

# The Organization of Professional Theatre in Vancouver, 1886-1914

ROBERT B. TODD

In the first decade and a half after its incorporation in 1886 Vancouver was a small town with only a modest theatrical life, somewhat inferior to Victoria's. But after 1900, as the city recovered from the economic depression of the 1890s, it began to enjoy a rich and varied professional theatre, and was able to share in the great age of theatrical touring in North America that ended with the onset of the First World War. The following account of these three decades of the Vancouver theatre will be just an outline, for little has been written on this subject and a wealth of detail remains to be explored.<sup>1</sup> My main objects are to identify the principal theatres of Vancouver before 1914, to survey the types of entertainment that they provided, and to show how the quality of the city's theatrical life was affected by both local and regional factors. The last of these goals points to my main thesis in what will otherwise be a largely descriptive paper, for I would claim that Vancouver's professional theatrical life in its early decades must be consistently viewed in the context of the organization of the theatre in the Pacific Northwest. The theatrical mosaic typical of the smaller cities of North America in those years — touring performers, resident stock companies,<sup>2</sup> and various forms of variety and vaudeville — was reproduced in Vancouver not only because of the city's

<sup>1</sup> The most substantial publication on the early Vancouver theatre is S. Roberts, *Shakespeare in Vancouver, 1889-1918* (Vancouver Historical Society, Occasional Paper No. 3, Vancouver, 1971); it has a brief survey of the development of theatre before 1914 at pp. 5-11. At the present time there are no published annals of the Vancouver theatre. I am grateful to Professor Malcolm Page (Simon Fraser University) and Ms. Anne Kloppenburg (Vancouver City Social Planning Department) for allowing me to consult annals for the years 1886-1907 being prepared under their supervision.

<sup>2</sup> A theatrical stock company was technically, and originally, one in which all members shared the profits, as in "joint stock company." In this paper, I use the term to refer to those touring companies that performed a large repertoire of plays, were usually based in one region, and often became resident by appearing for long seasons in a modest theatre in a community. They are to be contrasted with companies, often headed by major performers, who toured with just one or two plays, and made brief appearances at a town's major theatre at prices well above those charged by stock companies.

economic growth but also because of its regional links. By the time of Vancouver's incorporation the major centres of the northwest (Seattle, Portland and Victoria) had already experienced professional theatre for just over a quarter of a century. During the next twenty-five years, as Vancouver grew from a small community around the Granville town-site to a city with a population of over 120,000 on the eve of the First World War, its professional theatre<sup>3</sup> developed in close association with the prevailing theatrical life of the Pacific Northwest. Vancouver may have been a Canadian city, but before 1914 its theatre differed little from that of cities of comparable size in the United States. It was always one of the satellites of the major theatrical centre of San Francisco, and later became a part of the vaudeville circuits controlled from Seattle. These regional links made the Vancouver theatre in our period easily the richest of any western Canadian community.<sup>4</sup>

### *Early Days*

The closest neighbours of the young Vancouver, Seattle and Victoria were by the late 1880s familiar with a theatrical scene in which lengthy visits by stock companies were occasionally varied by the brief appearance of a leading actor or actress, or by the visit of a touring group exhibiting variety, vaudeville or minstrelsy.<sup>5</sup> Tours by stock companies may have

<sup>3</sup> The *amateur* theatrical life of the early city would, of course, also repay study. It often reflected ethnic and religious groupings, but also involved several independent efforts to establish an indigenous cultural life. Later in the period under study here there was, for example, a lively theatrical life among the Chinese residents: see *Province* (Vancouver), 25 January 1909, p. 1, and 27 January 1909, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> On the theatre in Regina in this period see P. B. O'Neill, "Regina's Golden Age of Theatre: Her Playhouses and Players," *Saskatchewan History* (Winter 1975), 29-37; and on Edmonton, J. D. Sheremata, *Entertainment in Edmonton before 1914*, M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1970. One measure of the situation in western Canada at the turn of the century is that *Cahn's Official Theatre Guide* for 1900 listed six theatres for British Columbia and three for Manitoba, but for the intervening territory only the Reading Room in Medicine Hat; see *Julius Cahn's Official Theatre Guide*, vol. 5 (New York, 1900), pp. 702-05. This book, produced by Charles Frohman's organization, was the *vade mecum* of booking agents.

<sup>5</sup> The history of the theatre in Seattle before 1914 is particularly well covered, largely due to a U.S. Federal Theatre annals project undertaken in 1936 (on this see R. Berelson and H. Grant, "The Pioneer Theatre in Washington," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 28, (1937), pp. 115-36). The major publications are: H. F. Grant, *The Story of Seattle's Early Theatres* (Seattle, 1934); E. C. Elliott, *A History of Variety-Vaudeville in Seattle from the Beginning to 1914* (Seattle, 1945); and M. K. Rohrer, *The History of Seattle Stock Companies* (Seattle, 1945). On the early Victoria theatre see C. C. Elliott, *Annals of the Legitimate Theatre in Victoria, Canada, from the Beginning to 1900*, University of Washington, Ph.D. dissertation, 1969. There is also information on the theatre in Victoria and other centres in British Columbia in the following articles by Michael Booth: "Pioneer

been haphazardly organized, but other performers appeared only because of a fairly well-managed booking system. Notable figures involved in booking in these early years were Michael B. Leavitt, the so-called father of burlesque, who pioneered touring in the northwest; his protege Al Hayman, who was based in San Francisco until the mid-nineties; John Hanna and J. P. Howe of Seattle; and after 1895 Calvin Heilig of Portland.<sup>6</sup>

It was this regional theatrical world that Vancouver joined shortly after its incorporation. The city's two earliest theatres were both modest wooden structures on the fringe of the old townsite, in the area of the present-day Chinatown.<sup>7</sup> Hart's Opera House, which operated between 1887 and 1889, had previously served as a roller rink in Port Moody.<sup>8</sup> The Imperial Opera House, which flourished from 1889 to the early part of 1894, was at least constructed as a theatre, but was essentially an assembly hall.<sup>9</sup> In these theatres stock companies performed during brief visits in conjunction with much longer stops at the better established community of Victoria. Occasionally offerings rose above the regular fare of the melodramas, minstrel shows and variety companies to the level of the Boston Mendelssohn Quintette, or such renowned performers

---

Entertainment: Theatrical Taste in the Early Canadian West," *Canadian Literature*, 4, (1960), pp. 52-58, and "The Beginnings of Theatre in British Columbia," *Queen's Quarterly*, 68, (1961), pp. 159-68.

