

FROM TEMPLE TO BARN:
THE GREENLAW OPERA HOUSE IN MEMPHIS, 1860-1880

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The nature of the theatre, its function and form, is nurtured and shaped by society; and in turn, the theatre, together with other arts of communication and promotion, responds in large measure by reflecting the society that grants both its scope and structure. In short, the kind of theatre is often determined by the kind of society. When the social, political, and cultural complex changes, the theatre too will shift to correspond with new structure, value, or aim. With society in constant flux, the theatre may anticipate, meet, or lag behind the various needs and demands.

Throughout its long history, the American professional theatre has been governed primarily by the profit motive. That is, its economic life has depended upon public response, rather than upon private subsidy. From its early beginnings in the eighteenth century to the present day, the commercial theatre by and large has been controlled by men of business.¹ Hence the historian should take into account economic, as well as social, political, and cultural forces that shaped the theatre's function and form. From 1860 to 1880 the Greenlaw Opera House shared and mirrored the fortunes, good and bad, of both Memphis and its people.

We hear that one of our millionaires intends building a splendid concert hall in the southern part of the city.

—*Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 5, 1860.

In keeping with many American theatre buildings, the Greenlaw Opera House was conceived, planned, and built by businessmen. J. O. and W. B. Greenlaw, ranked in 1861 as the fourth wealthiest men of property in Memphis, selected the architectural firm of Fay, Winter, and Foster—the same firm that had designed the New Memphis Theatre three years earlier. The foundation was laid during the late

1. Barnard Hewitt, *Theatre U.S.A., 1668-1957* (New York, 1959), 43-46; 91; 158-160; 256-257; 423-424; 485-486. Elmer Rice, *The Living Theatre* (New York, 1959), 80-82.

summer, and by the following February, "notwithstanding the hard times," construction was resumed until March when the first story was completed.²

During the first year of the Civil War, work on the new building continued sporadically, but by the end of May, 1862, the *Appeal* reported:

The Greenlaw Building is nearly completed. . . . The large oriel window at the top of the front is nearly finished, and the circle that caps the whole will soon be completed. The main roof is rapidly progressing.³

One week before the city was captured by the Union forces, F. A. Tannehill, manager of the company playing at Odd Fellows' Hall, planned to open the Opera House the following season. "If Mr. Tannehill will secure a first-class company, such as Laura Keene has in New York, he can make his establishment the place of resort for the amusement-loving portion of our community."⁴ Apparently the shell of the building had been completed before the Union occupation, but the interior remained unfinished until 1866. In the north wing of the complex, however, the Memphis Club rooms had been sufficiently constructed by 1864 to house the Grand Ball on St. Patrick's Day. That the War had halted completion of the building may be illustrated by the action of Joe Seligman, who opened his new livery stable on the ground floor in January, 1865. "Having been driven by 'military necessity' from his two previous stables," Mr. Seligman planned to "pay particular attention to the livery stable business, especially to the boarding of horses."⁵

In January, 1866, F. A. Tannehill attempted to form a corporation to finance the completion of the Opera House. His plans, which included a bonded capital of \$100,000, "to be taken in shares of \$100 each, ten shares, or \$1,000 being the maximum designated to constitute a vote," were printed in a circular issued to prospective share buyers. The proposed institution would be incorporated and governed by its Board of Directors, whose principal officers would be "salaried, thereby enabling them to devote their exclusive attention to the interest of stockholders." Even though its primary object was to make money,

2. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 5, 1860; Feb. 27, March 17-19, 1861. *Memphis Daily Argus*, March 18, 1861.

3. *Appeal*, May 22, 1862.

4. *Argus*, May 30, 1862.

5. *Memphis Daily Bulletin*, March 10, 1864; Jan. 23, 1865. *Argus*, May 11, 1865.

the proposed institution was also governed by high purpose, as set forth in Tannehill's circular.

The rapid and continued increase of Memphis, and the great progress of the age demand such an institution, to equal the measure of public liberality and their deserved comfort. The sum intended to be expended upon the already magnificent building, will secure this 'consummation devoutly to be wished.'⁶

Apparently Tannehill found few buyers, since the contract dated June 29, 1866, and drawn up by William B. Greenlaw, as "surviving partner of W. B. Greenlaw & Co.," listed F. A. Tannehill as sole lessee of the Greenlaw Opera House.⁷

The work on this temple of the drama is being pushed forward rapidly, in order to open on the 15th. A dispatch was received by Mr. F. A. Tannehill this morning, from his agent at New York, stating that the last member of the company had left for Memphis.

—*Daily Public Ledger*, Sept. 7, 1866.

Its two-hundred-foot frontage facing Second Street, the Greenlaw Block—at the southwest corner of Union and Second Streets—comprised two wings and a center, built of ruddy, dry-pressed brick. Romanesque in style, the wings were divided into four floors: ground, first, second, and third. The center, soaring to ninety-three feet above the pavement, featured sixty windows, exclusive of those on the ground floor, as well as a circular pediment ornamented with lyres and scroll work. The south wing contained court rooms and stores, whereas the north wing in 1865 was converted to house the activities of the Memphis Club. The entire ground floor of the Greenlaw Block consisted of shops, stores, and restaurant.⁸

Three halls were available for meetings, lectures, social events, and theatrical productions. The south wing's third floor, given over to Chancery Court, provided space for various lectures during the sixties and seventies. Combining ball room and theatre, the north wing's third floor accommodated three hundred couples at a dance, or a thousand spectators at a play, and included a gallery at the east end. Both amateur and professional companies gave performances in the

6. *Memphis Daily Commercial*, Jan. 6, 1866.

