

# THE ACTOR'S EYE

## *Impressions of Nineteenth-century Canada*

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**F**OR MOST OF ITS THEATRICAL HISTORY, Canada has been dependent on British and American actors. In fact, in the earlier part of this history she would have had no actors at all were it not for adventurous travelling companies, since the few Canadian actors of merit who appeared in the nineteenth century sought their living in the United States; even if they had stayed at home there would not have been enough of them to keep a single theatre open. The kind of actor who came into Canada during this period was something of a pioneer, for even in the cities acting could be a hazardous and difficult occupation. The records left by several touring players constitute an interesting account of the theatres they acted in and the towns and villages they passed through; their impressions collectively provide a vivid picture of contemporary Canadian theatrical conditions as well as an observant commentary on Canadian life.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Montreal, Quebec, and Halifax were the only towns with theatres (or what passed for them), and even here performances were irregular; several years might pass between visits of professional troupes. John Lambert noted of the theatres in Quebec and Montreal that "the persons who perform, or rather attempt to perform there, are as bad as the worst of our strolling actors; yet they have the conscience to charge the same price, nearly, as the London theatres."<sup>1</sup> Quebec was better off than Montreal because of the presence of the garrison amateurs, but only two of these "did not murder the best scenes of our dramatic poets." Boys performed the female parts ("despicably low") as there was only one actress, "an old superannuated demirep, whose drunken Belvideras, Desdemonas, and Isabellas, have often enraptured a Canadian audience."<sup>2</sup> The arrival of a company from Boston under the direction

of Luke Usher improved matters, but Lambert doubted whether the citizens of Quebec were willing to spend enough money to support professional theatricals.

The English actor, John Bernard, visited Montreal in 1810, reaching it after a road trip which he described with horror. He found a company "as deficient in talent as in numbers," but acted for it with great success. "The houses proved all good, and my own [benefit] was an overflow, an assurance to me what Montreal could do for a manager when any proper inducement was offered to it."<sup>3</sup> In Quebec he had similar success, in spite of having to perform "in a paltry little room of a very paltry public-house, that neither in shape nor capacity merited the name of theatre."<sup>4</sup> Bernard considered opening a theatre in Quebec himself, but felt that he would provide unfair competition with the army amateurs.

In the twenty years after 1825, Montreal established itself as the theatrical centre of Canada, and was visited during this period by such names as Edmund Kean, Madame Vestris, Edwin Forrest, Charles Kean, Charles and Fanny Kemble, Tyrone Power, Ellen Tree, Céline Céleste, Louisa Drew, James Wallack, and William Macready. Unfortunately, none of these performers (with one exception) left any impression of acting in Canada. The exception was Fanny Kemble, who had acted in Quebec and Montreal in 1833. She wrote in 1834 to Charles Mathews, then in the United States, in answer to his request for information about Canadian conditions. Her letter is worth quoting at some length.

Vincent de Camp had the theatres there, and (truth is truth) of all the horrible strolling concerns I ever could imagine, his company, and scenery, and *gettings up*, were the worst. He has not got those theatres now, I believe; but they are generally opened only for a short time, and by persons as little capable of bringing forward decent dramatic representations as he, poor fellow! was. . . . Our houses were good; so, I think, yours would be: but, though I am sure you would not have to complain of want of hospitality, either in Montreal or Quebec, the unspeakable dirt and discomfort of the inns, the misery of the accommodations, the scarcity of eatables, and the abundance of eaters (flies, bugs, &c.) together with the wicked dislocating road from St. John's to La Prairie, would, I fear, make up a sum of suffering, for which it would be difficult, in my opinion, to find an adequate compensation. In the summer time the beauty of the scenery going down the St. Lawrence to Montreal, and of the whole country round Quebec, might in some measure, counterbalance the above evils. But unless Mrs. Mathew's and your own health were tolerably good at the time, the daily and hourly inconveniences which you would have to endure, would, in my opinion, render an expedition to the Canadas anything but desirable. The heat, while we were in Montreal, was intolerable — the filth intolerable — the flies intolerable — the bugs intolerable — the people

intolerable. I lifted up my hands in thankfulness when I set foot again in "these United States." The only inn *existing* in Montreal was burnt down three years ago, and everything you ask for was burnt down in it.<sup>5</sup>

By the middle of the century, theatrical activity had been extended into the country towns and villages, and while acting in the cities became more comfortable and audiences larger, the same inhospitable conditions that Fanny Kemble complained of could be found almost anywhere outside Montreal<sup>6</sup>, Quebec, and Toronto<sup>7</sup>, although audiences were often enthusiastic and profits often good.

