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**The Life of Memphis Opera Houses: 1880-1910**

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“It is needless to say that all the stars of the American stage, at one time or another, played Memphis.”<sup>1</sup>

The Mississippi River. It is a valuable resource that carries unexplainable importance for every aspect of the past and present conditions of the South. So many aspects of southern life have been heavily influenced by its utility as a mode of easy transport, including the entertainment industry in Memphis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To some, this almost instantly brings to mind nostalgic thoughts of the grand showboats of the late 1800's that would travel up and down the river, performing grand plays and showy vaudeville acts as was glamorized by the elaborate MGM musical, *Show Boat*. However, the majority of performances that appeared in Memphis during this time period were not at all this style.

The location of Memphis, strategically placed on the river, is one of the main reasons that the city was able to successfully develop an active interest in supporting arts and musical performances between 1880 and 1910. Companies on tour with famous performers from New York and abroad would use the river to reach their performance

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destinations. As an established southern city located between the large arts centers of St. Louis and New Orleans, Memphis was a logical and worthwhile stop on their tour down the Mississippi. In fact, in 1902 *The Morning News* newspaper asserted that “any good play can obtain excellent audiences here.”<sup>2</sup>

Particularly in the 1890’s, this city had a significant interest in upscale operatic and dramatic performances, as well as a society to support them. Big arts patrons such as W.D. Bethell and Napoleon Hill funded the construction of beautiful opera houses in Memphis and hired managers that would book desirable acts to ensure their success. Newspapers of the time proudly declared, “Memphis gets the best plays on the road, that is, all the plays which leave the great cities in which they are originally produced come here.”<sup>3</sup>

Today, Memphis is known internationally for its original music of blues, soul, and jazz that grew out of the African American culture, but Memphis’s theaters between 1890 and 1910 represent an earlier time in the music performed in the city. At the turn of the century, a very segregated and prejudiced society existed in Memphis, and the patrons of these theaters were strictly white and many were of the upper classes. An overwhelming majority of the performances at the top theaters in the city were from traveling dramatic and opera companies and the remainder were frequently by the theater’s house company or orchestra. The taste of the upper classes that reserved box seats frequently dictated the type of performances that were brought. Musically, during the best days of the 1890’s this meant mostly operas. Dramatically, it meant plays popular in New York.

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<sup>1</sup> “Memphis Favored as Amusement Center,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), May 21, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> “The Stage and Stage Folks,” *Morning News* (Memphis, TN), May 4, 1902.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

### New Memphis Theater/Leubrie's Theatre/ Memphis Theatre

An early theater that served the city of Memphis was known by a variety of names, which changed frequently as new owners and managers controlled it. It began as Crisp's Gaiety and opened on October 19, 1857 on Jefferson under the management of William H. Crisp. The theater saw success in its first year but Crisp left Memphis after the second season to fight in the Confederate Army. In 1859, the theater was taken over by W. C. Thompson, who changed the name to the New Memphis Theater. The third season opened, but was swiftly closed by the outbreak of the Civil War. Between 1866 and 1868, the theater began to show performances again but experienced financial difficulty. The misfortune culminated in the death of Thompson in August of 1868. His wife ran the theater for the rest of the season in which the financial situation failed to improve.

In July 1869, new proprietors Spaulding and Bidwell leased the theater after the finances became too difficult for Thompson's widow to continue. They remodeled the New Memphis Theater, replacing the old benches with armchairs and adding boxes.<sup>4</sup> The walls were newly painted, the gas lighting system was replaced with brighter fixtures and better heating furnaces were installed. A lovely new chandelier was put in and improvements were made to the backstage area. The renovations cost about \$15,000.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Fauntleroy. Untitled, undated article. Folders of The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Library (Memphis, TN).