7. *Record Book 57, Part II*, pp. 127-128.

8. *Appeal*, Feb. 27, March 17, 1861. *Bulletin*, March 10, 1864. *Argus*, May 11, 1865. *Daily Public Ledger*, June 10, Aug. 27, Sept. 4, 1866.

north wing, usually identified as either the Greenlaw Opera Hall, or the Memphis Club Hall.⁹

The third hall, or the Greenlaw Opera House, was located in the central part of the Greenlaw Block. Four doors provided entrance, a door at each corner of both front and rear. The two front doors, each eight feet wide, were heavy enough to be rigged with pulleys and counterweights, and each contained an inner green door, double-hinged to open in as well as out. Once inside the building, the patron climbed a "spacious stairway" that led to a lobby, eleven feet in width, on the first floor. Six doors gave access to the interior.

In keeping with typical theatre buildings of the age,¹⁰ the elliptically-shaped auditorium measured ninety-two feet long, seventy-six feet wide, and fifty feet high. Cornices, each nine feet high, projected from the walls to arch toward the center, and at a line where the cornices terminated, the flat ceiling contained a large window. Smaller windows perforated the dome-like portion of the ceiling structure. In the center of the auditorium removeable chairs, placed on level floor, delimited the parquette, or pit. Between parquette and stage platform, at the west end, lay space for the orchestra. From the rear of the parquette, the floor inclined to form the dress circle that extended from one side of the stage to the other. The first (family circle) and second galleries surrounded both parquette and dress circle in the shape of an ellipse. Since the principal portion of the galleries received its support from the roof, there were only three columns in the auditorium. Attention had also been given to the problem of acoustics. Curves were usually employed in place of angles. The cornices, as well as the ceilings below the galleries, were curved, and the material separating the auditorium from the lobbies was of wood. "The division of the hall from the surrounding lobbies will have the effect of preventing the rattling of carriages and other noises in the street from reaching the interior."¹¹

Originally designed for concerts and lectures, the Opera House stage, though fifty-four feet wide, measured only ten feet deep—quite sufficient for singers and speakers but severely limited for actors in

9. *Appeal*, March 17, 1861; Jan. 26, March 7, 22, April 20, 28-29, Nov. 23, 1867; Dec. 10, 1869. *Ledger*, Aug. 27, 1866; July 2, Nov. 10, Dec. 9, 1870; Sept. 14, 1871; Sept. 9, 1872.

10. See the unpubl. diss. (Tulane, 1950) by Joseph P. Roppolo, "A History of the English Language Theatre in New Orleans, 1845-1861," 9-30.

11. *Appeal*, March 17, 1861. *Ledger*, Aug. 6, 25, 1866.

theatrical productions. As a result, when the Opera House was completed in 1866, the contract between Greenlaw and Tannehill specified the first of two chief renovations. As owner, Greenlaw extended the stage depth, built two dressing rooms at each side of the stage, and furnished upholstered seats in the parquette, dress circle, and first gallery. Tannehill, on the other hand, extended the forestage and supplied scenery approved by the architect, Mr. Winter. A chandelier with "hundreds" of gas jets, mounted from the center dome, illuminated both stage and auditorium, while a steam heating system was installed to keep the house warm in winter and cool in summer. With seating capacity at 2,500, the Opera House was divided as follows: parquette and dress circle, 1,000; family circle, 700; second gallery, 800. Aisle space was advertised as "wide, plenty of room to pass in front of those who are seated."¹²

The second major improvement occurred six years later when Ben DeBar and John Stevens leased the Opera House, renamed it the Grand, and thoroughly renovated the interior. Raised a foot higher, the stage extended to forty feet in depth. A new proscenium arch cut the opening to thirty-eight feet in width and framed the new drop curtain, designed by Angelo Wiesner. Additional backstage space in depth and width enabled the management to stage spectacular productions, replete with new scenery, properties, and furniture. Alterations in the auditorium included an enlarged orchestra, new chandeliers and gas brackets, recovered chairs, remodeled galleries, and frescoed walls. Seating capacity was reduced to 2,200 or to an \$1,800 house.¹³

The following chart of programming at the Greenlaw Opera House measures not only the degree of theatrical activity but also the kind of program available to the public from 1866 to 1878. More than one-half of the total theatrical activity occurred during two of the twelve seasons. The first, 1866-1867, represents Tannehill's futile attempt to compete with the New Memphis Theatre after the Civil War; whereas the second, 1872-1873, discloses DeBar's successful season before the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1873. The five seasons after Tannehill's failure, 1867-1872, as well as the five seasons following DeBar's success, 1873-1878, can scarcely be called either competitive or

12. Valued at \$30,000 in 1865, the property had jumped to an assessment of \$59,500 by 1868. *Assessment Books*, 1865 and 1868. *Appeal*, March 17, 1861. *Ledger*, June 10, July 30, Aug. 6, 25, 1866. *Record Book* 57, Part II, 127-128.

13. *Ledger*, May 20, July 16-17, 20-21, Aug. 5, Oct. 3, 9, 14-15, 1872.

productive—the ten seasons averaged an appalling low of 28 performances each year. Other than the seasons managed by Tannehill and DeBar, the Opera House featured sporadic entertainment by touring companies unable, for the most part, to lease the New Memphis Theatre.