<sup>6</sup> On the organization of touring in the region in this period see in addition to the works cited in the preceding note: M. B. Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management 1859-1909* (New York, 1912), esp. pp. 242 ff.; I. F. Marcossan and D. Frohman, *Charles Frohman: Manager and Man* (New York, 1916), pp. 102-03; E. M. Gagey, *The San Francisco Stage: A History* (Westport, Conn., 1950), pp. 167-69; and A. H. Ernst, *Trouping in the Oregon Country: A History of Frontier Theatre* (Oregon Historical Society, Portland, 1961), pp. 130-45. There is also a wealth of information on these figures in a file, "Theatrical Syndicate and Associations," gathered by the Federal Theatres Project on the theatre in Washington state (see preceding note); this data is in the Northwest Room, University of Washington Library, Seattle.

<sup>7</sup> For the location of these and other theatres see the map.

<sup>8</sup> It was operated by Frank William Hart, an American of Swedish descent; see I. Howard, *Vancouver's Svenskar: A History of the Swedish Community in Vancouver* (Vancouver Historical Society, Occasional Papers No. 1, Vancouver, 1970), pp. 33-34. In his reminiscences (B.C. Provincial Archives, "Frank William Hart, Prince Rupert, September 18, 1929") Hart (at p. 14) refers in entirely impersonal terms to his brief theatrical venture.

<sup>9</sup> It was built and operated by William Crickmay, a local architect. In 1894 it became the drill hall of the Pioneer Corps of Volunteer Soldiers of Vancouver, and by 1903 had been converted into a livery stable; see *Province* (Vancouver), 5 June 1903, p. 10.

of the day as Joseph Grismer and Phoebe Davis, or the tragedian Thomas Keene.<sup>10</sup>

Both these early theatres had been financed by local capital, but for Vancouver to acquire a major theatre to rival the Victoria Theatre (built in 1885) called for either an exceptional investment by the businessmen of the nascent city or some outside infusion of capital. In the event there was a combination of the two. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company, which had been given a major land grant in the west end of Vancouver for extending the railway to the city in 1887, reaped huge profits from land sales. The company reinvested some of these earnings in a hotel at the corner of Georgia and Granville Streets, and almost certainly relied on the same source to finance the construction of a theatre on a lot on Granville Street next to the hotel.<sup>11</sup> The result was the Vancouver Opera House, a theatre with a seating capacity of just over 1,200, built at a reported cost of \$100,000.<sup>12</sup> It was opened in February 1891,<sup>13</sup> and until it was converted into a vaudeville house in 1912 served as the city's principal home for touring theatrical companies. It was leased by the CPR to managers who would have conducted (mainly, one assumes, through Seattle<sup>14</sup>) the business of booking in touring performers. In 1896

<sup>10</sup> The following were some of the performances given during 1891. March saw the C. D. Hess Grand Opera Co. in *La Traviata*, *Lucia di Lammermor*, *Faust* and *Rigoletto*; April the Vancouver Cricket Club in *Prizes and Blades*, a comic operetta; August the Zig-Zag Musical Co. in *Running Wild*; September the Imperial Stock Co. (a visitor, not a resident) in *East Lynne* and *The Ticket of Leave Man*; October Goodyear's Minstrels; and November the New Orleans Co. in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

<sup>11</sup> See W. Kaye Lamb, *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (New York/London, 1977), p. 182. On the activity of the CPR in Vancouver in this period see N. MacDonald, "The Canadian Pacific Railway and Vancouver's Development," *BC Studies*, no. 35, (1977), pp. 3-35.

<sup>12</sup> For the technical details of the theatre see *Julius Cahn's Official Theatre Guide*, (*op. cit.* note 3), p. 703. I have not established the name of the architect. It may have been the C. O. Wickendon who designed several of Vancouver's early institutional buildings (the Lefevre Block, Christ Church Cathedral, the Federal Post Office). Certainly the same construction company, Thomas Tompkins of Brockville, Ontario, built the Post Office and the Opera House.

<sup>13</sup> The reception at the Lefevre Block for Miss Emma Juch, whose opera company opened the house, is a vignette of early Vancouver social history. It was held in the rooms of the Art Association; Mr. H. Abbot (the CPR's Superintendent) loaned palms and plants; present were members of the Abbot and Cambie families, and two future mayors, H. Cope and Dr. W. T. McGuigan (then city coroner). See *News-Advertiser* (Vancouver), 10 February 1891, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> There is little evidence of the exact form of the booking arrangements in this period. We know, for example, that Sarah Bernhardt's visit to the Opera House in September 1891 resulted from John Hanna's booking her for the whole Puget Sound region (see the file cited in note 8 at p. 9); and on another occasion the

the Opera House's lease was taken over by Robert Jamieson,<sup>15</sup> who managed it along with theatres in Victoria, Nanaimo and New Westminster, and could in this way guarantee visiting performers a short British Columbia tour.

In the middle years of the 1890s the Opera House was Vancouver's only genuine theatre. The Imperial had closed its doors in 1894, and not until 1898 was another theatrical building constructed. In the meantime the only alternatives to the Opera House were the Dunn Hall, and more often the Market Hall (later the City Hall),<sup>16</sup> both assembly halls converted for theatrical purposes. These were years of economic depression. In 1895 there were only some fifty-two nights of performances at the Opera House: six involved local amateur entertainment in which the house's manager, O. E. Evan-Thomas, played a prominent part; there were three performances by minstrel companies, one lecture (by Mark Twain), one diorama show, three visits by various companies, nine musicals and operas, and twenty-nine performances that can be loosely classified as legitimate drama. Among the noted actors who appeared were Thomas Keene, Denman Thompson (in *The Old Homestead*), and William Gillette. As a harbinger of the future we find a performance of *Charley's Aunt* by one of Charles Frohman's companies; soon the name of that producer and his fellow members in the Theatrical Syndicate would figure prominently in the roster of New York producers serving Vancouver and the northwest. Finally we may note that on September 28 there was a benefit performance to pay off the theatre's debts, a sure sign of the economic woes of the day.

The performers mentioned here would have reached Vancouver by steamer from Seattle,<sup>17</sup> though presumably many others did not ad-

---

newspaper refers to a booking made only two weeks before a visit (*News-Advertiser*, 15 January 1895, p. 5).

<sup>15</sup> On Jamieson, the son of a pioneer family who was active in theatrical management until the 1920s, see the informative obituary in the *Daily Colonist* (Victoria), 21 September 1945, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> When used as a theatre it was known by various names: the City Hall Theatre, the East End Theatre, the City Music Hall. It was not uncommon for city halls of this period to be used as theatres; there are parallels in Regina (see O'Neill, *art. cit.* n. 3, p. 29), and Winnipeg (see I. Craig, "Grease-paint on the prairies: an account of the theatres, the plays, and the players of Winnipeg from 1866-1921," *Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Papers*, 3rd series, no. 3, 1947, pp. 38-55 at pp. 45-46).

