WITH THE
SHOW!

THE FIRST CENTURY
OF SHOW BUSINESS
IN AMERICA

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Beaver Dam, Wisconsin's Concert Hall, was typical of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of similar theaters that dignified small towns across the nation in the late nineteenth century. Even for strangers, the Concert Hall was easy to find. Like so many others of its type, it proudly stood as part of the only three story building in town. When you entered the building, you walked past the two stores on the first floor, climbed a flight of stairs, walked past Tommy Hughes' Beaver Dam Citizen office, past the Reversa Club tavern, past the lawyer's office, to the ticket window/cloakroom. Then, up a long flight of stairs, and there it was. Empty, it did not look like too much more than a ninety-foot-long, flat-floored room with a raised stage at one end, the only glamour being the grand proscenium arch that towered twelve feet over the stage. Empty, that was all the room was. After all, it also served as the town's lecture hall, athletic arena, ballroom, city council chamber, political headquarters, skating rink, and National Guard drill room. But when the folding chairs were lined up in neat rows and filled with people, when the curtain with its beautiful painting of the Bay of Naples dropped, when the kerosene footlights cast their warm glow, when the anticipation of the crowd electrified the room, it became a real theater, as good—well, almost as good—as any other.
Admittedly, the Concert Hall did not have a lot of scenery—two curtains with matching side flats, one with a simple wooden kitchen on one side and a forest on the other, the second with an elaborate parlor on the front and a dingy prison on the back. But these were usually enough to suit all needs. The hero of a typical play began in his own plain kitchen, was unjustly cast into prison, escaped into the woods, and finally burst into the heroine’s fancy parlor, exposing the villain’s dastardly plan, righting all wrongs, and winning the heroine’s heart and hand. What else could anybody want? Besides, a good performance could make the sets seem to be whatever the play called for—the Capulet’s ballroom, the Count of Monte Cristo’s dungeon, or Uncle Tom’s cabin. For drama, the most important developments in the late nineteenth century took place, not in New York
City but in the Beaver Dams of America, not in grand, well-equipped theaters but in the small-town Concert Halls.

In Beaver Dam it was called the Concert Hall; in other similar towns, it might have been the Town Hall or the Opera House. Few were called theaters. In the late nineteenth century, the word “theater” with its traditional taint of immorality still disturbed many people, especially in rural areas. But if it was not quite proper to go to a theater, it was perfectly respectable to go to a concert hall, a town hall, or an opera house. And in small towns all around the nation people gathered to have traveling performers make them laugh, cry, shriek with fear, gasp with incredulity, and sigh with longing. They went to have fun, and they had it. As popular theaters had done for decades, the Concert Hall asked its patrons to refrain at least during the performance from stamping their feet, eating peanuts, whistling, shouting, standing on chairs, and spitting on

An audience in Cheyenne, Wyoming. HTC.
Drama reached virtually every part of the nation in the late nineteenth century, including this Portland, Oregon, theater. HTC.
the floor. But the injunctions succeeded no more often in the Beaver Dams than they did in the big cities. Nineteenth-century audiences left no doubt about how they felt about performers and performances. They were also determined to enjoy themselves even if they had to entertain each other. But despite all the audiences’ socializing and rowdyism, the play was the thing, the play and all the other attractions: P. T. Barnum lecturing on temper-
ance and exhibiting General and Mrs. Tom Thumb, Mark Twain drawing out his sarcastic barbs, the blackface minstrels frolicking, dancing, and wise-cracking, the Wild West shows, the singers, dancers, musicians, freaks, magicians, variety artists, and actors.

Before railroads made traveling companies financially feasible, stage entertainment did not reach much beyond the large towns and cities that could support resident com-

THE BILL-POSTERS DREAM

Bill posters regularly “pasted over” other playbills. This is also a parody if read down each column. NYLC.
panies. True, the great stars—the Edwin Forrests, Charlotte Cushmans, and Edwin Booths—traveled to play with some local companies, and some dramatic troupes did tour. But it was only after the Civil War that performers honeycombed the nation, bringing virtually every type of popular entertainment to virtually every settlement in the country. Long before the movies began to reach out into the American backlands, long before radio and then television brought a dazzling array of entertainment into people’s homes, live stage performances provided Americans with virtually all their entertainment—their adventure and escapism, their romance and “soap operas.” Many of the best performers and productions did not reach Beaver Dam. Traveling Broadway shows came only as close as Milwaukee, a distant sixty miles away. But some versions of all the most popular plays, the standard late-nineteenth-century repertoire, reached all the Beaver Dams. In fact, small town audiences saw many of the same popular plays year after year, sometimes several times in the same season.

