna. The *Gazette* praised his acting, claiming that "he lived the part he portrayed," which earned him many floral bouquets at the end. Another favorite was Lizzie Annandale, who played the role of Azucena. According to Sadie Martin, Annandale joined the Emma Abbott Company in 1881, and except for one season, sang exclusively with Abbott until 1891. Annandale often sang as many as seven performances a week, and was so trustworthy as a singer that she rarely had an understudy. In her performance of Azucena, the *Gazette* reported that she "electrified the audience with the power of her voice and the ability of her acting."³⁷⁹

In the advance publicity of the Emma Abbott troupe, Manager Little had announced that the Abbott troupe would be one of the last troupes to appear at the Grand for the season. By March 26th, the *Gazette* reported that Little was advertising the Grand for sale or rent. At the end of April, the theatre was leased by Mr. J.E. Reilly, a Texas-based manager who controlled fifteen theatres in Texas and Arkansas. Reilly and his family planned to move to Little Rock at the end of May, and the *Gazette* predicted that he would bring "many new attractions to our city the coming season."³⁸⁰

³⁷⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 8 March 1885.

³⁷⁹ *Gazette*, 8 March 1885; Martin, *Emma Abbott*, 49.

³⁸⁰ *Gazette*, 3 March 1885; 26 March 1885; 1 May 1885.

Capital Theatre Rebuilt

In June, Manager Hyde of the Capital announced plans to completely rebuild his theatre. By the end of June, the necessary capital had been secured, with plans to begin work soon.³⁸¹ In August, *Gazette* interviewed Manager Hyde and was shown the plans for the new Capital Theatre. A detailed description appears below:

The front entrance will be on Markham Street. The entrance hall, or “logia,” is to be forty feet long, and the box office and manager’s office are on the left of the hall. Stairways run up both sides to the first gallery. Entering the auditorium, the “foyer” between the dress circle and the wall is seven feet wide, and has a standing capacity of 200. The dress circle is arranged on an incline, as also is the parquette. The stage is 45 feet deep by 75 feet wide, and the scenery will be drop scenery entirely. The drop curtain will be 28 feet high and 37 feet wide. There will be twelve dressing rooms.

The furnishing of the house will be modern. The seating capacity of each chair will be very large—thirty inches—and the total seating capacity of the house will be 1500. There will be four proscenium boxes and six stalls, and the scenery will be entirely new and made by skilled artists. The theater being on the ground floor, ample provisions have been made for exits, and there can be no danger from fire. The heating of the house will be either by steam or furnace, and it will be lighted with incandescent electric light. The truth is, that the theater will be one of the best appointed theaters in the country, and will meet the growing demands of our city. It is located centrally, and accessible from all parts of the city by street cars.³⁸²

Max Thomas

Meanwhile, Manager Reilly was preparing the Grand for the 1885-86 season by cleaning and repainting the theatre in addition to refurbishing the seats.³⁸³ He announced that the season would be opened by the Max Thomas Comic Opera Company, who would present *Olivette*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and *Chimes of Normandy*.

³⁸¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 June 1885; 28 June 1885.

³⁸² *Gazette*, 6 August 1885.

³⁸³ *Gazette*, 2 September 1885.

According to the *Gazette*, Max Thomas was a “successful manager,” whose company had recently performed for two months at Schneider’s Garden in St. Louis. Their fame must not have been wide-spread, though, as the author was unable to locate any mention of Max Thomas or his company in any resources pertaining to nineteenth-century theatrics.³⁸⁴

The company opened the Grand Opera House season on September 3rd, with *Olivette*. The crowd was “fair-sized,” and the *Gazette* reported that the opera was “rendered in good style” and received “an enthusiastic reception from the audience.” The *Democrat* was more critical, and said that *Olivette* “did not come up to the expectation of the audience.” The company was advertised as having “a good orchestra,” but the *Democrat* reported that the “orchestra” was a combination of troupe members and local musicians who had obviously “not practiced together sufficiently.” The newspaper also criticized the abilities of the singers, and their lack of projection: “There was, too, a general weakness in the voices of the actors—a want of that training which enables a performer to fill a room with a whisper—which caused much of the singing to be so indistinct that the audience lost the pith of the play...”³⁸⁵

The next offering was *H.M.S. Pinafore* to a small audience. The *Democrat* must have been underwhelmed enough by the first night, for they did not review any of the company’s remaining performances. The *Gazette* review was noticeably briefer than the review of *Olivette*. The only two company members who received praise for their performances were Della Fox as Josephine and Charles F. Raymond as Captain Corcoran; all of the other characters “were only

³⁸⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 1 September 1885; 3 September 1885.

³⁸⁵ *Gazette* 4 September 1885; *Arkansas Democrat*, 4 September 1885.

passably given.” The *Gazette* pronounced the evening a “fair performance,” and announced that *Pinafore* would be repeated in the matinee performance.³⁸⁶

The *Gazette* did not attend the matinee of *Pinafore* and the review of the final performance of the company consisted of only three sentences:

The Max Thomas Opera Company gave Olivette at the Grand last night to a small house. The Chimes of Normandy had been announced as the play for the evening, but Olivette was substituted. The performance was like the others of the engagement, neither very good nor very bad.³⁸⁷

Sale of the Grand Opera House

Approximately one month later, the *Gazette* reported that the opera house had been sold to Mr. Quinn and Mr. Gray of the dry goods business. Quinn and Gray expressed the intention of remodeling the theatre and moving their entire business into it. Mr. Reilly, the manager of the Grand, disputed the sale, claiming that he held a three-year lease on the theatre. Nevertheless, the sale was made; and the two parties must have reached some type of agreement, as Reilly did continue to bring acts to the Grand for several more months.³⁸⁸

Ford Opera Company

The next opera troupe to visit the Grand was the Ford Opera Company under the management of John T. Ford, the father of Charles E. Ford who had brought his comic opera troupe to the city in 1883. John T. Ford was the manager of the Fifth Avenue Theatre that hosted the “official” Gilbert and Sullivan-sanctioned premiere of *H.M.S. Pinafore* in December 1879,

³⁸⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 5 September 1885.

³⁸⁷ *Gazette*, 6 September 1885.

³⁸⁸ *Gazette*, 2 October 1885.

which was immediately followed by *The Pirates of Penzance*.³⁸⁹ The *New York Times* reported that Ford held the exclusive rights to produce *The Mikado* in Baltimore and Washington, and the *Gazette* printed a quote that was allegedly from Gilbert and Sullivan, claiming that Ford had the exclusive rights to produce *The Mikado* in the southern states.³⁹⁰

The Mikado was the main draw of the company when they visited Little Rock in early December 1885. The company presented *The Mikado* for the first two nights of their engagement to large audiences. The *Gazette* praised the accessibility of the opera, saying that “to appreciate it one does not require ‘an acquired taste’.” The *Democrat* appreciated the novelty of the Japanese make-up, scenery, and acting: “The effect is so unusual and yet so comical that it produces a mixture of wonder and mirth that keeps the house ready at all times to burst out with hearty applause.”³⁹¹

The Mikado was repeated the next night to an equally crowded house. The *Democrat* reported that “all were delighted and all unite in praising the excellent voices of the entire troupe.”³⁹²

The closing performance was the ever-popular *H.M.S. Pinafore* to a smaller audience. The *Gazette* reported that many in the audience were disappointed that *Mikado* had not been repeated, and the *Democrat* voiced the opinion that *Mikado* was superior to *Pinafore*. While *Pinafore* was not as successful a performance as *Mikado*, both newspapers agreed that the

³⁸⁹ *The New York Times*, 28 May 1911.

³⁹⁰ *Times*, 16 August 1885; *Gazette*, 6 September 1885.

³⁹¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 1 December 1885; *Arkansas Democrat*, 1 December 1885.

³⁹² *Democrat*, 2 December 1885.

company was incapable of doing anything badly and pronounced the engagement a successful one.³⁹³

One week later, the Ford Company returned to Little Rock, this time for the grand opening of Hyde's new Capital Opera House. The grand opening performance was *The Pirates of Penzance* with a repeat performance of *The Mikado* the next night. Since the company had only recently visited the city, the reviews were brief; but the *Gazette* did praise the company, saying "whatever opera this company presents, it will be capitally done." Of the new opera house, the *Democrat* called it "large, safe, and beautiful," and the *Gazette* hailed the theatre as being the first Arkansas theatre in which the auditorium is located on the ground floor.³⁹⁴

Sans Souci Opera Company

Little Rock's fascination with *The Mikado* continued into the New Year, when Skiff's Sans Souci Opera Company played a three-night engagement at the Capital that included four performances of the popular opera. Both newspapers agreed that the principal singers of Skiff's company were superior to the Ford Company. The *Democrat* said Skiff's singers' voices were "more highly cultivated, and their articulation was so distinct that every word could be understood in any part of the house." The only principal singer who received any criticism was Mr. Felch, who played Ko Ko. When compared to Mr. Denham of the Ford Company, the *Gazette* stated that Felch's portrayal of the character "was not broad in its humor." "His [Felch's] singing was better, but he did not make as much fun out of it." The company had advertised that it used "the author's orchestration," but Little Rock audiences weren't able to appreciate "the author's orchestration" due to a weak orchestra. The *Democrat* lamented, "If the

³⁹³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 December 1885; *Arkansas Democrat*, 3 December 1885.

³⁹⁴ *Gazette*, 11 December 1885; *Democrat*, 10 December 1885; *Gazette*, 10 December 1885.

orchestra had been good, the performance would have been one of the best operas of the season.”³⁹⁵

H.M.S. Pinafore was the other opera presented by the company. The *Gazette* acknowledged that *Pinafore* had “lost its hold on the public, but the company put life into the remains...” The larger stage of the new Capital Theatre allowed for an impressive setting, with scenic effects that had “never been equaled in the city.”³⁹⁶

The closing performance of the company was another performance of *The Mikado*. This time, it was the *Gazette*’s turn to complain about the orchestra: “The orchestra was lamentably deficient, a piano being the only instrument in use—let us hope for the last time in opera in this city.” Less than a week later, bad weather stranded the company in Little Rock following an engagement in Hot Springs. The company gave two more performances of *The Mikado*—this time at the “popular prices” of 20, 30, and 40 cents. The performances were presented in “capital style,” and the *Gazette* reported that Mr. Felch’s Ko Ko—who had previously been criticized for lacking humor—“brought out all the fun in the ludicrous character, and convulsed his hearers with laughter.”³⁹⁷

Closing of the Grand Opera House

January 1886 was not a good month for manager Reilly of the Grand Opera House. On January 14th, it was reported that Manager Reilly was in dispute with the management of actress Patti Rosa, who had just closed an engagement at the Capital. Reilly alleged that he had a

³⁹⁵ *Arkansas Democrat*, 5 January 1886; *Arkansas Gazette*, 5 January 1886.

³⁹⁶ *Gazette*, 6 January 1886.

³⁹⁷ *Gazette*, 12 January 1886.

contract with Rosa, and that she should have played at the Grand. Rosa's management claimed that any contract they had once had with the Grand was null and void, as it had been made with a gentleman who was no longer acting as manager of the Rosa Company. Reilly filed a suit against the company for damages and served a writ on the company in the amount of \$330. The company paid the bond and a hearing was scheduled for January 26th.³⁹⁸

This dispute must have been the final straw for manager Reilly, for one week later he closed the theatre and sold his lease to Quinn and Gray, the two men who had already purchased the Grand Opera House. Quinn and Gray also bought Reilly's theatrical contracts for the remainder of the season and sold them—along with all of the Grand's furnishings—to Manager Hyde of the Capital Theatre. For the remainder of the century, the Capital Theatre would serve as the city's primary theatre.³⁹⁹

Bijou Opera Company

The only other opera company that visited the city in 1886 was the Bijou Opera Company, who played a Christmas engagement at the Capital Theatre. The prima donna of the company was Adelaide Randall, a mezzo-soprano who had previously performed with C.D. Hess' English Opera Company. From December 1882 until February 1883, she performed under D'Oyly Carte in his New York and Philadelphia productions of *Iolanthe*. Randall is one of those performers whose popularity is evidenced by the numerous mentions of her name in publications

³⁹⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 15 January 1886; *Arkansas Democrat*, 15 January 1886.

³⁹⁹ *Gazette*, 22 January 1886.

which chronicle the theatrical life of America in the late nineteenth century, yet no biography of her could be found.⁴⁰⁰

The Bijou Company opened their engagement on December 23rd with the ever-popular *La Mascotte*. According to the *Gazette*, Little Rock had “been wanting opera for some time,” so the performance was greeted by a large audience. The *Democrat* noted that *La Mascotte* had been sung in Little Rock numerous times “with good, bad and indifferent success;” therefore Little Rock audiences could discern between a good and bad performance of this opera. The *Democrat* was pleased to report that this particular performance was “above the average;” and both newspapers praised the performance of Adelaide Randall in the role of Bettina.⁴⁰¹

The next evening, the company produced *The Princess of Trebizonde* (*La princesse de Trébizonde*), a three-act *opéra bouffe* by Offenbach that premiered at the Bouffes-Parisiens in December 1869. The opera tells the story of a girl who poses as a wax figure of the Princess of Trebizonde and consequently falls in love with a prince.⁴⁰² The *Gazette*’s review of the performance was brief—a large audience was once again present, and all of the members of the company were deserving of praise. Of the opera itself, the newspaper did state that it was “equal in brilliancy and the number of its popular effects to any of the Offenbachian creations.”⁴⁰³

Christmas Day saw two performances by the Bijou Company: a matinee performance of *The Mikado* followed by an evening performance of *The Bridal Trap*. *The Mikado* was warmly

⁴⁰⁰ Stephen E. Busch, “C.D. Hess English Opera Company: A Chronology.” <http://www.nationaltheatre.org/location/HessCDMgr.htm>. (21 February 2010); David Stone, “Adelaide Randall,” in *Who Was Who in the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company*. 27 August 2001. <http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/whowaswho/R/RandallAdelaide.htm>. (21 February 2010).

⁴⁰¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 24 December 1886; *Arkansas Democrat*, 24 December 1886.

⁴⁰² Traubner, *Operetta*, 64.