<sup>5</sup> Seldon Faulkner, "The New Memphis Theater of Memphis, Tennessee From 1859 to 1880," (PhD diss., State University of Iowa), 109

The venue was renamed and reopened as the Memphis Theater on Sept. 18, 1869 as “one of the best in the South.”<sup>6</sup>

Under the new management, the theater hosted some great names of the time. Reformer and politician, Horace Greeley spoke at the Memphis Theater on June 2, 1871 and the poet John G. Saxe came on March 7, 1875. Later that year on October 5, 1875, John Phillip Sousa and his band made the first of three appearances in Memphis at this theater very early in his career. A little-known Sousa conducted the band as a short entertainment after the first act of the play. It was said that this performance was “Sousa’s first experience as an orchestra director” when he led the band in the *Bludso March*, composed and arranged by Sousa himself. He dedicated the short performance to American actor, Milton Nobles who starred in the play, “Jim Bludso” that night.<sup>7</sup>

A significant event in the history of New Memphis Theater is that of the outbreak of yellow fever, the worst of which Memphis experienced in the fall of 1878. From August to November of that year, the plague spread uncontrollably throughout the city and many citizens fled to avoid becoming infected. Less than 20,000 people stayed in Memphis, about one fourth of which died of the fever. The city lost its charter and became a mere taxing district of the state of Tennessee. Naturally, this had a major effect on the economy of Memphis and therefore on the New Memphis Theater. Most of the engagements planned for the fall of 1878 were cancelled, but shows began again in January 1879 to positive critical feedback. Although it was shortened by the effects of the plague, in his dissertation on the New Memphis, Seldon Faulkner asserts that, “all things

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Fauntleroy. Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

considered, the season's programming showed balance and good quality."<sup>8</sup> Many different sorts of shows were offered at the New Memphis at this time from Shakespeare to modern plays to lighter variety and minstrel acts.<sup>9</sup> The theater provided a valuable escape from the problems of everyday life citizens were experiencing at this time.

The difficult economic times in Memphis during these years resulted in unpaid taxes on the New Memphis Theater. On May 24, 1879, the theater was sold "by public outcry, by order of the Chancery Court," because the city desperately needed tax money to aid in recovery from the economic disaster the city was experiencing.<sup>10</sup> Brothers Lou and Ellis Leubrie, Memphis dry goods merchants, purchased the theater at public auction in front of the courthouse for the bargain price of \$10,100 (it had cost an estimated \$40,000 to build in 1857), and subsequently renamed it Leubrie's Theater.<sup>11</sup> Seldon Faulkner assesses that the fate of the theater during these years coincided with that of the financial situation in Memphis. The city had been struck by various outbreaks of yellow fever in the 1870's and was in serious financial troubles. Some very effective governing of Memphis saved it from total disaster, delaying creditors, "until stringent sanitary and governmental changes were accomplished." Memphis, therefore, "entered the eighties with a phoenix-like vitality and hope."<sup>12</sup> It would finally be able to recover during the years that followed.

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<sup>8</sup> Seldon Faulkner. "The New Memphis Theater of Memphis, Tennessee From 1859 to 1880," (PhD diss., State University of Iowa), 174

<sup>9</sup> Seldon Faulkner. *Ibid.* 171-175

<sup>10</sup> "Memphis Theater Sold," *Memphis Weekly Public Ledger* (Memphis, TN), May 24, 1879.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Seldon Faulkner, "The New Memphis Theater of Memphis, Tennessee From 1859 to 1880," (PhD diss., State University of Iowa), 176

The new manager of Leubrie's Theater was Joseph Brooks assisted by Frank Gray, who would later manage the Lyceum. Leubrie's experienced much success under the direction of Brooks in the 1880's, bringing all sorts of different acts including famous actors (Lillie Langtry and Mrs. Scott-Siddons), magic shows (Alexander Hermann) to lectures by famous literary figures such as Oscar Wilde.<sup>13</sup> It was described at this time as "the leading theater of our city" and "well-adapted for the purposes designed."<sup>14</sup> Leubrie's Theater served as the main performance venue in Memphis for the duration of the decade.

At this time, the theater published a program every week of the season called *The Mirror*. The program included advertisements of local businesses, news about the theater, upcoming acts and information about the show that particular week. In addition, issues of *The Mirror* from 1880 included excerpts from the *New York Times* with regards to recent events in popular social culture. This is a good indication that the managers of the theater tried to establish Leubrie's Theater as a popular upscale venue for theater-goers of Memphis. It serves as a valuable resource to examine the operations of the theater under the management of Brooks and Gray.

Between 1885 and 1886, Brooks yet again remodeled the theater, increasing the seating to 250. On Sept. 27, 1886 the name changed back to the Memphis Theater. For ten years (1879-1889) much of the success of this particular theater can be attributed to the fact that it had no major rival in Memphis.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Fauntleroy. Untitled, undated article. Folders of The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Library (Memphis, TN).

<sup>14</sup> "Memphis Theater Sold," *Memphis Weekly Public Ledger* (Memphis, TN), May 24, 1879.