<sup>17</sup> In May 1891 the management of the Opera House tried unsuccessfully to hold up the departure of the *Premier* (the ferry to New Whatcomb) so that Roland Reed could appear in *Lend Me Your Wife* to follow up his enormous success with *The Woman Hater*: *News-Advertiser*, 21 May 1891.

vance beyond the end of the railroad in that city. Those that did may often have failed to deliver all that was anticipated. In 1892 a touring company of William A. Brady's production of Boucicault's *After Dark* proved something of a disappointment at the Vancouver Opera House when "the water tank which was advertised to be used in the great river scene was not even there."<sup>18</sup> Also some of the noted performers who made the journey by sea may not always have been appreciated. In the early nineties the *News-Advertiser* noted, after a visit by Alexander Salvini (the son of the great Tomasso), that attendance at "tragedies or high comedies" had always been "below the medium," and that "it has been found an expensive business to turn the tastes of Vancouver theatre-going people to the heavier pleasures of play-acting."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, some years later the *Province* complained about the vulgarity of Leavitt's Spider and Fly Burlesque Company while conceding that "a good many people appeared to enjoy themselves immensely."<sup>20</sup> In the nineties, before the development of separate theatres for variety and vaudeville, the range of performances that the Opera House had to host inevitably produced a certain self-consciousness about the quality of the varied entertainment provided.

### *Growth and Boom*

The end of the economic depression is linked in the history of the Pacific Northwest with the discovery of gold in the Klondike. This event led to an increase in the populations of Seattle, Victoria and Vancouver and revived a theatrical life that had been partly dormant during the nineties. Its effect on the Vancouver theatre can be measured in a number of ways. Two new theatres were constructed: the Savoy, in 1898, was a music hall,<sup>21</sup> and the Alhambra, built in the following year,<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *News-Advertiser*, 29 November 1892, p. 8. For an illustration of the drowning scene from this melodrama for which the tank was to be used see A. N. Vardac, *Stage to Screen* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949) fig. 11. Vardac's book discusses the use of spectacle in melodramas of this period; certainly advertisements regularly offered Vancouverites spectacular theatrical effects.

<sup>19</sup> *News-Advertiser*; 10 December 1892, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Province*, 29 March 1898, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Opened 19 December 1898, for "refined vaudeville entertainment," it was known as the Grand after 1904; its seating capacity was 775. For a good evocation of a performance at this theatre in its early days see J. S. Matthews, ed., *Early Vancouver* (Vancouver City Archives, 1932), vol. II, pp. 303-05.

<sup>22</sup> It was opened 10 March 1899. Its other names were Theatre Royal (1902-1903), People's Theatre (1903-1906) and Orpheum (1906-1913). It had a seating capacity of just over 1,000.

served the same purpose before becoming the city's principal home for theatrical stock companies. Like Hart's and the Imperial these theatres were modest wooden structures, the Savoy occupying a lot with a frontage of only twenty-five feet. In late 1897 Vancouver had acquired a semi-resident stock company when a seasoned actor-manager from eastern Canada, Harry Lindley,<sup>23</sup> established himself first at the Dunn Hall and later at the City Hall. Although it was later recalled that he owed "nearly every hotel man in Canada,"<sup>24</sup> Lindley and his company rapidly won the hearts of Vancouverites with a combination of melodrama, farce and "specialty" (i.e., vaudeville) acts.

The Opera House thus had rapidly come to be part of a mosaic in which cheap popular entertainment<sup>25</sup> (including the early films<sup>26</sup>) vied with more expensive offerings by the touring companies. In 1899 there were 101 performances at the Opera House while the Savoy and the Alhambra were involved in an advertising war, the former asserting its superiority on the grounds that its performances were *not* preceded by street parades.<sup>27</sup> And in that same year the Klondike reached Vancouver's stages, as Harry Lindley's company performed a play entitled *On to the Klondike*,<sup>28</sup> allegedly written by the manager himself, while Gussie La-More (an inamorata of the legendary Klondike figure "Swiftwater Bill" Gates) danced at the Savoy.

Although the Opera House would have continued its booking links with Seattle there is no evidence that the burgeoning world of variety entertainment in Vancouver was as yet part of any of the circuits developing around Vancouver's southern neighbour.<sup>29</sup> In the early years of

<sup>23</sup> He had been active in eastern Canada since the late 1870s; see Murray D. Edwards, *A Stage in our Past* (Toronto, 1968), p. 53, and F. Graham, *Histrionic Montreal* (repr. New York/London, 1969), p. 170.

<sup>24</sup> W. McRae, *Town Hall Tonight* (Toronto, 1929), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to put admission prices for this or any period into perspective. As a matter of relative cost, it can be said that around 1900 the cheapest seat for a performance by a touring company at the Opera House (25¢) regularly equalled or exceeded the cost of the most expensive seat at the Savoy or the City Hall.

<sup>26</sup> These were regularly combined with vaudeville acts in Vancouver's early "store-front" movie houses, such as the Edison Electric Theatre (op. 1902) and Le Petit Family Theatre (op. 1903), both one block east of the Grand on Cordova Street. See the reminiscence by an early film exhibitor in the *Province*, 31 January 1948.

<sup>27</sup> *Province*, 23 March 1899. Street parades were a common feature of Vancouver's theatrical life into the early years of this century; they regularly served to advertise minstrel shows.

<sup>28</sup> It was performed on 2 and 4 March 1899 at the City Hall Theatre. Like other plays by Lindley, it may have been an adaptation; cf. Edwards (*op. cit.* note 22), p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> On these see E. C. Elliott (*op. cit.* note 4), chap. IV *passim*.

this century the situation was to change as Vancouver became part of a Seattle-based vaudeville circuit, while the Opera House joined the touring system controlled from New York by the recently formed Theatrical Syndicate.

The year 1905 was crucial as far as vaudeville was concerned. In the previous year Vancouver had acquired a rail link to the south with the completion of the Vancouver, Yukon and Westminster Railway and was therefore ready to become part of a circuit embracing the major centres of the Pacific Northwest. One such arrangement had been evolving for some years under the direction of John Considine of Seattle, who was supported by the wealth of a Tammany Hall politician, Timothy D. Sullivan. In 1905 this Sullivan and Considine circuit expanded to include Vancouver's Savoy Theatre (by then known as the Grand),<sup>30</sup> and later in the same year the People's Theatre (originally the Alhambra); the latter they converted into the city's first Orpheum Theatre, which opened in December 1906.<sup>31</sup> In 1905 there was also a four-month season of vaudeville at the Opera House; it was initiated by S. Morton Cohn of Seattle, but in the course of this season his circuit was taken over by the more powerful interests of Sullivan and Considine. Vancouver's integration into the American vaudeville system advanced still further when Alexander Pantages, whose circuit was also based in Seattle, opened a theatre on Hastings Street early in 1908.<sup>32</sup> Thus in less than a decade variety entertainment in Vancouver had passed from informally organized sets of "specialty acts" into a commercial arrangement that foreshadowed the centralized booking system of the movie circuits.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Province*, 22 September 1905, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> The events surrounding the surrender of this theatre by its tenant, the actor-manager Carl Berch, deserve to become a major legend of Vancouver's theatrical history. Suffice it to say that Berch did not yield the theatre without a fight; see the particularly graphic description in the *Province*, 24 November 1905, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Opened 6 January 1908. It is the oldest theatre in Vancouver still in use; after the construction of a new Pantages house in 1917 (see note 71 below) it had such names as the Royal, State, Avon and City Nights. It is currently a Chinese cinema, the Sun Sing.