ONE OF THE MOST ENTERTAINING and observant accounts of a tour which encountered these conditions was written by an amateur, Horton Rhys, who wagered five hundred pounds with a friend in England that he would make five hundred pounds profit (aside from living expenses) during a year's trip as actor and singer in any country other than Great Britain or Ireland. He was allowed to take with him any actress who had not appeared in London, Liverpool, or Manchester at the time of the bet. Rhys chose North America, and opened in Boston in May, 1859, acting under the name of Morton Price. For his programme he used skits and entertainments written by himself (including an operetta, *All's Fair in Love and War*), songs and dances, and three standard farces. In six months he had won his bet.

Rhys began the Canadian part of his tour at Quebec (which he found "at all times a dull-looking place") in the Music Hall on St. Louis Street ("a wretched contrivance"). The house grossed \$250, apparently a good sum for the town. Rhys was depressed by the trip from Quebec to Montreal. "Wood and water, water and wood, wretched hovels, squalid people, dirty children, mangy pigs, and emaciated cattle are all you'll see in the dreary length between the Scylla and Charybdis of Quebec and Montreal."<sup>8</sup> In Montreal he noticed the low social status of actors in Canada, explaining that they "are a little too much of the fly-by-night order" to warrant any respect. In Ottawa the reception was good, but the troupe had to play in an uncomfortable converted chapel. In Kingston Rhys likewise found no theatre or concert hall, and performed in the city hall for three nights. He thought Kingston a dreary town where shops all closed at seven, and the eyes of their proprietors at eight. The cats of Kingston, though, were "the

most rampaginous crew I even had the misfortune to listen to". The "lower orders" of Kingstonians ("principally Irish and Scotch") were "very dirty and discontented, and most prolific". The second visit to the city was more profitable, as it took place in Great Exhibition week. The group acted in *The Sons of Temperance* Hall on a stage so cramped that from it one could shake hands with everybody in the reserved seats. Audiences were large, however, and cracked nuts and ate apples "like sensible people." Here Rhys took \$450 in four nights, but had to cancel the Saturday night performance, as the Exhibition had ended that afternoon and only three people turned up. One of them, a man who had ridden twelve miles for the occasion, commented disgustedly, "*Al-ways* said as this *Kings-town* was the d-st hole out west, and now I know it! Ga way, hoss!"

Whereas in Kingston Rhys was at least able to praise fine buildings, Belleville aroused contempt. "Of all the melancholy, miserable, misanthropic-looking places I ever saw, Belleville is the beau ideal." The theatre was so new that it consisted only of lath and plaster, yet cost \$50 a night to hire. After two nights at this rent, Rhys moved to a hotel dining room for his third. Following profitable appearances in Cobourg, Port Hope, and Peterborough (none of which had a proper theatre), the company moved on to Toronto, "the handsomest town we have yet seen." Rhys greatly admired the streets, shops, gardens, churches, public buildings and hotels. Regrettably, there was only business enough for one night, and Rhys concluded that he "didn't care much about Toronto; there was too much assumption of exclusiveness, without just grounds to go on." Six performances in Hamilton at the Mechanics' Hall and the Templars' Hall were an improvement on Toronto, but Rhys was puzzled by the town.

Hamilton is curiously inhabited. There are more Englishmen there without any apparent occupation, and living upon apparently nothing, than in any other town in Canada. They seem to be an exiled lot, always looking out for and expecting something that never turns up . . . in short I never could make head or tail of them.

At St. Catherine's Rhys played in a hotel on a stage made of all the dining-room tables put together. The sole entrance to the stage was from the kitchen on a board perilously balanced on two buckets. The audience was "the most queer of all queer audiences . . . one foot in the grave and the other in bandages." The dining room was free, but Rhys was so angry at the owner's charge of five dollars a night for gaslighting that he left for London after one performance, though booked for three.