The period roughly between 1850 and 1920 was the heyday of popular theater in America. Before 1850, drama had a principally urban, heavily elitist audience; after 1920, movies and radio supplied the popular drama, and theater returned to its elitist base. But for the seventy years in between, live drama was everywhere in the nation. This period is usually ignored or at best skimmed over in theater histories because it produced few plays that critics judge to be important. But in that period more than any other, drama belonged to the people, the common people. It reflected their desires, needs, and tastes. While trying to plot successful careers for themselves, actors and promoters playing to the average American unconsciously discovered basic formulas that virtually guaranteed success, formulas that continually re-emerged in American popular culture.

To people living at the time, the period’s popular plays would have seemed a patternless hodge-podge. But underlying the dazzling variety of productions there was a common thread, more a mood than a theme. In the late nineteenth century, common people all over the nation were jolted by the “culture shock” that before the Civil War was largely confined to city dwellers. The same railroads that brought the popular entertainers to the Beaver Dams also brought the forces of modernization. All over the heartland of America, average citizens felt the bewilderment, the loss of control, the anxiety, and the frustration that accompanied the basic changes in the nature and quality of their lives. Their most cherished traditions, their values, and their morality all seemed to be threatened by the new industrial order. In response, small-town Americans found a political voice in the Populist party, later transferred to William Jennings Bryan’s crusading campaigns as a Democratic party presidential candidate. In their concert halls, they found emotional outlets if not practical programs, solace if not solutions.

The popular stage reaffirmed traditional values in its innumerable melodramas centered on the conflict between virtuous plain people and immoral, conniving businessmen. It provided vicarious escape into the sometimes carefree, sometimes tragic emotional world of stage Negroes in its widely diverse versions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. It offered sentimental nostalgia for a romanticized rural and frontier past in plays like Rip Van Winkle and Davy Crockett, preached the unity of Northerners and Southerners in its Civil War love stories, and staged exciting, reassuring
PLAYS FOR THE PEOPLE

myths of pre-industrial national greatness and strength in its Wild West shows. In these and the other perennial favorites that touring actors brought to the Beaver Dams of the nation lies at least part of the story of how average Americans reacted to and coped with the unsettling shocks of modernization.

Melodrama has proved perhaps the most enduring formula in American popular culture, one that has survived for centuries, from eighteenth-century gothic novels to modern sex sagas, from the relatively primitive pre-Civil War stage to the highly complex television soap operas. In various forms, melodrama dominated the popular stage during its heyday. Since its principal appeals and distinguishing traits were its formulas and its central values, melodrama could accommodate any setting, time, or character; it could end either happily or tragically. But whatever its particulars, at its heart stood Virtue, epitomized by the heroine, the miracle of love and delicacy, the paragon of excellence, the earthly angel. Her vulnerability, especially to the scheming blackguard of a villain, which placed her virtue under siege, supplied the dramatic tension. While minor characters provided some comic relief, the major characters suffered through an incredible series of predicaments. Being tied to railroad tracks in front of an oncoming locomotive, trapped in a burning building, fed to a buzzsaw, or threatened with the loss of the heroine’s “honor” were all in a night’s work for the hero and heroine. After as many setbacks and near disasters as time would allow (there seemed to be no limit to the audiences’ appetite for them), the action came to a morally edifying conclusion in which Right, Justice, and Goodness triumphed. Even when major characters had to accept earthly death rather than tarnish their virtue, they were assured of the higher rewards and glories of the Almighty. To make its moralisms clear and simple, melodrama employed only simplistic characters who were entirely good, entirely bad, or entirely silly. It also blamed the existence of evil on the villain’s personal character defects, not on more complex, more uncontrollable social or environmental problems. The answer to the villain’s evil schemes was also personal, a matter of faith and strength not a matter of social change or group organization. Plain, pure, old-fashioned American righteousness, personified by simple farmers or urban working-class people, was the universal and certain cure-all for any problem.