⁴⁰³ *Gazette*, 25 December 1886.

received as usual, and the *Gazette* praised Adelaide Randall's portrayal of Yum Yum: "Miss Randall lifted Yum Yum out of the old rut of silliness and gave the character a fascination." A special feature of the performance was the scenery--painted specifically for this performance by W.O. Thomas, the scenic artist of the Capital Theatre—which was "loudly applauded" and "liberally complimented."⁴⁰⁴

The evening performance introduced another new opera to Little Rock: *The Bridal Trap* (*Le Serment d'Amour*) by Edmond Audran, the composer of *La Mascotte* and *Olivette*.⁴⁰⁵ The *Gazette* did not say much about the production, other than that it was a "smooth performance." The newspaper chose instead to devote its column to a synopsis of the lesser-known work by Audran:

The whole plot of the opera is that Count Fiavignac is in love with a pretty village maiden Rosetta, and his aunt, the marquise, wants him to marry a wealthy but ugly one. Rosetta has the dowry of a hotel, which a village swain, Grivolin, wants, and by machinations of the marquise, Rosetta, for the good of the count, makes him her nominal husband. The count gets mad and finds out the trick. He claims Rosetta and the marquise is madder. While seemingly consenting to their union she disguises Grivolin as the count to delude Rosetta into marriage. The lovers "catch on" to the plot and disguise another girl, Marian, as Rosetta. They are married and the marquise is baited in her own bridal trap.⁴⁰⁶

New York Ideal Opera Company

Little Rock had to wait eleven months before another operatic troupe visited. In November 1887, the New York Ideal Opera Company presented four operas to the public. Three

⁴⁰⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 26 December 1886.

⁴⁰⁵ Edmond Audran, *The Bridal Trap*, English version by Sydney Rosenfeld (New York: Willis Woodward & Co., 1886), cover.

⁴⁰⁶ *Gazette*, 26 December 1886.

of the operas were well-known to Little Rock audiences: Wallace's *Maritana*, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*, and Planquette's *The Chimes of Normandy*. On the first night of the company's engagement, it presented a new opera, *Ruddy Gore* (*Ruddigore*), "Gilbert and Sullivan's latest great success."⁴⁰⁷

Ruddy Gore was premiered at the Savoy Theatre in January 1887, in the wake of *The Mikado*'s successful 672 performances. *Ruddy Gore* was not as well received as its predecessor. Traubner suggests that audiences were disappointed because they were expecting the "exoticism and gaiety of *The Mikado*." Also, the gothic element of ghosts—particularly in the second act—may have been off-putting to some audiences. Following the premiere, during which the second act was hissed and booed, Gilbert changed the spelling of the title to *Ruddigore* to remove any association with blood and gore.⁴⁰⁸

Little Rock was not particularly taken by *Ruddy Gore* any more than London audiences. The *Gazette* called it "the least meritorious of all of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas," but said "people went to see it simply because it was by them." Of the company itself, neither newspaper was impressed. Both critics were disappointed in the size of the company—10 people total—which diminished the effectiveness of the choruses. The *Democrat* stated that a full chorus was "the one thing necessary in opera;" and the *Gazette* called the absence of a chorus "a lamentable omission, and one most quickly noticed by an audience accustomed to good operatic performances."⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 11 November 1887.

⁴⁰⁸ Traubner, *Operetta*, 176-177.

⁴⁰⁹ *Gazette*, 11 November 1887; *Arkansas Democrat*, 11 November 1887.

The subsequent performances of *Maritana* and *Mikado* did not fare any better. The *Democrat* did not even bother to review the performances, and the *Gazette* was once again critical of the small cast. Even the “principal” singers were not spared criticism. Though the *Gazette* recognized the “careful training” evident in the voices, it pointed out that “not one is notably attractive.”⁴¹⁰

The final performance was supposed to have been *The Chimes of Normandy*, but a last minute change was made and *The Bohemian Girl* was presented instead. The *Gazette* saved its harshest criticism for this performance, calling it “little better than an amateur organization could have done.”⁴¹¹ The *Democrat* wrote a scathing review of the entire engagement:

The New York Ideal Opera Company, which closed an engagement here Saturday night, was the poorest excuse for an opera troupe that has ever visited this city. They should “drop out of the game,” traveling from place to place as they do with a handful of people, attempting to sing opera and expecting to draw the masses to hear them. There was a fine audience present Thursday night when they murdered “Ruddy gore,” which sealed the fate of the Ideals, and their succeeding performances were given in such a manner as would turn the attention of our amusement patrons against opera for all time to come. How the Ideals expect to “live” and get back to New York, unless the troupe is powerfully strengthened, is a mystery that will probably be solved by some kind-hearted railroad conductor. The “Mikado” was sung at the matinee Saturday and the “Bohemian Girl” at night. Imagine these popular operas being attempted with only ten people in the cast! But barnstorming is all the rage now-a-days, and only the better known class of theatricals can be relied upon.⁴¹²

Adelaide Randall

About one month later, Adelaide Randall returned to Little Rock. She had first visited the city one year prior as the prima donna of the Bijou Opera Company. This time, she had her

⁴¹⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 12 November 1887.

⁴¹¹ *Gazette*, 13 November 1887.

⁴¹² *Arkansas Democrat*, 14 November 1887.

own company which played a two night engagement in Little Rock. The first performance was *The Bridal Trap*, an opera that Randall had introduced to the city during her tour with the Bijou Company. Neither newspaper published an extensive review of this company's visit; the *Democrat* called Randall's singing "splendid," and the *Gazette* noted an improvement in her performance from that of a year ago.⁴¹³

The second night was a performance of another new opera: *Madame Boniface* by Paul Lacome. Lacome was a music critic and composer active in Paris who was a close friend of composer Chabrier. Between 1870 and 1900, twenty of his operettas were performed, though none of them are particularly well-known today.⁴¹⁴ According to the *Gazette*, *Madame Boniface* "is a young, innocent creature who has married a rich old confectioner. She coquets in the most childlike manner, which drives her poor old spouse nearly frantic. Her innocent flirtation nearly produces a calamity, but she is saved by a series of comical episodes, which only need to be seen to be appreciated."⁴¹⁵ Though this opera was new to Little Rock, it did not generate much press. The *Democrat* did not review the performance, and the *Gazette* printed a small column that included a few compliments to the company but said nothing of the opera itself.

Emma Abbott

The highlight of 1887 was undoubtedly the return of Emma Abbott for a brief engagement. On the day after Christmas, the company presented a matinee of *The Mikado* at popular prices, and the *Gazette* reported that this was the first performance of the year to "put

⁴¹³ *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 December 1887; *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 December 1887.

⁴¹⁴ Andrew Lamb, "Lacome [Lacôme d'Estalénx], Paul (-Jean-Jacques)," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

⁴¹⁵ *Gazette*, 6 December 1887.

standing room at a premium.” The *Democrat* praised the performance of this familiar favorite: “The old time favorite Mikado was vested with new interest—indeed, was rejuvenated, and was received most enthusiastically.”⁴¹⁶

That same night, the company presented a new opera to Little Rock: *Ruy Blas*, a *dramma lirico* in four acts by Filippo Marchetti that premiered at Teatro alla Scala in April 1869. The libretto was written by Carlo D’Ormeville after Victor Hugo’s drama of the same name.⁴¹⁷ Both newspapers called the opera “beautiful” and praised Abbott’s portrayal of the Queen of Spain. The *Democrat* was especially poetic in its praise of Abbott: “Miss Abbott was in excellent voice, and as clear as the song of the lute-toned lark, the divine melody floated forth from her snowy throat like birds released from a fair prison to soar toward the skies above.”⁴¹⁸

The next night, the company presented the ever-popular *Il Trovatore*. In past visits to Little Rock, Abbott did not appear in her company’s performances of this opera. It was often presented as a matinee and one of the other company sopranos would sing the role of Leonora. This time, Abbott herself appeared in the role, much to the delight of Little Rock music lovers. The *Gazette* reported that Abbott’s first act aria “fairly caused the audience to go wild with enthusiasm.” The *Democrat* said that Abbott “fairly outdid herself,” citing the performance to be “one of the grandest operas ever given in this city...”⁴¹⁹

During her stay in Little Rock, Abbott’s costumes got as much press as her singing. The *Gazette* reported that the amount of money spent on her costumes for *Trovatore* and *Ruy Blas*

⁴¹⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 December 1887; *Arkansas Democrat*, 26 December 1887.

⁴¹⁷ William Ashbrook, “Ruy Blas,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

⁴¹⁸ *Democrat*, 27 December 1887.

⁴¹⁹ *Gazette*, 28 December 1887; *Democrat*, 28 December 1887.

“would build and elegant homestead and furnish it in charming style.” The *Gazette* writer printed a description of some of her costumes:

To attempt to describe the dresses requires a minute knowledge of the dressmaker’s art far beyond that possessed by the ordinary reporter. When it is stated that the “gold dress” miss Abbott wears in “Ruy Blas” took fifty different women several weeks to embroider; that the fabric alone cost \$40 a yard, and that the embroidery is pure gold thread and the designs represents birds and flowers correct almost to nature, and that the trimmings is genuine point lace, the ladies can form some idea of the costume. The court dress of amber and garnet, richly embroidered, is a marvelous creation, and the velvet cloak, trimmed with genuine ermine, is a dream of splendor. The rich Lyons velvets worn in the operas of Ruy Blas and Trovatore are another evidence of Abbott’s extravagance and are said by many to be her most becoming dresses. In all Abbott carries over 240 different costumes, all which are equally as beautiful and costly as those described.⁴²⁰

Kate Bensberg

The year 1888 opened with the introduction of a young singer on her way up the career ladder. Kate Bensberg and her English Opera Company appeared at the Capital on January 17th, presenting Flotow’s less-known opera *L’ombre*. Kate Bensberg was a native of St. Louis and received her musical training in Stuttgart. Her operatic debut was in June 1883 at Kroll’s Theatre in Berlin as Cherubino in *Le nozze di Figaro*. For two years in the early 1880’s, she spent two years touring England with Carl Rosa and his English Opera Company. In 1885 in the United States, the American Opera Company was formed and Bensberg was engaged for the company’s first season in 1886. After her stint with the American Opera Company, she formed her own company, a group that was unique in that it performed only operas that did not require a chorus. The reasoning behind such a move was that it was a wiser use of financial resources to

⁴²⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 December 1887.

invest in a company consisting of a few exceptional principal singers rather than a large company of mediocre ones.⁴²¹

There is no formal account of the remainder of Bensberg's career, but there are references made in other resources that give one some idea of what she did. After a few years of traveling with her own troupe, Bensberg returned to Europe, which seems to be the scene of the remainder of her career. An October 1898 issue of *The Musical Times* mentions Bensberg and states that she "has studied under Madame [Mathilde] Marchesi in the French capital, and has achieved considerable success in opera on the Continent." According to a biography of tenor Enrico Caruso, Caruso shared the stage with Bensberg in a November 1895 production of *La Traviata* at the Teatro Mercadante in Naples. A significant portion of Bensberg's career must have taken place in Italy; in 1897, Mathilde Marchesi mentions Bensberg and states that she is "now pursuing a brilliant career in Italy." Later on, Bensberg must have assumed the role of teacher; for in a biographical sketch of American soprano Edith Mae Bideau, she is listed as being Bideau's teacher in Florence in 1913.⁴²²

Bensberg appeared in Little Rock in what was likely her final season as the head of her own company. The other members of the company consisted of Louise Engel, contralto, another veteran of the American Opera Company; Ross David, tenor, former member of the Clara Louise Kellogg Concert Company; and Ed Knight, basso, formerly of the Strakosch Opera Company.

⁴²¹ E. Douglas Bomberger, ed., *Brainard's Biographies of American Musicians* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 30-31.

⁴²² *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. XXXIX (London: Novello, 1898), 668; Pierre V.R. Key and Bruno Zirato, *Enrico Caruso: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1922), 57; Mathilde Marchesi, *Marchesi and Music: Passages from the Life of a Famous Singing-Teacher* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1905), 272; César Saerchinger, *International Who's Who in Music and Musical Gazetteer: A Contemporary Biographical Dictionary and a Record of the World's Musical Activity* (New York: Current Literature Publishing Company, 1918), 59.

The *Gazette* approved of her decision to travel without a chorus: “There is no doubt that four or five people who excel can give a much finer performance than a large number who are only mediocre.”⁴²³

The *Democrat* reported that between the second and third acts of the opera, Bensberg appeared before the curtain and favored the audience with “The Last Rose of Summer.” This rendition was received with much applause, thus obliging her to follow with “Sweet Home,” which the *Democrat* reported was “followed by a tornado of acknowledgments from the enthusiastic audience.” Of her singing, the *Gazette* was highly complimentary: “Miss Bensberg does not suffer when compared with Abbott or Hauk. She is truly a vocalist among a hundred thousand. Her voice is one of phenomenal purity and power...Her mastery of tone and expression proves her to be an artist of the highest class.”⁴²⁴

Summer 1888 Opera

In May 1888, the manager of the Capital Theatre announced his intention to furnish Little Rock with a season of summer opera at the popular prices of 10, 20, and 30 cents. Though many larger cities had enjoyed summer amusements for quite some time, this was the first venture of its kind in Little Rock. The season was to take place at Glenwood Park, and a forty foot deep stage was constructed in the park’s main building. The Bijou Opera Company with Adelaide Randall was engaged to present a season of light opera with a chorus supplemented by local talent.⁴²⁵

⁴²³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 13 January 1888; 17 January 1888.

⁴²⁴ *Arkansas Democrat*, 18 January 1888; *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 January 1888.

⁴²⁵ *Gazette*, 25 May 1888.

It is difficult to give a day-by-day account of what operas were presented during the summer season. Since opera was a daily event during the summer, neither newspaper felt compelled to cover every performance. Likewise, the reviews that do appear are not as critical as those during the regular season, consisting primarily of a polite description of the performance and a report on the size of the crowd. The popularity of summer opera was due not so much the artistic quality of the productions, but the promise of a cheap entertainment in an environment that provided a respite from the summer heat. The *Gazette* said it best in its coverage of the Glenwood Park season on June 19th: “The Park theatre is rapidly becoming the popular amusement resort of the city, and here the best people are to be found. It is cool and pleasant and the entertainment is fine, cheap too; then why not the popular place?”⁴²⁶

From May 29th until July 3rd, Adelaide Randall and the Bijou Opera Company gave nightly performances of light opera. The typical practice was to present one or two operas a week with a change of program each week. The following are the operas presented during the 1888 summer season: *The Princess of Trebizonde* by Offenbach, *La Mascotte* and *The Bridal Trap* by Audran, *Madame Boniface* by Lacome, *The Mikado* and *H.M.S. Pinafore* by Gilbert and Sullivan, *The Doctor of Alcantara* by Julius Eichberg, *The Chimes of Normandy* by Planquette, *Billie Taylor* by Solomon, and *Fra Diavolo* by Auber.

