

# PIONEER ENTERTAINMENT

*Michael R. Booth*

THEATRICAL TASTE IN THE  
EARLY CANADIAN WEST

**T**HE PIONEERS who began slowly to encroach upon the vast, unsettled regions of the American West brought with them a hunger for theatrical entertainment. Primitive theatres or "opera houses" sprang up everywhere in the new mining towns of the Pacific Coast and the Rocky Mountains. The need for drama and theatrical diversion was no less evident in the Canadian pioneer to the north, where in British Columbia theatrical activity followed immediately upon settlement. Of original drama there was virtually no trace (for reasons which will be apparent later), but theatres multiplied. The first Canadian theatres west of Ontario were built in Victoria, New Westminster, and Barkerville in the 1860's, and well before British Columbia joined Confederation in 1871 it had a flourishing theatrical life.

Victoria's first theatre, the Colonial, was opened in 1860, although professional and amateur performances had been given previously in converted halls and on board naval vessels in the harbour. By 1865, four theatres had catered at various times (often competing) to a regular population of about 5,000. Victoria could not accurately be called a frontier town. In some respect it was, especially with its large floating population of miners; theatrical activity increased greatly during the winters of the Cariboo gold rush, when thousands of restless miners waited in Victoria for the coming of the spring thaw which would permit them to rush northward and work their claims. However, the core of the community was a sophisticated and conservative circle of British settlers: civil servants, Hudson's Bay Company men, naval and military personnel. Their tastes were plainly reflected in the plays they went to see.

Not surprisingly, then, the most popular dramatist in Victoria was Shakespeare, although the 49 performances of his plays form only a small part of the repertory of 1860-65. *Hamlet* (11), *Macbeth* (8), *Othello* (6), *Richard III*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Romeo and Juliet* (5 each) were the most often acted. There were scattered performances of *I Henry IV*, *Henry VIII*, *Richard II*, *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *As You Like It*. The only other Elizabethan play was *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, which owed its nineteenth-century revival to Edmund Kean's powerful Sir Giles Overreach.

The *Daily British Colonist's* attitude to Shakespeare was one of awful respect and reverence, and can best be summed up in its description of Hamlet as "the sublimest production of the pen of the immortal Bard of Avon". However, it censured a performance of *As You Like It* for the retention of "several objectionable passages which have long since been discarded as ill suited to the present age of refinement". Doubtless it was relieved by an *Othello* "pruned of certain passages and phrases offensive to the modern ear".

Shakespeare did not always receive the most competent acting or production. Victoria depended on San Francisco for dramatic troupes. Their usual professional circuit was San Francisco-Portland-Victoria, with tours in Washington and Oregon and the odd side-trip to New Westminster, where a theatre had been opened in 1860. However, the length of the journey by sail or steam from San Francisco certainly kept companies away from Victoria, and sometimes it went without actors at all. Those who did make the trip were often mediocre, a truth attested by one witness who has left an eloquent account of a *Macbeth* in the Victoria Theatre, a "commodious and elegant temple of Thespis", as the *Colonist* called it.

The curtain rose on a cotton plantation set, which had done service for *Octoroon*, backed by a door and parlour windows draped with claret curtains, "a preposterously free rendering of the 'blasted heath'". The company laboured under a poverty of actors and acting talent. The murdered Duncan kept reappearing, first as a supplementary witch and then as the queen's physician. One of the witches, a bearded six-footer with a glass screwed into one eye, sang his part from the score in his hand as he leaned against a tropical tree. (This was still Davenant's semi-operatic *Macbeth* with Locke's music). The cotton plantation gave way to "much

tattered and very extraordinary mountains and water”, but the parlour and curtains remained, now changed into wings. The banquet tables were totally bare, and the four actors at each table remained motionless during the banquet scene, except for one who peeled an apple while Macbeth was distracted by Banquo’s ghost. Macbeth and his queen were enthroned on shabby horsehair chairs placed on a large packing-case which bore in large letters the name of the ship that brought it. The climax came in the conjuration scene, where there were only three actors to represent the line of eight kings. Each could be perceived, after one appearance, crawling hastily under the back scene to join the procession from behind, each king “enveloped from head to foot in a sheet”. Unfortunately, one of the sheets caught on a nail, and the actor’s struggles to free himself could easily be seen through the dilapidated back-cloth. No kings came forth; the performance stopped. At last the breathless actor appeared in tatters, the lower half of his sheet torn away to reveal tweed coat and trousers. The audience “broke into a perfect shout of uncontrollable laughter”.<sup>1</sup>

Not all Shakespeare was performed like this in Victoria. One of the high points of its theatrical history was the visit of Charles and Ellen Kean in 1864. The Keans presented *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*,<sup>2</sup> *Richard II*, *Henry VIII*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, all rapturously received by both the *Colonist* and crowded houses. In his farewell speech, Kean said that it was gratifying “to find in this remote part of the world while efforts were put forth to develop the natural resources of the country . . . Shakespeare and the poets could find a response”.