One remarkable trait of the Memphis Theater was its ability to stay open throughout some of the hardest years in Memphis's history that were filled with plague and economic troubles. Much of the success of the theater at that time was due to effective management of the venue.<sup>15</sup> On September 17, 1891, the theater hosted the play "Below Zero," and unfortunately the 40-year-old venue burned down after midnight. It was a sad, yet not uncommon ending to a playhouse that had served the city for many years.<sup>16</sup> During this period, it was much more common than today for a building to burn to the ground due to gas lighting and lack of fire-prevention technology. The destruction of the Memphis Theater made way for the city's two newest theaters, the Grand Opera House and the Lyceum, to rise in popularity as the city's best performance venues.

#### The Grand Opera House/Hopkins's Grand Opera House

The Grand Opera House was conceived by 25 businessmen in Memphis who were interested in "more and better theater facilities" in the city to compete with Leubrie's Theater, which was receiving most of the quality theater business at the time.<sup>17</sup> The head of the investor group was Captain W.D. Bethell, a businessman, president of the taxing district, and big investor in the city.<sup>18</sup> Bethell was a very important man in Memphis with regards to funding the arts. He served as a Captain in the Confederate Army during the Civil War and relocated to Memphis after its close. He served as president of the State

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<sup>15</sup> Seldon Faulkner, "The New Memphis Theater of Memphis, Tennessee From 1859 to 1880," (PhD diss., State University of Iowa), 179.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Fauntleroy. Untitled, undated article. Folders of The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Library (Memphis, TN).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> David Bowman. "Orpheum is Last Vestige of Grand Period in Memphis'..." Folders of The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Library (Memphis, TN) 1981.

National Bank, and used his inherited wealth to acquire interests all over the city. When Memphis lost its charter in 1879, Shelby County became a taxing district of the state and Capt. Bethell served as president (a role much like mayor) from 1891 to 1893. During his time in office, the Frisco Bridge, the first bridge over the lower Mississippi River, opened for use.<sup>19</sup>

According to the *Memphis Avalanche*, the laying of the cornerstone of the Grand Opera House was in itself a noteworthy event on October 28, 1889. At 3:00 pm, a group of investors and guests (including W.D Bethell and fellow businessman, J.S. Menken) assembled at the site where the construction was taking place and ceremoniously laid the cornerstone. Beneath it were laid copies of all the local newspapers from the preceding Sunday, a couple significant photos, as well as “old and modern coins, postage stamps and other things.”<sup>20</sup> A bottle of champagne was broken over the top of the stone and speeches were given by those present, most notably J.S. Menken who declared the importance of the event to Memphis as a great city of the South as well as the importance of theater as both a teacher and an amusement to the citizens of the city.<sup>21</sup>

The goal of the Board of Directors (consisting of the main stockholders) was to open “the finest theater west of New York City,” and they succeeded in that “outside of New York City there was no theater with such a massive stage at that time,” according to journalist David Bowman.<sup>22</sup> The stage was “51 feet deep, 82 feet wide, and 80 feet high

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<sup>19</sup> “William D. Bethell,” [www.memphishistory.com](http://www.memphishistory.com)

<sup>20</sup> “The Grand Operahouse: Cornerstone Laid Yesterday With Interesting Ceremonies,” *Memphis Avalanche* (Memphis, TN), October 29, 1889.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> David Bowman. “Orpheum is Last Vestige of Grand Period in Memphis’...” Folders of The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Library (Memphis, TN) 1981.

to the gridiron,” which supported the scenery and lighting above the performers.<sup>23</sup> Built on land that was once part of a coal yard, they opened the Grand Opera House on Sept. 22, 1890 for a total cost of \$200,000 on the corner of Main and Beale Streets.

Opening night at the Grand Opera House was a magnificent success. The *Memphis Daily Avalanche* newspaper declared the next day that it was a “magnificent thespian temple” and that, “the opening of the Grand Opera House last night was the most brilliant theatrical and social success in the history of the city.”<sup>24</sup> All the aristocrats of Memphis society attended to hear soprano opera star, Emma Juch perform in Giacomo Meyerbeer’s “Les Huguenots.” She was described as “a soprano voice of perfect intonation, full compass and sufficient volume,” and “the large audience dwelt on every note she sang as though loth to lose even the echo of it.”<sup>25</sup> The *Memphis Daily Avalanche* reporter did not hesitate to objectively evaluate the events of the evening. Although Miss Juch performed excellently, he admitted that the opera itself “is not of a nature ever calculated to become popular” because, “it lacks the sprightness and softness which characterize the great Italian composers.” The management and crew, however, were congratulated heartily at the end of the evening.