GREENLAW OPERA HOUSE
PROGRAMMING TYPES: 1866-1878
(Number of Performances)

SEASON July 1- June 30	LECTURE		CONCERT OPERA		PANORAMA- TABLEAUX	PLAY		VAUDEVILLE TROUPE	MINSTREL TROUPE	MISC. PERF.	TOTAL PERF.
	Serious	Comic	Serious	Comic		Farce	Drama				
1866-67		1	10	6	20	35	34	30			136
1867-68	1							15	6		22
1868-69	5				4			29	4	5	47
1869-70	1		2							2	5
1870-71	15	2	10					7	5	1	40
1871-72	22		4					6		2	34
1872-73	2			10		74	72	22			180
1873-74	1							10	19		30
1874-75	1							10	2		13
1875-76	2						5	7	6		20
1876-77	2						3	6			11
1877-78			3			2	7	13	1	32	58
TOTAL	52	3	29	16	24	111	121	155	43	42	596

The chart, moreover, reveals that the bulk of programs during the twelve-year period was limited primarily to plays (40%) and vaudeville (26%). The remaining share was rather equally divided among lectures, concerts, minstrels, and panoramas. Most of the plays were presented during the two major seasons, while vaudeville programs were distributed rather consistently throughout the period. Seventy percent of the lectures occurred from 1870 to 1872, and most of these were devoted to the controversial subject of spiritualism. Most of the concerts were spread among three seasons, all but four of the panoramas occurred during the first season, while slightly less than half of the minstrels performed in 1873-1874. The thirty-two miscellaneous performances in 1877-1878 consisted of programs by the Temperance League.

GREENLAW OPERA HOUSE.—There was no performance at this establishment last evening, the manager being overwhelmed by a sea of financial troubles.

—*Daily Public Ledger*, Oct. 30, 1866.

As the first of the two major seasons at the Opera House Tannehill's stint lasted six weeks. Having selected eleven men and seven women as members of his permanent stock company, Tannehill organized his program in keeping with the star system. That is, he had contracted with name actors on tour to play two-week engagements at the Opera House. Consequently, he was in direct competition with a similar program in operation at the New Memphis Theatre, and potential audiences—faced with similar choices—inevitably chose the more popular of the two.¹⁴ Tannehill's stars, such as Emilie Melville, Charles Dillon, and Mollie Williams, were unable to attract numerous audiences, especially when a popular star like Charlotte Thompson was playing at the New Memphis Theatre. Miss Thompson stayed four weeks in Memphis, and Tannehill closed his doors one week before her "highly remunerative" engagement had been completed. Other factors too apparently contributed to Tannehill's failure. With a long weekly salary list—eighteen stock actors, conductor and orchestra members, stage manager and four crew members, business manager and treasurer—as well as two-week contracts with his stars, Tannehill faced weekly operational costs—his gas bill alone totaled more than \$200—high rent payments—\$8,000 for the year with \$1,333 due November first—and excessive taxation by local, state, and federal authorities. Even though Tannehill added his own wife and the popular comedian Sam Ryan to the acting company, persistent periods of inclement weather,

14. Tannehill opened the Opera House on Monday, Sept. 17 and closed on Saturday, Oct. 27. The manager, claiming that his stock company was numerically "greater than any other Company ever placed upon the Memphis stage," listed the following actors and their lines of business: John Hill and F. A. Tannehill, leading gentlemen; J. B. Curran and H. E. Johnson, first and second old men; John B. Wilton, eccentric and first comedy; W. T. Melville, second comedy and dialect parts; J. H. Rogers, heavy business; W. H. Chester, W. Crook, James Keeth, general business; N. V. Brayere, walking gentleman; Annie Dillingham, leading lady; Lou. Eldridge and Mrs. Chester, first and second old women; Lillian Eldridge, second soubrette and walking lady; Alice Raymon, second walking lady; Lela Watkins, Miss Western. His business and production staffs included Captain T. U. Tidmarsh, "Manager of the front part of the house"; Signor Oliviera, Orchestra leader; George Grain and Mr. Burton, scenic artists; Mr. Alexander and his "Assistant, Machinist and Property Makers"; N. V. Grace, treasurer. The actor W. H. Chester was also listed as stage manager. His first star Emilie Melville played until Saturday, Sept. 29; his second Charles Dillon, until Saturday, Oct. 13; his third Mollie Williams, until Saturday, Oct. 27. For a discussion of Memphis variety theatre audiences and their predilection for the popular and the novel, see Eugene K. Bristow, "The Low Varieties Program in Memphis, 1865-1873," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* XLIV (December, 1958), 423-427. *Ledger*, Sept. 15, 17, 29; Oct. 1, 13, 27, 30, 1866.

together with the economic "dull times," contributed to the "small" or "fair" audience attendance at the Opera House. His own illness during the week prior to his opening, as well as the death of his house manager Captain Tidmarch on September 24, may have expanded Tannehill's "sea of troubles."¹⁵

Having arrived in Memphis as contracted by Tannehill, the Webb sisters, Emma and Ada, found themselves stranded without an engagement for more than a week. W. H. Passmore, as well as George J. Deagle, attempted to lease the Opera House, but all negotiations failed. Nevertheless, the Opera House was reopened "under new management" on Tuesday, November 6. Apparently W. B. Greenlaw had entered the theatrical business. Although his name never appeared in print as the "management"—J. H. Rogers, for example, was listed only as the "stage manager"—Mr. Greenlaw himself paid the city license fee. The new management cancelled all season tickets issued by Tannehill, suspended the free list—except for the press—and with a diminished permanent acting company, five members having "left for the North," opened with the Webb sisters for a two-week engagement. Surprisingly enough, Tannehill and his wife remained as actors with the company. Following the Webb sisters, the stock company played for three nights, then closed on November 22, and the remainder of the season was given over to touring companies, such as Adelaide Ristori's Company, The Buislay Family, and Maximilian's Italian Opera Troupe. Even though Robert McWade leased the Opera House and brought in a new stock company for three weeks in March—his stars were Lotta and Blanche DeBar—the new "temple of drama" remained under direct control of W. B. Greenlaw for the next five seasons and served primarily as a second theatre for touring companies unable to lease the New Memphis Theatre.¹⁶