The staple dramatic fare, aside from Shakespeare, was nineteenth century melodrama, comedy, and farce.<sup>3</sup> As almost every evening’s entertainment consisted of a double bill concluding with a farce, farce was easily the most popular of these categories. Eighteenth century comedy, out of fashion in the Victorian age, was represented by only the occasional per-

<sup>1</sup> N. de Bertrand Lugin, *Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island*, 1928, pp. 219-222.

<sup>2</sup> In which Ellen Kean, portly and 58, played the Fool. The *Colonist* called her “no less successful . . . than in her female characters”.

<sup>3</sup> Opera did not come to Victoria until 1867, when the Bianchi Company from San Francisco presented *Il Trovatore*, *Norma*, *L’Elisir d’Amore*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

formance of Colman's *The Jealous Wife*, Moore's *The Gamester*, and Centlivre's *The Wonder*. The most commonly performed plays were the dramas of Boucicault (including eight performances each of *The Colleen Bawn* and *The Octoroon*), the farces of Buckstone and J. M. Morton, and the comedies of Tom Taylor. Bulwer-Lytton's dramas, *The Lady of Lyons* (12) and *Richelieu* (6), Jerrold's nautical play, *Black-Eyed Susan* (11), and Tobin's comedy, *The Honeymoon* (10), were also standard repertory pieces. Eighteenth century tragedy was confined to Sheridan's *Pizarro* and an English adaptation of Schiller's *The Robbers*.

The more sensational melodramas were also popular. From 1860 to 1865, Victoria saw several moral treatments of drink and crime: *The Drunkard*, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, *The Drunkard's Progress* (in eight tableaux, and *The Six Degrees of Crime*, wherein "a young man starting out in life with a large fortune at his command, squanders the same on wine, women, and gaming, and becomes a thief and a murderer, and finally dies by the hands of the public executioner". Other melodramas included *The Spectre Bridegroom*, *The Somnambulist*, *The Floating Beacon, or The Norwegian Wreckers*, and *The Sea of Ice*, in which a mother and her baby are shipwrecked in the Arctic, the mother murdered, and the baby, brought up by savages, reappears in the last act as a Parisian lady with a savage and untamed spirit beneath her superficial refinement.

Entertainments lighter than the legitimate drama also formed a part of Victoria's theatrical life. In 1861, the San Francisco Minstrels and Buckley's Minstrels visited the Colonial and Moore's Music Hall, and later several semi-professional minstrel troupes were formed. The "delineation of Ethiopian eccentricities" was popular; one theatre, the Lyceum, was largely given over to minstrel shows. The Orrin family, a group of acrobats and gymnasts, played at the Victoria Theatre, which earlier had featured Miss Ella Cadez in a "Terrific Ascension on a Single Wire from the Stage to the Gallery!"

THE CONDITIONS OF theatrical activity in Barkerville were quite different from those in Victoria. Barkerville was very much a pioneer town, a frontier community. Gold had been discovered on Wil-

liams Creek in 1861, and two years later Barkerville was a crudely and hastily constructed boom town, the centre of the great Cariboo gold rush. Its population fluctuated, but at the height of the boom has been estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000.<sup>4</sup>

The Theatre Royal opened in May, 1868, and burned down four months later in the fire that destroyed Barkerville. A new building was erected to serve both as a theatre and a fire-hall for the newly-formed Williams Creek Fire Brigade. The combination is probably unique in theatrical history. The new theatre opened in January, 1869. Records of the Barkerville theatre are available until 1875, when the *Cariboo Sentinel* ceased publication.