The performance for the first night in a new theater opened for the first time, and from which the echo of the workman’s hammer had scarce died away, ran remarkably smoothly, and the management deserves the congratulations showered upon them.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> “Another Thespian Temple: The Grand Opera House Dedicated Last Night” *Memphis Daily Avalanche* (Memphis, TN), September 23, 1890.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

According to the *Memphis Daily Avalanche* reporter's account, the only mishap of the event was that the plush chairs for the stockholders' boxes had not been set in place, and had to be substituted at the last minute with "common chairs."<sup>27</sup>

The group of stockholders were all in attendance for the theater's opening night, most notably Captain W.D. Bethell and Mr. W.M. Sneed who together escorted Judge E.S. Hammond onto the stage at "8:25 o'clock" to give an opening speech. In his address, Judge Hammond commended the hard work of the Board of Directors and thoroughly thanked the investors on behalf of the entire city emphasizing that, "we are here tonight in something of a delirium of pleasure to celebrate the first new theater we have had in nearly forty years."<sup>28</sup> Everyone noted the beauty and elegance of the new building.

The decorations, the hangings, chandeliers, brilliant lights, the magnificent drop curtain (painted by Noxon and Toomey depicting an exotic scene of *The Triumphal Entry of the Rajah of India into Singapore* after his victory over the Persians), the ladies' parlor with its handsome plush furniture and ornaments, met with universal approbation and were curiously inspected by the visitors before the performance and between the acts.<sup>29</sup>

That evening was truly a grand affair and a significant positive advancement for the arts in Memphis as it entered the decade of the 1890's, which would prove to be a prosperous time for the city.

Many great stars performed at the Grand Opera House during its sixteen-year life as a venue for traditional operas and plays. Its stage saw the likes of French actress Sarah Bernhardt, who was known by her fans as "The Divine Sarah." The great British

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

tragedian, Henry Irving appeared there as well. He was the first actor ever to be knighted in 1895. Opera star Adelina Patti sang at the Grand Opera House in 1894. This world-renowned Italian soprano toured the United States only twice and at her peak of talent and fame collected up to £1000 per performance. She maintained excellent technique in her voice, known for its “amazing purity of tone and vocal flexibility.” Her only flaw was said to be the “overuse of ornamentations” that she added to her roles.<sup>30</sup> The great Polish pianist and composer, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, was another significant musician to play at the Grand Opera House. Trained in Warsaw, he gained worldwide recognition for his musical talents and was also a major activist for the liberation of his home country during the world wars. His style was said to be emotional rather than flashy, and he composed a variety of works from operas and symphonies, to smaller piano pieces.<sup>31</sup>

The Grand Opera House continued to provide Memphis with quality theatrical and musical performance into the twentieth century. In 1907, the Orpheum Circuit Company took over the theater and made it an exclusively vaudeville theater. It was renamed it The Orpheum, which it has been until this day. The original 1890 building burned down in 1923 but the theater was rebuilt on the original site in 1928.<sup>32</sup>

### Lyceum Theater

The Lyceum Theater was opened under different circumstances than the Grand Opera House. The original Lyceum was built as part of the grand plan for the Amateur

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<sup>30</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Adelina Patti” (vol 14, pg 303-304).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* s.v. “Ignacy Jan Paderewski” (vol 16, pg 73-75).

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Fautleroy. Untitled, undated article. Folders of The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Library (Memphis, TN).

Athletic Club. The Amateur Athletic Association was begun by David J. McComb as a solution for the fact that Memphis had no formal indoor facilities for physical exercise. Admitting young men only, membership and interest in the club quickly increased until McComb acquired enough support to construct a grand building on the northwest corner of Third and Union, “unrivaled in the South.”<sup>33</sup> It included not only a gymnasium (which occupied the entire upper floor with modern equipment allowing for the practice of “every sort of athletic exercise”) but also, “a fine theater, offices, club rooms, a restaurant, and sleeping apartments.”<sup>34</sup>

The Amateur Athletic Club functioned as much like a social organization as a fitness facility. The members hosted many events and it was reported that “the social entertainments given by the club proper, were many and were as brilliant as have ever been known in the city,” according to the *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche*.<sup>35</sup>

Aside from the fact that it occupied the two lower floors of the club building, the Lyceum Theater operated completely independently of the Amateur Athletic Club, whose interests included only “to receive the revenue derived from its rental.”<sup>36</sup> The theater opened on September 29, 1891 with a performance by American actress, Julia Marlowe.