<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that at no time in this period were Vancouver's music-halls licensed to sell strong drinks. Indeed this option was rejected in a local referendum in 1901 by a majority of almost three to one (see *Province*, 8 July 1901). Opponents of the measure pointed to the bad example of the American "box houses" where liquor and prostitution mingled freely. They may also have known of the resistance to this importation in the Kootenays a few years earlier (see C. Evans, "Théâtre Comique," *Westworld*, July-August 1978, pp. 35-36). Later vaudeville circuits, both in the U.S. and Canada, rejected these pioneer traditions in their appeal to a family audience.



That the Opera House did not permanently yield to vaudeville in 1905 was partly due to the efforts of two men: Ernest Ramsay Ricketts, who replaced Robert Jamieson as the CPR's lessee in 1902, and John Cort. Ricketts was to all appearances an unusual figure to occupy this post. He had worked for the Bank of Montreal since coming to Canada from England in 1887, and before that he had been educated at a public school, Felsted, as befitted the son of a colonial civil servant.<sup>34</sup> He came to Vancouver in 1898 and in the four years that elapsed before he took up the management of the Opera House had established himself locally in a number of ways. He had shown a keen interest in amateur theatrical activity, and in 1901 had organized the local reception on the occasion of a visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York (the future King George V and Queen Mary).<sup>35</sup> His translation to the Opera House may well have been connected with his theatrical activities, but it certainly reflects the integrated interests of the CPR and the Bank of Montreal, their traditional banker,<sup>36</sup> and may also denote a desire on the part of the CPR to have their theatre managed from Vancouver rather than the fading city of Victoria where Jamieson was based.

Ricketts was able to make a success of his job, largely thanks to his association with John Cort. Cort had begun his career in Seattle in the late 1880s, building up a small circuit of burlesque houses.<sup>37</sup> In 1900 he had entered the world of legitimate theatre with the construction of his Seattle Grand Opera House and the formation of the Northwestern Theatrical Association with Calvin Heilig of Portland. This association owned or controlled numerous theatres in the northwest and very soon became the region's link with New York's Theatrical Syndicate, a highly organized monopoly which controlled theatres throughout North America. It is not clear when Vancouver's Opera House joined the association,

<sup>34</sup> See *Burke's Landed Gentry* under "Ricketts, formerly of Twyford, Hants." I shall be publishing a biographical study of Ricketts in a forthcoming issue of *Vancouver History*.

<sup>35</sup> See J. S. Matthews, *Early Vancouver*, vol. II, pp. 268-70. Ricketts also handled arrangements for a visit by the Duke of Connaught to Vancouver in 1912; see *Vancouver Sun*, 3 December 1938, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> There was social integration too. Ricketts was a member of the Vancouver Cricket Club in 1899 at a time when its president was Campbell Sweeny (British Columbia superintendent for the Bank of Montreal), and its vice-president Richard Marpole (western superintendent of the CPR). See *Province*, 28 March 1899, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> On Cort see E. C. Elliott (*op. cit.* note 4), pp. 45-57, and Ernst (*op. cit.* note 8), pp. 137-41. Much of their information is based on the article by Jessica H. Kelly, "John Cort: The Frohmann of the West," *The Coast*, March 1907, pp. 144-47. Between 1891 and 1893 Cort had acted as manager of the Victoria Theatre.

but by 1905 its membership was well established. On a visit to Vancouver in that year Cort announced that Ricketts would take over the lease of the Victoria Theatre on behalf of the association,<sup>38</sup> and also revealed that he had arranged with the CPR for the Opera House to be renovated, as it duly was in the summer months of 1907.<sup>39</sup> By 1905, then, it was evident that Vancouver had established itself as the primary theatrical centre in British Columbia,<sup>40</sup> and that both in the areas of legitimate theatre and variety entertainment it was linked to metropolitan centres in the United States.

Exactly how well Vancouver was served by these arrangements is difficult to say. It would be interesting to compare in detail the annals of the Vancouver theatre in this period with those of the larger centre of Seattle to determine which companies and performers made the additional journey to British Columbia. Certainly in the years 1900 to 1905 the Opera House saw many of the great names of the day: Nat Goodwin, Maxine Elliott and Mrs. Fiske acted there, and the voices of Nellie Melba and Lillian Nordica were heard. Against these peaks we have to set the lowlands, represented by the stock companies touring from Seattle and Portland and the large number of touring opera companies. It was not until its final years (1909-1912) that the Opera House hosted a truly astonishing number of outstanding performers<sup>41</sup> and no longer needed as much ballast from these minor companies. This development can again be traced to John Cort, who in 1910 broke off his agreement with the Theatrical Syndicate and formed the National Theatre Owners Association, which operated an "open door" policy of admitting production both by producers affiliated with the Syndicate and by the "Indepen-

<sup>38</sup> *Province*, 29 November 1905, p. 1. By 1911 Ricketts was a director of the association; see *Who's Who In Western Canada*, vol. I (1911).

<sup>39</sup> *Province*, 30 January 1907, p. 1, and 25 September 1909, p. 8. The seating capacity of the house was increased to 1,600, and both interior and exterior were extensively remodelled; see *Greater Vancouver Illustrated* (Vancouver, 1908), p. 99.

<sup>40</sup> Ricketts, following in Jamieson's footsteps, had taken over the New Westminster Opera House (*Province*, 13 September 1905, p. 10), and by 1906 was claiming that he was carrying the Victoria Theatre at a loss (*Province*, 5 December 1906, p. 7).

<sup>41</sup> In the space of less than a month in November and December 1910 visitors to the Opera House included Anna Pavlova, Ellen Terry, the actors William Faversham and De Wolfe Hopper, the actress Virginia Harned, the pianist Liza Lehmann, all in addition to two operettas by Henry Savage's touring companies. The average attendance for the ten performances involved here was 81 percent, as the box-office receipt book (see note 62 below) reveals.

dents" (notably the Shubert Brothers, Mrs. Fiske and David Belasco).<sup>42</sup> The Independents had never acquired a theatre in Vancouver, despite some efforts in 1905,<sup>43</sup> but now were admitted to the city's principal theatre. Mrs. Fiske no longer had to appear in the English Bay Roller Rink, as she had on her visit in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* in 1908.<sup>44</sup>

The performances at the Opera House represented the cream of Vancouver's entertainment,<sup>45</sup> but a cheaper and more continuous form of entertainment was available elsewhere. We have mentioned vaudeville, which flourished with its "two-a-day" system not only in the houses affiliated to the large circuits, but after 1909 also in some smaller theatres.<sup>46</sup> Important too were the stock companies that performed musical comedies and operettas, particularly during the summer. But perhaps most interesting are those stock companies that offered legitimate drama; they showed surprising resilience in the years before the First World War, and were not in any way excluded by the activities at the Opera House.