15. The cost of gas in Memphis was high in comparison with the cost in other cities: "Philadelphia per 1,000 feet, \$3.15; New York, \$3.66; Jersey City, \$4; Albany, \$3.75; Buffalo, \$3.50; Cincinnati, \$3.33; Louisville, \$3.33; Chicago, \$3.80; St. Louis, \$4.27; Baltimore, \$3.30; Washington, \$4.10; Boston, \$3.25; Memphis, \$6.20." *Memphis Daily Commercial*, June 7, 1866. A city theatre license for one year at \$801 was paid by W. B. Greenlaw on 4 February 1867. *Register of City Licenses, 1866-1870*. In addition to theatre taxes imposed by local and state authorities, the Federal Government collected an annual license fee of \$100 (1862-1870) and two percent of the gross receipts (1864-1870). *The Congressional Globe, 1861-1862*, 2308, 3088. George S. Boutwell, *The Tax-Payer's Manual* (Boston, 1865), 74-75. *Record Book 57, Part II*, pp. 127-128. *Ledger*, Sept. 18-22, Oct. 1-2, 15, 17, 20, 22, 26, 30, Nov. 2, 5, 1866.

16. *Ledger*, Oct. 30-31, Nov. 1-3, 5-8, 23-24, Dec. 1, 4, 13-14, 18-19, 31, 1866; Feb. 28, 1867. *Appeal*, Jan. 24, 29, Feb. 8, 14-20, March 1-2, 15, 17, 21, 27, 30-31, April 2, 6-7, 12, 1867.

The moisture last evening, especially under foot, deterred many ladies from witnessing the Tale of Enchantment, but there was an excellent house of the other sex, and the performances, scenery, costumes, tableaux and dancing received the usual tokens of admiration.

—*Memphis Daily Appeal*, Nov. 26, 1867.

Programming during the minor seasons at the Opera House was severely limited in breadth and depth. Only vaudeville and minstrel performances were consistently presented, and both types were similarly structured and gave the same range of talent: a series of skits, songs and dances, trapeze, tumbling, and gymnastic turns designed to whet the appetite for novelty and spectacle. The comedians, acrobats, magicians, ventriloquists, trapeze performers, and jugglers more than overwhelmed the concert singers and lecturers, not only by their numbers but also by their drawing power. There were twice as many performances by magicians and gymnasts as there were by lecturers, while vaudeville and minstrel troupes gave forty percent more performances than opera and concert companies. Whereas the most successful of the concert artists, such as Patti and Nilsson, drew audiences of 2,000, magicians like DeCastro packed the house with more than 3,000.

In 1866-1867, for example, the tableaux company of *Paradise Lost* ran three weeks and drew "large and select audiences," but in the same season, the Hanlon Brothers, gymnasts and trapeze performers, had a similar run and attracted "crowded" houses. Sixty performers in Heaven and Hell might attract a "vast assemblage of the human family," but a company of acrobats, jugglers, tight rope walkers, monkeys, and dogs—complete with exhibitions of that "wonderful elasticity of the human frame"—always meant "crowded" and "delighted" audiences of men, women, and children.¹⁷ Entertainment value was the main approach to programming—instructional qualities taking a definite back seat.

To combat the inherent narrowness of the program, and the rapidly-dimming sheen of the novelty acts, producers were apparently forced to find new approaches to coax audiences to the Opera House. As early as July, 1865, a new element was introduced. At Odd Fellows' Hall, a "vocal and instrumental gift concert" was held, and a knowing press warned a credulous public that the scheme smacked of the "fra-

17. *Ledger*, Dec. 1, 3-4, 13-14, 18-19, 31, 1866; April 17-22, 24, 29, May 2, 4-6, 8, 1871. *Appeal*, Feb. 6, 8-10, 1870.

ternity of swindlers" in the city. The prizes which were said to be given away were numerous.

The articles consist of Pianos, Watches, Chains, Silverware, Rings, Bracelets, Gents' Pins, Ladies' Sets, Ribbon-Pins, Silver Spoons and Forks, and a great variety of goods too numerous to mention.

To boost ticket sales, the tableaux company of *Paradise Lost* initiated this scheme at the Opera House in 1866. Silverware and other gifts were given away at the end of each performance, and the *Ledger* commented that it was "a novel idea," which gave "general satisfaction."¹⁸

The give-away program was revived in 1869 by Spalding and Bidwell's Varieties Troupe. The company was playing in the Opera House, in direct competition with a troupe of midgets performing nightly in the north wing. The *Appeal* commented on the level of public "taste."

The character of their performances [the Varieties Troupe] is chaste, modest, and entertaining; and yet, while within the sounds of their voices, . . . a large hall is crowded until there is not standing room, with people eager to see a collection of *lusus naturæ* and malformed human beings, they, with all their attractions, cannot draw a full house.

To attract audiences, the Varieties Troupe gave away a hundred dollars each night, but failed to build attendance.¹⁹

Two years later, however, the give-away element increased the number of people attending performances by the magician DeCastro. He stayed in the city a week and gave away money, walnut bureaus, and pigs, as well as one hundred additional presents each night. DeCastro had paved the way, for by the following autumn of 1871, Sam Sharpley's Silver Show emphasized the give-away aspect of the program, rather than the performances by the magician Logrenia and his "trained birds, cats, and mice." Sam's show ran two weeks with its nightly gifts of "a set of furniture, gold coins, gold and silver watches," and "hundreds" of additional presents. Apparently the way to the hearts of an audience—by filling their pockets—was a scheme devised by producers long before the advent of radio and television.

