

HISTORY OF THE ST. CHARLES THEATRE OF NEW ORLEANS  
UNDER THE MANAGEMENT OF DAVID BIDWELL,  
1880-1888

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

The record of the English stage in New Orleans constitutes an important chapter in the theatrical annals of America. New Orleans supported the first operatic company in the United States; it had the first theatre to be illuminated with gas; and during the 1830's and 1840's it had the largest and most magnificent playhouse in North America, the St. Charles Theatre. The New Orleans stage ranked with the best in the country and dominated the theatrical activity in the surrounding frontier sections. Almost all of the important stars of the day visited its theatres, and the fact that so many stars undertook the long and arduous trip indicates that engagements in New Orleans were as profitable as those in eastern cities.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of the Civil War until the beginning of David Bidwell's management, the St. Charles Theatre, as well as all dramatic activity in New Orleans, was in a state of decline due to the war. Bidwell's management from 1880 to 1888 elevated the St. Charles until once again it competed

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<sup>1</sup>Nelle Smither, A History of the English Theatre in New Orleans (New York, 1944), p. 6.

with the best theatres in the country. His use of a stock company in the St. Charles gave the old system the last trial it was destined to have in that theatre.

After Bidwell's death, Mrs. Bidwell first rented the St. Charles to Mark Klaw, Joseph Jefferson, and Abraham Erlanger and then to J. S. Hopkins of New York. Hopkins hired "Parson" Davies to manage the St. Charles. Davies was known as a promoter of prize fights and similar forms of public entertainment, rather than for any connection with the drama. Under his management, the St. Charles operated as a low-price theatre showing inferior-variety entertainment until June 4, 1899, when, ending an era of theatrical activity, it burned to the ground.

The most comprehensive histories of New Orleans's drama are found in John Smith Kendall's Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre, Nelle Smither's A History of the English Theatre in New Orleans, and Lucille Gafford's unpublished doctoral dissertation from the University of Chicago in 1930, "A History of the St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans, 1835-1843." None of these cover in detail the St. Charles Theatre during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The objective of this investigation is to compile a chronological history of the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans from 1880 to 1888, the last successful years of the theatre when it was under the management of David Bidwell. In order to clarify the role of the St. Charles Theatre as it reflected

theatre art in New Orleans during the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, special attention will be given to the physical improvements of the theatre, the kind of entertainment provided, the personalities who appeared, and the critical comments of the local newspapers.

The major source of information for this investigation will be a New Orleans newspaper published during this period, the New Orleans Daily Picayune. Dates, productions, and personalities taken from the New Orleans Daily Picayune have been verified with the New Orleans Bee and the New Orleans Times Democrat. Other valuable sources which offer substantial information are various historical works dealing with New Orleans during the period under investigation.

The study is organized into six chapters arranged chronologically. Chapter One is the introduction, presenting the problem and purpose of the study with a tracing of the development of the St. Charles up to the time of the beginning of David Bidwell's management. Chapter Two, 1880-1882, investigates David Bidwell's first two seasons as manager of the St. Charles. Chapter Three, 1882-1885, shows the emphasis on dramatic production. Chapter Four, 1885-1887, concerns Bidwell's Star Dramatic Company. Chapter Five, 1887-1888, deals with variety entertainment. Chapter Six is a summary and conclusion of the study.

Development of the St. Charles up to  
David Bidwell's Management

New Orleans was founded in 1718 in the name of France by Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. "Almost from the beginning there was a sort of society--a group of men and women who held themselves aloof from the rabble and who, as best they could, preserved the manners of the court of France."<sup>2</sup> The city, by 1753, was one of gaiety and luxury, quite different from the religious colonies, but similar to the Virginia and South Carolina colonies established by the English. Many of the English colonies were founded by groups which shared the same religious conviction, and the reason that these colonists came to the New World was to worship according to their beliefs. New Orleans was established by speculators, who publicized in France that New Orleans held many opportunities for fast riches. Marquis de Vaudreuil, governor-general at that time, established a court in New Orleans that was said to be the beginning of fashionable life in Louisiana.<sup>3</sup> The Indian Father, written by Leblanc de Villeneuve and the first play ever produced in New Orleans, was presented in de Vaudreuil's home.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, New Orleans was predominantly Creole, a blending of French and

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<sup>2</sup>Lyle Saxon, Fabulous New Orleans (New York, 1928), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>4</sup>Oliver Evans, New Orleans (New York, 1959), p. 27.

Spanish ancestry. A large portion of these Creole families were of distinguished and highly aristocratic lineage. These people with a profound respect for a gracious, cultured existence became the first aristocratic families of New Orleans. The Creoles had inherited a highly developed sense of the aesthetic and gallantry from the French and the love of adventure from the Spanish.<sup>5</sup> They established a rich and cultural society in which they enjoyed various kinds of entertainment, particularly the French theatre.

The influx of Americans into New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase caused immediate discord. New Orleans began to mushroom with merchants, investors, speculators, and flatboatmen from all over the country. These men were not Quakers or Puritans with strong religious beliefs, but Englishmen who had brought from England the desire to make money. Being more shrewd and more calculating than the Creoles, the Americans gradually became richer while the Creoles became poorer. The Creoles were culturally superior to the Americans at that time. They were families of refinement and education, many receiving education from their mother countries, and they considered the "barbaric" Americans a threat to their culture. The Creoles treasured highly the traditions of their ancestry, and these American intruders were not welcomed as members of their high social

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<sup>5</sup>M. H. Herrin, The Creole Aristocracy (New York, 1952), p. 30.

stratum. Consequently, the Americans had to establish a social structure of their own. The development of the English-speaking theatre became integral to the new American society of New Orleans.<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1806, attempts had been made to introduce the English-speaking drama into New Orleans. William Duff, A. Cargill, Noah Miller Ludlow, Aaron J. Phillips, and William A. Turner brought companies into New Orleans between 1806 and 1820. They ran into three major difficulties: the majority of the people still did not speak English; there were no English-speaking theatres in which to play; and the Creoles still remained aloof from English-speaking people.<sup>7</sup> New Orleans did, however, have two French-speaking theatres at that time--the St. Phillip and the French opera house, the Orleans. The Orleans housed the first operatic company in the United States and continuously maintained a regular opera company except for the years of the Civil War.<sup>8</sup> The enormous amount of operas and music in New Orleans undoubtedly made the city a cultural center, rivaling any city in pre-Civil War America.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Saxon, Fabulous New Orleans, p. 162.

