

THE ST. LOUIS MUNICIPAL OUTDOOR THEATRE

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I

IN July, 1913, a group of public-spirited St. Louisans organized the St. Louis Pageant Drama Association for the purpose of encouraging the production of performances for the entertainment and education of our citizens and to create and promote public sentiment for a civic theatre. The time was opportune in view of the fact that the 150th anniversary of the city's founding occurred in 1914 and it was decided to commemorate this event with a production that would at once challenge the attention of the country and leave our city a heritage for future inspiration.

The St. Louis Pageant and Masque of 1914, the former a drama by Thomas Wood Stevens portraying our city's history, and the latter a symbolic poem prophesying its future by Percy MacKaye, was the result. This superb production, after a year of preparation, was produced in the natural amphitheatre on Art Hill, in the heart of Forest Park, and its unforgettable loveliness will linger as long as life in the memory of all who saw it. So far-reaching and fundamental was the purpose underlying it, that every element of our social fabric was eventually drawn into the current, and it marked an epoch in the civic and artistic life of our city, of which co-ordination of civic effort was the keynote; 7,500 citizen-actors participated in the production and the spectacle was witnessed by 400,000 people, the largest audience

ever assembled to view a dramatic production.

In the discussion of entertainment for the masses one frequently hears the statement that producers must give the public what they want, the general inference being that too high-typed a production is over the head of the crowd. The Pageant Drama Association, being inexperienced producers, reversed this rather generally accepted theory with a firm conviction that art and beauty are universal in their appeal, and for once producers gave no consideration to any commercial phase of the production, concentrating entirely on the esthetically constructive principles of dramatic art.

Certainly no audience was ever more democratic. In size it has never been equalled and in appreciation it has never been excelled, and so far as St. Louis audiences are concerned, it corrected any impression to the contrary that may have existed in certain channels as to the type of entertainment to which the masses respond. It is significant that with a complete indifference to box office results and a seating capacity of 50,000, one-half of which was free to the public, the Association realized a surplus of \$17,125.

Thus was public sentiment created and crystallized for a civic theatre—and now for the realization.

II

When the Association decided to commemorate the tercentennial of

Shakespeare's death, it was felt no better way could be devised than to produce one of his plays, adapted to the outdoors, in some natural setting more intimate than the big Pageant site on Art Hill, since it would have been impossible to have heard the players in the big auditorium.

After deciding on the play, Miss Margaret Anglin was asked to produce it, and invited to come to St. Louis to look over a number of available sites. Miss Anglin arrived on a cold, raw November Sunday and, accompanied by Mr. John H. Gundlach, President of the Association, Mr. W. W. LaBeaume and Mr. Lambert E. Walther, made a tour of Forest Park, visiting various sites that looked promising. The Municipal Theatre site was the last visited and, while the choice of the committee, the committee was nevertheless very anxious to learn what Miss Anglin thought of it. Her reaction was immediate and enthusiastic, and after testing the acoustics from every angle, the availability of the site for varied productions having been carefully considered and a minute study of transportation facilities having previously been made, it was selected as the proper site.

The artistic success of the performance surpassed all expectations—the audience was enthralled by the unrivalled beauty of the production and was quick to realize that no small part of the excellence of the production was due to the enchanting beauty of the stage and auditorium and Miss Anglin's intelligent treatment of the natural loveliness of the stage.

In the "As You Like It" performance, as in the Pageant and Masque, the Association emphasized community participation in the performances. Hundreds of our people took part in the prologue of Elizabethan dances, directed by Mr. Cecil Sharp of London.

III

Having faith in the great educational value of the theatre to our people and in the belief that St. Louis should maintain its leadership in the community play, the Association as the conclusion of the "As You Like It" performance presented the stage and its accessories to the city with the request that funds be provided to make the site a permanent outdoor theatre for the use of the people.

The following year the city placed the theatre on a permanent basis, building a stage and concrete auditorium, and erecting at the entrance an ornamental colonnade.

The Municipal Theatre is situated in St. Louis's largest park—Forest Park, on a wooded hill overlooking the River des Peres, the slope of which is admirably adapted to the seating arrangement. Experts have generally agreed that there is no lovelier environment for an outdoor theatre in the world.

The auditorium, which is entirely surrounded by trees, has a depth of 256 feet, an average width of 225 feet and a total seating capacity of 9,270. It is constructed of reinforced concrete—portable chairs being used for seats. The exits are so arranged that the theatre can be emptied in from ten to twenty minutes. Everyone in the audience has an unobstructed view of the stage, the acoustics being such that the voices of the performers carry satisfactorily to every part of the auditorium.

The stage is built upon the banks of the River des Peres, in the midst of a dense shrubbery. Two majestic oaks, about seventy feet high, form a proscenium arch in the foreground. Between the stage and the audience is an orchestra pit, 10 to 18 feet wide, which will accommodate an orchestra of 150. The difference in the elevation of this

pit and that of the farthest row of seats in the auditorium is 53 feet. The stage has a total width of 120 feet and is 90 feet deep, connecting to a bridge leading across the little river to the dressing rooms, all permanent buildings, hidden in the shrubbery. The bridge is so located that it may be effectively used in connection with the stage. The lighting is by electricity, both large searchlights and smaller lights being used, and the artistry of the lighting effects is unsurpassingly beautiful.

The theatre is at the disposal of the people of St. Louis for civic entertainments of all kinds, but may not be used at any time for the purpose of obtaining revenue. All funds derived through the use of the theatre must be expended in improving the theatre—installing complete lighting devices, concrete ornamentation and comforts for the audience.

IV

Since the completion in 1916, the Municipal Theatre has been used on more than 195 occasions, the character of the performances given consisting of grand opera, choral concerts, dramatic productions, playground festivals, Greek games, and a now permanent mid-summer season of light opera and a permanent late summer fashion show of fall styles.

It is interesting to note that the Municipal Theatre is not "municipal" in the same sense as are the Art Museum, the Public Library or the Zoölogical Gardens, all of which are supported by taxation. While our parks are maintained from the general municipal revenue and the Municipal Theatre is in our largest park, the theatre is supported by fees derived from the Opera and Fashion Show, to which admission is charged, it being stipulated that 1,600 free seats be provided for the public at all performances. With these exceptions the theatre is at the disposal of the public, free of charge, under the regulation of the Department of Parks and Recreation.

The Municipal Theatre is a triumph of community effort and is now an accepted factor in the recreational life of our people. Through its policy of community participation and free admissions, it has awakened an interest in music, dancing, singing, designing and kindred elements of histrionic art that make for the ultimate realization of the goal of its founders—the democratization of art. Its founders have fostered the idea that much of the value of the theatre will be nullified unless our people are drawn into the performances and free admission provided so every citizen may have the cultural advantages he has helped to create.