Jules Grau Comic Opera Company

Because Little Rock had enjoyed such an extended season of opera during the summer, the fall 1888 season consisted primarily of plays and minstrel amusements. It was not uncommon, though, for an opera company to visit the city around the Christmas holiday, and the

⁴²⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 June 1888.

Jules Grau Comic Opera Company did just that, playing a four-night engagement at the Capital Theatre. The Jules Grau Comic Opera Company was managed by Jules Grau along with his brother Matt. Jules and Matt came from the same Grau family of operatic impresarios that produced Maurice Grau of the Metropolitan Opera and Robert Grau, the manager of the Grau English Opera Company that had visited Little Rock in 1883 and 1884.⁴²⁷

The Grau Company opened their engagement with an opera new to Little Rock audiences: Carl Millöcker's *The Black Hussar (Der Feldprediger)*. *Der Feldprediger* premiered at the Theater an der Wien in October 1884; and the English translation *The Black Hussar* premiered in New York in May 1885. *The Black Hussar* is set during Napoleon's Russia campaign of 1812-13. Neither newspaper printed an opinion of Millöcker's opera, but it appears to have been well-received. Of the Grau Company, the *Gazette* said that it was "well equipped for presenting comic opera," though the company contained "no particularly fine voices."⁴²⁸

The next day, the company presented a matinee of *The Bohemian Girl* and an evening performance of *The Queen's Lace Handkerchief*. *The Bohemian Girl* was played to a standing room only audience, and the *Gazette* reported that the performance, especially the choruses, "delighted the large audience." The newspaper did not say much about the evening performance except to say that the company "scored another success."⁴²⁹

On the third night, the company introduced another new opera to Little Rock: *Erminie*, a comic opera by Edward Jakobowski based on the French play *L'Auberge des Adrets*. *Erminie* was presented at the Capital Theatre to a large audience, and the *Democrat* reported that "those

⁴²⁷ Grau, *Forty Years Observation*, 179.

⁴²⁸ Traubner, *Operetta*, 139; *Arkansas Gazette*, 25 December 1888.

⁴²⁹ *Gazette*, 26 December 1888.

present were delighted and gave frequent manifestations of their feelings by applauding the actors.” Of the opera itself, the *Gazette* pronounced it to be a “beautiful comic opera,” and “the most delightful of the operas given.”⁴³⁰

On the final night, *The Black Hussar* was repeated by request of the audience. The review of this final performance was brief, and the efforts of company members May Douglas, Jessie Hatcher, Gilbert Clayton, H.H. Waldo, and Frank Frear were recognized as being “popular as ever.” The *Gazette* concluded that the visit of the Grau Company had been a “very successful engagement.”⁴³¹

The Little Tycoon

The first operatic performance of 1889 occurred in February, with performances of *The Little Tycoon*, an American operetta whose score and libretto were written by Willard Spenser. Written in 1886, it featured Japanese effects that must have been influenced by the premiere of *The Mikado* a year earlier. *The Little Tycoon* is regarded by some to be the first successful American operetta. While there had been several American operettas written prior to *The Little Tycoon*, including two pieces by John Philip Sousa, Spenser’s work was the first to be a box-office success. It enjoyed a two and a half month run in its opening city of Philadelphia before becoming a popular touring work for several years. According to Gerald Bordman in *American*

⁴³⁰ Traubner, *Operetta*, 360; *Arkansas Democrat*, 27 December 1888; *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 December 1888.

⁴³¹ *Gazette*, 28 December 1888.

Operetta, The Little Tycoon contained “the first song from American comic opera to achieve national popularity, a trite, pleasant waltz called “Love Comes Like A Summer Sigh.”⁴³²

The first performance in Little Rock of this popular opera almost didn’t happen. Upon the company’s arrival in town, a dispute arose between Manager Thomas of the Capital Theater and W.S. Reeves, road manager of *The Little Tycoon* Company. The disagreement centered on the conditions of the contract between the two parties, and it initially seemed that there would be no performance that evening. According to the *Gazette*, approximately \$150 in advance ticket sales were refunded to customers who were told that there would be no performance that evening. Word of the conflict spread around town, and many who had intended to come to the performance stayed away. At 8 o’clock, after the normal start time of performances at the theatre, Reeves received a telegram from Willard Spenser, composer and manager of the company, telling Reeves to proceed with the performance under Manager Thomas’ terms.⁴³³

Word spread around town that an agreement had been reached, and the performance proceeded before a large audience. The opera was a success, and the *Gazette* reported that it was “brim-full of catchy music,” and “the most gorgeous comic opera in point of costumes of Japanese splendor ever produced in this city.” The newspaper writer did express some disappointment in the company’s failure to live up to its promises. The advance agent for the company had claimed a cast of fifty-two people and “a carload of scenery,” but the *Gazette* claimed that “all this was a gross misrepresentation.”⁴³⁴

⁴³² Gerald Bordman, *American Operetta: From H.M.S. Pinafore to Sweeney Todd* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 41.

⁴³³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 2 February 1889.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

The Little Tycoon was successfully repeated twice more to large audiences. In the closing review of the company, the *Gazette* had the following parting words for *The Little Tycoon* Company: “With the advanced prices coupled with the misrepresentations by the company they did better than they deserved, the engagement being financially successful.”⁴³⁵

Summer 1889 Opera

In May and June, Little Rock once again enjoyed a season of summer opera; the MacCollin Opera Company was engaged for a period of three weeks at the Capital Theatre. The company was headed by A.W.F. MacCollin, who was the principal comedian with the D’Oyly Carte, McCaull, and Stetson opera companies before forming his own company.⁴³⁶

The company opened its engagement at the Capital Theatre with a performance of *Falka*, a comic opera in three acts by Francis Chassaigne. The *Gazette* pronounced the performance “a musical treat,” and commended the company for their talented singers and strong chorus. The newspaper writer congratulated Manager Thomas on securing such a successful company, calling the accomplishment “an example of pluck and energy that will win.” Following the initial run of *Falka*, the company presented the following operas during the remainder of their engagement: *La Mascotte*, *The Mikado*, *The Bohemian Girl*, and *The King’s Musketeers*.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 February 1889.

⁴³⁶ W.S.B. Mathews, ed., *Music: A Monthly Magazine, Devoted to the Art, Science, Technic and Literature of Music* XVII, no. 3 (January 1900): 284.

⁴³⁷ W.L. Hubbard, ed., *The American History and Encyclopedia of Music* (New York: Irving Square, 1910), 159; *Arkansas Gazette*, 21 May 1889.

The MacCollin Company

The MacCollin Company must have been quite popular with Little Rock audiences, as they were engaged to open the 1889-90 season at the Capital Theatre in September. The company opened with a performance of *Fra Diavolo* followed by *The King's Musketeers* and *Falka*. Perhaps because the *Gazette* writer had the opportunity to watch this company many times over the summer, and thus knew the capabilities of the company, he was particularly critical of the opening performance. According to the *Gazette*, the company had an “off night,” and its performance was “not up to the usual standard.” The *Gazette* writer blamed the substandard performance on poor casting: “With one or two exceptions the principals were apparently over-weighted with the roles, being in a manner unequal to the requirements both vocally and dramatically...” The *Democrat*, usually the more critical of the two publications, had nothing critical to say of the performance. Rather, it devoted its entire column to praising the efforts of the company’s prima donna, Fannie Hall.⁴³⁸

The subsequent performances of the company must have been better, at least in the eyes of the *Gazette*. Of the matinee performance of *The King's Musketeers*, the critic praised the company as “equal to every requirement” of the opera. The attendance at the Saturday evening performance of *Falka* was as good as could be expected—Saturday was typically a light day for theatre attendance—and the *Gazette* called *Falka* “the best effort of the MacCollin Company.”⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 21 September 1889; *Arkansas Democrat*, 21 September 1889.

⁴³⁹ *Gazette*, 22 September 1889.

Emma Abbott

In December, Emma Abbott made her fifth visit to Little Rock, presenting her longest season to date: six evening performances and two matinees. The advance sale of tickets for the Abbott engagement began at 9 a.m. four days in advance of opening night. In anticipation of the great number of people desiring tickets, purchasing numbers were assigned beginning at 7 a.m., and some people assembled at Sayle & Ashby's drug store (which sold the tickets) as early as 6 a.m. At the end of the first day of sales, over \$3,000 worth of tickets had been sold, the largest advance sale of tickets in the city's history.⁴⁴⁰

In the advance advertisements for the Abbott company, it was originally announced that the company would produce the following operas: *Bohemian Girl*, *Rose of Castile*, *Martha*, *Fra Diavolo*, *Norma*, *Ernani*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Yeomen of the Guard*. Little Rock citizens must have been disappointed over the absence of *Il Trovatore* from the list of offerings; for two days later it was announced that *Fra Diavolo* had been omitted and *Il Trovatore* put in its place. Apparently Little Rock would not allow Abbott to visit the city without presenting *Trovatore*; in all of her visits to the city, *Trovatore* appeared on the bill, either in excerpts or in its entirety. This was not the first time that Little Rock had requested a change of program to include its favorite opera—the same thing had happened in 1885.⁴⁴¹

The first performance of the Abbott Company was Balfe's *Bohemian Girl*, and the company was given "an imperial welcome by a large and brilliant assemblage." The *Gazette* pronounced Abbott's company to be the strongest one that she has ever had, and said that it was the combined work of the orchestra, chorus, and soloists that made the evening so successful.

⁴⁴⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 5-6 December 1889.

⁴⁴¹ *Gazette*, 3 December 1889.

Miss Abbott's performance received a rave review as usual. The *Gazette* reported that Abbott's voice "was in good trim," and praised "the exceeding richness of her notes." Lizzie Annandale, "the queen of contraltos," was praised for her portrayal of the Gypsy Queen; but the *Gazette* encouraged those who wished to hear Annandale at her absolute best to attend the next performance of *Il Trovatore*.⁴⁴²

The second night, the company presented the favorite opera *Il Trovatore*, "one of the most melodious and well-constructed works that was ever written." Abbott's portrayal of Leonora was hailed as a "marvel of vocalization," but the highest praise went to Lizzie Annandale's portrayal of Azucena. According to the *Gazette*, "Miss Annandale, whose magnificent voice is always in tune, was wedded to the dramatic portraiture of Azucena. She delighted the audience, and her acting as well as her singing evoked unstinted applause."⁴⁴³

Following a matinee of *Martha* in which Abbott did not appear, the company presented *The Rose of Castille* by Michael Balfe of *Bohemian Girl* fame. Written fourteen years after *Bohemian Girl*, *The Rose of Castille* was the first of several operas that Balfe wrote for the Pyne-Harrison troupe in residence at the Lyceum theatre in London between 1857 and 1863.⁴⁴⁴

The opera was praised as being "full of sparkling melody and catchy ballads," and the performance was "elaborately presented and magnificently sung." Not surprisingly, one of the elements of the performance that received the most attention was Miss Abbott's costumes, which were replicas of fifteenth century Spanish court dress. Miss Abbott's second act dress was described as "a marvel of loveliness, all handworked in different colored silks, and in gold and

⁴⁴² *Arkansas Gazette*, 10 December 1889.

⁴⁴³ *Gazette*, 11 December 1889.

⁴⁴⁴ Nigel Burton, "Balfe, William Michael," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

silver.” According to the *Gazette*, this costume was part of a wardrobe for which Abbott had paid costumers Worth and Felix between \$60,000 and \$75,000.⁴⁴⁵

The following night, the company presented Bellini’s *Norma*, and the *Gazette* reported that no audience in Little Rock ever left a theater any better pleased than the one which the production of *Norma* furnished such exquisite delight.” According to Charles Pratt, manager of the Abbott company, *Norma* was a special favorite of Emma Abbott: “Miss Abbott thinks more of *Norma* than any opera in which she sings. She has given more study to the part than any other, and being about the grandest opera ever written, and knowing that it would draw immensely in Little Rock, at her special request it was put down for tonight.” Abbott’s attachment to the role was apparent in her performance. According to the *Gazette*, “Abbott’s beautiful *Norma* not only captivated, but enthralled the great audience. She gave a dramatic interpretation of the role, and her admirable acting was as much a feature as the sweetness of her vocalization.”⁴⁴⁶

The next performance was the introduction of another new opera, Verdi’s *Ernani*. The *Gazette* reported that the performance was superior to the previous night’s presentation of *Norma*, and that the music of *Ernani* was “far more soul-inspiring than any sung in “*Il Trovatore*””—high praise indeed coming from a city that was clearly enamored with *Trovatore*. The *Gazette* used a local reference in an attempt to explain the audience’s enthusiasm for the production: “If the Mayor’s twelve-ton steam roller had passed over them as they applauded the

⁴⁴⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 12 December 1889.

⁴⁴⁶ *Gazette*, 13 December 1889.

artistic efforts of the singers, it could not have squeezed out of them any greater amount of enthusiasm.”⁴⁴⁷

The Abbott Company closed their successful engagement with a matinee performance of Gounod’s *Romeo and Juliet* followed by Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Yeoman of the Guard*. In a front-page review titled “Veni, Vidi, Vici,” the *Gazette* said the following about Abbott’s visit to Little Rock: “Emma Abbott and her strong operatic company came to Little Rock at the beginning of the week saw large audiences gather to hear their beautiful productions, and conquered every one that listened to them. It was the greatest operatic season Little Rock has ever enjoyed.”⁴⁴⁸

In spite of being a great artistic success, the Abbott engagement was not a financial success for Manager Thomas of the Capital Theatre. In his negotiations with the Abbott troupe, he guaranteed the company \$4500 for eight performances. The eight-performance season in Little Rock drew receipts totaling \$4900.25, which left Manager Thomas with \$400.25. The *Gazette* reported that Thomas’ expenses for the week totaled \$400, leaving him with a net profit of \$.25. “When the dramatic season closes there is a great big benefit in store for Manager Thomas,” promised the *Gazette*, “no matter whether he wants it or not.”⁴⁴⁹

Jules Grau Opera Company

The final operatic performance of the decade came courtesy of the Jules Grau Opera Company, who returned to the city for a three night Christmas engagement. The first performance was Offenbach’s *The Brigands*, a new piece to Little Rock audiences. The *Gazette*

⁴⁴⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 14 December 1889.