Vancouver, as we have seen, did not have anything like a resident stock company until the arrival of Harry Lindley in 1897. He and others performed at the City Hall Theatre, but after 1902 the People's Theatre became the main home for such companies until its conversion for vaudeville in 1905. These companies were undoubtedly a cut below even the best stock companies of the northwest that performed at the Opera House. Lindley, for example, confined his touring to British Columbia; he offered his audiences plays, vaudeville acts, and the enticement of free groceries and gifts for children at matinees. The repertoire of his and other companies of that era often harked back to the melodramas of the

<sup>42</sup> On the conflict between the Syndicate and the Independents, see J. Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces* (Ithaca, 1968), pp. 3-27. On Cort's involvement see the references to Elliott and Ernst in note 35.

<sup>43</sup> *Province*, 23 November 1905, p. 1, and 8 December 1905, p. 5. Later there was an abortive effort to build a theatre for the vaudeville independents: see *Province*, 24 December 1909, pp. 17 and 23.

<sup>44</sup> The rink was regularly used as a theatre for musical stock companies during the summer, when it was known as the Imperial Theatre; Mrs. Fiske interrupted a week of *The Bohemian Girl*.

<sup>45</sup> Some were in fact sponsored by the cream of Vancouver society. Between 1908 and 1912 the Vancouver Women's Musical Club acted as the local impresario for a number of distinguished visitors to the Opera House: for example, Paderewski, Mischa Elman and John McCormack. There is a rich collection of material on the early activities of this organization at Vancouver City Archives, Add. Mss. 397.

<sup>46</sup> The National, in the first block of West Hastings Street, was opened in July 1909 as part of the National Amusement Company's vaudeville circuit. When it became a cinema vaudeville was transferred to the larger Columbia next door. Around 1913 the same block of Hastings Street also boasted the Panama, which combined films and vaudeville.

preceding century that were now rarely, if ever, seen on the stage of the Opera House. Lindley, who was himself Irish,<sup>47</sup> staged Irish plays, such as *Arrah-na-pogue*, by Dion Boucicault, and hardy perennials like *East Lynne* and the temperance drama *Ten Nights in a Barroom*. Indeed, as late as November 1905 Carl Berch, the actor-manager who ran the People's Theatre, was producing Tom Taylor's *The Ticket of Leave Man*, first staged in London in 1865.

There is every indication that however hackneyed this repertoire may have appeared from a metropolitan perspective<sup>48</sup> these "popularly priced" stock companies were well supported in Vancouver. Melodramas continued to strike a chord in popular taste, and were to provide the plots of many of the earliest films.<sup>49</sup> Still, after about 1907 stock companies do seem to have acquired a repertoire of more recent plays; indeed, a relatively short period often elapsed between a New York production of a play, its appearance on tour at the Opera House, and its performance by a local stock company.<sup>50</sup> The companies of the period 1907-1914 differed in other ways from their predecessors: they usually changed their plays weekly rather than almost nightly (as had Lindley and others), and they certainly excluded "specialty" acts from their programs.

In those years Vancouver had three main theatres in which stock companies appeared.<sup>51</sup> The Lyric (at Pender and Hamilton Streets) was a theatre in the Oddfellows Hall, and for most of its short life (it was no longer used after 1911) was managed by George B. Howard.<sup>52</sup> In 1911 Howard moved on to the Avenue Theatre on Main Street<sup>53</sup> and held its

<sup>47</sup> See Graham (*op. cit.* note 22). In November 1898 Lindley staged a play entitled *The Man for Galway* for the building fund of the Catholic Church!

<sup>48</sup> Of a production of *Ten Nights in a Barroom* in New York George Odell exclaimed "in 1893 mind you!" (*Annals of the New York Stage*, vol. 15, New York, 1949, p. 814).

<sup>49</sup> This is the major theme of Vardac's book (*op. cit.* note 17).

<sup>50</sup> For example *The Squaw Man*, with William Faversham in the title role, opened the renovated Opera House in October 1907, a year after being produced in New York; two years later this play was part of Del S. Lawrence Company's summer stock season at the Opera House.

<sup>51</sup> In 1907 and 1908 the Dominion Hall on Pender Street served temporarily as a theatre, and just before the First World War the Alcazar on Commercial Street was opened with its own stock company. The latter was for many years the York Theatre, home of the Vancouver Little Theatre. On the Imperial Theatre see note 69 below.

<sup>52</sup> See the description in *Greater Vancouver Illustrated* at pp. 111-12; the opening performance was on 2 September 1907.

<sup>53</sup> Opened 10 April 1911, this theatre had a seating capacity of just over 1,200, and cost over \$80,000 to build; see *Province*, 18 November 1910, p. 1, and 8 April 1911, p. 22. It was demolished in 1936.

lease until 1914 when it was taken over by Klaw and Erlanger (of the Theatrical Syndicate) as a house for touring companies. The Empress (at Gore and Hastings Streets) was opened in 1908<sup>54</sup> by the Del S. Lawrence Stock Company, but was managed for some years by an American actor, Walter Sandford. It was at this theatre that George Howard revived stock during the First World War, and it served stock companies during the inter-war years before its demolition in 1940.

A good way of evoking the world of the stock companies that performed in the Pacific Northwest in these years is to outline the career of an actor who frequently visited Vancouver. J. Rush Bronson, an American, appeared with three different companies in Victoria in 1886, 1890 and 1891.<sup>55</sup> In 1901 he was the manager of the Orpheum Theatre in Los Angeles.<sup>56</sup> In April 1904 the Allen Stock Company performed a play of his, *A Mother's Devotion*, for a week at Vancouver's People's Theatre.<sup>57</sup> In the following year he appeared with the Ed. Redmond Company at the same theatre. By 1908 he was the business manager of the Del S. Lawrence Company, a group that seems to have developed from the Redmond Company; and in 1909 he was business manager of Vancouver's Empress Theatre, where the Lawrence Company often appeared. Typically, he was married to an actress, Rae Bronson, who appeared with him in the Allen, Redmond and Lawrence companies. Mobility and versatility seem to have been the main elements in Bronson's career, and would in different degrees have typified the careers of most stock company actors in this period. They served the communities of the northwest until World War I, and in some cases into the twenties, before the companies were eclipsed by the mass entertainment provided by films, vaudeville and radio.<sup>58</sup>

Vancouver's professional theatre before the First World War was largely peopled by performers from the United States like Bronson, appearing in productions designed initially and primarily for an American audience. American themes were as a result very prominent, particularly in plays

<sup>54</sup> 29 June 1908. This theatre had originally been the brainchild of a noted actor M. B. Curtis, who had appeared with the Carl Berch Co., and was in search of a replacement for the People's; see *Province*, 10 February 1906, p. 1. It was eventually constructed by a consortium of local businessmen; see *Greater Vancouver Illustrated*, p. 176. It was demolished in 1940.