<sup>7</sup>John Smith Kendall, The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre (Baton Rouge, 1952), pp. 2-5.

<sup>8</sup>John Smith Kendall, History of New Orleans, II, 3 vols. (New York, 1922), 727.

<sup>9</sup>Henry Kmen, Music in New Orleans, the Formative Years, 1791-1841 (Baton Rouge, 1966), p. vii.

It was not until New Orleans saw the arrival of James H. Caldwell and his company that the English-speaking drama was firmly established. By this time, the Americans had secured themselves economically and could occupy themselves with "cultural" amusements. The New Orleans Americans were cavaliers; they did not harbor strong religious intolerance toward entertainment as did many of the Americans of other cities. The New Orleans Americans were for the most part Englishmen who had brought with them English pastimes, balls, musical concerts, hunting, and card playing, which made fertile soil for drama. Therefore, theatre was not banned but encouraged. Theatre attendance was also encouraged by the intermarriage of the Americans and Creoles. Even though the Americans had been forced to establish their own society, as soon as they began to make their fortunes, the Creole families became anxious for their sons and daughters to marry the rich Americans, exchanging their aristocratic names for the American dollar. The Americans, to offset the cultural advantage enjoyed by their Creole fellow-citizens, began to plan an English-speaking theatre of their own. According to Kendall, a small group of Americans from New Orleans, the identity of whom is unknown, sent a proposal to James H. Caldwell in Richmond, Virginia, to transfer his theatrical activities to New Orleans. Caldwell and his company opened on January 7, 1820, in New Orleans, with a contract at the Orleans. The contract permitted Caldwell to use the theatre

on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights, while the French company retained it for the remaining nights of the week.<sup>10</sup> Although the tension between the Creoles and Americans persisted, the rivalry was perhaps helpful rather than detrimental. It was the ethnic differences which divided the city's population into sections and which caused Caldwell to build his own English-speaking theatre in the American section of New Orleans. The formal opening of Caldwell's new theatre, the Camp Street Theatre, took place on January 1, 1824. The Camp Street Theatre was illuminated by a "gas machine," which had been brought from England. Illumination by gaslight appeared in a theatre in New Orleans two years before gas apparatus was installed in any New York theatre.<sup>11</sup>

The rivalry between the Creoles and Americans persisted in the theatres, prompting the competing manager to try to better the other by producing the newest works with leading visiting actors and actresses. The Camp Street Theatre was visited by almost all of the important stars of the day. These visiting stars were supported by the theatre's own permanent stock companies. The business of the stock company was two-fold: first, to support the visiting "star" performers, and second, to entertain with productions of their

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<sup>10</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, pp. 17-19.

<sup>11</sup>Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A., 1668 to 1957 (New York, 1959), p. 90.

own. During the summer months, Caldwell took his Camp Street Theatre stock company to other locations in the South. Smither states that Caldwell expanded his theatrical empire until he controlled the entire lower Mississippi Valley and even a portion of the Ohio.<sup>12</sup>

Caldwell retired from management of the Camp Street Theatre in 1833 for a more lucrative field of endeavor, the establishment of a gas company. His last two years at the Camp Street Theatre had been financially distressing. According to Kendall, a cholera epidemic of 1832 had cost the city almost one-sixth of its population, and the effect upon business had been staggering.<sup>13</sup> Caldwell was out of the Camp Street Theatre only twelve months before he started planning a newer and greater theatre. Using revenues which the gas company made available to him to invest in any enterprise that appeared promising, Caldwell was able to build a new theatre, the St. Charles. In Kendall's History of New Orleans, he states that "no other playhouse in this country could compare with it in size or splendor of decoration."<sup>14</sup> This great structure, located at 102 St. Charles Street, was valued at \$350,000, with its chandelier alone worth \$10,750. This chandelier with 250 gas jets was twelve feet high and

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<sup>12</sup>Nelle Smither, English Theatre in New Orleans, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup>Kendall, History of New Orleans, II, 738.

thirty-six feet in circumference and weighed two tons. It was said that Caldwell used the new theatre to advertise his project, which was to illuminate the entire city by gas.<sup>15</sup>

Caldwell had justified his reentry into theatrical activity by declaring that the older Camp Street Theatre was inadequate for the increased population of New Orleans, and thus dramatic productions were falling into decay in the city which had been one of its principal strongholds. Large theatres had appeared in other cities in response to the changes which were in progress due to the acceptance of public entertainment. The size of the theatre had a great effect upon the type of plays presented and the style of acting used.<sup>16</sup> Caldwell's St. Charles Theatre met the newest demands of the dramatic productions.

The work at the St. Charles Theatre during Caldwell's management was virtually a reflection of English playhouse productions in London. Caldwell was English-born, and he tried to keep in contact with developments in his native land. The plays presented were in many instances the same simultaneously presented in London, and a large percentage of Caldwell's actors were English-trained.<sup>17</sup> For four years Caldwell provided entertainment as fine as that to be seen in

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<sup>15</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 113.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

the Park Theatre, the Bowery, Niblo's Garden and Richmond Hill Theatre of New York; the Chestnut, Walnut and Arch Street Theatres of Philadelphia; and the Boston, Tremont, and Warren Theatres of Boston. However, the financial panic of 1837, the depression which followed, and the destruction of the St. Charles by fire in 1842 constituted a series of blows from which Caldwell never recovered.<sup>18</sup> Caldwell was forced to relinquish his dominance of theatrical activity in New Orleans to Noah Miller Ludlow and Solomon Smith.