18. For an account of successful variety theatre management in Memphis during the sixties and seventies, see Eugene K. Bristow, "Charley Broom, Variety Manager in Memphis, Tennessee, 1866-1872," *The Southern Speech Journal* XXV (Fall, 1959), 11-20. *Argus*, July 19, 1865. *Appeal*, Feb. 9, 1867. *Ledger*, Dec. 12, 1866.

19. *Appeal*, Jan. 15-18, 1869.

At the same time producers experimented with the give-away program, public interest in spiritualism increased steadily. Reflecting the trend for more entertainment with less cerebation, lectures on spiritualism took place not only in the Greenlaw Opera House but also in other halls throughout the city. When Father O'Reilly spoke at St. Patrick's Church in 1868, he reviewed the various viewpoints held by the public.

Some regard it as the New Religion, destined to redeem our modern sinful world, while others look upon it as the resuscitation of all that was evil in the practices of the ancient Gnostics. Many, without doubt, . . . see nothing deeper in it than amusing table-tappings and extraordinary furniture motion.

Reverend David Walk of the Linden Street Christian Church spoke at least twice on spiritualism, while a Methodist minister and a Baptist preacher debated the subject at the Opera House. Interest in the topic increased to the point that seances were held at Cochran Hall, a Young People's Spiritual Association was formed, and by 1872, there was a building known as Spiritual Hall.²⁰

If there was one subject that could draw crowds to lectures, debates, and exhibitions, it was spiritualism. The *Ledger*, however, commented in 1871 that, after the question had been "badly discussed all around the illogical circle, the many disputants find themselves face to face at the point where the discussion commenced." Nevertheless, lectures and debates ranged from *Life in the Spirit World to Spirit Damnation*. A physician once spoke on *Modern Spiritualism and Its Influence upon the Human Mind*. The significant feature of many lectures and exhibitions was the "sensational" manner with which they were presented. In May, 1871, Clara Robertson lectured on the *Holy Spirit, Angels, Devils, Prophecy, and the Gospel of Christ to this Refined Age*, but the climax of her program was the exhibition "of her power over the spirits." The press reported her performance.

Miss Robertson seated herself near a table and went off into trance state. Questions were written on slips of paper, to which she gave incoherent answers, such as gypsies are familiar with, or such as can be seen on conversational cards—answers "that keep the word of promise to the ear but break it to the hopes." The performance closed with table-tipping.

20. *Ledger*, April 23, 29, 1868; April 12, 15, 17-22, 24, May 3, 5, Oct. 16-18, 20-21, 1871; Jan. 26, May 13, 17, 1872. *Appeal*, April 25-26, 1868; Nov. 27, 1869.

Eventually, Miss Robertson met her match at the hands of Professor Von Vleck, the "celebrated medium detective," at the Assembly Hall. By performing "tricks" quicker than Miss Robertson, the detective outshone the trance-medium.²¹

The increasing emphasis on sensationalism and entertainment by professional lecturers continued a trend initiated after 1860. During the sixties and seventies, the need for intellectual stimulation was supplied by debating societies and literary clubs. The Jeffersonian Debating Society, for example, was composed of "some of the most intelligent and promising young men of the city," while the Irish Literary Association held debates and gave essays, readings, and lectures. Although the formation of these clubs indicates a revival of interest in the instructive, as well as the entertaining, after the Civil War, such interest must have been limited to the intellectually-curious amateurs, who were obviously in a definite minority. The professional lecture was certainly not as widespread as it had been in 1859-1860. When the Confederate Historical and Relief Association asked Colonel Duncan McRae to lecture in the city, he accepted—but with reservation.

You can readily understand how one may well shrink from the task of making a literary effort in Memphis. The public palate here seems not to crave that species of food, and those of us who have heretofore attempted to tempt its appetite have brought away our dishes as full as we carried them.

By 1873 the *Ledger* noted that "Memphis is about the poorest place on this continent of ours for public lecturers." Evidently, Memphians had "cultivated a taste for enjoyments" other than "feasts of reason."²²

It is the intention of the managers to provide for Memphis amusements superior to those of any city in the country. Only such stars as must attract attention by their fame or pleasing novelties have been engaged, and among these the whole range of the dramatic field is represented, in order that the

21. Additional "sensational" lecturers on spiritualism included Charles H. Read and Professor Wilson. *Ledger*, April 29, May 1-2, 17, Oct. 14, 16-19, 23, Nov. 13, 18, Dec. 18, 20, 1871; Jan. 24-25, Feb. 8, 1872; April 5, 14, 1873.

22. For a discussion of the significant shift in 1860 from instructional elements to entertainment, see Eugene K. Bristow, "Variety Theatre in Memphis, 1859-1862," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* XIII, (1959), 117-127. J. M. Keating, *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County Tennessee With Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Citizens*, II (Syracuse, 1888), 131-132. *Appeal*, Jan. 18, 29, Feb. 2, 12, Dec. 17, 1867; Feb. 15, Aug. 14, 1869. *Ledger*, Aug. 20, Nov. 14, Dec. 10, 1866; Sept. 10, Nov. 12, Dec. 9, 1870; April 13, Sept. 9, 13, 16, Dec. 20, 1871; Jan. 16, 1873.

ordinary routine of a dramatic season may have as great variety as possible.