⁴⁴⁸ *Gazette*, 15 December 1889.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

did not say anything about the opera, except that it was the best comic opera performance of the season. Most of the critic's attention was given to prima donna Marie Greenwood. Greenwood was a native of Memphis, which probably gave Little Rock audiences a special affection for her. She had previously sung with Emma Abbott and would later form her own company, the Marie Greenwood Opera Company. The *Gazette* reported that she sang "like a 22-karat prima donna," and was encored repeatedly. Alice Vincent, the other prima donna of the company, received her fair share of praise as well. While the *Gazette* praised her for being "a very pleasing singer," the critic was more impressed with her beauty: "She has a sweet face and figure which, when encased in tights, requires a few lines of well-written poetry to describe."⁴⁵⁰

The Brigands was repeated the next afternoon in a matinee that was well attended. That evening, the Grau Company presented *Amorita (Pfungsten in Florenz)*, a three act comic opera by Czibulka set in 15th century Florence. Czibulka was a Hungarian composer who was active as a bandmaster in the Austro-Hungarian military. *Pfungsten in Florenz*, his most popular operetta, premiered in Vienna in December 1884. An English translation by Sidney Rosenfeld and Leo Goldmark titled *Amorita* premiered at the Casino Theatre in New York in November 1885.⁴⁵¹

The *Gazette*'s review of *Amorita* was rather generic, calling the piece "full of pretty songs and delightful choruses." The remainder of the review was devoted to doling out polite praise to several of the company's principals.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 25 December 1889.

⁴⁵¹ *A Year of Opera at the Castle Square Theatre from May 6, '95 to May 6, '96* (Boston: Charles Elwell French, 1896), 95-96; Andrew Lamb, "Czibulka, Alphons," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*; John Denison Champlin, Jr. and William Foster Apthorp, eds., *Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1893), 117.

⁴⁵² *Gazette*, 26 December 1889.

The closing performance of the Grau Company was a repeat performance of *The Brigands* that was warmly received. An observation made by the *Gazette* points to how much the city had grown musically in the last two decades. In the last month of 1889, Little Rock was favored with twelve operatic performances presented by two different companies in a span of only eighteen days. Moreover, all of these performances were well patronized. Twelve operas in eighteen days is significant when compared to Little Rock's operatic activity in the previous decade; in the entire decade of the 1870's the city witnessed only nineteen operas presented in their entirety.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 26 December 1889.

CHAPTER 4

OPERA IN LITTLE ROCK: 1890-1899

The Thompson Opera Company

The first operatic performance of 1890 consisted of a new company presenting a new opera. The Thompson Opera Company was on its first tour when it stopped in Little Rock for a two night engagement. The company had only one opera in its repertoire: *Said Pasha*, a comic opera by American composer Richard Stahl. Stahl was formerly the conductor of the Tivoli Theatre orchestra in San Francisco, and it was at this theatre that *Said Pasha* premiered in 1888. In its east coast premieres a year later, the consensus of opinion was that *Said Pasha* had a weak libretto, but tuneful, catchy music.⁴⁵⁴

In the advance press of the company, the *Gazette* reported that the Thompson Opera Company had recently played a successful engagement at the Grand Opera House in New Orleans, and that they had been contracted to return there during Christmas. Because *Said Pasha*'s exotic Turkish theme, Little Rock audiences were promised elaborate costumes and scenery.⁴⁵⁵

Since the company presented the same opera during their engagement, both newspapers chose to review only the opening night performance. The general opinion of the press was that *Said Pasha* was an amusing way to spend an evening, but contained nothing spectacular or particularly memorable. Of *Said Pasha*, the *Gazette* said, "While there is no remarkably striking feature in the opera, it must be confessed that there is some good music and more than a measure

⁴⁵⁴ *The Builders of a Great City: San Francisco's Representative Men, The City, Its History and Commerce*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco: San Francisco Journal of Commerce Publishing Co., 1891), 239.

⁴⁵⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 12 January 1890.

of comedy of a very pleasing order in it.” The *Democrat* was less impressed: “Of the opera itself but little can be said, it being rather light and containing few of those gems which bring an opera into popularity.”⁴⁵⁶

Hardly anything was said of the performance of the principals, most of them being unknown to Little Rock audiences. The *Gazette* said that “they all have pleasing and some of them strong voices,” and pointed out that Joseph Greensfelder and Arthur E. Miller last appeared in Little Rock with the MacCollin Company. The majority of the praise went to the comedic work of Ed. Gavan and Frank David, which the *Democrat* praised as “not overdone.” The following day, the company presented a matinee and evening performance before leaving town.⁴⁵⁷

In February, the MacCollin Company returned to Little Rock. This was the same company that had presented a season of opera the previous summer and had delivered an unsatisfactory performance in the regular season opener in September. In the advance publicity for the company, both newspapers focused not so much on the strengths of the company, but on its familiarity, with a promise that it had improved since last year.

The company presented Millöcker’s *The Beggar Student* to a fair-sized audience. The *Gazette* was very positive in its review, stating that the company had improved so much that it was “scarcely recognizable.” In its disappointing performance in September, the *Gazette* had criticized many of the principal singers for not appearing in roles that were to their best advantage. This time, the report was that the principals were “in splendid voice.” The *Democrat* was bored with the performance, saying nothing at all about the company’s performance: “the

⁴⁵⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 January 1890; *Arkansas Democrat*, 18 January 1890.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

week—theatrically speaking—has been rather dull, a fair house only being present last night to witness “The Beggar Student” by the MacCollin Company. This opera, though full of pretty and catching airs, has been about worn out, and the regulars want something new.”⁴⁵⁸

The company was originally scheduled to appear for one night only, but instead remained in the city long enough to present *Falka* at a reduced price of fifty cents. Neither newspaper reviewed the performance.

The Alcazar Opera Company

In April, Little Rock was the victim of possibly one of the worst barnstorming productions ever rendered in the city. The *Gazette* announced that the Alcazar Comic Opera Company would appear for one night at the Capital Theatre, presenting “the popular and tuneful” *La Mascotte*. The cast, “said to be an excellent one,” was listed as Agnes Sherwood, Charles Gilbert, and Jerome Sykes.⁴⁵⁹

The Alcazar Company was formed in the fall of 1889 by Jerome Sykes and “Punch” Wheeler. In *Famous Stars of Light Opera*, Lewis Strang describes how the Alcazar Company was founded:

The fall of 1889 found Mr. Sykes practically stranded in Kansas City. One day he met “Punch” Wheeler, then a well-known advance agent. They compared notes, and found they had thirty dollars between them. After an hour spent in deliberation, they decided to “put out” an opera company. In another hour they had brought together nine people, and had formed “The Alcazar Opera Company.” In two days they were on the road. They had overcome the difficulty of securing a chorus by hiring a scenic artist to paint one on a drop.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 15 February 1890; *Arkansas Democrat*, 15 February 1890.

⁴⁵⁹ *Gazette*, 13 April 1890.

⁴⁶⁰ Strang, *Famous Stars of Light Opera*, 160-161.

The Alcazar Company survived for only one season, primarily playing small towns in Texas and Mexico. Wheeler, who acted as advance agent for the company, would offer a town a long list of repertoire from which to choose; but according to Strang, “the company always played ‘The Mascotte,’ which was made to fit any title, and no one seemed to know the difference.” During a stop in Mexico, the theatrical manager insisted the company present *Erminie* instead of *Mascotte*. Fearing they would be found out and punished by the Mexican authorities if they tried to pass off *Mascotte* as *Erminie*, the company was forced to play *Erminie*, or something like it. No one had a score of the opera, but they had a copy of the play upon which the opera was based. In the twelve hours before curtain, the company managed to improvise an opera and passed it off as *Erminie*. According to Strang, the performance was a success, and the company was engaged for another performance.⁴⁶¹

When the company performed in Little Rock, the *Democrat* didn’t review it, and the *Gazette* barely mentioned the performance. What little the *Gazette* did say, though, was enough to infer that the performance was a flop.

The Alcazar Opera Company, composed of only six people, equally divided among the sexes, gave a performance of the “Mascott” at the Capital Theatre Sunday night. With such a limited company and without a chorus, the singers made a dismal failure in the performance. Fortunately the audience was small.⁴⁶²

Summer Opera 1890: Herbert Opera Company

The summer opera season returned to Glenwood Park, where the Herbert Opera Company played an engagement from June 18th to August 14th. The Herbert Opera Company, led by George M. Herbert, does not appear in any publications as far as the author could discern. It stands to reason, though, that the companies engaged for summer opera in a small metropolitan center such as Little Rock would be rather obscure names. In the theatrical world, summer was the “off-season,” and many companies used the time to rest and regroup for the start of the next season. Many singers who could afford not to work during the summer chose not to; Emma

⁴⁶¹ Strang, 161-162.

⁴⁶² *Arkansas Gazette*, 15 April 1890.

Abbott often spent her summers in Europe planning for her upcoming season. Those singers who accepted summer engagements were most likely less well-known performers who couldn't afford not to work during the summer.

The Herbert Company opened the summer season with a performance of *The Chimes of Normandy*, playing to 700-800 people. The first performance did not go as smoothly as one would have hoped; the *Gazette* said that "the first performance was not a success in every respect." The rough initial performances of the company were most likely due to the singers being fatigued from the previous spring season. As their health improved, the *Gazette* spoke encouragingly of the company, noting improvement with each subsequent performance.⁴⁶³

Between the opening performance of *Chimes of Normandy* and the closing performance of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, the Herbert Company presented *La Mascotte*, *Olivette*, *Mikado*, *Bohemian Girl*, and *Billee Taylor*. At the end of the season, the *Democrat* reported that the company had made many friends during their ten week stay in the city, and "a hearty wish of success" was extended to the Herbert Company for the fall season.⁴⁶⁴

The Pearl of Peking

After enjoying ten weeks of opera during the summer, Little Rock did not welcome another other company to the Capital Theatre until December. On December 6-7, a company under the management of Rice and Dixey presented *The Pearl of Peking*. *The Pearl of Peking* was an English adaptation of *La Fleur de Thé*, one of Lecocq's early successes. It was first presented in English in New York in 1871, and a later version with musical interpolations by Gustave

⁴⁶³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 June 1890; 29 June 1890.

⁴⁶⁴ *Arkansas Democrat*, 13 August 1890.

Kerker appeared in 1888. The latter version was the one most likely presented by Rice and Dixey. In a score to this later version, Kerker and Lecocq are listed as the composers while Charles A. Byrne is listed as the librettist. In a review of the Little Rock performance, the *Democrat* referred to the production as Charles A. Byrne's *Pearl of Peking*.⁴⁶⁵

Overall, the performance of *The Pearl of Peking* did not live up to expectations. The *Democrat* praised the stage setting, and claimed that the costumes were the finest ever seen in a comic opera production in the city. Unfortunately, the lavish costumes and scenery could not make up for the company's lack of vocal talent. According to the *Democrat*, the company contained "several sweet voices," but on the whole was "somewhat weak."⁴⁶⁶

The *Gazette* was not as gracious in its review. The *Gazette* writer described the company as being "deficient in many respects," and criticized the singers for being "incapable of giving an entertaining rendition of the music, which was as light as air and anything but tuneful." Of the opera itself, it was criticized for failing to live up to its promise of "quaint originality:" "...throughout the piece musical people and regular play-goers can very readily recognize the delightful strains of the Mikado, Little Tycoon and other operas of that popular class, attuned to strange and unfamiliar words."⁴⁶⁷

The following day, the *Gazette* reported that the subsequent performances of the opera went much more smoothly and were better received. Perhaps in an attempt to explain his company's poor performance, Manager E.A. Stevens told the newspaper that he had recently

⁴⁶⁵ Traubner, *Operetta*, 77; *Catalogue of the Allen A. Brown Collection of Music in the Public Library of the City of Boston*, Vol. 4 supplement (Boston, The Trustees: 1916), 213.

⁴⁶⁶ *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 December 1890.

⁴⁶⁷ *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 December 1890.

been forced to dismiss several of his stronger singers due to “unbecoming conduct.” He added that the company would be adding several talented singers to its roster when it arrived in Paris, TX.⁴⁶⁸

Jules Grau

Immediately following the close of *The Pearl of Peking*, the Jules Grau Comic Opera Company made its third consecutive December visit to Little Rock. The Grau Company presented three operas during their stay: *Amorita*, *The Gondoliers*, and *Erminie*.

The company opened their engagement with a performance of *Amorita* to a small yet appreciative Sunday night house. The biggest attraction of the engagement was the presentation of Gilbert and Sullivan’s newest operetta *The Gondoliers*, which the company played for two nights at the Capital Theatre. Any new production of Gilbert and Sullivan could be assured a large audience, and the Grau Company was not disappointed; the *Gazette* reported that the audience was one of the largest of the season.

The audience was quite pleased with both performances, and particular praise was given to the company’s prima donna, Fatmah Diard. It is unclear at which point in her career Diard was in when she appeared with the Grau Company; but by 1896, it is known that she had appeared in companies led by John Stetson, J.C. Duff, E.E. Rice, Charles E. Ford, John Templeton, and Zelda Seguin. She is also listed as a pupil of the great Mathilde Marchesi.⁴⁶⁹

It was the intention of the Grau Company to repeat *The Gondoliers* at the matinee on their final day in town; but a request was made by a number of Little Rock ladies that *Amorita* be

⁴⁶⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 December 1890.

⁴⁶⁹ *A Year of Opera at the Castle Square Theatre*, 26.

repeated. It seems that Fatmah Diard appeared to better advantage in *Amorita*, as the *Gazette* said that she sang “some of her best arias” in this opera. The *Gazette* went on to praise Diard’s command of her instrument: “She sings with less effort than any soprano that has appeared at the Capital at any time during the past two seasons. Her voice has remarkable range, her trilling being marvelously well executed.”⁴⁷⁰

The final performance of *Erminie* closed a very successful engagement for the Grau Company. The *Gazette* claimed that Grau had “no complaint to make about the reception accorded him in this city.” The company was praised as “one of the best balanced operatic organizations in the country,” and both newspapers were pleased to announce that Grau and his company would return the following summer for a ten week engagement.⁴⁷¹

The Little Tycoon

The first operatic performance of 1891 was the return of *The Little Tycoon*, Willard Spenser’s operetta that was first presented in Little Rock in 1889. It was presented three times, each to large audiences. Both newspapers agreed that the performance was a strong one, but the *Gazette* was of the opinion that the 1889 cast was a stronger one.