Covering much the same ground as Rhys were Sam Cowell, one of the first music-hall stars, and his wife. Cowell began his Canadian tour of songs, dances, and farces at St. Catherine's in July, 1860, sending reports to his wife, who remained in the United States till September and kept a diary of their whole North American trip. Cowell did well in Hamilton, Toronto, and Montreal, and when his wife joined him they took \$951 for four nights in Quebec, receipts which led Mrs. Cowell to write thankfully, "Good Canada! God save the Queen!" Three more nights in Montreal on the swing back into Ontario yielded \$480, but Mrs. Cowell's jubilation disappeared at Ottawa. Her description of their arrival at the theatre is vivid:

Over the wooden pavements, and no pavements, and deep ruts, and thick pools of mud, we picked our way till we were in the fields. A great building towered over us. It was the 'New Hotel' which had been opened to accommodate the Prince of Wales and suite, but was now shut up! Across a dismal road lay the Theatre. 'A rat-hole below and a swallow's nest above.' We knocked in vain for admittance, for a long time. At last got into the den. Dismal crackling, brown 'evergreens' decorated the Theatre in the audience part. The dust clogged one's throat, and the gas leaked so badly that half had to be put out. — Sam dressed half in sight of the audience, and Miss German had a cellar (full of rats) assigned to her.<sup>9</sup>

The remainder of their tour in Canada conveys a similar impression of hardships encountered. In Brockville, there was "such a noisy set of 'roughs' in the gallery that Sam not only had to talk to them, but declined having the gallery used at all the next night . . . in consequence of this resolution, we had only \$62." The first night in Kingston produced \$105, but the next night only half as much, for "being market day, the 'dirty, stagnant little town' as it is called, was very busy, but the business hurt the concert, as few above the rank of shopkeepers live in Kingston and all were wanted in their stores at night." Belleville depressed the Cowells as much as it had Rhys a year before, "a stragglng, forlorn looking little town," with the same monstrous scenery of "forest, forest, forest, in all it stages of decay" all the way from Kingston. Receipts were poor here, but good again in Toronto and Hamilton. Mrs. Cowell explained two bad nights in St. Catherine's by describing it as "only a village, and apparently almost a deserted one now." Brantford was much better, \$215 in two nights, although "a yelping dog was in, and made a great outcry, several times, during the evening which hurt the concert." Three performances in London produced \$339; on the last night "a most fashionable audience . . . there was great enthusiasm." The Cowells were

persuaded to play in Ingersoll, much to Mrs. Cowell's regret, for the take was low (\$65 for two nights) and the conditions frightful.

Violent storm. No gas in Ingersoll, and streets in total darkness. Seeing nothing, and drenched with rain, we got to the Hall. . . . The Hall, lighted by oil, was desolate-looking in the extreme. No dressing rooms, and a platform so frail that it trembled as they each got on it. A temporary dressing-room was formed by 'two uprights' and a line across, on which was pinned my double sized tartan shawl as a curtain. — The railway rugs, etc. were called into requisition as window blinds, etc.

After four performances in Woodstock ("no gas . . . the road rather eccentric") and Chatham, Mrs. Cowell remarked in her diary, "it will be quite a relief to get into a city like Detroit, after these half savage villages."

**A** MORE CHEERFUL ACCOUNT of another extended theatrical tour — this one of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in 1866 — was published anonymously in the 1890's, under the title of *Negro Minstrelry — The Old Fashioned Troupes*.<sup>10</sup> The author, "prompted by a wild love of adventure," joined a minstrel troupe organized in Boston. After a succession of poor houses in Maine, the company crossed into Nova Scotia from Eastport to Campobello Island. They came without advance notice and were mistaken for Fenian raiders because of the bright green covering of their double bass, sighted as their boat approached the shore. The islanders, enrolled in the militia to a man, greeted them with guns and pitchforks, but the misunderstanding was cleared up and the performance successful.