—Ben DeBar and John A. Stevens, managers,
Grand Opera House, *Daily Public Ledger*,
Oct 3, 1872.

Completely renovated and renamed the Grand, the Greenlaw Opera House witnessed its best season in 1872-1873. John Stevens, listed as proprietor and manager, and Ben DeBar, as business manager, had corrected the physical inadequacies of the Opera House, anticipated the public taste for novelty, and provided a successful season of dramatic and variety fare in Memphis. That DeBar and Stevens could promise and deliver numerous stars "in rapid succession" indicates the strength of their theatrical circuit, which included theatres and stock companies in St. Louis, Kansas City, New Orleans, as well as in Memphis. Consequently, the managers shifted their stock companies from one city to the next, according to the needs of their stars, contracted traveling combination companies from New York City like the George Fox Humpty-Dumpty troupe, and rarely scheduled a single attraction for more than one week. In this way, DeBar and Stevens achieved "great variety" and balance in their programming. Audiences flocked to the Opera House, and on several occasions, attendance was so great that the supply of standing-room-only tickets was sold out and people were turned away. Since DeBar and Stevens rarely appeared in Memphis, the Opera House was actually managed by T. W. Davey, and his popularity with patrons was sufficient to warrant the gift of a tortoise-shell cigar case. Apparently business at the Opera House had been excellent, for in March the *Ledger* reported: "The Grand Opera House is to undergo a complete tearing out and fitting up during the summer months, preparatory for the next theatrical season." In keeping with the national trend of centralization in the American theatre, managerial control of Memphis theatres was strengthened during the summer, and the proprietors anticipated a prosperous season in 1873-1874.

Both the Memphis Theater and Greenlaw Opera House will be reopened in September under the joint management of Messrs. Leffingwell, Greenlaw and DeBar. The attractions at both houses will be excellent, comprising the most noted dramatic stars and most popular combinations in the country.²³

23. DeBar and Stevens opened on Monday, Oct. 14, 1872, and closed their winter season on Monday, March 24, 1873. The stage manager, T. W. Davey, however, continued a spring season, featuring the Katie Putnam Comedy Company, until April 5 and

That the managers' plans failed to materialize may be attributed to the female mosquito of the species *Aedes aegypti*, which, together with economic and social events, contributed to the demise of the Greenlaw Opera House.

It is to be regretted that Mr. Nobles did not appear at our cozy little Memphis Theater, with its excellent orchestra and appropriate scenery and properties, instead of the old barn on Second street, termed an opera house.

—*Daily Public Ledger*, Dec. 12, 1877.

In the nineteenth century, yellow fever was a disease that struck suddenly and spread rapidly. Memphis had always been vulnerable to the plague, but it was not until the seventies that the fever struck with such severity—three epidemics (1873, 1878, 1879) and almost 25,000 cases. Neither physician nor layman knew from whence it came, or to what extent the disease would spread. Although the Spanish called yellow fever by its symptom, "vomito negro," Memphians knew it by a name that embraced both superstition and fear—the *man with the yellow umbrella*. By 1900 Major Walter Reed and his associates in Cuba had proved that "the man" was really the female mosquito of the species *Aedes aegypti*. As long as there were breeding grounds for yellow fever mosquitoes, and as long as infected people traveled—and thousands of transients passed through Memphis—the fever could reach epidemic proportions in a few days.

In the seventies sanitary conditions were such in Memphis that almost the entire city provided a vast breeding ground not only for mosquitoes but also for disease. Into the alleys were thrown, almost

then closed until Lawrence Barrett and the New Orleans company arrived for a three-day engagement, beginning April 28, 1873. Stars, or touring companies, and opening dates of performance consisted of the following: DeBar, Stevens, and the St. Charles Theater Stock Company, Oct. 14; Joe Murphy, impersonations, Oct. 21; Lawrence Barrett, supported by the New Orleans Varieties Theater Company, Oct. 28; Charlotte Thompson, supported by the New Orleans Varieties Theater Company, Nov. 4; F. S. Chanfrau, Nov. 11; Mrs. James A. Oates and The Comic Opera Company, Nov. 25; John Collins, supported by DeBar's St. Louis Company, Dec. 2; Charlotte Thompson, supported by DeBar's St. Louis Company, Dec. 9; George L. Fox and the Humpty-Dumpty Pantomime Troupe, Dec. 16; Maggie Mitchell and the Grand Opera House Company, Dec. 26; W. H. Lingard Comedy Company, Jan. 7; Robert McWade in *Rip Van Winkle*, Jan. 13; C. B. Bishop, supported by DeBar's St. Louis Company, Jan. 20; John E. Owens Dramatic Combination, Jan. 27; Martinetti-Ravel pantomime troupe, Feb. 3; Joseph Proctor in *The Red Pocketbook*, Feb. 18; Carlotta Le Clercq, standard repertory, Feb. 24; Dominick Murray in *Escaped from Sing-Sing*, March 4; Miss Leo Hudson in *Mazeppa*, March 17; Katie Putnam Comedy Company, March 25; Lawrence Barrett, supported by his New Orleans company, April 28. *Ledger*, Oct. 14-16, 19, 22, 29, Nov. 5, 11-12, 25, Dec. 2-3, 9-10, 16, 24, 26, 1872; Jan. 6-7, 13-14, 21, 27-28, Feb. 4, 10-11, 19, 24, March 3, 10-15, 17, 24-29, April 5, 7, 28-29, May 1, July 14, 1873.