Melodrama conveyed a fantasy or fairytale-like mood, its unrealistic characters and its consistent use of archaic language—its “thous,” “whithers,” and “yons”—being signals of make-believe as clearly as was “once upon a time.” Yet because melodrama exalted the traditional values to which people desperately clung in the face of fundamental change, audiences credited melodrama with being more real than reality, a higher truth that transcended everyday experience. An ideal statement of the way life ought to be, melodrama made evil and corruption easy to identify and solutions easy to find; it made heroes of common, simple people; and it made virtue and the virtuous triumph; it testified that, no matter how unfair life seemed, justice was not dead. Besides the welcome simplicity, reassurance, and hope that it offered in a complex, uncertain, and disillusioning world, it offered vicarious thrills in the titillation provided by the villain’s immoral intentions toward the heroine. At the same time, the hero’s and heroine’s faith and composure also served as models for and challenges to viewers undergoing perplexing trials and tribulations of their own. Melodrama served perhaps an even more important, certainly more concrete and immedi-
ate function for audience members by providing an outlet for their feelings and emotions—a chance to scream, to laugh, to gasp, and to cry. It was at once a celebration of the traditional American way of life and an elegy for it.

Although melodrama took a wide range of forms, one of its classic patterns forced the heroine to choose between her feelings and her sense of duty, often between her love for a poor but worthy farmboy and her responsibility to redeem the family mortgage by marrying the corrupt villain. Worked and reworked with innumerable variations and complications, this basic dilemma provided sentimental and emotional quandries for thousands upon thousands of theater-goers, especially women, to worry about, fret over, and sob through. In Hazel Kirke, “always a favorite with the ladies who sympathize with Hazel’s troubles,” as a San Francisco critic observed in 1888, Hazel refuses to clear her father’s debts by marrying the mortgage-holder, instead wedding the man she truly loves, even though this means that her father disowns her. Her husband, too, marries for love, not family obligation. Having cut themselves off from their parents, a serious social sin, the couple inevitably suffers. Among other calamities, Hazel’s father goes blind, his mill is repossessed, and Hazel attempts suicide. But ultimately, after all the potential tears have been wrung out of the audience, all the characters are reunited and live happily ever after.

Since melodrama like other show business forms evolved to suit its audiences, it, too, reflected changes in its public’s concerns and anxieties, especially those that involved

*Hazel Kirke* was one of the most popular melodramas. NYLC.
the family, the core of the melodrama. In particular, the emergence of the "liberated" woman seemed to many people to challenge the very bases of society—marriage, home, and family. Thus, it is no surprise that a melodrama that addressed this issue, *East Lynne*, a dramatization of an English novel published and adapted for the stage in 1861, proved to be one of America’s most popular plays for at least half a century. In it, Lady Isabel’s philandering husband unjustly accuses her of infidelity. Uncertain of his fidelity and unable to accept his jealous restrictions, she falls in love with another man. After much fretting and soul-searching, she finally runs away with her lover, abandoning her marriage, her husband, and, sin of all female sins, her infant son, Willie. When she should be totally willing to sacrifice personal happiness for her family, she turns her back on her domestic "duty," woman’s highest calling. So she pays. Her lover predictably turns out to be a ne’er-do-well who deserts her. Alone and pulled by the maternal ties that even a liberated woman in a melodrama cannot cut, she returns home in disguise to visit baby Willie, just in time to find him on his death bed, to reveal her true identity and deep love for him, and to hear him use his last breath to gasp out, "Mama, Mama." A broken woman, Isabel falls ill, a victim of the sentimental swoon that plagued so many nineteenth-century heroines. On her death bed, her husband, never even thinking to apologize for his past behavior, magnanimously forgives her, to the delight and sobs of all. Although audiences apparently felt Isabel had to suffer, they also wanted to see her forgiven after she had paid for her sins. When Edwin Forrest changed the ending, having her husband castigate the dying Isabel for her transgressions, audiences booed and hissed so vehemently that Forrest quickly returned to the traditional ending. Although they did not realize it, common Americans, at least the women that dominated audiences for these plays, were becoming more tolerant of some of the ideas voiced by "new women" like Isabel, even as they outwardly clung to their old values.