Three main factors determined the dramatic life of Barkerville. The first was the nature of the audience. Miners and storekeepers formed the town's population; there was nothing of the sophisticated elite to be found in Victoria. As a result, entertainment was much lighter in character. It may also have been lighter because of Barkerville's dependence on amateurs, who are not always capable of serious drama. Furthermore, the theatre's physical resources were very limited, even for the staging of the more spectacular melodramas seen in Victoria. Barkerville was a long way from the regular professional circuit, and five hundred miles by river and road from New Westminster. There were no other large audiences on the way to make the return journey profitable. In the seven years from 1868 to 1875, only three professional groups visited the town. Thus entertainment was largely in the hands of the Cariboo Amateur Dramatic Association, formed in 1865.

The third factor affecting the Barkerville stage was the fluctuating economic prosperity of the area. The theatre was built at the height of the boom; the following years constituted a period of steady economic decline. Businesses were advertised for sale, and miners and merchants left town in increasing numbers. Leading amateurs in the C.A.D.A. were among them, and performances had to be cancelled for the lack of a cast. The amateurs were always in financial difficulties, and reports of poor attendance at the theatre were frequent. By 1873, the Theatre Royal was in a state of disrepair, and performances had virtually ceased.

Barkerville's repertory was much the same as the lighter side of Vic-

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Elliott, *Quesnel*, 1958, p. 26.

toria; farces by Buckstone, Morton, Craven, Oxenford, and Charles Mathews formed the greatest part of it. The amateurs tried nothing more serious than Taylor's comedies, *Still Waters Run Deep* and *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*. The professionals exhibited farces and minstrel shows. There was no Shakespeare, and nothing earlier than Charles Dibdin's ballad opera, *The Waterman* (1774). Even straight melodrama was rarely performed. No professionals visited Barkerville after 1871, and the doldrums of the Theatre Royal were enlivened only by an evening of Chinese theatricals whose strange conventions greatly bewildered the *Sentinel* reporter.

One play of local origin was *A Trip to Peace River, or, The Road Agents Abroad*, "a new melo-drama, written for the occasion by Augustus Frederick Funghoid, Esq.," its *dramatis personae* comprising Clem Johnson, a road agent; Steve Simmons, a hungry traveller; Jefferson Washington, landlord of Buckley House; and two Chinese travellers. Acted only once in 1869, *A Trip to Peace River* does not survive, but it appears to have been a good example of the immediately topical play. On the very day it was performed parties of miners were racing northward to the Peace River area in search of new, reputedly rich gold fields. There had been much rivalry and secrecy along the route, and the event had already stirred Barkerville. "Augustus Frederick Funghoid" was probably James Anderson, a Scottish miner and author of *Sawney's Letters*, a collection of poetical epistles describing a miner's life. The *Sentinel* called him "foremost in the rank of Cariboo poets", and he wrote songs to be sung at dramatic performances as well as the prologue read on the opening night of the second Barkerville theatre, which told the audience:

And here tonight, within this spacious hall  
Built by kind labour volunteered by all,  
We meet again — and by your beaming eyes  
You're pleas'd once more to see the curtain rise.

It concluded elegantly:

Be you the laughing brooks 'mid sunny beams,  
And we the fountains that supply the streams;  
And may the current, bright, unsullied, flow  
In rills of pleasure to the house below.

A COMPARISON of the theatrical life of Victoria and Barkerville reveals definite patterns of theatre-going. Firstly, the character and circumstances of each town determined the nature of its entertainment. Victoria, a logical terminus for San Francisco touring companies, depended almost entirely on professionals; Barkerville, far removed from the regular circuit, on amateurs. The differences between the sort of plays produced were in part created by the differences between the audiences who saw them. In both places light entertainment was popular, but only in Victoria existed a certain degree of sophistication which enabled regular support to be given to Shakespeare. The theatres in both towns were physically limited, but Victoria was at least able to reproduce the stage effects necessary for the success of sensational melodrama, whereas this was impossible on the tiny Barkerville stage. Finally, it was economic prosperity and an expanding population that enabled both towns to have a theatrical life at all, but in Barkerville the end of the gold rush meant the end of the theatre. Victoria's theatre survived in spite of the economic decline because the town was not completely reliant on gold for its existence.

When we come to examine the kinds of drama popular in the early West, we quickly realize that there was really no difference between Victoria's repertory and, say, that of any small British provincial theatre of the period. Native drama could not exist in a community dominated by elements so close to Britain in ancestry, time, taste, and cultural outlook. In the case of Barkerville—a real frontier town—there is a single example of a local piece produced; in Victoria, none. The distinctive character of the early Canadian theatre comes from its local environment, not from its repertory; it is a character all the more marked in a community, which, like Barkerville, was closer than a more sophisticated town like Victoria to the pioneer spirit of the West.