In Saint John and Fredericton receipts were low; the company faced ruin. In Fredericton bailiffs seized the baggage and musical instruments, which were released after the intervention of a clever lawyer. But the manager was detained at wharfside, and avoided his captors only by a desperate dive through the kitchen window of the moving paddlesteamer, landing "like a Brazilian bat" smack in a great pan of milk and eggs which the coloured cook and his wife were making into bread pudding. The escape from the officers proved only a temporary relief. Receipts were still low in Carleton, and the company disbanded. However, five of them, including the author — a violin, cello, cornet, and two end men, all doubling their parts — resolved to see what they could do on their own without the expenses of a large group. They advertised by pasting cheap wallpaper the

wrong side out on fences and painting in huge letters of red and black such captions as "Go and See, This Night, the Most Wonderful Combination of the 19th Century".

The first success of the new company — after failures in Windsor and Hantsport — came in Wolfville. The high school gymnasium was offered free on the condition that they clean it up, and the janitor was put on duty as ticket seller. After the evening, the five men found they had \$90 profit to divide between them, which they partly laid out on the hire of two horses and a wagon large enough to transport them and their baggage wherever they wanted to go. With the transaction came the driver, Jehu Stevens, who had apparently overestimated the strength of his team and wagon. The next day they set out, Nell wheezing "as if she had the croup," Doctor with "a certain misgiving of the fetlocks," and the "erratic conduct" of the wheels alarming the passengers, who spent much of their time pushing. So travelled these strolling players in Nova Scotia in 1866, by means which had been unchanged for centuries all over the world.

Good audiences turned out through the Annapolis Valley, although in Lawrencetown

. . . we found the inhabitants so suspicious of strangers that although the street in front of the hall was packed with people, not one would enter till the mail arrived; on the reception of which, however, and the perusal of an extended notice in the Bridgetown paper (written by one of ourselves) they dashed for the door with an impetuosity almost sufficient to upset the ticket-seller.

In Montangen, a French village on the Bay of Fundy, not only were the posters in English useless, but also the audience (attracted to the schoolhouse by a poster daubed hastily with extraordinary French) did not understand that they had to pay to see the show, and sat patiently waiting for it to begin while the "bones" man addressed them pleadingly but ineffectually in English. At last the schoolmaster, the sole person in the village who could speak English, explained the situation, whereupon the audience began a mass stampede to the door and were only persuaded to stay by being informed (through the schoolmaster) that the company would perform for ten cents a head, "after which the show proceeded, apparently enjoyed by our strange audience as much as if they understood every word."

Success continued. In Yarmouth the minstrels played to 3,000 on two nights. On July 4th their wagon was wrecked at Port Latour, and the only "theatre" was a fish house without seats, stage, lamps, or windows. However, the whole

male population was organized into a transport train until, with planks, boxes, stools, flags, lamps, etc. "we had improvised quite a respectable *opera house*," and the "fishy redolence" was almost forgotten. To compensate for their pains, the minstrels charged fifty cents, double price, for performing on Independence Day, and took \$65. After Shelburne, Jehu Stevens declined to proceed any further, and conveyances had to be procured from day to day. At Lock's Island the only hall was filled with merchandise, but the show went on happily in a large sail-loft, with Union Jacks for dressing-room curtains and planks on empty herring boxes for seats. The first to arrive were three beautiful young ladies in hats, lace, kid gloves, and pearl-studded lorgnettes, who insisted on paying a dollar each for "reserved" seats. Their appearance in the sail-loft, calmly seated in the first row of herring boxes, astonished the company, particularly as throughout the performance they intently studied the actors through expensive opera glasses, although they were only a few feet from them.

The minstrels found Halifax too big for their purposes, and so played the mining settlements to the north. Mount Uniacke was "a most miserable place, with none of the comforts and hardly any of the necessaries of life", and the miners and their families were "a wretched lot". A concert in "a shanty called the School House" was crowded, though unpleasant for the author, as "a burly miner, with a big pistol in his belt, and sitting close to the low stage, amused himself with ejecting tobacco juice over my polished boots." At Shubenecadie the troupe acted in a government drill shed; at Renfrew "we almost lost our lives, owing to an attack on the part of a ferocious army of fleas." At Albion the audience in the Temperance Hall was composed of "rough Scotch miners".