The gas company, which had provided Caldwell with its revenues to build the St. Charles, took possession of the property on which the St. Charles stood, now renumbered 436 St. Charles Street. The gas company then replaced the burned structure in 1843 "with one which would be measurably the equal of its predecessor."<sup>19</sup> When the second St. Charles was completed, its interior dimensions were seventy-nine feet, eight inches wide, a hundred and forty-nine feet, ten inches deep, with an elevation of fifty-three feet, four inches. The proscenium opening was thirty-nine feet, eight inches high and fifty feet wide, with the depth of the stage being sixty-one feet.<sup>20</sup> The dimensions of the St. Charles stage made it one of the most stageworthy theatres in the nation

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

at that time. The wide proscenium opening and the depth of the stage made it possible to handle any type of entertainment from animal acts in the variety shows to the elegant scenery of the legitimate stage. The St. Charles's proscenium can be compared to the proscenium of the O'Keefe Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, built in 1960, or the Pavilion of Los Angeles, California, built in 1964. The proscenium width of the O'Keefe Center can be adjusted from sixty feet to thirty-six feet, while the Pavilion proscenium varies from fifty-eight feet to thirty-six feet.<sup>21</sup> Then, as now, the size of the stage and the proscenium opening lent itself to more varied production styles.

The gas company leased the second St. Charles to Ludlow and Smith. The theatrical seasons at the St. Charles under the management of Ludlow and Smith were some of the most brilliant and lucrative in the history of the theatre. The stock company was large and capable, and it was the second St. Charles, according to Kendall, that "saw more famous actors on its stage than any other theatre in this country."<sup>22</sup> Junius Brutus Booth, Edwin Booth, Joe Jefferson, J. H. McVicker, W. J. Florence, Tom Placide, Charlotte Cushman,

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<sup>21</sup>Maxwell Silverman, Contemporary Theatre Architecture (New York, 1965), pp. 23, 33.

<sup>22</sup>Kendall, History of New Orleans, II, 738.

J. H. Hackett, Jenny Lind, Charles Kean, Edwin Forrest, and Fanny Ellsler were among the crowd of celebrities who trod its boards.<sup>23</sup>

Ludlow and Smith's ten-year regime at the St. Charles came to a close in 1853. Ludlow announced his decision to retire from theatrical business, thus causing Smith to bring his own career to a close. Both men had added materially to their fortune through their successful management of the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans.

Ben DeBar took over the management of the St. Charles Theatre after the retirement of Ludlow and Smith. He had come to America in 1835 to act in James H. Caldwell's company in the first St. Charles and eventually had become stage manager of the second St. Charles Theatre under Ludlow and Smith. "During the seven years which were to elapse before the Civil War broke out . . . Ben DeBar enjoyed a monotonous series of prosperous seasons, and grew rich and rotund and ever more amiable."<sup>24</sup> DeBar was prominent not only in theatrical and business circles, but in polite society as well. He was universally known and respected and had a host of friends and admirers in New Orleans; therefore, he was able to maintain a remarkably fine stock company to support the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 739.

<sup>24</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 294.

visiting stars year after year until the outbreak of the Civil War.

On April 12, 1861, the St. Charles Theatre was closed and did not reopen until January, 1864. Ben DeBar's business commitments in St. Louis were such that he could not leave the city; consequently, he entrusted the 1864-65 season of the St. Charles to Thomas Davey. Davey did not have a strong stock company, and the season was unsuccessful. DeBar returned to New Orleans for the 1865-66 season at the St. Charles, but the season was only moderately satisfactory. From 1864 to 1877, Ben DeBar struggled with the management of the St. Charles, but the challenge of the political, social, and economic system of the city prevented the citizens of New Orleans from concerning themselves with what went on in the theatres.<sup>25</sup> The theatrical decline finally depleted DeBar's private resources. He had acquired the St. Charles Theatre in 1865 from the gas company, which wanted to dispose of the property. He had paid only a small amount in cash, and the gas company retained a mortgage on the remainder. Because DeBar was unable to pay the interest on the mortgage, the gas company foreclosed on the St. Charles.

The theatre was auctioned off to Robert Strong, who had been employed by DeBar as an assistant in the business office of the St. Charles. Strong ran the St. Charles for two

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 496.

disastrous seasons, using inferior performers. Strong abandoned an attempt to rehabilitate the St. Charles, and on March 7, 1880, it was announced that David Bidwell had taken over the St. Charles's lease.<sup>26</sup> He had purchased the property from the New Orleans gas company and planned to manage it himself.

From the very founding of New Orleans, the city had been interested in cultural activities. With no hindering or binding religious restrictions, New Orleans citizens moved quickly to establish theatricals as a social and cultural amenity. The transfer of Louisiana to the United States actually accelerated dramatic activity in New Orleans. The resultant influx of Americans caused James H. Caldwell to establish English-speaking drama in New Orleans and to build a theatre, the St. Charles, to house it. Caldwell provided the public with the best actors, actresses, and plays to be had in this era. Because of the people's interest and because of Caldwell's cultivation of superb theatrical activities, drama continued to flourish in the second St. Charles Theatre. The St. Charles declined during the Civil War, and it was not until the time of David Bidwell's management that the theatre again thrived and competed with the best theatres in the country.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 551.

## CHAPTER II

### BIDWELL'S FIRST SEASONS IN THE ST. CHARLES

1880-1882

When David Bidwell took over the management of the St. Charles Theatre in 1880, he was not a newcomer to the theatrical world. He was first prominent in New Orleans's theatrical affairs in 1861. At that time he was one of a triumvirate managing a theatre called the Academy of Music.<sup>1</sup> Later, he became the exclusive owner of this theatre, planning to run the Academy and the St. Charles Theatre as one enterprise. He managed the two principal theatres of New Orleans so profitably that he was frequently referred to in the profession as the "Napoleon of Managers."<sup>2</sup> Bidwell established a sort of circuit on which he took complete theatrical companies, each specializing in one particular play and presenting it in a succession of cities. According to Kendall, in his History of New Orleans, Bidwell was the first in this country to develop the idea of a theatrical circuit.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Smith Kendall, The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre (Baton Rouge, 1952), p. 486.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 570.

<sup>3</sup>John Smith Kendall, History of New Orleans, II, 3 vols. (New York, 1922), 739.

He also established the matinee, which enabled him to operate his circus features at the Academy of Music at a profit. The matinees were for the benefit of women and children who could not go out unattended at night. Kendall states that Bidwell seemed destined to succeed in show business for he had a shrewd appreciation of the amusement requirements of the people.<sup>4</sup>

David Bidwell's perception of what the public's entertainment preference was had been developed in his youth. He was born in June, 1821, in the town of Streyvesant, New York. At the age of fourteen, he accepted a berth on his father's steamboat.<sup>5</sup> For eight years he worked during summers as a steward on his father's steamboat and through the winters as a ticket seller in the old-time theatres of New York. In both these jobs, David Bidwell came into contact with all classes and conditions of society. From these experiences, he developed an understanding of the needs and whims of the public.<sup>6</sup>

He finally gave up the river life and became a proprietor of a New York restaurant, but this venture lasted for only eighteen months. He then became associated with the Empire House, a noted hotel in New York, from 1843 through

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<sup>4</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 563.