Although melodramatic villains most often were urban businessmen, melodrama did not portray city life or commercialism as the cause of problems. Instead, melodrama personified evil in the warped psyches of its villains. Consequently, it dealt directly with few broad social issues or problems. But there were two glaring exceptions, two of the most performed plays in American history: *Ten Nights in a Barroom* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Making the cases for temperance and against slavery, two major moral crusades, these plays got support and patronage from people who otherwise considered drama to be immoral. But the plays became perennials not because they pleased a few people who otherwise disliked the theater but because they pleased so many people who loved it. The plays’ emotionally moving, melodramatic scenes, not their moral messages, made them two of American drama’s greatest hits.

*Ten Nights in a Barroom*, first adapted for the stage from T. S. Arthur’s temperance novel in the 1850s, detailed the destruction of Joe Morgan and his family by demon rum. Beginning with “harmless” drinks at the local tavern, Joe becomes a helplessly addicted drunkard, throwing away his every cent trying to quench his insatiable thirst. When he has money to buy booze, everyone in the tavern loves him, but when he is broke, his "friends" want nothing to do with him. Yet he cannot stay away from them or from the tavern, which becomes virtually his only home. One of the high points, or perhaps it should be
"Look at me, I am your mother!"
low points, of the play comes when Joe’s lovely, little daughter, Mary, pursues him into the saloon—a young innocent girl in a saloon!—urging him in song:

Father, dear father, come home with me now!
The clock in the steeple strikes one.
You said you were coming right home from the shop,
As soon as your day’s work was done.
Our fire has gone out, our house’s all dark,
And mother’s been watching since tea
With poor brother Benny so sick in her arms,
And none to help her but me.
Come home, come home, come home!
Please, father, dear father, come home!

Joe chooses to stay in the bar and try to mooch one for the road. Instead, he gets a whisky glass thrown at him. It sails over Joe’s head and smashes into Mary’s forehead, mortally wounding her as she pathetically pleads with her father to go home to his family. After a properly long and tearful death scene in which Mary extracts a vow from her father never again to enter a tavern, she expires. Seeking solace and strength from the only source he knows, Joe takes refuge in drink, not in the tavern but in a bottle of whisky he has stashed at home in case of just such a medicinal emergency. This backsliding leads to the biggest scene of the play, a writhing, screaming, fear-crazed onslaught of delirium tremens, that would either scare the hell out of drinkers or drive men to drink. After the red-eyed, hissing serpents stop crawling all over him and disappear back into the wallpaper where they have come from, Joe, remembering his pledge to his martyred Mary, dries himself out and is “restored once more to happiness.” Combining temperance, emotionally charged family images, the tragic death of the morally precocious child, the delirium scene, which made it impossible even for nineteenth-century actors to overact, and the happy ending, the play ran well into the twentieth century.

The other perennial favorite that dealt directly with a controversial social issue, slavery, was also based on a sensational novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a landmark bestseller in American popular literature. In it, Harriet Beecher Stowe uses every sentimental and romantic device of the period to portray slaves as human beings who feel the same pain and anguish as whites when they suffer indignities and oppression. The novel opens on the Shelby’s idyllic Kentucky plantation, a model of a happy inter-racial family, with the slaves, regardless of age, as the children. But then a crass slave-trader forces Shelby to sell some slaves to pay his debts. When Eliza Harris learns that her young son is to be sold, she takes him and runs away to the North. Ultimately, after outracing her pursuers over the frozen Ohio River to freedom, she rejoins her husband George, who fights off slave-catchers and takes his family to sanctuary in Canada. Loyal, devoutly Christian Uncle Tom learns that he, too, is to be sold but refuses to flee with Eliza because he feels it is his Christian duty to submit to his superiors. On the way to be sold in the deep South, Tom meets Evangeline St. Clair, Little Eva, a saintly young white girl who, like Mary in Ten Nights, possesses the innate purity and wisdom that nineteenth-century romantics attributed to children. Eva persuades her father to buy Tom and to take

Repentant Lady Isabel is reunited with her dying son in this East Lynne poster. HTC.
Little Mary is struck down by demon rum in Ten Nights in a Bar-room. HTC.

him home to the benevolent St. Clair plantation, where Eva radiates her Christian love for all God’s children, black and white. But slavery weighs heavily on Eva’s pure heart, and she dies a slow, sentimental death, the angel of goodness destroyed by the sins of slavery.

At a vile slave auction, Tom is sold to Simon Legree, a brutal, immoral slave-driver who has turned his plantation into an inhuman agrarian factory. After refusing to whip other slaves, Tom dies a Christ-like martyr’s death at Legree’s hands.