Conried’s Comic Opera Company

In late January, Conried’s Comic Opera Company paid its first visit to Little Rock. The company was led by impresario Heinrich Conried, who is most well-known as director of the Metropolitan Opera from 1903 until 1908. Conried began his tenure at the Metropolitan Opera with a controversial move, a staging of Wagner’s *Parsifal*, which was protected by a thirty-year

⁴⁷⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 10 December 1890.

⁴⁷¹ *Gazette*, 11 December 1890.

copyright making Bayreuth the only legal performing venue for the opera. Another controversial performance, the American premiere of Strauss' *Salome*, occurred during his management. Some triumphs of his tenure include the debut of Enrico Caruso in 1903 and the engagement of Gustav Mahler as conductor in 1907.⁴⁷²

The company that Conried brought to Little Rock was a large one, comprising sixty people. The *Gazette* reported that the company required an extra train coach for the cast and a separate baggage car for the scenery, trunks, and props. The repertoire for the engagement was to be *The Gypsy Baron*, by Johann Strauss, "The Waltz King," and *The King's Fool*, by Adolph Muller.⁴⁷³

The Gypsy Baron (Der Zigeunerbaron) is, according to Traubner, one of Strauss's greatest works, second only to *Die Fledermaus*. It premiered in Vienna at the Theater an der Wien in October 1885. It tells the story of a man who returns home after a long absence to find it occupied by gypsies. After being spurned by his sweetheart, he goes to the gypsies, who make him their leader.⁴⁷⁴

The Little Rock premiere of *The Gypsy Baron* was a decided success. The *Gazette* was carried away by the waltz music, "through which the listener is carried to the realm of sweet melody characteristic of all of Strauss' compositions." The *Democrat* was impressed by the overall craftsmanship of the piece: "The graceful waltz movement and its sensuous swing and

⁴⁷² Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 312, 315, 347; Susan Thiemann Sommer, "New York," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

⁴⁷³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 January 1891.

⁴⁷⁴ Traubner, *Operetta*, 128-129; Hubbard, *American History and Encyclopedia of Music*, Vol. 2, 369.

the merry marches have in this work felicitous companions of a higher grade in the well-written musical declamation, and the entire opera is round and complete.”⁴⁷⁵

Of the company itself, the *Democrat* praised it as being “one of the most competent companies that has ever visited this city.” The *Gazette* agreed, calling it a “well-balanced company,” in which “the principals stand upon an equal footing as to merit.”⁴⁷⁶

The Gypsy Baron was repeated the next afternoon at the matinee, and the evening bill consisted of Adolph Mueller’s *The King’s Fool*. Neither newspaper gave a detailed review of the *The King’s Fool*, mentioning only its “bright and catchy music.” The *Gazette* said that the Conried Company “made a decided impression” upon the city and both newspapers extended the promise of a warm welcome should the company ever return.⁴⁷⁷

Summer Opera 1891

In December 1890, both city newspapers had said that the Jules Grau Company would play a ten week engagement during the summer 1891 season. For whatever reason, this agreement fell through, and Manager T.W. Mullaly took a different approach in how he engaged talent for the summer season. Rather than engaging a complete company, as he had in the past with the MacCollin and Herbert companies, Mullaly engaged individual singers to form a temporary summer company. This company bore the name of Mullaly Opera Company. This was a wise move on the part of Mullaly, as it likely enabled him to a greater number of talented

⁴⁷⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 21 January 1891; *Arkansas Democrat*, 21 January 1891.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ *Democrat*, 22 January 1891; *Gazette*, 22 January 1891.

singers rather than being forced to pay mediocre ones simply because they were members of the company that had been engaged for the season.

Though the Grau Company did not play the summer 1891 season, its prima donna, Fatmah Diard was engaged by Mullaly to spend her summer in Little Rock. Other singers of some reputation included George Olmi, formerly of the McCaull and Fay Templeton companies, and Henri Leoni, formerly of the Bijou Theatre Company. The *Gazette* added that both Olmi and Leoni had performed “for years” at the Casino Theatre in New York.⁴⁷⁸

The company opened the summer season at Glenwood Park with a rough performance of *Erminie*. The *Gazette* was gracious, though, reminding readers that it was “the first time the entire company had appeared together except at rehearsal, and taking all things into consideration, the performance could have been worse.”⁴⁷⁹

The company rapidly improved, for eleven days later the *Gazette* was congratulating the city for being “among the first Southern cities of any size to demand an attraction of this kind [summer opera].” The critic then turned the praise to the Mullaly Company: “The company now playing an engagement at Glenwood Park will compare favorably with the best regular light opera organizations in the country. It is all that could be desired vocally and histrionically. It possesses some of the most conscientious hard workers on the stage.”⁴⁸⁰

In mid-June, it was announced that Manager Quarles, the site-manager under Mullaly, would alternate venues between Glenwood Park and the Capital Theatre. The reasoning behind

⁴⁷⁸ Rudolph Aronson, *Theatrical and Musical Memoirs* (New York: McBride, Nast and Company, 1913), 52; *Folio*, Vol. 26, 9; Brown, *A History of the New York Stage*, 43; *Gazette*, 14 June 1891.

⁴⁷⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 5 June 1891.

⁴⁸⁰ *Gazette*, 14 June 1891.

the decision was that there were many who lived in the suburbs that could not conveniently travel to and from Glenwood Park. Since it was summer, Quarles promised the employment of large fans to keep the theatre cool; and the *Gazette* said that it was “claimed” that the temperature could be reduced as low as seventy degrees Fahrenheit. To further alleviate the heat, the gas jet lighting was to be replaced with electric lighting. A mere five days after this announcement, after a few nights at the Capital where ticket sales did not match expenses, Quarles abandoned his experiment and the Mullaly Company settled back in at Glenwood Park for the remainder of the season.⁴⁸¹

In mid-July, the *Gazette* reported that many opera-goers had been “bowed down with disappointment the past five weeks on account of the inability of the tenor at Glenwood park to sustain his role in a manner equal to those presented by the other members of the company.” Fortunately, a replacement was brought in, Thomas H. Persse. Prior to coming to Glenwood Park, Persse had sung with the Mary Greenwood company as well as Ilma de Murska. At the conclusion of the summer opera season, he joined the Grau Company and later went on to perform with Clara Louise Kellogg and the Castle Square Opera Company.⁴⁸²

In late July, a dispute arose between the company and Manager Mullaly. Joe P. Quinn, owner of the local dry goods store, filed an attachment against the box-office receipts of the company to pay for items obtained by members of the company. Mullaly authorized the debt to be paid out of the salaries of the singers, who were not aware of the outstanding debt, believing it to have been paid. It also came out that Mullaly was a week behind in paying the singers their salaries; it seems that the expense of retaining his company was greater than what he was netting

⁴⁸¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 June 1891; 24 June 1891.

⁴⁸² *Gazette*, 12 July 1891; Mathews, *Music: A Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 9, 553-554.

in ticket sales. Mullaly attempted to end the season early, offering each company member a train ticket back to New York if they would surrender the remaining five weeks of their contracts. The singers refused, and severed their connection with Mullaly, opting instead to finish the season themselves, with company members George Olmi and Alexander Clark acting as managers.⁴⁸³

From the opening production on June 4 until the close of the season on July 31, the company presented the following operas: *Erminie*, *Olivette*, *Patience*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *Bohemian Girl*, *La Mascotte*, *Pirates of Penzance*, and *The Chimes of Normandy*. Both newspapers pronounced the season to be a success, the *Democrat* calling it “the best summer opera ever seen in this city.”⁴⁸⁴

Conried’s Comic Opera Company

At the end of the year, the popular Conried Company returned to Little Rock for a brief engagement. The talent roster of the company had changed since it was last in the city, and now included several names well known to Little Rock audiences: Fannie D. Hall and A.F.W. MacCollin, both of the MacCollin company that supplied Little Rock’s second season of summer opera; George M. Herbert, leader of the troupe who played in the city in the summer of 1890; and J. Aldrich Libbey, of Spenser’s *Little Tycoon* company.

The company presented a matinee of Strauss’s *The Gypsy Baron*, followed by the Little Rock premiere of Millöcker’s *Poor Jonathan* (*Der arme Jonathan*). *Der arme Jonathan* premiered at the Theater an der Wien in January 1890, where it enjoyed over one hundred

⁴⁸³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 25 July 1891.

⁴⁸⁴ *Arkansas Democrat*, 30 July 1891.

straight performances. Traubner suggests that there were several elements of the opera that held a fascination for Viennese audiences. First, the opera was set in modern time in Boston, Monaco, and New York. The main character was also an American: a rich man, Mr. Vandergold, who trades places with a pauper, Jonathan Tripp.⁴⁸⁵

The *Gazette* reviewed both performances together, and reported that *The Gypsy Baron* matinee had the largest attendance of the season, and that *Poor Jonathan* had a large house as well. Both performances were well-received, though *Poor Jonathan* gave “better satisfaction.” The opera contained elements that were always popular with Little Rock audiences: “light and catchy” music with “plenty of fun interspersed.”⁴⁸⁶

The Little Tycoon

After a year-long absence, *The Little Tycoon* was again successfully presented at the Capital Theatre in January 1892. Since this was the third time that this opera had been presented with largely the same performers, neither newspaper devoted much of their column to vocal or dramatic criticism. The *Gazette* noted that there were “quite a number of good voices” in the company, and that the scenery and costumes were “new and beautiful.” The *Democrat* printed a synopsis of the plot—the first time either newspaper had ever done so. The plot was most likely so well-known that neither newspaper felt the necessity to do so. Since this opera is not well-known to present-day readers, though, a brief synopsis of the plot is as follows: General Knickerbocker’s daughter, Violet, is in love with Alvin, a young American. Knickerbocker disapproves of the match, and intends for Violet to wed Lord Dolphin, an English nobleman. Alvin then appears before Knickerbocker disguised as Lord Dolphin asking for Violet’s hand.

⁴⁸⁵ Traubner, *Operetta*, 139.

⁴⁸⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 13 December 1891.

His guise would have worked had the real Lord Dolphin not entered at the moment that Knickerbocker was about to give Violet's hand to Alvin. Not to be outdone, Alvin then disguises himself as the Great Tycoon of Japan and appears at Knickerbocker's lawn party. Knickerbocker is enamored with the Tycoon, and gives Violet to him in marriage.⁴⁸⁷

The *Democrat* also used the performance as an opportunity to discuss the dramatic merits of the opera, and its impact on the United States theatrical scene.

No American opera has ever attained such success as "The Little Tycoon," which has been presented to audiences everywhere which tested the capacity of the house. The people of this country are slow to recognize the merits of home literary and theatrical productions, and it is a high compliment to the composer that his creation has, by its intrinsic merit, won its way to a high place among the standard comic opera of the present day. "The Little Tycoon" is an admirable satire on the tendency to Anglomania and to fawn upon the nobility of other nations.⁴⁸⁸

Summer Opera 1892

Summer opera returned to Glenwood Park with a mixed bag of singers forming the temporary Glenwood Opera Company. The two prima donnas of the company were originally announced to be soprano Agnes Earle and contralto Nettie La Vallette. For whatever reason, neither of these singers lasted very long; the season opened on June 27, and by July 1, the *Gazette* announced that Marie Greenwood would fill the position of company prima donna. After this, there was no more mention of either Earle or La Vallette. Audiences welcomed the arrival of Marie Greenwood, the popular Memphis native who had appeared with the Grau company in December 1889.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁷ *Gazette*, 10 January 1892; *Arkansas Democrat*, 6 January 1892.

⁴⁸⁸ *Arkansas Democrat*, 7 January 1892.

⁴⁸⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 25 June 1892; 28 June 1892; 1 July 1892.

The season progressed smoothly until August 3, when the *Gazette* reported that the Glenwood Park management had asked for the resignation of singer Chas. Shackford after a particularly disappointing performance of *Amorita*.

Mr. Shackford appeared in the character of Fra Bombardo in *Amorita*, Monday night, and his acting and singing having failed to come up to the standard required by the park management, and falling far below what Mr. Shackford is capable of making of the role, they concluded to let him go.⁴⁹⁰

Three days later, tenor Samuel S. Partello arrived in Little Rock, presumably as a replacement for Shackford. It was reported that he had been singing summer opera in St. Paul, MN, prior to coming to Little Rock. He had appeared in Little Rock before, with the Grau company when it presented *The Black Hussars* in December 1888.⁴⁹¹

During its ten week stay in Little Rock, the Glenwood Company presented *La Mascotte*, *Said Pasha*, *Erminie*, *Fra Diavolo*, *The Merry War*, *Amorita*, *Billee Taylor*, and *The Mikado*. At the conclusion of the season, it was announced that Shackford, the singer who had been dismissed, had formed his own company out of the Glenwood Company and would head to Canada.⁴⁹²

Ship Ahoy

In October, Little Rock witnessed its first presentation of *Ship Ahoy*, a farcical comic opera by Fred Miller, Jr. and Henry Donnelly. *Ship Ahoy* is about the Oriole Opera Company

⁴⁹⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 August 1892.

⁴⁹¹ *Gazette*, 7 August 1892.

⁴⁹² *Gazette*, 4 September 1892.

and its manager, Col. Mapleson Mulberry, who are shipwrecked on a deserted island.⁴⁹³ The company that presented *Ship Ahoy* in Little Rock was under the supervision of the composer, Fred Miller.

Of the production, the *Gazette* called it “in every way suitable to the refined tastes of Little Rock theatre-goers.” The newspaper described the opera as “a mixture of farce comedy and comic opera, just enough of each to make it entertaining.”⁴⁹⁴

Jules Grau Opera Company

After an extended season of summer opera, Little Rock did not see any more opera until February 1893, when the Grau Company returned for an extended engagement of eight performances. Included among the cast was Thomas Persse, the tenor from the 1891 summer opera season at Glenwood Park.

Most of the operas presented by the Grau Company were well-known favorites: *Said Pasha*, *Boccaccio*, *Olivette*, *The Black Hussar*, *Martha*, *The Bohemian Girl*, and *The Gondoliers*. The final night, the company presented a new opera, and English adaptation of *Die Jagd nach dem Glück*. *Die Jagd* was composed by Franz von Suppé of *Boccaccio* and *Fatinitza* fame. *Die Jagd* premiered in Vienna at the Carltheater in October 1888, where it was a failure. It achieved popularity in the United States in an English translation titled *Clover*, and premiered at Palmer’s Theater in New York in May 1889. It was this version that the Grau company produced in Little Rock.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹³ *The New York Times*, 2 December 1890.