<sup>5</sup>J. Curtis Waldo, Illustrated Visitor Guide to New Orleans (New Orleans, 1879), pp. 51, 52.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 563.

1846. It was at the end of 1846 that David Bidwell came to New Orleans to join his brother, Henry Bidwell, in a ship chandlery business. The brothers' firm prospered during the Mexican War by supplying the government with transports which ran to and from the port of New Orleans with troops and supplies for the United States Army in Mexico. They expanded their business and bought the Phoenix House, which adjoined one of New Orleans's theatres. The Phoenix was a saloon on St. Charles Street and had acquired its name because it had been built on a part of the site of the old St. Charles Theatre. The brothers decided to divide their business interests in 1852; the ship-chandlery house went to Henry and the Phoenix to David.<sup>7</sup>

The Phoenix, because of its nearness to the theatre, was frequented by actors and the young "men about town." David Bidwell drifted naturally into the theatrical business. He became associated with George Lawrason, a local investor, in building the Academy of Music. Lawrason owned the ground, and Bidwell contributed the money for the construction of the building.

Bidwell had been affiliated with the Academy of Music for nineteen years before he bought the St. Charles. Kendall said that every man, woman, and child in New Orleans who had an interest in public amusements knew Bidwell personally.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 564.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 570.

The ownership and management of the St. Charles was a business investment in which David Bidwell was confident of further success. Bidwell wanted to de-emphasize the circus feature of the Academy of Music and promote drama. The St. Charles was to be his means for bringing the drama to the public.

Before David Bidwell took over the management of the St. Charles from Robert Strong, who had bought the St. Charles in an auction from the gas company that foreclosed on Ben DeBar, several engagements had been scheduled by Strong. These engagements were allowed to perform as scheduled, and then the theatre was closed until the following announcement of Bidwell's ownership appeared in the Picayune. "On Thursday next the St. Charles Theatre, under the management of Mr. David Bidwell, will open for the introduction to the public, of the wonderful Midgets General Mite and Major Atom."<sup>9</sup> The midgets were said to be the smallest human beings of their age in the known world. They were scheduled for the remainder of the season, for it was too late in the 1879-1880 season for Bidwell to make many changes.

Before the 1880-1881 season, the St. Charles received a complete renovation as part of the plan to draw the public to the old theatre. The Picayune records the following:

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<sup>9</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 7, 1880.

Mr. David Bidwell, who has managed and been connected with the amusement of this city for a quarter of a century, felt so confident of good business that he purchased the old St. Charles Theatre outright and will keep both that and the Academy of Music open to the public the coming season. The St. Charles, now in the hands of carpenters and painters, will have the appearance of being an entirely new theatre on the opening night.<sup>10</sup>

On October 30, 1880, before the actual season opened, Bidwell held open house for friends and reporters. The Picayune review was as follows:

Outside, the theatre retains its old shape, while it is dressed in new paint and ornamented with novel gas fixtures and glass globes, made and lettered for the purpose used. Passing through the street doors the spectator, long used to the old theatre of Ben DeBar's time, is filled with wonder and admiration at the transformation with the dingy, time-worn old edifice of the past to the magnificent dramatic temple of the present. Roomy space and comfort is everywhere the distinguishing feature of the establishment. The vestibule by the box-office is eighty feet long--covering the entire width of the building--by fifteen feet in width. In the center where the old box-office stood is now a wide passageway leading directly to the parquette. On each side of the parquette entrance are stairways leading to the "dress circle," back of which are the stair landings with ample room for passage to the vestibule; the family circle and gallery ticket office is on the right. The decorative painting and gilding in the vestibule is rich and beautiful, maroon, red, orange, and gold colors, prevailing while the ceiling is ornamented in the prevailing style of Egyptian and Japanese devices . . . The stairs are richly carpeted and an entrance to the parquette is covered with jute carpeting, made here. The double stairway leading to the family circle stairs, on either side of the parquette entrance, are handsomely carved, and are surmounted by elegant Japanese vases, of a novel pattern supporting the gas brackets

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<sup>10</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, September 1, 1880.

and tasteful illuminated globes. While the general shape of the auditorium has not been altered, the decorations and new chairs have made a complete transformation in the appearance of the interior. Folding opera chairs, of the largest size ever made for a theatre, of the latest improved pattern, have been placed in the parquette, dress circle, and family circles. The private boxes on each side of the stage are tastefully draped with lace curtains, and hung with figured blue damask lambrequins. The front of the dress circle has been surrounded with an open work iron balustrade between which and the first row of chairs is ample room for persons to pass while others are seated. In fact, there is ample room between all the rows of chairs in the house. The only blemish in the appearance of the reconstructed theatre is the old ceiling which remains over the parquette. Another season will see the St. Charles with a new arched dome, and it will then be one of the handsomest theatres in the United States. It is now one of the most comfortable and convenient for seating, hearing, and seeing. While everything had been done for the comfort and pleasure of visitors to the St. Charles, something had been accomplished for the convenience of performers on the stage in the way of fitting up new dressing rooms. Much great praise is due to the veteran manager, David Bidwell, who has had the nerve to purchase outright the old St. Charles Theatre property, and spend twenty thousand dollars of hard money the first season in making his theatre an honor to the city and a credit to the drama. His works, a confidence in the future prosperity of New Orleans, and his enterprise richly deserves public patronage and success.<sup>11</sup>

David Bidwell's keen business sense was evident from this review. He had taken the famous old St. Charles Theatre and refurbished it, making it pleasing to look at and comfortable for the patrons, as well as providing new dressing rooms for the stars. After appealing to the public by remodeling the St. Charles, he had to devise a schedule to

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<sup>11</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 31, 1880.

keep its patronage. He arranged engagements with a broad array of talent that would appeal to all tastes in the theatre to cover twenty-two weeks of the first season. The engagements acquired before the season began were announced in the Picayune:

Strakosch and Hess's English Opera Company with Marie Rose and other prominent artists.  
 Maurice Grau's French Opera and Opera Bouffe Company, with some new artists and the latest opera.  
 The Alice Oates Comic Opera Company.  
 M. B. Leavitt's New London Burlesque Company.  
 M. B. Leavitt's Specialty Company with thirty variety artists.  
 M. B. Leavitt's Female Minstrel Combinations.  
 Meade and Maginley's Dramatic Combinations, playing John Habberton's new comedy called "Deacon Crankett."  
 Mr. E. E. Rice's Bijou Opera Company.  
 Jarrett and Rice's Comedy Combination making "Fun on the Bristol."  
 James A. Herne's "Hearts of Oak" Combination.  
 Miss Annie Pixley in "M'liss," supported by McDonough and Fulford's Dramatic Comedy.  
 Mr. Milton Nobles in his peculiar dramatic creations.  
 H. B. Mahn's English Opera Company, producing Von Suppe's "Boccaccio."  
 Mr. Oliver Byron with dramatic company.  
 Professor Hermann, the magician, with a novelty company of grotesques.  
 Haverly's new minstrel organization.<sup>12</sup>

The Picayune's comment on the announced season was, "This is a strong array of attractions, selected with a great care by the shrewd manager with a view to please all classes of amusement seekers and great hopes of a successful season are

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<sup>12</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, September 12, 1880.

entertained."<sup>13</sup> Sunday, October 31, was the Grand Opening of the St. Charles. Bidwell, a week in advance, ran this announcement in the newspaper to advertise the new opening:

Bidwell's New  
St. Charles Theatre  
David Bidwell Proprietor and Manager  
Grand Opening  
Sunday, October 31, 1880

Of this noble and spacious Temple of Music and Drama which has been entirely remodeled, refitted and redecorated, thoroughly ventilated and modernized.

1,880 large, elegant and comfortable opera chairs, manufactured expressly for the Theatre, from the latest patterns. The largest chair ever placed in this country.

The entrances and exits are ample and easy. The great size of this famous theatre, in connection with ample improvements and its celebrated acoustics place it at once in the front rank as the Largest, Finest, and Best Opera House in the City.

For the opening the Manager has engaged and will bring to New Orleans, at great expense for one week only,

Tapliapietra  
Grand Italian Opera Company,

embracing sixty members including the following distinguished artists: M'lle Maria Litta, M'lle L. B. Ross, Miss Mathilde Phillips, Signor Baldanza, Signor Fillippi, Signor Papini, Signor Gottscahlf, M'lle Anna Rossetti, M'lle W. Zelma, M'lle Girard, Signor Ugo Talbot, Signor Tagliapieta, Signor Cravelli, Signor Barbernas, Cermeri, Tasie, etc. Signor Aubert Conductor; Signor Ernestor Abbiati, Stage Director; and a Grand Chorus and Orchestra. The only Grand Italian Opera Company that will travel in America, and the only one that will visit New Orleans this season.

Tickets for the opening will be the Dress Circle

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

and Parquette \$1, Family Circle Opera Chair 50¢, Gallery 25¢, and Private Box \$10.

During the week the following operas will be given: "Lucia di Lammermoor," "Il Trovatore," "La Favorita," "Faust," "Martha," "Lucrecia Borgia," and Rossini's masterwork, "William Tell."

The above operas will be produced with an extra-ordinary strong cast, complete in every detail with new costumes for each opera. Box Office will open Thursday, October 28, 1880.<sup>14</sup>

David Bidwell faced his first complete season at the St. Charles with the knowledge that it had not had a successful season since 1861. The season before the Civil War saw the heaviest and most profitable trade the city had ever had. Two-thirds of this business was lost by the merchants during the war and not regained afterward, for the railroads had taken the place of river trade, for which New Orleans depended.<sup>15</sup> The suspension of commerce had greatly increased the number of poor in New Orleans, and the situation was made worse by the large number of Negroes who fled to New Orleans after their freedom. These poor had to be fed; the money was obtained in fines and assessments levied on the banks, corporations, property owners and even on private individuals for assistance given by them to the Confederate cause. These fines, assessments, and taxes were levied by "carpetbaggers" from the North, who took over the management of New Orleans

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<sup>14</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 24, 1880.

<sup>15</sup>Henry Rightor, Standard History of New Orleans (Chicago, 1900), pp. 566, 567.

and Louisiana affairs. A time of corruption, debt, and tyrannical rule followed.<sup>16</sup> It was not until 1876 that Louisiana citizens succeeded in electing their candidates.<sup>17</sup> Bidwell realized that the secession from the Union had had the effect of uniting for the first time the Creoles and the Americans. They had fought side by side for the South, and the rivalries which had persisted throughout the years between the two factions disappeared when they worked as a single unit to rebuild New Orleans.<sup>18</sup> Bidwell capitalized on the new social harmony by enticing both the Americans and the Creoles to attend his English-speaking theatre by offering opera, the oldest form of Creole entertainment, at the opening of the first season of the St. Charles under his management.

The season at the St. Charles Theatre was inaugurated October 31, 1880, by the appearance of the Tagliapietra Opera Company with the opera, Lucia di Lammermoor. On opening night the opera and the cast received an enthusiastic reception from a large audience. Miss Litta, the heroine, appeared in her strongest role, illustrating her flexible voice and her extensive register. She was acknowledged for her performance with a call before the curtain. The marriage

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>18</sup>Evans, New Orleans, p. 60.

scene in the second act was admirably sung, the quartet was enthusiastically encored, and the "mad" scene in the third act was fine, according to the review in the New Orleans Daily Picayune. The critic also stated that the orchestra performed creditably and that the debut of the St. Charles under Bidwell could not have been better initiated than with the opera Lucia.<sup>19</sup> After the poor stock company of Ben DeBar and the inferior performers of Robert Strong, the good review and the audience response to the opera indicated that New Orleans was ready to support quality entertainment.

