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THEATER IN THE WILDERNESS

by John D. Fitzgerald
author of "Papa Married a Mormon"
and "Mamma's Boarding House"

A MOVEMENT is now under way in Utah to build a replica of the fabulous old Salt Lake Theater. If the persons behind this movement display one percent of the tenacity, stubbornness, and vision of the man who built the original theater, the replica will certainly be built!

There was great consternation among officials of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1861 when their leader Brigham Young announced he was going to build a theater in Salt Lake City. They told him that if the Mormons built a theater before a temple in which to worship, it would invite the condemnation of the whole country.

They argued that many Christians believed the theater to be an evil place, and if the Mormons built one it would bring censorship from all other religious sects. And, finally, they said there were no materials with which to build a theater.

"There is nothing lovely in this world," Brigham Young replied, "but the Lord created it for the good of his children. It is the abuse and not the use of anything that constitutes evil."

And so on March 8, 1862, the first theatrical production was presented in the Salt Lake Theater. During the first eight years of its existence, more than 500 plays, farces, and operas were produced in the theater, a record unequalled by any American theater of that time. Firearms had to be checked at the box office, and parched corn, dried apples, and dried peaches took the place of present-day popcorn.

When the famous midget, General Tom Thumb, and his family played the theater, he told Brigham Young: "I can understand everything about your religion but polygamy." The Mormon leader patted the midget on the head and replied, "Yes, I know, but you will understand it when you get as big as I am."

A young Shakespearian actor fell in love with an actress named Sara Alexander



who was a ward of Brigham Young's. When the young actor asked Young's permission to court Miss Alexander, the Mor-

mon leader told him: "Young man, I've seen you attempt Richard III and Julius Caesar with fair success, but I advise you not to aspire to Alexander."



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Brigham Young rarely missed a performance at the theater and often was responsible for the show being able to go on at all. When David McKensie, playing Uncle Tom, couldn't find his coat during one performance, Young gave the actor his own coat to wear and watched the performance in his shirt sleeves.

Young averted a panic one evening when three oil lamps in the footlights burst into flames. He jumped to the stage and put out the fire with his hat.

A leading lady who was a blonde needed a brunet wig for a part and, after finding none available in the wardrobe department, took her problem to Brigham Young. The Mormon recalled that a young actor named John McDonald had a beautiful head of long black hair which he wore shoulder length.

Young asked the actor to cut off his hair so a wig could be made from it and the show go on. McDonald must have been a real trouper because he replied, "If the success of the play depends upon my hair, Brother Brigham, you shall have it!"

THE FIRST TIME Brigham Young imposed any censorship on the theater was during the first professional ballet to appear in it. Young instructed the manager that all ballet skirts must be ankle length. The manager protested that it would be impossible for the troupe to dance, but Young was insistent.

During the first performance, many of the dancers tripped and fell on the long skirts. Before the second performance, the manager cut one inch off the skirts.

When this went unnoticed by Young, the manager cut off another inch at the next performance and continued doing this until, by the final night of the ballet, the skirts had been shortened to their original

length. Brigham Young had attended every performance and either hadn't noticed or pretended he hadn't!

The Salt Lake Theater gave to the world such playwrights and librettists as Channing Pollock, Edwin Milton Royle, and Otto Harbach. Annie Adams Kiskadden was a popular leading lady during the 1870s. One evening when the baby used in the play, "The Lost Child," became ill, Mrs. Kiskadden substituted her own baby daughter for the part. That was how the famous Maude Adams made her stage debut at the age of seven months.

Later she appeared in several plays with her mother, and at nine, she did her first solo, singing "The Yaller Girl Who Winked at Me." By the time she was 20, Maude Adams was playing leading roles in the theater and went on from there to world fame and fortune.

Some of the greatest stars on the American stage appeared in the Salt Lake Theatre before it closed: Edwin Booth, Forbes Robertson, Otis Skinner, Henry Miller, John Drew, Richard Mansfield, Cyril Maude, Robert Mantell, George Arliss, Sarah Bernhardt, Mary Anderson, Ada Rehan, Billie Burke, Blanche Bates, Ethel Barrymore, and others.

Brigham Young was often criticized for building the theater, but he silenced his critics for all time when he declared, "I built the theater to attract the young of the community and provide amusement for the boys and girls rather than have them run all over creation for recreation."

"Upon the stage of a theater can be represented evil and its consequences, good and its happy returns and rewards, the weakness and the follies of man, the magnanimity of virtue and the greatness of truth.

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