⁴⁹⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 8 October 1892.

⁴⁹⁵ Traubner, *Operetta*, 110.

Since the Grau Company was so well-known to Little Rock by now, the *Gazette* gave little in the way of detailed dramatic or vocal criticism. In fact, the *Gazette* critic had nothing negative to say throughout the entire engagement of the company. The *Gazette*'s opinion of the engagement—and of the Grau Company in general—can best be summed up in a quote from the review of the first night's performance: "Jules Grau never came to Little Rock with a poor company."⁴⁹⁶

Robin Hood

Shortly after the departure of the Grau Company, Little Rock was introduced to another new American opera. *Robin Hood* by Reginald De Koven was composed in 1891 and was the second American-composed opera that Little Rock had seen, *The Little Tycoon* being the first.

De Koven was born in Middletown, Connecticut, but moved to England with his family when he was thirteen. He received his musical education in Germany and France, and was a student of Leo Delibes.⁴⁹⁷ De Koven wrote many pieces for the light opera stage, but *Robin Hood* was his only piece that achieved any lasting success. According to Bordman, "De Koven, a fine musician, was to compose one supremely beautiful score, then spend a quarter-century unsuccessfully attempting to repeat that achievement."⁴⁹⁸ One of the reasons for *Robin Hood*'s success was the popularity of one of its songs, "Oh, Promise Me," a sentimental song often performed at weddings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Gerald Bordman recounts an instance when Jessie Bartlett Davis, whose pants role Allan-a-Dale sang "Oh, Promise Me," attempted to substitute a new song in place of the popular air:

⁴⁹⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 February 1893.

⁴⁹⁷ Bordman, *American Operetta*, 48.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

She had tired of singing and encoring her great hit (she estimated that at that point she had sung it about five thousand times in two thousand performances), but when she began the interpolated melody she was hooted off the stage and had to return sheepishly singing what Reginald De Koven had written for her.⁴⁹⁹

Robin Hood premiered in Little Rock before “an audience of fair proportions.” The *Gazette* did not seem particularly overwhelmed by the production, but was polite in its review:

The quaint opera, entirely new to local patrons, was admirably presented in every detail, and left a pleasant impression with all who saw it. The company, individually and collectively, is one of the best seen here in several seasons in an operatic production, having the merit that “Robin Hood” possesses, both as to catchy music and refreshing dialogue. The principals have pleasing voices, especially the prima donna, Miss Edith Balch; the burlesques are exceptionally amusing, the chorus is full and strong, and the attention given to stage properties and costumes rendered the performance the success it was. It was all right.⁵⁰⁰

Jules Grau

In late spring, the Jules Grau Company returned to present another extended season of opera at the Capital Theatre. The repertoire for the engagement was *Boccaccio*, *Mikado*, *Said Pasha*, *Fra Diavolo*, *Martha*, *Giroflé-Girofla*, and *Fatinitza*. The company received the same warm welcome that it always did when it played in the city, and the *Gazette* assured Grau that the same welcome would be extended upon his return next season.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁰⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 17 February 1893.

⁵⁰¹ *Gazette*, 4 June 1893.

Summer Opera 1893: Nelson Opera Company

The summer opera season opened on June 7 with the Nelson Opera Company. Glenwood Park manager LeComte had seen the company perform in Memphis; and being impressed with the “thoroughly artistic and satisfactory work” of the company, engaged them to present a four-week season of summer opera.⁵⁰²

The season was originally scheduled to open on June 5, and a large crowd gathered at the park on this evening, expecting to see a performance of Offenbach’s *The Grand Duchess*. Manager LeComte met the crowd at the door and explained that neither the costumes nor the company’s tenor had arrived on the noon train; hence the season opening was postponed until the 7th.⁵⁰³

By the 7th, the tenor, Alonzo Hatch, still had not arrived, so the company attempted to temporarily engage another tenor, R. Jefferson Hall, who was playing an engagement with the Patience Opera Company in nearby Pine Bluff. Hall’s company would not release him from his engagement, though, so the Nelson Company was forced to make a creative personnel change. For the opening performance of *The Grand Duchess*, the tenor role of Fritz was assumed by company soubrette Dorothy Morton, who reportedly began learning the role at 4:00 p.m. that day.

The Grand Duchess was a success, particularly the performance of Dorothy Morton. Of Miss Morton, the *Gazette* said that “she needed no sympathy from the audience in her strange, suddenly assumed role. She captured the audience at once and held them captive till the fall of

⁵⁰² *Arkansas Gazette*, 2 June 1893.

⁵⁰³ *Gazette*, 6 June 1893.

the last curtain.” Such was her success that the *Gazette* went on to say that she made the audience “glad that Mr. Hatch had failed to arrive.” Even when Hatch did finally arrive on the 10th, Morton was permitted to remain in the role for the rest of the performances of *The Grand Duchess*.⁵⁰⁴

The subsequent performances of *The Chimes of Normandy* and *H.M.S. Pinafore* proceeded smoothly before appreciative audiences. It wasn’t until a performance of *The Princess of Trebizonde* that it was revealed that all was not well at Glenwood Park.

Those who went to Glenwood Park last night expecting to see a good performance of the “Princess of Trebizonde” were disappointed; for the opera was not up to the standard of those presented on previous occasions. The orchestra was missing, the singers did not seem to try to sing, or else could not. Some rigid disciplining is needed, and doubtless Manager Le Comte will see that it is done.⁵⁰⁵

Three days later, it was announced that the Nelson Company ended their engagement approximately a week early after only sixteen performances. It was revealed that the company members had not been paid for several weeks, and that Manager LeComte had been forced to advance the company money several times during the engagement to “prevent them [the company] from disappointing their audiences.”⁵⁰⁶

Summer Opera 1893: The Annandale Opera Company

The summer opera season was redeemed when the Lizzie Annandale Opera Company presented a two week season of grand opera at Glenwood Park. This was the first time that Little

⁵⁰⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 8 June 1893.

⁵⁰⁵ *Gazette*, 24 June 1893.

⁵⁰⁶ *Gazette*, 27 June 1893.

Rock had witnessed a season of grand opera since Emma Abbott's last visit in 1889; moreover, it was the first time grand opera had been presented in a summer season at Glenwood Park.

Lizzie Annandale was the longtime contralto with the Emma Abbott Company; but she had been forced to find other work following the death of Emma Abbott in January 1891. There is no record of when the Annandale Company formed or how long it existed; but an article in the *New York Times* in summer 1894 indicates that Annandale was singing with another company by then.⁵⁰⁷

The company opened with Flotow's *Martha*, and the *Gazette* took pleasure in announcing that Annandale had "lost none of the sweetness in her voice since her former appearance here with the Emma Abbott Company several years ago." Subsequent performances featured the familiar favorites of *Il Trovatore*, *Bohemian Girl*, *Maritana*, and *Faust*. One of the final performances of the company was Little Rock's first full-length production of Bizet's *Carmen*.⁵⁰⁸

Pauline Hall

After the departure of the Annandale Company, Little Rock didn't see any more opera until January 1894, when Pauline Hall and her company played a brief engagement at the Capital Theatre. Pauline Hall was a versatile singer and comedienne whose career spanned light opera, burlesque, and vaudeville. Her career began in 1875 as a chorus girl and dancer at Robinsons's Opera House in Cincinnati. In 1878, she joined the Alice Oates Opera Company, appearing in small roles and in the chorus. Little Rock had the opportunity to first see Hall when she was

⁵⁰⁷ *The New York Times*, 5 June 1894.

⁵⁰⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 11 July 1893.

performing with Haverly's English Opera Troupe. Her Fiametta in *La Mascotte* "made a very favorable impression and was greeted with warm applause." Hall's greatest success was her creation of the title role in *Erminie* at New York's Casino Theatre in 1886.⁵⁰⁹

By the time she reappeared in Little Rock in January 1894, she was a full-fledged star, and had been at the head of her own company for two years.⁵¹⁰ For two nights and a matinee, she and her company presented *The Honeymooners*, a comic opera by William Furst. According to Strang, Pauline Hall "was not consistently successful in obtaining operas of notable merit," and he listed *The Honeymooners* as one of those lacking "notable merit." When speaking of *The Honeymooners* and *Dorcas*, another opera in Hall's repertoire, Stang stated that neither of them was "strong enough to make any lasting impression. They were both of the familiar "prima donna in tights" type, and their librettos were without striking originality, and their scores showed only commonplace tunefulness."⁵¹¹

Little Rock was very pleased with the performance of Pauline Hall; the *Gazette* said, "Miss Hall has a charm of manner, a beauty of face and figure, and a voice of such sweetness as to win her auditors at once...." Her comedian sidekick, Richard Golden, was also praised for his strong performance. Of the opera itself, the *Gazette* described it as "indeed an eccentric comic opera." Later on in the review, the critic added that the opera "is without plot worth mentioning, but the opera itself abounds in pretty airs and choruses." Little Rock audiences often seemed just as pleased by pretty music and pretty girls as they were by more legitimate operatic

⁵⁰⁹ Dixie Hines and Harry Prescott Hanaford, eds., *Who's Who in Music and Drama* (New York: H.P. Hanaford, 1914), 150-151; *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 April 1883.

⁵¹⁰ Hines and Hanaford, *Who's Who*, 151.

⁵¹¹ Lewis C. Strang, *Prima Donnas and Soubrettes of Light Opera and Musical Comedy in America* (Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1900), 241.

performances. In spite of the flimsy construction of *The Honeymooners*, the *Gazette* still called it “a decided hit,” saying “if any one enjoys comic opera, topical songs sung in an inimitable manner, clever and captivating dancing, the magnetic charm of a sweet voice and pretty figure such as is possessed by Miss Hall,...he cannot afford to miss seeing the ‘Honeymooners.’”⁵¹²

The Algerian

Approximately one week later, Little Rock witnessed the production of another American opera, *The Algerian* by Reginald De Koven. *The Algerian* was composed in 1893, two years after De Koven’s much more popular *Robin Hood*.⁵¹³

The prima donna of the company was Adele Ritchie, who at this time was just beginning her career. Ritchie made her operatic debut in the fall of 1893, in a small role in *The Algerian* at the Park Theatre in Philadelphia. In early 1894, following the departure of The Algerian Company’s prima donna, Adele Ritchie was promoted to the company’s top position.⁵¹⁴

In its publicity for the upcoming production, the *Gazette* printed the following synopsis of *The Algerian*:

The story centers in the effort of a young soldier temporarily in command of a military post at Algiers, to engage in a flirtation with Suzette, known as Baya, the Star of the Orient, who is in reality a stranded actress. Celeste, an ex-actress, and a friend of Suzette’s, visits Algiers just in time to learn this from her, and as the flirtatious officer is her lover, she takes Suzette’s place and gives him a lesson in constancy.⁵¹⁵

During their one-night stay in Little Rock, The Algerian Company presented a “satisfactory and enjoyable” performance that was both visually and aurally pleasing. The

⁵¹² *Arkansas Gazette*, 24-25 January 1894.

⁵¹³ Traubner, *Operetta*, 361.

⁵¹⁴ Brown and Koch, *Who’s Who on the Stage*, 366.

⁵¹⁵ *Gazette*, 28 January 1894.

efforts of Adele Ritchie as Celeste were well-received, the *Gazette* calling her “a pretty and fascinating young lady.” Dorothy Morton, who had appeared in last summer’s ill-fated Nelson Opera Company, played the role of Suzette. According to the *Gazette*, “She was accorded a generous recognition last evening, which showed that she had lost none of her popularity since her last visit here.”⁵¹⁶

Summer Opera 1894

For the first time since its inception, the summer season at Glenwood Park was not limited only to opera. The first two weeks of the season consisted of vaudeville performances, followed by a very brief season of opera by a company consisting of singers of little reputation. The first week’s production was *Dorothy*, a comic opera by composer Alfred Cellier and librettist B.C. Stephenson. The performances were well-received, and the next week the company presented *Giroflé-Girofla*, a production which the *Gazette* said “was one of which the company may be proud.” During the third week, there was no mention made in the *Gazette* of opera at Glenwood Park. At the end of the third week, the newspaper published the following curt announcement:

The company playing comic opera the past three weeks at this park closed their season last night...there will be no more performances.⁵¹⁷

Thomas Q. Seabrooke and Co.

In December, Thomas Q. Seabrooke and his company appeared at the Capital Theatre for one night, presenting *The Isle of Champagne* by William Furst. Seabrooke began his career as a

⁵¹⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 1 February 1894.

⁵¹⁷ *Gazette*, 29 June 1894; 10 July 1894; 17 July 1894.

farce comedian, but found success in comic opera when he assumed the role of General Knickerbocker in *The Little Tycoon* in 1888. When asked why he switched to performing comic opera, he replied, “I liked to hear myself sing.”⁵¹⁸

According to Strang, it was Seabrooke’s particular talents as a comedian that inspired librettists Charles Byrne and Louis Harrison to create *The Isle of Champagne*: “they [Byrne and Harrison] remarked that, if they could get up an opera in which Seabrooke could do half a dozen different varieties of inebriation, it would be something great.”⁵¹⁹ *The Isle of Champagne* is about an island whose inhabitants drink only champagne. When a foreign ship wrecks on the island’s shores, the residents are introduced to a foreign beverage: water. After trying water, the residents experience sobriety for the first time in their lives. The only islander who resists is King Pommery, played by Seabrooke.⁵²⁰

Seabrooke and his company of almost seventy people presented *The Isle of Champagne* to a standing-room crowd at the Capital Theatre. The *Gazette* praised the performance as “an engagement extraordinary” containing “no semblance of a flaw.” The newspaper went on to praise the efforts of Thomas Seabrooke: “Mr. Seabrooke is grotesquely funny and entertainingly versatile. His clearness out-wits the smartest anticipations and no audience ever hears and sees him without being treated to kaleidoscopic surprises, in the execution of his mirth-provoking antics.”⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ Lewis C. Strang, *Celebrated Comedians of Light Opera and Musical Comedy in America* (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1901), 129.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid, 133.

⁵²⁰ Ibid, 134-135.

⁵²¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 December 1894.