<sup>55</sup> I have relied on C. C. Elliott's annals of the Victoria theatre (*op. cit.* note 4).

<sup>56</sup> *Cahn's Guide* (*op. cit.* note 3), p. 196, actually refers to a J. Bush Bronson, but I am assuming that this is an error.

<sup>57</sup> The play was set in Louisiana, and Bronson himself played the part of an old mammy.

<sup>58</sup> Rohrer (*op. cit.* note 4) has traced this development for Seattle.

and musicals, a fact that is attested by the number of titles overtly referring to the towns and states of the U.S.A.<sup>59</sup> Canadian themes and performers were rarely in evidence. In the late 1890s Harry Lindley, in addition to his *On to the Klondike*, had written sketches with the titles *In the Cariboo* and *A Scene on Hastings Street* that would have fed some familiar images to an audience of British Columbia. Again, as the Boer War impinged on Vancouver, both Lindley and Clara Mathes (an actress whose company appeared mainly in British Columbia and Alberta) staged plays on South Africa that, one assumes, would only have appealed to a Canadian audience.<sup>60</sup> Among Canadian performers we may mention visits by Emma Albani, Jessie Alexander, the elocutionist,<sup>61</sup> Harold Nelson, with his stock company from C. P. Walker's Theatre in Winnipeg, and William Henry Drummond, who in 1901 offered readings from his own works at a gathering chaired by Sir Charles Hibbert Tupper. But this could scarcely have offset the American domination of the Vancouver stage; even when we take account of the wealth of amateur theatrical activity in the city, and acknowledge the fact that a great deal of the material from the south had no national flavour at all, we can scarcely avoid the conclusion that as far as Vancouver was concerned this was an age of theatrical colonialism.<sup>62</sup>

#### *Decline: The Case of the Opera House*

A crucial event in Vancouver's theatrical life in the years immediately preceding the First World War, and a signal of changes to come, was the

<sup>59</sup> Some typical titles from the annals of the Opera House: *Alabama* (1895), *The Waifs of New York* (1896), *Alone in Greater New York* (1898), *A Texas Steer* (1903), *He Came from Milwaukee* (1911).

<sup>60</sup> Mathes' company performed *South Africa* under the patronage of the Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles in February 1901.

<sup>61</sup> See the preface to *Jessie Alexander's Platform Sketches* (Toronto, 1921), where this rare bird of a Canadian touring artist describes some of her experiences on the road.

<sup>62</sup> See the sarcastic characterization of this whole period by Betty Lee, *Love and Whiskey: the Story of the Dominion Drama Festival* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 61-63: "Maybe the dramatic material being exported down the Road was becoming pretty threadbare. But the Canadians were still plunking down their cash, weren't they? And after all, that's what really mattered" she concludes (p. 63). Lee is particularly concerned with the *quality* of the touring companies, but it is equally important to stress the American *content* of so many of their offerings, at a time when the proportion of foreign-born residents of Vancouver that came from the United States was never higher than 18.4 percent, and under 10 percent of the total population — figures based on the statistics in N. Macdonald, "Population Growth and Change in Seattle and Vancouver, 1880-1896," *Pacific Historical Review* 39 (1970) pp. 297-321, reprinted in J. Friesen and H. K. Ralston, eds., *Historical Essays on British Columbia* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 201-27; see Table VII.

demise of the Opera House and the failure to provide an adequate replacement. We are fortunately in a position to provide an economic commentary on this important development.

There is evidence that some two years after renovating the theatre in 1907 the CPR felt that its investment was unprofitable. In July 1909 we find Richard Marpole, the General Executive Assistant, writing from Vancouver to Sir Thomas Shaughnessy, president of the CPR, to urge him not to agree to Ernest Ricketts' request for improved terms in his lease of the Opera House.<sup>63</sup> Marpole referred to the "poor business general with all theatrical ventures during the past two years" and complained about the company's earnings being "too small, looking to the amount of money invested in this property." Certainly economic growth had slowed in 1907 and 1908, years in which the Opera House faced increasing competition from vaudeville and films. By the terms of the lease with Ricketts, the CPR took 30 percent of the income accruing to the theatre after the performers had been paid, and the same percentage of revenue from advertising in the theatres;<sup>64</sup> in other words the rent fluctuated with the theatre's income, a fairly philanthropic arrangement which may have been used to attract Ricketts to his post in 1902. For the twelve months from July 1908 to June 1909 the CPR's revenue amounted to \$9,254.77, while for the whole of 1907 we know that 30 percent of just the box-office returns accruing to the house amounted to \$7,704.25.<sup>65</sup> Judging from Marpole's letter it was in the light of this small growth in revenue that the CPR divested itself of the Opera House in September 1909 to local interests for \$200,000.<sup>66</sup> Within a year it had passed at a cost of \$300,000 into the hands of Sullivan and Considine, who renovated the building and opened it as the "New Orpheum" vaudeville house in 1913.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> The letter is dated 14 July 1909, and is in the Canadian Pacific Corporate Archives (reference B 90561). I am indebted to Mr. Omer Lavallee, Corporate Archivist of Canadian Pacific, for locating this document for me.

<sup>64</sup> This can be inferred from the financial data accompanying Marpole's letter, where the division of revenue between the companies, the house and the CPR is given for the period June 1908 to July 1909.

<sup>65</sup> My source here is the box-office receipt book of the Opera House for 1907. This, and the corresponding books for 1906 and 1910-1912, are kept in the Northwest History Room of the Vancouver Public Library. I hope to publish elsewhere a detailed analysis of this unusually rich body of economic data on the operation of a theatre of the period.

<sup>66</sup> *Province*, 25 September 1909, p. 8. In the letter to Shaughnessy Marpole says that he is in correspondence about the sale of the theatre. Shaughnessy was in fact in Vancouver on 19 September 1909.

<sup>67</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, 13 February 1912, p. 7. The sale was completed before December

During its last three years the revenue at the Opera House did increase considerably; the house's share of the box-office receipts advanced from over \$42,000 in 1910 to nearly \$50,000 in 1911, and by July 1912 when Ricketts' lease expired had amounted to over \$37,000.<sup>68</sup> But on balance the CPR may have been wise to sell since despite the number and quality of performances at the theatre in the period 1910-1912, and the increased revenue at a time of economic prosperity, these years did mark the start of an overall decline in theatrical touring.<sup>69</sup> This development along with the economic recession that began in 1913 may have affected plans to replace the Opera House with a new home for touring companies. Ricketts failed to get a projected theatre at Pender and Burrard Streets any further than the foundations,<sup>70</sup> while Klaw and Erlanger (of the Theatrical Syndicate), who had planned to build a new theatre in 1913,<sup>71</sup> fell back on the Avenue as their Vancouver outlet. Ricketts, who during 1912 and 1913 had booked touring companies into the inadequate facilities of

---

1910, as we find a note accompanying the box-office receipt for a Press Club concert on 16 December 1910 stating "Rent-Gratis. As arranged by Mr. E. R. Ricketts with Mr. Considine."