On the first of November, the same opera company performed Faust. For the Grand Opening, the theatre had capacity crowds, but the second performance had a small audience. Politics intervened, for the national election of 1880 was at hand.<sup>20</sup> The candidates for President of the United States were James A. Garfield, Republican, and General Winfield Scott Hancock for the Democrats.<sup>21</sup> To the people of New Orleans, politics still came first over entertainment. But even with a small audience, the review was again favorable to the cast of the Tagliapietra Italian Opera Company. The paper's comment on Miss Litta was that she was not

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<sup>19</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 1, 1880.

<sup>20</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 2, 1880.

<sup>21</sup>T. Harry Williams, Richard N. Current, and Frank Freidel, A History of the United States Since 1865 (New York, 1960), p. 125.

"ravishingly beautiful, but the good Lord has endowed her with 'an angelic voice' which she uses with great skill."<sup>22</sup>

The following week, Miss Mathilde Phillips, sister of one of America's greatest contraltos, Adelaide Phillips, appeared in the opera La Favorita. La Favorita was given on two nights, November 2 and 3.<sup>23</sup> The operas Il Trovatore and William Tell were presented on Thursday and Friday, respectively.<sup>24</sup> Both were reported to have been splendid shows, although the performances had only fair attendance.<sup>25</sup>

Following the Tagliapietra Opera Company, the Alice Oates Comic Opera Company arrived to perform a musical called Long Branch.<sup>26</sup> Alice Oates played the lead in the play written for her by William Seymour. The Picayune said that "it is difficult for Miss Oates to follow in the steps of the Opera Company of the preceding week."<sup>27</sup> The attendance was again poor, with an array of empty seats.

The next attraction was M. B. Leavitt's Rentz-Santly Novelty and Burlesque Company. The show opened with a minstrel scene, went into specialty acts by individuals, and finished with a burlesque, "Penn's Aunt," starring Miss Lisa

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<sup>22</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 2, 1880.

<sup>23</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 3, 1880.

<sup>24</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, November 5, 1880.

<sup>25</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 5, 1880.

<sup>26</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, November 7, 1880.

<sup>27</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 9, 1880.

Weber; the individual specialty acts included an original song and dance, a skipping-rope dance, vocal gems, original sketches, a dance and clock-work jig, and a stump speech.<sup>28</sup> The Picayune's review stated that the "famous Rentz-Santly Novelty Company was a disappointment; . . ." and except for the first night, the audiences were small.<sup>29</sup>

The C. A. Watkins Dramatic Organization, supporting the tragic actress Miss Ada Gray, the next attraction for the St. Charles, presented the following plays given from Miss Gray's repertoire: East Lynne, Camille, The New Magdalen, Frou-Frou, and L'Article. After the week's schedule of plays, Miss Gray gave one performance of her most admired impersonations. Miss Gray was an excellent actress, but her supporting company was inadequate and the audiences were small.<sup>30</sup> The St. Charles Theatre closed for a week because no organization had been scheduled after the Watkins Dramatic Organization.

Activities resumed on December 13, with the Madison Square Theatre Company from New York. The company presented Steele MacKaye's play Hazel Kirke, a domestic drama, startling because of its naturalness and simplicity.<sup>31</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, November 14, 1880.

<sup>29</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 15, 1880.

<sup>30</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 29, 1880.

<sup>31</sup>Glenn Hughes, A History of the American Theatre (New York, 1951), p. 236.

play had just completed a week's run at the Academy of Music, but the ticket sale indicated that the people had not had enough of Hazel Kirke. Therefore, Bidwell transferred the play to the St. Charles, where the scenery and costumes could be shown to better advantage on the theatre's larger stage. Audiences continued to fill the theatre all week. The Daily Picayune reported that the "St. Charles finally had something worthwhile since its opening."<sup>32</sup>

James A. Herne and his company were scheduled at the St. Charles for the holiday season. The play to be presented was Hearts of Oak, written by Herne in collaboration with David Belasco. The play, based on an English original, was first entitled Chums, but was changed to Hearts of Oak.<sup>33</sup> James A. Herne and Frank E. Eiken, one of the more popular leading men in the country, won the admiration of the audiences. The play drew large crowds, with its new scenery and novel mechanical effects. The review given in the Daily Picayune on December 21 was duly appreciative:

"Hearts of Oak" met a full house at the St. Charles. This work . . . is in reality a domestic drama concerning honest, humble people, bred by the sea, and it readily appeals to the sympathies and understanding of all classes. The scenery is worthy of the theatre and many of the mechanical effects, such as the storm with moving clouds and real water for rain, the great mill in motion are

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<sup>32</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 14, 1880.

<sup>33</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 288.

genuine novelties. The Hearts of Oak is excellently played and is worthy of patronage.<sup>34</sup>

Christmas Eve, 1880, David Bidwell sponsored a "toy gift matinee," giving a gift to each child in the audience. The theatre was filled and so noisy that it was difficult to hear the performance of Hearts of Oak.

The week of December 27, 1880, M. B. Leavitt's English Burlesque Opera Troupe arrived to present Carmen, Orpheus, and La Fille du Tambour-Major.<sup>35</sup> The troupe was a large one with a number of talented performers, drawing a full house for each performance.<sup>36</sup> La Fille du Tambour-Major was splendidly costumed, and Orpheus was deemed a hit.<sup>37</sup>

Miss Annie Pixley, supported by McDonough and Fulford's Dramatic Company, was scheduled to present M'liss, Child of the Sierras on January 10. The announcement appeared in the January 8, 1881, St. Charles Theatre Programme. It stated that Annie Pixley "pleases especially by her singing, which is much superior to that generally heard on the dramatic stage. She is an actress of the Lotta School."<sup>38</sup> Miss Pixley was known for her pleasing voice, her hearty manner,

<sup>34</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 20, 1880.

<sup>35</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, December 27, 1880.

<sup>36</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 28, 1880.

<sup>37</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 4, 1881.