Pauline Hall

Shortly after the New Year in 1895, Pauline Hall and her company returned to Little Rock for a one-night engagement. She presented the opera *Dorcas*, the opera that along with *The Honeymooners* Strang criticized as being dramatically and musically weak.⁵²²

The support that Hall had assembled for herself during the 1894-95 season featured several singers with whom Little Rock was familiar, including William Broderick, formerly of the Emma Abbott Troupe, and J. Aldrich Libbey, formerly of the Little Tycoon Company and the Conried Company. The *Gazette*'s review of the performance was devoted solely to praising the performance of Hall and her supporting cast. The newspaper said nothing of the merits—or lack thereof—of *Dorcas*; but the critic did perhaps issue a subtle opinion of the opera in the following statement: “Miss Hall...and her individuality subordinates the merit of any play or opera in which she essays a stellar role.”⁵²³

Whitney Opera Company

In mid-January, the Whitney Opera Company played a one-night engagement at the Capital Theatre. The program consisted of another opera by Reginald De Koven, *The Fencing Master*. The opera is about Francesca, who is the daughter of a fencing master. Her father has taught her his art, and she succeeds him as fencing master. Francesca falls in love with Fortunio, the heir to the Dukedom of Milan; but Fortunio mistakes the fencing master Francesca for a boy.⁵²⁴

⁵²² Strang, *Prima Donnas*, 241.

⁵²³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 2 January 1895; 4 January 1895.

⁵²⁴ *Gazette*, 14 January 1895.

The Whitney Opera Company was still in its infancy when it visited Little Rock. It was founded in 1894 by manager Fred C. Whitney, who had gotten his start in opera producing the De Koven operas *The Algerian* and *The Fencing Master*. His company debuted on October 29, 1894, at New York's Herald Square Theatre with another De Koven opera *Rob Roy*.⁵²⁵

Jules Grau

After an absence of almost two years, the Jules Grau Opera Company returned to Little Rock to play a week-long engagement. The Grau Company never failed to crowd the Capital Theatre whenever it visited; this was partly due to the company keeping its prices "in the popular vein." While many opera companies charged as much as \$2.00 for premium seats, the Grau Company set the price limit at \$.75.⁵²⁶

The opening night's performance was Suppé's *Boccaccio*; and its successful performance led the *Gazette* to predict crowded houses for the remainder of the engagement. The second night, the company produced *Tar and Tartar*, a comic opera by Harry B. Smith and Adam Itzel. The *Gazette* reported that *Tar and Tartar* "abounded in merry and pleasing incidents, which quite captivated the audience."⁵²⁷

Following performances of *Fra Diavolo* and *Martha*, the Grau Company presented another new opera to Little Rock audiences: *Paul Jones*, an English adaptation of Planquette's 1887 operetta *Surcouf*. The *Gazette* hailed *Paul Jones* as "one of the best performances that has

⁵²⁵ John Parker, ed., *Who's Who in the Theatre: A Biographical Record of the Contemporary Stage* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, Ltd., 1922), 869.

⁵²⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 21 April 1895.

⁵²⁷ Mathews, *Music: A Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 20, 135; *Gazette*, 24 April 1895.

been given by the Grau Opera Company.” The remainder of the engagement consisted of the familiar operas *Ship Ahoy*, *Bohemian Girl*, and *Falka*.⁵²⁸

Tavary Opera Company

In November, grand opera returned to Little Rock courtesy of the Tavary Opera Company. Marie Basta Tavary was a Russian soprano born in Cologne, Germany. Her musical instruction at first revolved around the piano; and Franz Liszt was one of her instructors. She eventually turned to cultivating her singing voice, studying with Marchesi in Paris and with Lamperti in Milan. She sang extensively in Europe in such theatres as the Royal Italian Opera and the Munich Court Theatre. Upon coming to America, she undertook a tour of the United States under the management of Charles Pratt, former manager of Emma Abbott.⁵²⁹

The tenor of the company was Albert L. Guille, a long-time member of Adelina Patti’s company. For three years, he was a court singer for Don Luis I, King of Portugal, who conferred upon Guille the honor of “Chevalier of the Legion of Christ.” Guille was known not only for his range—reportedly reaching high D—but also for his short stature; Patti reportedly referred to him as the “silver-tongued little French tenor.”⁵³⁰

The Tavary Company opened its two-night engagement at the Capital Theatre with a double bill: Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Tavary’s Lucia won the praise and admiration of Little Rock theatre-goers. The *Gazette* praised her voice as being “of beautiful quality, highly cultivated and brilliant in execution.” The newspaper was

⁵²⁸ Traubner, *Operetta*, 90; *Gazette*, 26 April 1895.

⁵²⁹ Col. Sinn’s *Montauk Theater: A Description of Brooklyn’s Latest and Handsomest Theater* (New York: William McKinley, 1895); *The Musical Times and Singing-Class Circular*, Vol. 34 (London and New York: Novello, Ewer, and Co., 1893), 664.

⁵³⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 17 November 1895

even more effusive in its praise of tenor Albert Guille, calling him “the surprise of the evening.” “His wonderful, pure and sympathetic voice is powerful and rich and conveys to his listeners the intensity of feeling and the heart-throbs by which it has its magnetic control over the senses of those who are so fortunate as to live under its spell in the short hours of the opera.”⁵³¹

The final performances of the Tavary Company were a matinee of *Il Trovatore* and an evening performance of *Carmen*. The *Gazette* did not publish much in the way of a review of the performances, but said that “Little Rock’s music lovers will retain pleasant memories of the Tavary engagement.”⁵³²

Wang

Very little information exists on the first operatic performance of 1896. On March 14-15, the *Gazette* announced a production of *Wang* for the 16th at the Capital Theatre. *Wang* is a two-act, Asian-themed comic opera by Morse and Goodwin. The production, starring Albert Hart, was advertised to be “full of catchy airs, tuneful melodies, capital choruses and words, which are far above the average libretto.” Nothing is known about the performance at the Capital Theatre—if it even occurred—as the *Gazette* made no more mention of this production.⁵³³

The Della Fox Company

One night after the supposed performance of *Wang*, the Della Fox Opera Company played a one-night engagement at the Capital. Della Fox was a soubrette who got her start in opera singing with the Bennett and Moulton Company. It while performing with this

⁵³¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 16 November 1895.

⁵³² *Gazette*, 17 November 1895.

⁵³³ Hubbard, *American History and Encyclopedia of Music*, Vol. 2, 434; *Gazette*, 15 March 1896.

organization that Fox was discovered by Heinrich Conried, who cast her in his company's production of *The King's Fool*. She later appeared opposite DeWolf Hopper in such productions as *Castles in the Air*, *Wang*, and *Panjandrum*. In August 1894, she debuted as a star in her own right at the Casino Theatre playing the lead role in *The Little Trooper*, the same opera that the Fox Company presented at the Capital Theatre.⁵³⁴

The Little Trooper was composed by William Furst, the same composer responsible for *The Isle of Champagne*. In advance publicity for the company, the *Gazette* printed the following synopsis of *The Little Trooper*:

The story...deals with the jealousy of Clairette, the newly wedded wife of Emile Deval, a Captain of Hussars. An untimely meeting with a former sweetheart, who is unaware of his marriage, and whom he is decidedly anxious to avoid, arouses the suspicions of his wife, and as he lacks courage to tell his old flame of his marriage, he succeeds in making her, too, intensely jealous. Both women follow him to camp. Clairette becomes popular with the officers and earns the sobriquet of "The Little Trooper." Matters are finally adjusted without bloodshed, and a happy ending is made.⁵³⁵

According to the *Gazette*, there was a near record-breaking audience of Little Rock citizens and those from surrounding towns present to witness the performance of *The Little Trooper*. In her portrayal of the title role, Della Fox "met every expectation and justified the laudatory advance notices printed about her." Overall, the performance "proved in many respects the most brilliant of the season."⁵³⁶

⁵³⁴ Strang, *Prima Donnas*, 199-201.

⁵³⁵ *Arkansas Gazette*, 14 March 1896.

⁵³⁶ *Gazette*, 18 March 1896.

The Bostonians

The last operatic performance of 1896 occurred when The Bostonians appeared at the Capital Theatre in November in its great hit *Robin Hood*. The “Pinafore craze” of 1879 was responsible for the rise of both The Bostonians as well as of its star Jessie Bartlett Davis. The Bostonians were first known as The Boston Ideals, a company that was formed for the express purpose of performing *H.M.S. Pinafore* in April 1879. According to Deane Root, “this troupe became the outstanding comic opera company in America in the 1880s, performing many American and foreign operettas.”⁵³⁷

Jessie Bartlett was a church choir singer in Chicago when she was discovered by John Haverly, who organized the Chicago Church Choir “Pinafore” Company. She made her operatic debut playing Little Buttercup; and by the end of the season had married the company’s manager, William J. Davis. William Davis was supportive of his wife’s singing career, and encouraged her to pursue training for the grand opera stage in New York. While in New York, she was discovered by Colonel Mapleson, the current manager for Adelina Patti. During a run of *Faust* in which Patti was singing Marguerite, the contralto cast as Siebel became ill, and Jessie Bartlett Davis was brought in as a substitute. Davis turned down Mapleson’s offer to send her to Italy for three years of study, and instead toured with the Carleton Opera Company and with the ill-fated American Opera Company later reorganized as the National Opera Company. Her experience with the American Opera Company proved exhausting and discouraging, and she returned home resolved to never sing again.

⁵³⁷ Root, *American Popular Stage Music*, 166.

During this period of rest, she was offered a position with The Bostonians, thus beginning her ten-year career with the company. Davis remained with The Bostonians until her retirement in the summer of 1899.⁵³⁸

Though Little Rock had seen *Robin Hood* once before, it now had the opportunity to see it performed by the company responsible for the opera's fame. In fact, Reginald De Koven had conceived *Robin Hood* with the Bostonians in mind. The opera was presented to a standing-room-only crowd; and the *Gazette* reported that the performance "exceeded expectations." All of the principal characters were given due praise; Davis's rendition of the popular "Oh, Promise Me" proved that "her wonderful contralto had lost none of its richness and melody." The *Gazette* writer chose to devote much of his attention to Miss Gracia Quive, the "debutante" of the company who had been with The Bostonians barely two months. The reason for this disproportionate review was the writer's admission that he had known Quive "from youngest girlhood."⁵³⁹

Summer Opera 1897

It is difficult to construct an exact chronology of the 1897 season of opera at Glenwood Park; curiously, the *Gazette* did not cover the season as extensively as it had in the past. The first mention of summer opera appeared in the May 22 issue of the *Gazette*, when it was reported that a group of singers from Chicago would arrive that evening, and that a season of summer opera would commence shortly. The piece announced as the opening bill was *Pink Dominoes*, a "farcical comedy." It seems that opera was never to be the primary entertainment at Glenwood

⁵³⁸ Strang, *Prima Donnas*, 88, 95-99.

⁵³⁹ Bordman, *American Operetta*, 46; *Arkansas Gazette*, 24 November 1896.

Park during this season; what little opera that was presented always appeared alongside novelty acts and comedic sketches.⁵⁴⁰

The next mention of opera at Glenwood Park appeared July 27, the opera being *The Wooden Spoon*, a one-act operetta by Hope Temple.⁵⁴¹ The singers whose names had appeared in the May 22 opening announcement were nowhere to be found. Rather, a quartet of singers consisting of Eunice Drake, Dixon Hutton, Marye Rumbough, and H.W. Hollenberg are the only singers mentioned for the remainder of the season. The season closed on August 14; and the opera of the final two weeks was Balfe's operetta *The Sleeping Queen*.⁵⁴²

The Metropolitan Opera Company

The regular season of 1897 opened with a one-night engagement of the Metropolitan Opera Company. The *Gazette* enthusiastically endorsed the impending arrival of the company, saying "The engagement of this company promises to be all that music lovers could possibly expect and such a mammoth organization should without question pack the opera house to the doors." It is highly unlikely, though, that this company was connected with the famed New York opera house. While the Metropolitan Opera did tour extensively, the 1897-98 season is listed as one of the few seasons during which the company did not tour. Furthermore, the Metropolitan toured always toured with grand opera featuring very famous singers such as Lilli Lehmann,

⁵⁴⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 22 May 1897.

⁵⁴¹ *Catalogue of the Allen A. Brown Collection*, 186.

⁵⁴² *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 July 1897; 3 August 1897; Nigel Burton, "Balfe, Michael William," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

Jean de Reszke, and Enrico Caruso; the company that visited Little Rock in September 1897 presented light opera and did not feature any singers of notable reputation.⁵⁴³

The company presented Millöcker's *The Black Hussar* to a "fair-sized" audience, and the *Gazette* reported that the performance was poorly received.

There were several good voices in the leading roles but the chorus was far from perfect and there was little in the production to commend it to the favor of amusement seekers. Miss Kitty Marcellus, one of the principals, has a good soprano voice and Montjoy Walker and Elmer Ellsworth are clever comedians, but there is an absence in the company of enough material to merit extended notice....The company is not up to the high standard of a popular comic opera organization.⁵⁴⁴

Sofia Scalchi

The final operatic performance of 1897 came courtesy of Sofia Scalchi, a contralto of international fame. She made her operatic debut in 1866 as Ulrica in *Un ballo in maschera*, and two years later sang Azucena at Covent Garden. She remained a popular favorite at Covent Garden until 1889; during this period she also appeared numerous times in St. Petersburg, Russia. Her first appearance in America was in 1882, when she appeared as Arsace in *Semiramide* at New York's Academy of Music. Her repertoire ranged from the florid singing of *Semiramide* to the heavier roles of Azucena and Amneris in *Aida*. Pants roles constituted a large part of her repertoire, and Henry Krehbiel claimed that Scalchi "could wear man's attire and walk in tights more gracefully than any woman who ever appeared on the American operatic stage." Scalchi appeared in one of her most well-known pants roles, Siebel in *Faust*, alongside Nilsson and Campanini in the opening performance of the Metropolitan Opera in 1883. Scalchi participated in the American premieres of two Verdi operas; she was Emilia in the 1888

⁵⁴³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 5 September 1897; Nancy Malitz, "Metropolitan Opera Company," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

⁵⁴⁴ *Gazette*, 8 September 1897.

