

All the World's a Stage

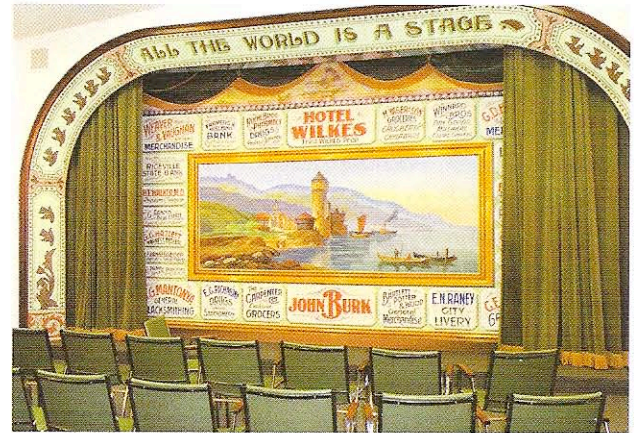
Opera houses were a focal point for entertainment in Iowa towns small and large at the turn of the 20th century. Acting troupes traveled from venue to venue on the passenger trains that ran as many as eight times a day. Rather than carry sets with them, they staged their performances in front of local opera curtains that provided generic “front room, back room, timber, and town” backdrops. Today Iowans can learn more about this slice of Iowa theater history in two different exhibits of opera curtains here in the state.

The Riceville Public Library is home to five curtains that were originally hand-painted shortly after the turn of the last century for the Brown Opera House in Riceville. Such a collection is quite rare, according to Jim Cross, Riceville Public Library director and de facto curator for the curtains. “Some towns may have one curtain displayed or in storage, but to have a full set of curtains in the town they were created for is special.”

Five curtains constitute a full set. Because pull drapes were not used to cover the stage opening, the first curtain was lowered to serve that purpose. The second curtain displayed advertisements from local sponsors, a glimpse into the vitality and breadth of the businesses operating at the time in small-town Iowa. The other three curtains — street, pastoral, and mountain scenes — were the backdrops for different play acts.

The Riceville opera curtains were restored in 1980 through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and now hang in a community room inside the library, where a stage stenciled on the walls re-creates the original Brown Opera House design. (Plans to restore the 1901 Opera House were thwarted when fire destroyed the historic building last fall.) Cross serves as tour guide for the display. “I really enjoy having school kids come here. I get to share really interesting things about theater and Riceville’s history.”

Mt. Pleasant in southeast Iowa reveals another treasure trove of opera curtains and repertoire theater history. Part of the Old Threshers’ Museum, the Theatre Museum displays



COURTESY CAROL BODENSTEINER

The Riceville opera curtains were restored and now hang in a community room painted to re-create the original opera house — complete with a misquotation of Shakespeare.

the largest single collection of opera curtains — indeed of theater history — in the United States. “Our collection is the best-kept secret in the United States,” says Martha Hayes, who leads tours that showcase the 30 to 40 opera curtains housed at the museum. Others agree. Iowa’s Theatre Museum was recently honored for Excellence in Theatre History Preservation by the Theatre Museum in New York.

“The heyday for traveling theater companies was the 1920s,” says Hayes. “Some 400 touring companies were operating in the United States. Iowa had 168 — the most touring companies of any state.” Most of the curtains in the Mt. Pleasant collection, adds Hayes, come from Iowa towns of less than 1,000 people.

Iowa boasts still another claim to fame in opera curtain history. Jesse Cox of Estherville revolutionized early scene painting when he developed a method for painting dye and glue on muslin. Because of his innovations, backdrops could be folded into small-suitcase sizes and carried with the touring company. Cox became the premier source for theater curtains, painting some 4,000 in his career. His palette, paints, and some of the curtains he painted are displayed in Mt. Pleasant along with original posters of world-famous actresses, costumes, play bills, musical instruments, and countless other artifacts of this remarkable time in Iowa theater history. — C.B.

For more information on the Riceville and Mt. Pleasant opera curtains, email director@riceville.lib.ia.us and theatremuseum@iowatelecom.net or visit www.oldthreshers.com.