nightly, "slops and foul water," while by 1879, there were only "four and a half miles of sewers in the entire city." Other than "rain and hail storms" to wash away "the accumulating filth of ages," sanitary forces were at work, but their activity was sporadic—in the last analysis, ineffectual. The streets, which had been paved with wooden blocks (called Nicolson pavement), had begun to rot, and in 1874 melon plants began to grow in the pavement as well as in the alleys. "It looks as if Memphis has gone to grass." In 1876 there were "deep holes and floating sections of wood" on Main Street. With sanitary conditions little "better than those of the poorest medieval borough," and more than ripe for the sudden and deadly yellow fever plague, the residents of Memphis—wholly unsuspecting—in the summer of 1873 awaited the flourishing fall trade, "with optimism."²⁴

Yellow fever broke out first in Happy Hollow, and with an average of two deaths a day in early August, the fever spread until it "had reached the top of the bluff" by the beginning of September. Although the plague moved rapidly into northern Memphis, the area called Pinch, it was not until September 14 that the Board of Health announced that yellow fever had reached epidemic proportion. Following the announcement, many citizens left, and within two weeks, "only fifteen thousand out of a total population of forty thousand" stayed to endure the plague. One-third of those remaining contacted the disease, and about two thousand died. Then the frosts arrived in the last of October, the fever subsided and soon disappeared.

Few of the influential citizens were lost since few exposed themselves to the virus for any length of time. By Christmas most of the merchants had returned and trade was brisk as usual, but in the future they would never be free from the fear that in the late summer the plague would strike, swift and deadly, before they could flee. . . . Men would continue to profit from the economic advantages which Memphis offered, but they lived in a temporary world.

Concurrently, with the plague of 1873 came a national depression, precipitated by the "failure of the banking house of Jay Cooke and Company" on September 18. It was not until 1878 that "recovery" began. The fear of plague, together with the national "panic" and a rapidly

24. Gerald M. Capers, Jr., *The Biography of a River Town, Memphis: Its Heroic Age* (Chapel Hill, 1939), 187-192. Keating, *op. cit.*, II, 60. *Ledger*, Aug. 24, 1871; Sept. 15, 1873; March 3-5, 17, Aug. 27, 1874; Feb. 25, March 4, May 14, 19, 27, June 3, Aug. 24, Sept. 21-22, Oct. 7, 1875; March 24, Aug. 14, 16, 1876; Jan. 15, 1877; March 15-16, 1878.

mounting city debt, soon produced in the city an "economic stagnation."²⁵ The Greenlaw Opera House shared the same doldrums as the city.

Having provided a full season of legitimate theatre in 1872-1873, the Greenlaw Opera House presented a total of only twenty performances of drama or concerts from 1873 to 1880. At the same time, variety performances had dropped over fifty percent. Minstrel and vaudeville troupes drew fairly well after 1873, give-away shows and lectures on spiritualism continued to attract audiences, and Harrigan and Hart in 1876 initiated a new twist to the usual program of specialty acts.

It opens with a drama which grows interesting as it progresses; while Harrigan and Hart introduce their specialties between the scenes, always in a most fortunate way, and in numerous ways insinuate themselves into the different parts of the play.

The press complimented the two actors on the freshness of the arrangement, describing the play as "a sort of hook on which to hang the fine specialty acts."²⁶ The program was quite popular and drew crowds for seven performances—no simple achievement in those depression days.

That the Greenlaw Opera House as a "temple of drama" rapidly declined after 1873 may be attributed not only to the general depreciation of the physical plant but also to the introduction of girlie shows. As early as January, 1874, the press criticized the inadequacies of the heating system, and managers thereafter promised rather consistently that "the house will be better warmed and lighted than last night." Apparently very little was done in succeeding years to keep the house in good repair. Nor is this surprising. No manager leased the Opera House on a seasonal basis after 1873, and since the theatre obviously operated on a catch-as-catch-can arrangement, i.e., whenever touring companies happened to rent the place, the physical plant depreciated rapidly. For example, when Zebulon Vance of North Carolina lectured in 1875, a reporter noted that the "miserable acoustics of the house were nearly overcome by the distinct and well modulated voice of the

25. Capers, *op. cit.*, 188, 192-194, 201-203. Keating, *op. cit.*, II, 32-33. Richard B. Morris, *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York, 1953), 510. *Ledger*, July 21, Aug. 30, Sept. 15, Nov. 1, 5, 1873; March 2, 17, April 17, 22, 27, Aug. 22, 26, 28, Nov. 14, Dec. 3, 19, 1874; Jan. 27, Feb. 6, 12, 15, May 3, 19, July 29, Aug. 27, 1875; Jan. 15, March 16, 28, Aug. 5, 16, Oct. 19, Nov. 11, Dec. 13, 1876; April 4, Aug. 14, Nov. 19, 24, 1877; March 15, 1878.

26. *Ledger*, Nov. 22, 1873; Jan. 26, March 21, Sept. 26, Oct. 5, 7, Nov. 10, 12, 1874; Sept. 27, Nov. 24, 26, 1875; Jan. 11, 21, 1876; Oct. 22, 1877.

speaker." By the spring of 1876, the Opera House had diminished to second-class status.

It is rumored that it is the intention to turn the Greenlaw Opera House into a first-class theatre for next season. An expenditure of twenty-five thousand dollars will be necessary in order to fit up the Opera House properly.

The intention was never realized, nor was the expenditure ever made.²⁷

Even though girlie shows had played at the Opera House in the sixties, they were acceptable to the family trade, having been billed as spectacle or ballet and therefore suitable for women and children. For example, the *Tale of Enchantment*, a pirated version of New York City's *The Black Crook*, was produced in 1867.