Much of the success of the early years of the Lyceum can be attributed to the charm and charisma of manager Johnny Mahoney, who took over in 1892 and was well-liked by everyone who knew him. He was described by the *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche*

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<sup>33</sup> “Lyceum Now in Ashes,” *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* (Memphis, TN) November 8, 1893.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

as, “genial, courteous and popular,” and his efforts made the Lyceum Theater “a synonym for all that is attractive in the dramatic world.”<sup>37</sup>

The original building that hosted the Lyceum was short-lived. The theater, as well as the athletic club were destroyed by fire on November 7, 1893. Because of primitive fire department technology and communication systems of the time, buildings were frequently lost to fire before the rescuers were even notified of the blaze. Fortunately, the building was insured, but all parties involved suffered a significant loss. The night of the disaster, the James T. Powers Company had performed the play, *Walker, London*, and suffered a huge loss of scenery, costumes and props collectively worth \$10,000 which paled in comparison to Powers’s wife’s dismay at the discovery that her water spaniel, Snatch, had perished in the flames of her dressing room.<sup>38</sup> Manager Johnny Mahoney was heartbroken on the site of ash and smoke the next morning and the *Commercial Appeal* noted that “he didn’t try to hold back the tears.”<sup>39</sup> His emotion was so moving that newspaper reporter Howard Hawthorne McGee composed a sonnet that appeared that very morning in the *Memphis Commercial* entitled, “Glory in the Ashes” and dedicated to Mahoney.<sup>40</sup>

It was concluded that the fire had started in the stage area, either from a flammable material too close to the pilot flame under the stage, or else from a live wire in the fly space of the ceiling.<sup>41</sup> The alarm was sounded two minutes after midnight and it

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Sterling Tracy. “Memphians of 1906 Enjoyed Ragtime, Cakewalk, Theater Despite Unrests of The Day,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), March 12, 1950.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “Lyceum Now in Ashes,” *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* (Memphis, TN) November 8, 1893.

was quite amazing that no lives were lost, because about thirty people were asleep in the athletic club's boarding rooms at the time. The *Appeal-Avalanche* newspaper described the next morning the individual stories of narrow escape from all involved in the fire, most of which lost almost all their wardrobe and possessions to the disaster. The loss of the entire building and furnishings amounted to \$160,000, but the building was only insured for \$70,000.<sup>42</sup>

A new Lyceum was rebuilt at a different location on the corner of Second and Jefferson a year later and formally opened on December 3, 1894. It was beautifully furnished, and noteworthy that it was the first theater in Memphis to be furnished strictly with electric lighting.<sup>43</sup> The beautiful lobby opened onto Second Street. Thanks to Mahoney's enthusiasm and the support of two main investors, Hu L. Brinkley and Stanwood Kyle, the funding was accumulated in record time "in the pit of one of the worst depressions in the national experience," reported later by *Commercial Appeal* journalist, Sterling Tracy.<sup>44</sup>

The actor, Otis Skinner appeared in the play, *Count de Grammont*, as the opening performance of the new Lyceum Theater, and much attention was given by the patrons not only to the performance, but to the beautiful new building designed by Chicago architects, Wood and Lowell. The interior of the theater was plush and luxurious featuring mosaics, tapestries, marble columns, and murals. Touring actor Joseph Jefferson later proclaimed that, "it is one of the prettiest theaters in the United States and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Eileen Sheahan. "Theater in Memphis: Its History," *Memphis: The Mississippi Valley and the Mid South*. (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1978), 21

<sup>44</sup> Sterling Tracy. "Memphians of 1906 Enjoyed Ragtime, Cakewalk, Theater despite Unrests of the Day," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), March 12, 1950.