<sup>68</sup> For the period January 1910 to July 1912 the gross box-office returns were:

	<i>Performances</i>	<i>Gross</i>	<i>Company</i>	<i>House</i>
1910	172	172,393.50	129,789.33 (75.3%)	42,604.17 (24.7%)
1911	195	199,721.25	149,754.64 (75%)	49,966.61 (25%)
1912	153	143,076.40	105,398.36 (73.7%)	37,678.04 (26.3%)

In his letter Marpole states that Ricketts' "clear gains" for the period July 1908 to June 1909 "would be about \$2500"; this represents 2.1 percent of the gross receipts at the box office, or 32 percent of his own share of those receipts. In addition to the expenses of running the theatre Ricketts would presumably have paid a sizeable fee to the agencies that arranged bookings, in his case principally John Cort's organizations. His "clear gains" for 1910-1912, if we can rely on Marpole's estimate, would have been close to the following: 1910 — \$3,620, 1911 — \$4,194, and 1912 (7 months) — \$3,005.

<sup>69</sup> See Poggi (*op. cit.* note 40) chap. 2. He calculates (30-31) that the average number of companies on tour declined from 313 in 1908 to 124 in 1914.

<sup>70</sup> He had begun by announcing plans for a theatre at Georgia and Burrard Streets to cost \$750,000 (*Sun*, 15 February 1912, p. 1); these were scaled down to a combined theatre and apartment block at Pender and Burrard, to cost \$400,000 (*Province*, 21 August 1913, p. 3; cf. Vancouver Building Permits, Vancouver City Archives, 1913, No. 5517, issued 22 August 1913). Ricketts' failure to complete the latter parallels an earlier failure; in 1905 a plan for a stock company theatre had ended with a hotel being built on the foundations (*Province*, 13 March 1905, p. 1, and 23 May 1905, p. 1).

<sup>71</sup> *Province*, 21 August 1913, p. 3. The new building was to be at Granville and Nelson Streets.



the English Bay Roller Rink and the Imperial Theatre on Main Street,<sup>72</sup> managed this theatre in 1915 before retiring from theatrical management. He had been a central figure in an era in Vancouver's theatrical history that was not to be approached for more than half a century.

At the start of the First World War the main areas of professional theatre in Vancouver were in varying degrees under the control of interests based in the United States. Films had by then also emerged as a major source of entertainment; indeed, by 1913 there were more buildings devoted to films than to any form of live entertainment, and although some of these were converted "store fronts" others were large theatres built and designed as cinemas.<sup>73</sup> The tripartite system of theatrical entertainment — touring companies at the Opera House, stock companies elsewhere, and vaudeville — that had served Vancouver for the past decade was beginning to change. Only two more theatres would be constructed in the city before the 1950s that did not have films as their primary purpose; these — the second Pantages Theatre of 1917, and the present Orpheum, opened in 1927 — were both designed for vaudeville, though they soon yielded to moving pictures.<sup>74</sup> In the years after 1918 stock companies and touring performers appeared less frequently and when major artists did visit Vancouver they often had to accommodate themselves to the schedules of cinemas and vaudeville houses.<sup>75</sup>

By the mid-twenties Vancouver was removed from the theatrical world that it had known before 1914. Though the full effects of the change were not felt until the 1930s, it was already clear that outside sources could no longer provide a full range of professional theatre for the city. With the contraction of touring the geographical advantages of

<sup>72</sup> Opened 14 October 1912, this was a small theatre; the cost quoted in the building permit (1912, No. 2319; 10 May 1912) is only \$60,000. After Ricketts' departure it was used by a stock company and later by Sullivan and Considine; despite a checkered career, including a long spell as an auto wrecker's, it survives today as the Venus Theatre.

<sup>73</sup> See the advertisement in the *Vancouver World*, 15 February 1913, p. 30. Between January and July 1912, it is worth noting, some 40 of the 153 performances at the Opera House were of Kinemacolour films, shown twice a day.

<sup>74</sup> There are brief accounts of both theatres available. On the Pantages see A. Irving, "Past, Present, and Future, Being a Report on the Majestic Theatre," (Vancouver, 1966; privately printed; there is a copy in the Vancouver City Archives); on the Orpheum see R. D. Watt and H. D. Kalman, "The History and Architecture of the Orpheum," in *Orpheum Theatre Feasibility Study* (Community Arts Council, Vancouver, 1973).

<sup>75</sup> For example, in the single month of January 1924 Anna Pavlova was restricted to a matinee at the Orpheum while Jascha Heifetz gave a concert at the Capitol Theatre (a cinema) beginning at 10:45 p.m.

being a part of the theatrical world of the Pacific Northwest had lost their significance. For its theatrical life in the future Vancouver would have to look increasingly to its own resources.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Staff at the following collections have been of notable assistance to me in preparing this article: Vancouver City Archives; Vancouver Public Library; Northwest History Room; B.C. Provincial Archives; University of Washington Library, Northwest Room.



FIGURE 1 *The Vancouver Opera House, built by the CPR and opened in February 1891.*

REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY



FIGURE 2 *The Georgie Woodthorpe Stock Co. as they appeared at the Vancouver City Hall Theatre in September 1899.*

REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE VANCOUVER CITY ARCHIVES

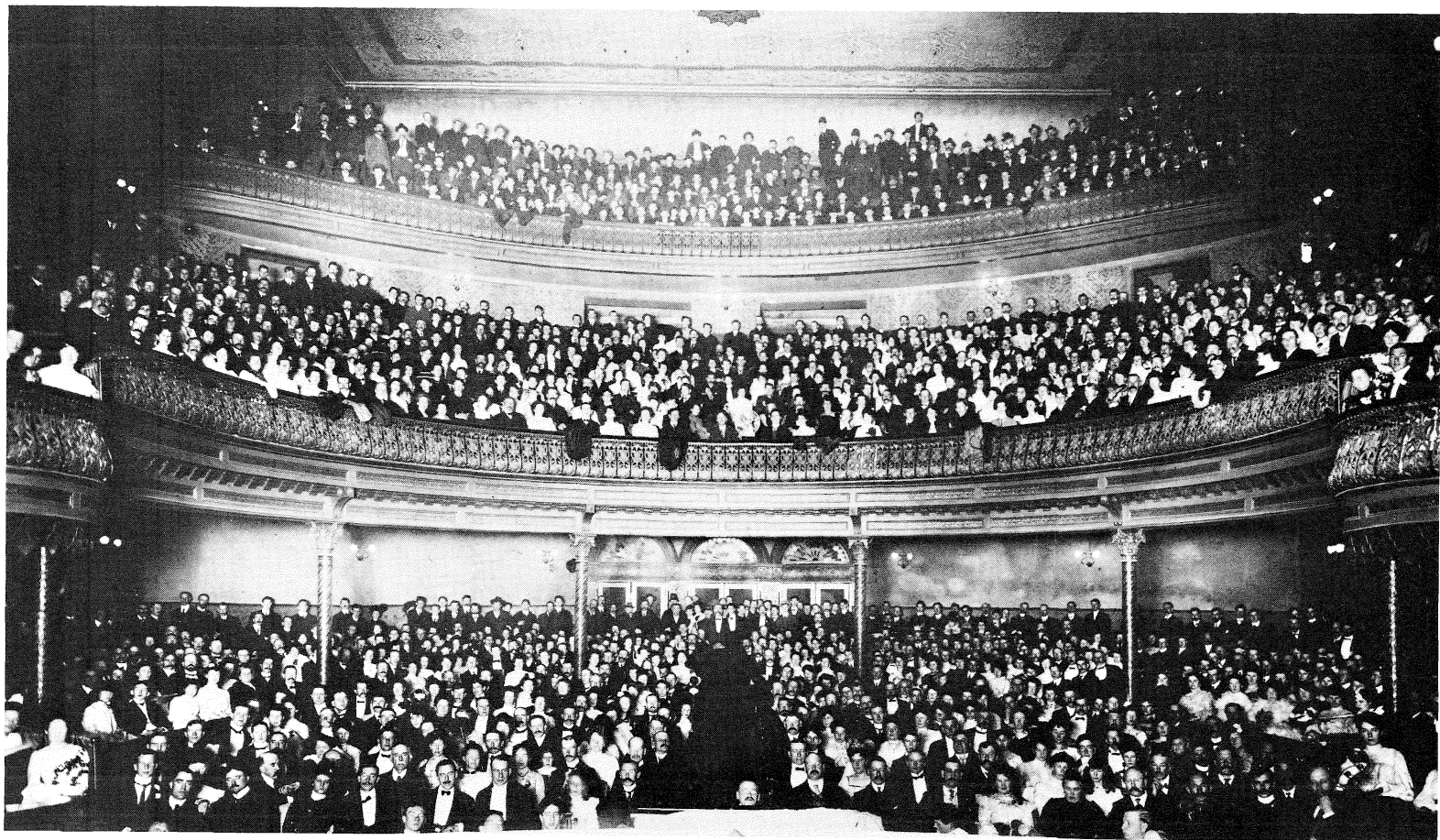
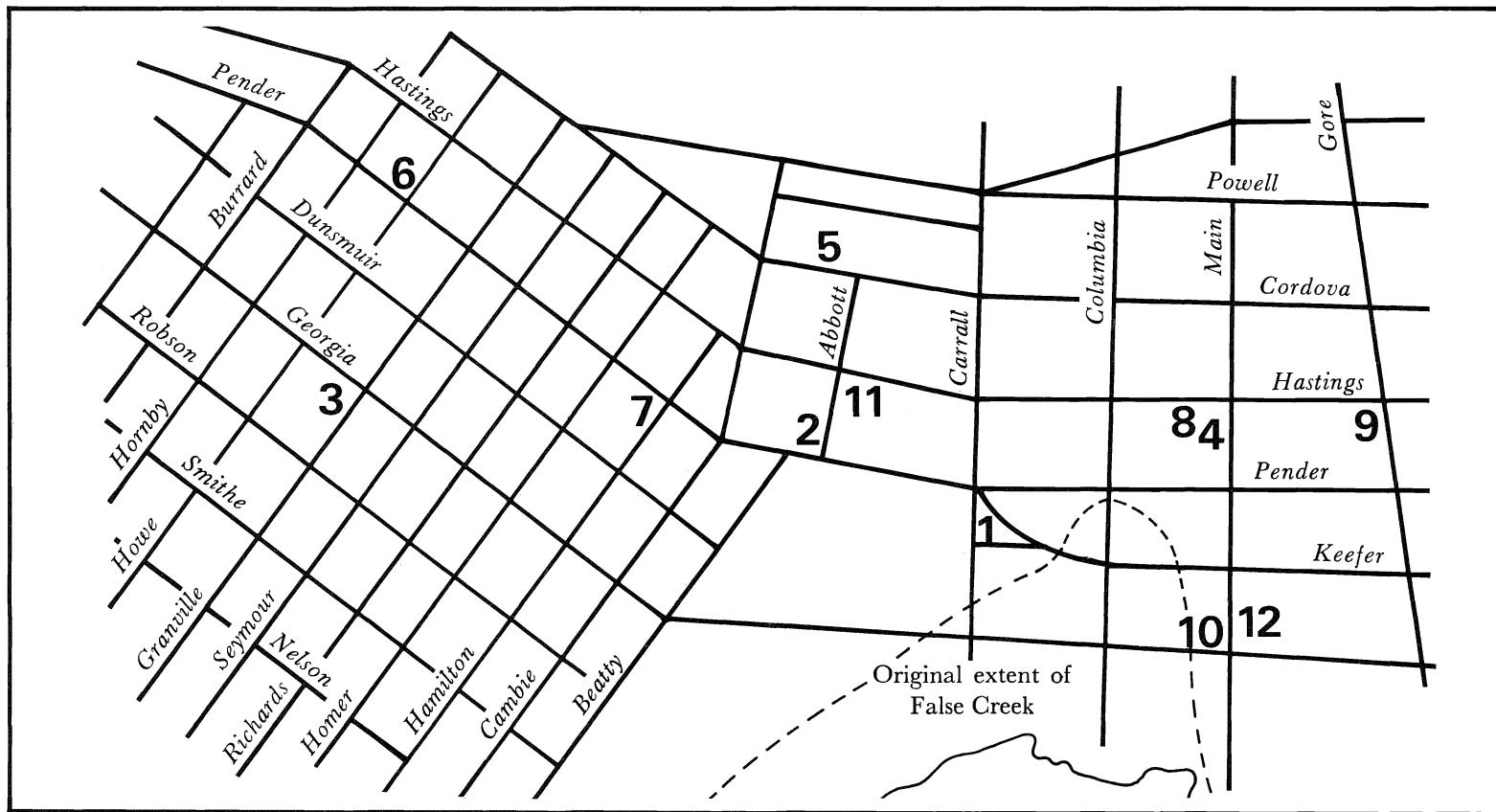


FIGURE 3 *Audience at the Vancouver Opera House, 1903.*

REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE VANCOUVER CITY ARCHIVES



THE MAJOR THEATRES OF VANCOUVER: 1886-1914

- |                                   |                                      |              |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Hart's Opera House             | 5. Savoy; Grand                      | 9. Empress   |
| 2. Imperial Opera House           | 6. Alhambra; Royal; People's Orpheum | 10. Avenue   |
| 3. Vancouver Opera House; Orpheum | 7. Lyric                             | 11. Columbia |
| 4. Market Hall; City Hall         | 8. Pantages                          | 12. Imperial |