Another magnificent audience greeted the reigning dramatic spectacle, and expressed renewed gratification at witnessing the splendid tableaux, the superb dresses, the graceful and artistic dancing and the very beautiful appearance of the corps de ballet. . . . The ballet is the best we have seen, and numbers some very pretty faces and graceful forms.

By the mid-seventies, however, both the character of the girlie shows and the composition of the audience had changed. From 1875 to 1877, six female troupes visited Memphis and played at the Assembly Hall, or the Greenlaw Opera House. Each company featured the dancing girls—four companies presented the can-can dance—and two stressed classical "statuary." That audiences were entirely male may be easily seen with program titles such as *Forbidden Pleasures*, *Naughty Blondes*, and *Female Bathers*. The New York Statuary Troupe, for example, opened in the autumn of 1876 but had to get a court injunction to continue its performance—the police board said that "the presentation was vulgar." A dramatic critic visited the theatre to decide for himself.

The art pictures were of the usual kind, as seen in nearly all theaters occasionally. . . . The women were dressed in close fitting tights . . . with a thin gauze covering. . . . Several of the forms were attractive, while others would never have attracted the attention of a sculptor or painter, as stuffed legs are not recognized by art as the genuine article. The performance was nothing more than what had been displayed in this city many a time at both legitimate and variety theaters.

However much the girlie shows in the seventies resembled the ballet troupes in the sixties, advertisements were designed to coax only men to

27. *Ledger*, Jan. 28, 1874; Feb. 6, Nov. 6, 8, Dec. 7, 1875; March 16, Dec. 18, 1876; Nov. 16-17 Dec. 8, 11-12, 1877; May 8, 1878.

the theatre, women and children stayed home, and audience attendance consequently declined in 1877. For example, the Parisian Red Stocking Blondes played to "about two hundred people of the masculine gender" in December, and three nights later, the Milton Nobles Comedy Troupe drew a family audience of only 1,032. Both the "uninviting appearance" of the physical plant and the limiting appeal to masculine audiences combined to restrict attendance at the Opera House in the late seventies.²⁸

In the spring of 1878, both the Greenlaw Opera House and the leading variety theatre in Memphis—the Jefferson Street Theatre—became temperance halls, wherein speeches, lectures, and concerts were held to attract crowds and add new names to the "Red Ribbon brigade." Thus, in the former "temple of drama" where Ben DeBar had played Falstaff to overflowing audiences—and later where torch singers had carolled songs like *My Heart Goes Pit-a-Pat*—sober men resonantly crooned lyrics like *Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep*, and where bright-eyed girls, in spangles and tights, had danced the can-can, clear-eyed men lectured on the *Wiles of the Serpent*. Where there had once been violin solos by Signor Oliviera—and later where bird-imitators had thrilled audiences—a main feature of the "temperance jubilee" was a young man who gave "his cornet imitations." Within five weeks, there was a slight admission fee, consisting of a nickle, or a dime, "to defray expenses in prosecuting a good cause."²⁹ Perhaps, if the plague had not come in the late summer, a new kind of theatre at the Greenlaw Opera House may have risen from the ashes of the old.

Yellow fever struck on August 13 with all its deadly ferocity. While hundreds were dying in the first few days, thousands more were rushing, "panic-stricken," out of the city. "By the middle of September only 19,600 people remained in the city, 14,000 of whom were Negroes, and most of the whites were Irish." When the fever subsided, more than twice the number of people had died in 1878 than had died five years earlier.

Immediate signs of recovery were not apparent . . . as they were following the plague of 1873. Thousands of

28. For an account of *The Black Crook* as a girlie show, see Julian Mates, "The Black Crook Myth," *Theatre Survey* VII (May, 1966), 31-43. *Appeal*, Nov. 3, 5, 13-17, 19-24, 26-30, Dec. 1, 3, 1867. *Ledger*, Feb. 26, Nov. 16, 19, 1875; Jan. 4, 1876; Feb. 14, Nov. 13, 15, 21-23, 27, Dec. 4, 7-8, 11-12, 1877.

29. *Ledger*, March 2, 4, 11, 26, 29-30, April 1, 4, 6, 8, 30, May 8, 24, June 10, 1878.

refugees failed to return, and debt became so pressing that the municipality surrendered its charter and became a mere taxing district of the state.

In the winter of 1878-1879, the people of the city initiated "an energetic sanitary campaign." The fever broke out again, however, in the summer of 1879 and lasted well into November, the longest period for the fever of the three epidemics—but by far, the least severe. Over one-half of the residents again left the city, and quite a few never returned. Thus, by the end of 1879, the character of the city and its population had changed. As a taxing district—with local political control removed—the city was open not only to balancing the budget, but also to the cleaning up of "filth unfit for human habitation," the building of sewers, and the paving of its streets. "In the history of the city, the year 1880 marks a distinct cultural break."³⁰

As a potentially theatre, the Greenlaw Opera House was apparently abandoned during the epidemics and clean-up campaigns. By the spring of 1879, the Opera House was advertised as a storehouse, and when it was destroyed by fire in the early eighties, the press neglected to give the theatre a proper obituary, in keeping with its potential brilliance and decline—"a splendid concert hall" in the sixties, "a temple of drama" in the early seventies, and finally, "the old barn on Second street termed an opera house."³¹

30. Capers, *op. cit.*, 194-205. Keating, *op. cit.*, II, 33.

31. *Appeal*, March 9, 1879; Jan. 18, 1884. *Avalanche*, Jan. 20, April 13, Dec. 23, 1880. *Weekly Public Ledger*, Oct. 9, 1883.