<sup>38</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, January 8, 1881.

and her beauty. She attracted a full house for her performances, even though her supporting company was weak.<sup>39</sup>

The Grand International Opera Company came to New Orleans to perform Carmen, William Tell, Mefistolfeles, Bohemian Girl, Il Trovatore, and Fra Diavolo in the St. Charles Theatre. On January 10, 1881, the St. Charles Theatre Programme announced the coming opera company and promoted it by saying,

It appeals to the interest of two classes-- those who appreciate and value musical art for itself and those who must go to the opera because it is fashionably in their way, and in some measure a social duty. Time was when the real lovers of opera--grown so by culture--were almost entirely debarred from its pleasures, the doors being closed against them by high prices of admission.<sup>40</sup>

The week began with Carmen, sung in English before a crowded house. The lead had difficulty in singing--for the language was unfamiliar to her, resulting in a cold reception from the audience.<sup>41</sup> William Tell was the performance staged on the following night. Weather conditions were blamed for the poor house. Mefistofeles recovered the loss suffered on the previous night by drawing an immense audience to hear and see Marie Roze sing the dual role of Margherita and Helen. She was honored by being called before the curtain twice. The Picayune said that the production was hampered by the

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<sup>39</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 11, 1881.

<sup>40</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, January 10, 1881.

<sup>41</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 18, 1881.

lack of suitable scenery, and the brass section of the orchestra overpowered the chorus, which had too few voices. Bohemian Girl followed the success of Mefistofeles, and it too was well received. The part of Arline, played by Abbie Carrington, was reported to have been "remarkably strong," and she received hearty applause for her role. In the same production that Abbie Carrington gained approval, Lizzie Annadale's Gypsy Queen was criticized for its lack of force and intensity.<sup>42</sup> Il Trovatore was inferior to the two previous performances. It was sung in English and lost much in the translation into English. For that reason, Il Trovatore was rated only as a "good" show.<sup>43</sup>

Saturday started the repeat performances of the company, with one new opera yet to be given Saturday night. Carmen was repeated for the Saturday matinee and Fra Diavolo was given on Saturday night, a good performance but not up to the standard of the other presentations.<sup>44</sup> Sunday, January 23, Abbie Carrington sang beautifully in a return performance of Bohemian Girl, and Mefistofeles was repeated to a full house on Monday.<sup>45</sup> The second presentation of William Tell brought a "grand performance" rating from the critic of the

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<sup>42</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 20, 1881.

<sup>43</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 21, 1881.

<sup>44</sup>New Orlenias Daily Picayune, January 22, 1881.

<sup>45</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 24, 1881.

New Orleans Daily Picayune.<sup>46</sup> Aida was added to the schedule on Wednesday, January 26, with Roze playing Aida. This opera was staged with magnificance and sung with great power.<sup>47</sup> Carmen was performed for a third time on Thursday, and Faust closed the run for the Grand International Opera Company of Max Strakosch and C. D. Hess. The series of operas, as a whole, had been most successful, with good reviews in the local newspapers and capacity crowds. The troupe, consisting of Marie Roze, Abbie Carrington, Lizzie Annadale, Miss Pressy, Hayden Filla, Mr. Gottschalk, Mr. Conly, Ostava Torriani, Miss Arcone, Mr. Byron, Mr. Carelton, F. E. Hall, Mr. Tilla, Mr. Howard, Laura Schirmer, and Mr. Perugine, was a well-trained group with well-trained voices. Their professional pride in what they were doing helped the troupe to have a successful run at the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans.<sup>48</sup>

On January 30, Oliver Doud Byron and his company arrived to present three plays.<sup>49</sup> The first play, Across the Continent, was presented on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday nights, with a Wednesday matinee. It had been performed for the first time in New Orleans on the St. Charles stage in 1873

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<sup>46</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 24, 1881.

<sup>47</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 26, 1881.

<sup>48</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 29, 1881.

<sup>49</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, January 30, 1881.

by Mr. Byron and, since that time, had been a favorite of the public.<sup>50</sup> This play originally had a double name, Home or Across the Continent, but Home was later deleted from the title. The play, as expected, brought a full house for each performance because it suited a large class of theatre-goers.<sup>51</sup> Ten Thousand Miles Away was presented Wednesday and Thursday nights and Saturday matinee. The opinion of the audience was that the play was a sensation. Bound to Succeed was presented for the audiences on Friday and Saturday nights. The audience found this society drama to be hilarious and felt its title indicated that it had a bright future before it.<sup>52</sup>

The following week the Jarrett and Rice Dramatic Company was scheduled to present the play Fun on the Bristol, or A Night on the Sound, but their train broke down enroute to New Orleans. The company was transferred to a riverboat, but it did not arrive in time to perform as scheduled on Tuesday night, February 8. The play opened one day late, on Wednesday, February 9, with a decided hit. The review from the Picayune said that "the play was clever and fun."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 538.

<sup>51</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 31, 1881.

<sup>52</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 5, 1881.

<sup>53</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 10, 1881.

Mr. Frederick Paulding was the next attraction on the St. Charles's stage.<sup>54</sup> He was to introduce one or two new plays from his repertoire, as well as give a short run of The Fool's Revenge.<sup>55</sup> Again, for the second consecutive week, the scheduled performance did not take place because the company did not arrive in time. The company finally reached the city by steamboat but could not unload and move to the theatre in time for the opening curtain. The performance was postponed until the following night, February 14. The company performed seven plays, with not one earning a good review. Paulding's antics were "grotesque" and "out of character" for Bertuccio in The Fool's Revenge; the troupe's supporting roles were "weak" in The Love of Life and The Merchant of Venice; the play Salviati was "terrible" and Paulding "overacted"; and Paulding was "overweighted by the character" of Hamlet.<sup>56</sup> These were a few of the terms used to describe the performances, indicating that the St. Charles did not have a successful week.

The St. Charles was once again filled when Milton Nobles and his company appeared in the productions of The Phoenix and Man of the People. Nobles was declared to be excellent,

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<sup>54</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, February 13, 1881.

<sup>55</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 13, 1881.

<sup>56</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 19, 1881.

with a capable supporting cast, Miss Jasie Batchelder, and Alonzo Schwartz.<sup>57</sup>

Professor Herrmann, a magician, followed Milton Nobles. Professor Herrmann's act consisted of Lorrella's doing a dance and acrobatic acts and Val Vose's entertaining with a ventriloquist act. The audiences were only of fair size, but the performers were well received.<sup>58</sup>

The following week, M. B. Curtis and his troupe appeared at the St. Charles in a play entitled Sam'l of Posen. Curtis and the play were a hit. The immense audience had given Curtis and his entire company such a hearty welcome that Bidwell seized the opportunity to make special arrangements to hold Curtis for an extra performance.<sup>59</sup> After Curtis completed his engagement, the St. Charles remained closed for a week.