The novel’s emotionally moving, melodramatic scenes were a natural for adaptation to the mid-nineteenth-century stage. Almost immediately, many competing dramatizations emerged, differing in tone, emphasis, characters, and even message. Over its roughly eighty-year life as a major show business fixture, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” became more a catch phrase for a wide range of shows than the name of a specific play with a specific script, more an institution that evolved to suit its audiences than even a relatively fixed production. The variations in the stage versions of the novel provide a fascinating example of how changes in audiences’ interests and tastes shaped popular drama.

The first successful dramatic production of Uncle Tom’s Cabin enjoyed an unprece-
PLAYS FOR THE PEOPLE

dented run of 325 consecutive performances in New York City during 1853-54. Written by George L. Aiken for George C. Howard’s family-based repertory company, the play featured four-year-old Cordelia Howard as Little Eva. The production climaxed, not with Tom’s death, but with Little Eva soaring up to heaven on the back of a white dove, her arms extended in a benediction as the orchestra played “Nearer My God To Thee.” Using a pattern for popular drama that dated back at least to Shakespeare, Aiken ensured the entertainment value of his sentimental melodrama by adding heavy doses of music and comedy. But he also retained many of the novel’s emotionally moving antislavery scenes, scenes that provoked increasing controversy and divisiveness in the 1850s as the sectional conflict over slavery intensified.

Ever the barometer of public opinion, P. T. Barnum in 1853 offered in the American Museum’s lecture room a “just and sensible dramatic version of Mrs. Stowe’s book” that toned down the anti-slavery, pro-Negro sentiments of the original. Barnum boasted that his play, while presenting a “true picture of negro life in the South,” did not “foolishly and unjustly elevate the negro above the white man in intellect or morals . . . and instead of turning away the audience in tears the author has wisely consulted dramatic taste by having Virtue triumphant at last.” As always, Barnum geared his production to offend none and dazzle all. He featured a beautiful panoramic view of a Mississippi River sunrise and a riverboat that smoked grandly as it moved across the stage. He also had brutal scenes like the slave auction deleted or played lightly and ended the production happily—George Shelby racing just in the nick of time to rescue Uncle Tom from maniacal Simon Legree. Productions like Barnum’s and the minstrel parodies of Uncle Tom’s Cabin that transformed it into Happy Uncle Tom and portrayed none of the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery proved far more popular in the strife-torn late-1850s than did serious stage versions of the novel.

After the Civil War, productions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin proliferated, making it probably America’s most performed play. It proved so popular that many actors and companies, called “Tommers” and “Tom Shows,” toured the nation presenting nothing but Uncle Tom’s Cabin and an occasional Ten Nights in a Barroom. The Tommers, who knew all the lines and all the scenes in all the versions, varied

Romanticized 1852 sheetmusic cover of “The Death of Little Eva.” HTC.
A realistic portrayal of Eliza fleeing from slave-chasers with dogs in a serious 1901 production. HTC.

the blend to suit their personnel and their audiences. Once slavery was abolished, many Tom troupes restored previously censored anti-slavery speeches and scenes because they provided such powerful melodrama. Tommers also drew material from other show business forms, especially minstrel shows. The result was a dazzling variety of productions with the same name. One Uncle Tom’s Cabin fan who had seen the show at least twenty-five times claimed that he had never seen the same version twice.

Beginning with the play’s comic and melodramatic basics, Tommers added their own special features and novelties, which often proved greater attractions than the classic scenes. In the 1870s, a promoter realized that Eliza’s flight to freedom would be much more exciting if she were hounded by live, snarling dogs. The “bloodhounds”—actually mastiffs or Great Danes—were such great hits that they became necessities for Tom Shows, just as good endmen were for minstrel troupes. From minstrels, Tommers drew other novelty features: plantation material, heavy dialects, ludicrous caricatures of Negroes, and the practice of making up forty-year-old Uncle Tom to look like an old uncle. Tom Shows also reflected the great impact black entertainers made on show business. In the 1870s, the Northern public “discovered” and became fascinated with slaves’ religious music, the spirituals. It was not long until traveling Tom Shows added jubilee songs and singers to their companies. In 1877, for example, the Howards, still at it after twenty-five years, played Uncle Tom’s Cabin with one hundred Negroes from Slavin’s Original Georgia Jubilee Singers. By