



DISASTER

attends a matinee

It was a gay holiday crowd that filled the newly opened Iroquois Theater that afternoon 55 years ago; then tragedy struck.

by Howard Earle

Art by Elmer Smith

A YEAR-END holiday spirit prevailed in Chicago that December afternoon 55 years ago.

The intense cold—eight degrees below zero—was little deterrent to a city preparing to greet the joyous New Year. And there was no foreboding of the tragedy that would leave the Midwest metropolis grief-stricken before nightfall.

Hundreds of women, taking advantage of the Wednesday bargain matinee, flocked with their children to the Iroquois Theater to see "Mr. Bluebeard," a musical extravaganza starring Eddie Foy.

The Iroquois, open only weeks, was the last word in theater construction. The elegant interior glittered with marble and gilded plate glass, deep red plush and mahogany. There was a 60-foot ceiling in the promenade foyer, and marble staircases curved in grandeur to balconies and galleries. It had been hailed as a model of efficiency, convenience, safety, and, above all else, it was "fireproof."

The theater seated some 1,600 and about 100 standing-room tickets were sold that afternoon, putting attendance at more than 1,700—at least 80 percent women and children. There were another 400 persons backstage.

Enthusiastic applause greeted the end of the first act. The second opened with a double octet—eight men and eight women—in a number called

"In the Pale Moonlight." Two huge carbon lights threw "moonlight" on the scene.

Then it happened!

No one seemed sure whether it was caused by a blown fuse or the powerful carbon lights. A stagehand noticed a scorch the size of a half-dollar on a curtain at the side of the stage.

Suddenly the scorched piece burst into flame. The flame grew as it crawled upward toward nearly 300 flammable drops and backings suspended above the stage.

The stagehand tried to beat out the blaze with a broom. It raced beyond his reach and the next instant exploded into a massive ball of fire among the sets. The blaze consumed the entire top of the stage in seconds.

People moved uneasily in their seats. They seemed awed by the blaze above the stage, now no longer hidden from their view. An undercurrent of fear became apparent.

Eddie Foy was preparing to come on stage with a comic elephant. He heard the commotion running through the audience and dashed from his dressing room to the stage.

The octets were doing their utmost amid rising confusion to carry on with their act. Burning

fragments began dropping all over the stage.

Then the music stopped. The audience froze.

"Fire!" someone cried and the audience began to move. Foy shouted at them not to get excited, that no one was in danger.

He called to the orchestra leader to play an overture. There was some music. The people on the main floor began to quiet down, but those in the gallery near the flames began to panic.

Someone began lowering the fire curtain to block the flames before they reached beyond the stage. But it stuck a few feet above the stage.

It had struck a wire running from the stage to the balcony used by the aerial ballet act.

BACKSTAGE most of the cast and others were jammed against the stage door, trying to escape. But the door was locked and had to open inward. The whole stage was a mass of flames now, with the heat stifling, the smoke suffocating.

Somehow stagehands broke open the door with a heavy object. They did the same to the big double doors in the rear, through which scenery was brought into the theater.

Instead of scenery, a blast of cold air came in now, rushed toward the stage, swept flames along with it, ignited the "fireproof" fire curtain, and sent searing flames licking out into the auditorium.

Eddie Foy found the stage no longer bearable. Burning timbers were dropping to the floor all about him. Almost blinded and choking, he fought his way to the Dearborn Street stage door.

There was no fire-alarm box in the theater, no fire buckets, water hoses, or effective extinguishers. Any ushers who might have helped had fled.

Only two of the 10 exits were usable. The others were locked or barred. Some were still nailed shut because the theater was so new.

Men, women, and children struggled to escape. Some fell in the aisles and were trampled to death. Others reached closed doors and were crushed to death by waves of fear-crazed humans.

Women rushed from the balconies to outside fire escapes, only to find iron platforms with no ladders leading to the street below. The first arrivals were forced by others, crowding behind them, to jump to their deaths on the pavement.

When the firemen arrived and forced their way into the theater, they climbed the marble staircases but couldn't open some of the doors into the auditorium—they were barricaded with bodies. Once the firemen did get inside, they put out the blaze in 20 minutes.

Though 602 persons died, the Iroquois Theater fire did do some good throughout the nation. Theaters suspected of being unsafe were closed and forced to make repairs. Some irreparable theaters were closed permanently.

Building-code regulations put into effect in Chicago after the Iroquois Theater fire have become standard in most cities. They read almost like an inspector's notebook on the reasons for the Iroquois disaster:

1. The audience must be limited to the number of seats available.
2. The stage and theater must be equipped with fire-fighting apparatus.
3. The stage must have an overhead automatic sprinkler system with sprinkler heads that open at 165 degrees.
4. No flammable draperies could be used, and all scenery must be tested for fireproof qualities.
5. All theaters must hold fire drills before each performance, with all exits open and ushers taking their places and going through their routine.
6. During each performance there must be a certified and licensed fire guard on the stage.
7. All theaters must have a tested fireproof curtain which must be lowered at least twice before each performance.
8. All exit doors must open outward.

Iroquois Theatre ABSOLUTELY
FIREPROOF

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