Eventually arriving at Cape Breton Island, the group got a hostile reception from the telegraph operators of Plaster Cove, the terminal of the Atlantic Cable. These men, "the most discourteous, supercilious pack that we had yet encountered," were apparently annoyed by "the fact of our Yankee origin; surely an anomaly, seeing that Yankee capital and ingenuity was the prime cause of their being so employed." Such was their hostility that they turned up at a performance in Port Mulgrave armed with rotten eggs, but were prevented from a demonstration by the timely presence of forty Yankee fishermen carrying marlin-spikes, the crews of two Gloucester schooners who had been informed by the actors of their plight.

Following this incident, the minstrels profitably retraced much of their route, and ended the summer's tour in Halifax. In his final remarks, the anonymous author commented on the people he had met, differentiating "the Blue-nose from



the Yankee". He was impressed by the weight of social distinctions and the rigidity of class lines in Nova Scotia, and especially interested in "the scion of aristocracy, who kills time by lounging aimlessly around the streets and attending daily service at the Episcopal church." This sort of person's contempt for anything American, matched by his admiration of anything English, puzzled the writer:

Tell him that his own land lacks "go-ahead-a-tiveness," that Yankee enterprise and Yankee ingenuity are all that are needed to develop its neglected resources, to make factories spring up along its disused water-courses, and to awake its town to renewed life and vigour — and he will shrug his shoulders pityingly, as much as to say, "We leave you Yankees to the undisturbed enjoyment of this bustle and confusion; we are content to jog along in the ruts which our ancestors marked out for us, satisfied if only we dwell within the shadow of the crown."

To the theatrical traveller in pre-Confederation Canada the professional environment seemed primitive and the people often peculiar. Nevertheless, the seemingly universal badness of the roads and the makeshift nature of theatre buildings, Temperance Halls, Mechanics' Halls, hotel dining rooms, and other substitutes for a theatre and a stage, did not deter him from acting anywhere that audiences (many of them enthusiastic) were to be had. Without his comments we would know very little about theatrical conditions in Canada at this time, particularly the conditions that were faced in innumerable small towns and villages far away from the main theatrical centres.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John Lambert, *Travels through Lower Canada and the United States of North America in the Years 1806, 1807, and 1808* (London, 1810), I, 302.
- <sup>2</sup> Lambert, I, 302.
- <sup>3</sup> John Bernard, *Retrospections of America* (New York, 1887), 355.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 363. Another traveller to Quebec said of the theatre there that it "receives little encouragement from the inhabitants; transient people are its best supporters; it is but a very indifferent building for scenic representations, being only the upper apartment of a tavern, with so small an entrance to the audience part of it, that in the event of fire the most dreadful consequences must ensue." Jeremy Cockloft, *Cursory Observations Made in Quebec . . . in the year 1811* (Toronto, 1960), 32.
- <sup>5</sup> Anne Mathews, *Memoirs of Charles Mathews* (London, 1938-39), IV, 320-21. Needless to say, Charles Mathews did not act in Canada.
- <sup>6</sup> One actor who played in Montreal in 1858 remembered that the summer seasons there were popular with performers. "There was a change of bill every night, and

so the work was heavy . . . yet the Montreal season was thought to be most desirable, enabling those who had saved money during the winter to hold on to their savings, and those who had not to — well, to live. Montreal is a pleasant city. The audiences, in those days, were responsive, and the people were friendly.” J. H. Stoddart, *Recollections of a Player* (New York, 1902), 115.

<sup>7</sup> Even then, the cities might not always be comfortable for players. Writing of Toronto in the 1860's, Rose Eytinge recalled that “the weather was bitterly cold, and the theatre was like an ice-house. After all these years . . . my memory carries me back to the horror of that dimly-lighted, freezingly cold, long, narrow den which was miscalled a dressing-room.” *The Memories of Rose Eytinge* (New York, 1905), 104.

<sup>8</sup> Horton Rhys, *A Theatrical Trip for a Wager through Canada and the United States* (London, 1861), 49.

<sup>9</sup> M. Willson Disher, ed., *The Cowells in America* (London, 1934), 176.

<sup>10</sup> *Negro Minstrelsy. The Old Fashioned Troupes* (Boston, n.d.), 9.