I know of none of equal size which is more completely or conveniently equipped.”<sup>45</sup>

Critics wrote that, “the physical properties and artistic attributes of the new Lyceum were unsurpassed.”<sup>46</sup> All the aristocrats of Memphis society attended the opening night festivities that ran late into the evening. The Hon. G. C. Matthews, associate editor of the *Commercial Appeal*, gave an opening speech for the assembled crowd. Johnny Mahoney was introduced on stage by Skinner as “that little gentleman, that emblem of will and pluck,” for which he received a thorough round of applause.<sup>47</sup>

1902 and the decade after saw the Lyceum as the main stage of upscale taste in music and drama in Memphis. Performers of the highest quality from New York and all over the world appeared there. Manager Frank Gray boasted about the success of the theater at this time:

From the beginning of the season to the end, the boards of the Lyceum have been filled by the best talent in every line that it was possible for me to effect a contract with, and the local public have shown a very kind and flattering appreciation of the efforts made on their behalf.”<sup>48</sup>

At a time when other, smaller theaters were putting on vaudeville and burlesque shows, Gray proudly announced that his breed of “Memphis theater-goers, as a class, do not care in the slightest for the plays of a coarse or suggestive type” and that, “at no time has anything been on [the Lyceum’s] boards which could fairly bring forth the animadversions of the pulpit.”<sup>49</sup>

The quality of acts brought to the Lyceum Theater from its opening night to around 1910 was very high. A large portion of the performers who graced the Memphis

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<sup>45</sup> “The Stage and Stage Folks,” *Morning News* (Memphis, TN) May 4, 1902.

<sup>46</sup> Sterling Tracy. *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> “The Stage and Stage Folks” *Morning News* (Memphis, TN), May 4, 1902.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Lyceum's stage came from New York or abroad and performed many famous plays and operas. The most frequently offered shows were plays by Shakespeare. Julia Marlowe performed there, an American actress most famous for her renditions of Shakespeare's roles. Lillian Russell, another American actress and singer known as a period symbol of feminine grace and beauty, performed at the Lyceum. Actors Otis Skinner and Frederick Warde appeared there to critical acclaim. Memphis theater-goers were quite lucky that their city provided them with such an extensive selection of quality shows. In fact, a ticket in Memphis at the Lyceum cost between fifty cents and one dollar less than it would have for the same seat in a theater in New York at the same performance.<sup>50</sup>

The Lyceum Theater was a top theater in Memphis from its reconstruction to about 1920, when it became solely a motion picture theater.<sup>51</sup> For many years it competed closely with the Grand Opera House, but then rose to the top again when the Orpheum Circuit took over its rival in 1907, featuring mostly vaudeville acts. The Lyceum ended its life in 1936 when it was torn down to make room for a parking lot. It had served the city well for so long, but had become outdated and fell out of favor with the public as newer theaters were built in Memphis.

### Social Interest in Memphis Theater

Styles and tastes have varied among Memphis theater-going audiences over time, but their interest in quality entertainment has remained. After the Civil War, the majority of shows that performed in Memphis were smaller companies who traveled down the

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<sup>50</sup> Carolyn Powell. "The Lyceum Theater of Memphis: 1890-1900," Master's Thesis. University of Mississippi, 1951. 212

<sup>51</sup> Eileen Sheahan. "Theater in Memphis: Its History," *Memphis: The Mississippi Valley and the Mid South*. (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1978).

Mississippi River performing various forms of entertainment from comedy shows to minstrel acts, to opera and burlesque companies. There were not very many opera houses in Memphis at the time, and Leubrie's Theater experienced success as a result. The economy of Memphis during these decades was uncertain. The Civil War took its toll on the city's economy in the late 1860's and the yellow fever epidemics raged through the 1870's. During the 1880's, Memphis's economy recovered from these hard times, business was good, and there were people with disposable wealth willing to fund the arts and patronize the shows. Therefore, the years between 1890 and 1910 could be considered the best years of theater and music for Memphis's cultural life. These decades saw the end of the Memphis Theater, but the construction of two new opera houses that theater-goers and actors alike highly praised. The *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* declared in 1893 that, "Memphis, among the cities of the South, is leading off in the grand march of improvement and development."<sup>52</sup> During these years, Memphis was able to host a great number of large companies with famous stars of New York's theater and opera stages. Famous performers from abroad stopped in Memphis on their tours of the United States. It was a time of prosperity for the Grand Opera House and the Lyceum Theater.