American premiere of *Othello* and was the first Mistress Quickly in the 1895 premiere of *Falstaff*.⁵⁴⁵

Scalchi had retired from the stage by the time she and her concert company visited Little Rock. The evening's program was divided into three parts: the first part was a mixed concert during which Scalchi sang "Nobles Seigneurs, salut!" from *Les Huguenots*; the second and third portions of the program consisted of the third act of *Faust* and the fourth act of *Il Trovatore* respectively. According to the *Gazette*, Scalchi's Siebel in *Faust* "disclosed her greatest triumph and gratified the audience to a full extent." The greatest share of praise went to soprano Marie Toulinguet, called "the treat of the evening" by the *Gazette*.⁵⁴⁶

Wang

There was only one operatic performance recorded by the *Gazette* in what was an unusually lean 1898 theatrical season. For much of 1898, the country was embroiled in events that culminated in the Spanish-American War, and such events were the focus of Arkansas newspapers. Therefore, it is unclear whether the theatrical life of the city did, in fact, slow down due the conflict, or whether the newspapers simply weren't giving the theatres the same amount of coverage as they had in the past. The war had minimal impact on daily life in Arkansas; the state had been asked to contribute 2,000 men to the effort. According to Mike Polston in his article on the Spanish-American war in Arkansas, the conflict did cause prices to rise, which could have forced many to cut back on theatre attendance and other luxuries.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁵ Elizabeth Forbes, "Scalchi, Sofia," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*; Krehbiel, *Chapters of Opera*, 93, 97.

⁵⁴⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 14 November 1897.

Little Rock witnessed another performance of *Wang*, which the *Gazette* advertised to be presented by a company of fifty people plus a mechanical elephant. The *Gazette* did not review the actual performance, but a writer for the *Democrat* was in attendance. In a very brief review, the *Democrat* reported that the opera was presented before a large audience, and praised the opera as being “as bright and sparkling as ever.”⁵⁴⁸

Sofia Scalchi

In early February 1899, contralto Sofia Scalchi made her second visit to Little Rock, presenting a program similar to the one she gave on her first visit. The first half of the program was to be a mixed concert; and the second half was to feature the second act of *Martha* followed by the first act of *Semiramide*. Scalchi’s visit was well-publicized; the *Gazette* called it “the chief musical event of the season,” and the *Democrat* stated that “There has probably never been any musical attraction booked to appear in this city which has attracted as much notice as the coming of that world’s famous contralto, Madame Sofia Scalchi.”⁵⁴⁹

For whatever reason, the engagement of Scalchi failed to live up to its publicity. The *Gazette*’s review offered few clues, except to suggest that poor heating of the theatre may have been to blame.

The great contralto, Mme. Scalchi, appeared at the Capital Theatre last night before a fair-sized audience. The program opened with numbers by Mr. W.A. Pick, pianist; Miss Noldi, soprano, Sig. Conzio, tenor, and Sig. Alberti, baritone. It was followed by the second act of *Martha*, with Mme. Scalchi as Nancy. The superb voice of the star was heard with rapt attention by the audience especially when she sang “The Last

⁵⁴⁷ Mike Polston, “Spanish-American War,” in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*; available from <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>; Internet; accessed 10 March 2010.

⁵⁴⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 March 1898; *Arkansas Democrat*, 19 March 1898.

⁵⁴⁹ *Gazette*, 4 February 1899; *Democrat*, 6 February 1899.

Rose of Summer.” The first act of “Semiramide” concluded the program. Little Rock’s music-loving contingent was out in goodly numbers and remained to the end, despite the poor heating of the theater, which the management promises shall not occur again.⁵⁵⁰

El Capitán

The next attraction was the Little Rock premiere of John Philip Sousa’s popular operetta *El Capitán*. Known as “The March King,” Sousa made several attempts at composing a hit operetta before achieving success with *El Capitán* in 1896. It premiered at New York’s Broadway Theatre in April 1896, with DeWolf Hopper in the title role. According to Bordman, “El Capitán was the leader of a rebel band dedicated to the overthrow of Don Medigua, the viceroy of Peru. Medigua captures his nemesis and secretly executes him. He then disguises himself as El Capitán and leads the rebels around and around in circles until they are too exhausted to fight.”⁵⁵¹

The arrival of *El Capitán* was greatly anticipated by Little Rock citizens. The *Gazette* excitedly reported that “music in march tempo will reign supreme,” and that “the stage will echo with the tramp, tramp, of the armed hosts of the Peruvian army as portrayed by pretty chorus girls.”⁵⁵² *El Capitán* arrived in Little Rock at just the right time, when the city was swept by Sousa fever; the famous band leader himself performed in the city at Glenwood Park one night before the performance of his popular operetta. When *El Capitán* took the boards at the Capital Theatre, the audience was not disappointed:

⁵⁵⁰ *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 February 1899.

⁵⁵¹ Traubner, *Operetta*, 363-364; Bordman, *American Operetta*, 63.

⁵⁵² *Gazette*, 11 February 1899.

A magnificent presentation of Sousa's "El Capitan" was witnessed by a mammoth audience at the Capital Theater last night; a larger audience, in fact, than that which greeted the great band-master and composer himself Sunday night. The tuneful music of "El Capitan" will linger long in the memory of Little Rock theater-goers. It was the best comic opera production seen here in recent years.⁵⁵³

Broadway Theatre Opera Company

In late February 1899, the Broadway Theatre Opera Company played a one-night engagement at the Capital Theatre, presenting another opera by Reginald De Koven, *The Highwayman*. *The Highwayman* is a three-act comic opera set in England during the reign of George III.⁵⁵⁴

The star of the company was Camille D'Arville, a soprano who divided her career between London and the United States, and appeared with such organizations as the Carl Rosa Company, The Bostonians, and The Casino Theatre. D'Arville was engaged to create the role of Lady Constance in *The Highwayman*, but quit the project during the rehearsal phase after a dispute with the management. Following its premiere in December 1897, *The Highwayman* enjoyed a six-month run at New York's Broadway Theatre with Hilda Clark in the role of Lady Constance. During the show's run at the Broadway, D'Arville must have reconciled with the management, for she is listed as having performed the role from February 1 until March 26, 1898, when Hilda Clark returned to the role.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ *Arkansas Gazette*, 14 February 1899.

⁵⁵⁴ *Gazette*, 25 February 1899.

⁵⁵⁵ Strang, *Prima Donnas*, 217-221; Traubner, *Operetta*, 361-362; Brown, *A History of the New York Stage*, 416.

The Highwayman was presented before a large Little Rock audience. The *Gazette* was complimentary of the scenery and costumes, calling them “superb,” and of the cast, calling it “some of the best talent in the country.” Of Miss D’Arville, the *Gazette* said “there are perhaps none who heard her last night who will disagree with the verdict of metropolitan audiences in according her a front place in the coterie of really great singers of the time.” The *Gazette* concluded its review by stating that the usual objections to the elevated ticket prices charged by opera companies would be “dwarfed by the evident popular enjoyment which the event gave.”⁵⁵⁶

Andrews Opera Company

In March, the Andrews Opera Company was scheduled to play a two-night engagement at the Capital Theatre. The Andrews Opera Company was a family-run organization that was conceived in 1875 as a concert troupe, and whose talent was supplied by the ten Andrews siblings. In 1884, the company emerged as an opera company; and according to Cornelia DuBois in her history of the company, “its nucleus always consisted of the Andrews brothers and sisters, their wives, husbands, and even children.” The company toured the country, presenting both light and grand opera in English, until it disbanded in 1901.⁵⁵⁷

The first night of the company’s Little Rock engagement did not happen. The company arrived, but a heavy rainstorm would have made it difficult for ticket holders to make it through the flooded streets to the theatre. As a result, Capital Theatre management decided to cancel the performance, “the first time in five years the curtain did not ring up at the Capital Theatre...for a previously advertised performance.” In compensation to those who had purchased tickets, the

⁵⁵⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 28 February 1899.

⁵⁵⁷ Cornelia Andrews DuBois, “Operatic Pioneers: The Story of the Andrews Family,” *Minnesota History Magazine* 33 (Winter 1953): 317, 324.

company consented to present a matinee of *Giroflé-Girofla* the following afternoon followed by the regularly scheduled evening performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pirates of Penzance*. Unfortunately, the *Democrat* did not review the performance, and the *Gazette* published only a brief review. The *Gazette* reported that “in many respects the company is a strong one. The chorus is fully up to the requirements.” The company returned several days later and presented *Martha*, which was not reviewed.⁵⁵⁸

Jefferson De Angelis

The last operatic performance of the century was the one-night engagement of Jefferson De Angelis in his latest success *The Jolly Musketeer* by Julian Edwards. The following plot synopsis was printed in the November 26 issue of the *Gazette*:

The story turns on a love episode, with fun on the side, Henri, the titled musketeer having fallen in love with a pretty innkeeper's daughter, whom he cannot marry because of their difference in social standing. Henri has an obliging friend, the Marquis de Chantilly, who intends to commit suicide shortly, and who hits on the plan of aiding his friend by marrying the innkeeper's daughter before killing himself. She then will be a marchioness, and quite aristocratic enough to satisfy Henri's family. It may be said, en passant, that the suicide was contemplated because the marquis, having fought a forbidden duel, was condemned to be shot, Richelieu giving him the option of suicide, of which delicate favor he proposes to avail himself. In the meantime when the marquis sees the girl he falls desperately in love with her himself, and marries her. But his good intentions are thwarted in the matter of helping his friend out by the arrival of a pardon which lifts the death penalty. When Henri learns that his friend is married to the girl and is not going to conveniently die so that he, Henri, can have her, there is the deuce to pay.⁵⁵⁹

Jefferson De Angelis began his career as a variety actor alongside his sister; and in 1881 he formed an opera company and spent several years touring Australia, Asia, and Africa. Upon

⁵⁵⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, 28-29 March 1899.

⁵⁵⁹ *Gazette*, 26 November 1899.

his return to the United States, he appeared with the McCaull Opera Company and then became one of the leading comedians at the Casino Theatre. In the fall of 1898, De Angelis found his greatest success as the title character in *The Jolly Musketeers*; and it was during his successful tour of this opera that De Angelis appearing in Little Rock.⁵⁶⁰

Jefferson De Angelis and his company of sixty-five singers appeared before a large audience that included “the leading representatives of the city’s culture and society.” The performance was a success, and was the subject of a lengthy review in the *Gazette*, whose reviews of the year’s previous operas had consisted of no more than a short paragraph. A portion of the review appears below:

The Jefferson de Angelis Opera Company, which is responsible for the superb production, is one of the strongest organizations traveling. A discriminating Little Rock theater-going public recognized that fact, and responded accordingly. The performance is a “go” from opening to close. The wealth of costly scenery and costumes and the big company of sixty-five principals and chorus combine to make an attraction second to none ever seen in this city. Mr. De Angelis, who is in reality “The Jolly Musketeer,” is an inimitable comedian and the audience was in constant peals of laughter while he was on. As an entertainer he has no superior...The singing was above the average, and altogether there was nothing lacking to make the performance an ideal one.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁶⁰ Strang, *Celebrated Comedians of Light Opera*, 236-252.

⁵⁶¹ *Arkansas Gazette*, 2 December 1899.

CONCLUSION

The thirty-year span from 1870 to 1900 witnessed the conception and development of an operatic culture in Little Rock, Arkansas. There were many obstacles along the way: lagging urbanization, transportation limitations, war, and economic hardships. As Little Rock took steps toward becoming a legitimate urban center, traveling opera troupes responded by including the city on their itineraries.

The year 1870 served not only as the beginning of a new decade, but also as the beginning of the operatic era in Little Rock. Transportation proved to be a great obstacle early in the decade; and the Brignoli troupe was the only company willing to risk traveling the unpredictable Arkansas River to bring Little Rock its first professional opera. The operatic stage languished for most of the decade; but improved railroad connections after 1875 paved the way for other companies to venture into the state. Beginning in 1878, Little Rock hosted at least one traveling opera troupe each year for the rest of the century. The predominant genre of repertoire performed during this time was English translations of French *opera bouffe*, which was a reflection of theatrical trends across the country.⁵⁶²

In the 1880s, Little Rock had earned its place on the Southern theatrical circuit, and companies began playing extended engagements at the city's two theatres, the Capital and the Grand. The city's increased taste for opera can also be seen in the inauguration of summer opera seasons in the latter part of the decade. While French *opera bouffe* remained popular throughout the decade, other operatic genres became a regular fixture of Little Rock's theatrical seasons. The "Pinafore craze" of 1879 ushered in numerous performances of Gilbert and Sullivan; and

⁵⁶² Root, *American Popular Stage Music*, 132.

English translations of the German operettas of Strauss, Suppé, and Millöcker became popular during this period. While operetta remained the predominant operatic genre seen on Little Rock stages, the city saw its share of grand opera thanks largely in part to the touring of Emma Abbott and her English Opera Company.

The repertoire trends of the 1880s continued into the first half of the 1890s, with the occasional performances of opera by American composers. American opera asserted itself much more during the second half of the 1890s; from January 1895 until December 1899, a little over forty percent of the operas seen in Little Rock were by American composers.

The complete story of Little Rock's operatic life has yet to be told. Further research is needed into the history of opera in Little Rock in the twentieth century and beyond, specifically the decline and eventual ceasing of traveling opera troupes visiting the city. In his dissertation *The Death of a Road Show Town: Little Rock, Arkansas, 1899-1921*, Larry T. Menefee traced the decline of Little Rock's theatrical life in the early twentieth century; but his study focuses on non-musical drama. A similar study that focuses on Little Rock's operatic stage is yet to be done.

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VITA

Soprano Jenna Tucker is a native of El Dorado, Arkansas, and holds a Bachelor of Music degree in from Ouachita Baptist University and a Master of Music degree from Louisiana State University.

Mrs. Tucker is an active performer on both the operatic and recital stage. Some of her recent professional credits include solo performances with the South Arkansas Symphony and the Sinfonia Chamber Orchestra in performances of Vaughan Williams' *Hodie* and Haydn's *Little Organ Mass*, numerous recitals in South Arkansas and North Louisiana. In summer 2009, she was a participant in the *Asolo Festival and Institute for Song Interpretation* in Italy. Some of her opera role credits include Despina in *Così fan tutte*, Constance in *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, Amy March in *Little Women*, Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*, and Baby Doe in *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.

Some of her honors include Grand Prize Winner at the Monroe Symphony League's Emerging Artist Competition, Semi-Finalist in both the Orpheus Competition and Shreveport Opera's Singer of the Year Competition; and two-time National Semi-Finalist in the National Association of Teachers of Singing Artist Awards (NATSAA) in 2006 and 2008.

Mrs. Tucker serves on the voice faculty at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, and at Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia, Arkansas.