Funding for these theaters at the end of the nineteenth century largely came from the wealthiest and most socially-connected members of Memphis society. At that time, the responsibility for funding the performing arts rested strictly on those who cared enough about the project and had the funds at their ready disposal to invest in such endeavors; the upper-class aristocracy. There was no public funding, despite the fact that

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<sup>52</sup> "Good Times in Memphis." *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* (Memphis, TN), Mar. 19, 1893.

all classes were able to enjoy the benefits of the arts.<sup>53</sup> Hence, without the support of several very prominent businessmen in Memphis, the opera houses would not have been able to exist.

Other groups in Memphis also supported bringing quality acts to the city. The Beethoven Club of Memphis operated prominently at the turn of the century, its goals being to bring upstanding, talented musical acts (most often opera) to the local theaters for the pleasure of the aristocratic classes. At the time it was described as “the guiding spirit of local musical activities.”<sup>54</sup> A program from one such performance states that operatic star Mme. Johanna Gadski of Carnegie Hall performed at the Lyceum Theater in 1906. At this time, the president of the club was Mrs. Napoleon Hill, presumably an aristocratic woman of the arts herself. Her husband, Napoleon Hill, was a prominent businessman in Memphis society with interests in many different areas, as well as one of the original investors in the Grand Opera House. The majority of the advertisements in the event program make known that several of the individual members of the club also gave music lessons in various areas, frequently voice and piano. In multiple ways, the Beethoven Club encouraged music in Memphis at the turn of the century and is still in existence today.

### Conclusion:

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<sup>53</sup> David Bowman. “Orpheum is last Vestige of Grand Period in Memphis’...” Folders of The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Library (Memphis, TN) 1981.

<sup>54</sup> Robert L. Buckner. “Artist-Visitors Lend Radiance to Memphis’ Season,” October 15, 1923.

Memphis' height of theatrical success of this era began in the 1890's and continued profitably for the first decade of the twentieth century. There were a large variety of theaters showing all sorts of performances at this time in the city, as well as the general financial means to host and view them. During this time, going to the theater was essentially the only significant form of entertainment for the public in Memphis, and they were willing patrons.<sup>55</sup> Later into the twentieth century (approaching 1920) motion pictures became a wildly popular entertainment business not only in Memphis, but all over the country, causing the conversion of many existing theaters to solely motion picture houses, and the opening of new theaters strictly for this purpose. Naturally, the live theater business suffered losses with the changing times, but some venues continued to offer regular performances.

### The Memphis Auditorium

In 1912, the city of Memphis decided that it needed a large public auditorium for conventions, performances, and other large events. A committee was created with the task of working out financing such a project, and it was decided that this would come from a combination of public funds, private donors, and publicly-issued county and city bonds. In 1916, the old courthouse in downtown Memphis had burned down and it was decided that the new auditorium would be built on the plot where it had once stood, the property costing \$115,000. It would "cover the entire block bounded by Main, Poplar,

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<sup>55</sup> Eileen Sheahan. "Theater in Memphis: Its History," *Memphis: The Mississippi Valley and the Mid South*. (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1978), 21

Front and Exchange Streets.”<sup>56</sup> The work of planning and fundraising was delayed by U.S. involvement in World War I, but recommenced in 1921.<sup>57</sup>

The Memphis Auditorium opened with a grand dedication on October 17, 1924 cost \$1,494,000 to build. John Phillip Sousa, known as “The March King,” gave the first performance in the new opera house, which featured two separate performance halls. The first, “for use of operas and other large attractions” featured a seating capacity of 5,811 and the second concert hall, “for concerts and smaller attractions” seated 2,463 persons.<sup>58</sup> This building would be renamed Ellis Auditorium, and served Memphis for the duration of the twentieth century. Ellis Auditorium was very recently torn down in 1994, and replaced by the Cannon Center for the Performing Arts in 2003, an extension of the Cook Convention Center that cost \$92 million to construct.

Music and drama continue to carry a significant presence in Memphis today. The Memphis Theater, The Grand Opera House, and the Lyceum Theater have been replaced today by the Orpheum (which has reinvented itself from its days as a vaudeville theater) and the Cannon Center. Both of these venues present high-quality dramatic and musical performances to the city’s audiences, including traveling shows from New York stages, just like at the turn of the century. Memphis has maintained its taste for quality performances established more than one hundred years ago and its future in the arts also looks bright.

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<sup>56</sup> Rowlett Paine. “History of the Auditorium,” *Dedication: Memphis Auditorium*, October 20-22, 1924. Folders of The Memphis and Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Library (Memphis, TN).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Rowlett Paine. Ibid.



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