Professor Seeman, another magician, reopened the St. Charles. David Bidwell and Professor Seeman had worked out a scheme to give away gifts during the magician's performance. This "gimmick" was to stimulate people to come to the St. Charles Theatre. At least seven gifts, consisting of silk dresses, gold watches, silver tea services and china

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<sup>57</sup>New Orleans Bee, February 19, 1881.

<sup>58</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 1, 1881.

<sup>59</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 8, 1881.

tea sets were given away at each performance.<sup>60</sup> The device was completely successful, for the magician and his gifts continued to fill the house until there was no standing room left. Extra seats were brought in and even the orchestra pit was filled. Professor Seeman remained at the St. Charles by popular demand for four weeks. A total of two hundred and six presents were given away during his performances.<sup>61</sup>

Professor Seeman ended his stay in the St. Charles by giving a benefit show for Mr. J. Kittredge, which closed the first season of the St. Charles Theatre under the management of David Bidwell. The Picayune summed up the first season as follows:

Bidwell can feel proud of his first season at the St. Charles Theatre, for this theatre under his management has just completed a prosperous run of twenty-one weeks. The St. Charles is truly one of the handsomest theatres of the South.<sup>62</sup>

On October 1, 1881, the St. Charles opened its door for the new theatrical season of 1881-1882. The season began with an appearance of the Mastodon Minstrels, an organization that had only been in existence one year, but it provided good entertainment and it filled the house for the first week.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, March 20, 1881.

<sup>61</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 11, 1881.

<sup>62</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 19, 1881.

<sup>63</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 2, 1881.

David Bidwell, after the success of M. B. Curtis and his play Sam'l of Posen from the previous season, rescheduled Curtis and his play for the 1881-1882 season. This engagement again met with success in the St. Charles. Sam'l of Posen continued for a week.<sup>64</sup>

The third week of the new season was devoted to the C. D. Hess Acme Opera Company. The company performed the light opera Olivette.<sup>65</sup> There was no one actor or actress who stood above the others, but, rather, a strong ensemble. Even the chorus was given an encore.<sup>66</sup> A new piece called The Mascotte was performed by the group in the second half of the week and, like Olivette, it was a success, drawing a review that stated, "the best part comes from the orchestra. The company does quite well and carries the work along smoothly giving a pleasing performance with rich costumes and fresh and tasteful scenery."<sup>67</sup>

The Humpty Dumpty Pantomime Company followed the Hess Acme Opera Company. The stars of this group were Alfred the Great and Misco, the pantomimic clown. The Picayune termed the show as "outstanding" with remarkable antics and escapades. The audience was loud in demonstrations of

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<sup>64</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 9, 1881.

<sup>65</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, October 16, 1881.

<sup>66</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 17, 1881.

<sup>67</sup>New Orleans Times Democrat, October 24, 1881.

appreciation.<sup>68</sup> The Humpty Dumpty Pantomime Company had one Saturday matinee just for children, and the theatre was filled. That Saturday night the company presented the melodrama called Corsican. Praise was given to both performances.<sup>69</sup>

In November, 1880, the M. B. Leavitt Rentz-Santly Novelty and Burlesque Company was a disappointment to its audience at the St. Charles. Bidwell engaged the troupe for another trial in November of 1881, and again the company failed to impress the audience. This year it had a female minstrel show, which the Picayune criticized for lack of wit and for presenting a performance that was inferior for a first-class theatre such as the St. Charles.<sup>70</sup> The Times Democrat went so far as to say, "We cannot advise or foretell crowded houses this week at the St. Charles."<sup>71</sup> The troupe tried to redeem itself by closing its engagement with a burlesque of Hazel Kirke, but that too failed.

The Widow Bedott Company arrived to perform the play Widow Bedott. Mr. C. B. Bishop played the role of Widow Bedott, and Mr. Sol Smith was Elder Sniffes. Although the play was said to be slightly exaggerated, it had a successful

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<sup>68</sup>New Orleans Times Democrat, October 31, 1881.

<sup>69</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 6, 1881.

<sup>70</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 7, 1881.

<sup>71</sup>New Orleans Times Democrat, November 7, 1881.

run "attended by the best of society which were kept in a state of beautiful mirth."<sup>72</sup>

Hearts of Oak by the James A. Herne Company returned to the St. Charles with its novel mechanical effects. The play was advertised as having elaborate and costly scenery, which consisted of a rolling surf, ocean, lighthouse in the distance, squall, signal, wreck of the Nantucket in full view of the audience, rescue, rainbow, interior of the old well, and the House of Teney and Chrystal. Even with all the special effects, including a real baby in the third act, the play was unable to fill the house.<sup>73</sup> On November 25, 1881, the Times Democrat review was that the play was "thoroughly charming. There is nothing in it of the tawdry claptrap which renders the world so distasteful to cultivated and intelligent people. It is true to life. Furthermore it is cleverly interpreted by competent and conscientious artists."<sup>74</sup> Neither the reviews nor the elaborate novel effects were enough to draw an audience.

After the Herne Company run, Baker and Farron arrived to present a play, Chris and Lena, or German Life on the Mississippi. They had a good opening night, but the audience dwindled; by Friday night the company changed its bill and

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<sup>72</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 15, 1881.

<sup>73</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 21, 1881.

<sup>74</sup>New Orleans Times Democrat, November 25, 1881.

presented a play called Foreigners or Up Salt Creek. This last production was a musical with marches and original songs, but it lacked a plot.<sup>75</sup>

Early in December the Crowley-Barton Opera Company arrived at the St. Charles with entertainment called Madame Favart. The Picayune stated that this production was a pleasant surprise for the audience, with its rich costumes, novel designs, and general splendor.<sup>76</sup>

The week of December 12 saw the return of the New York Madison Square Theatre Company and their play Hazel Kirke. According to the newspaper review, this year's production was in some respects better than the year before, but the Picayune stated that, "Our theatre goers need no advice when that delightful and affecting drama is presented."<sup>77</sup> On December 14, 1881, the New Orleans Times Democrat review read that the play "is beautiful, mounted, and is given with all the delicacy and taste its charming requirements demand. It is well worth seeing again and again, if only as an art study."<sup>78</sup>

Professor Baron Seeman, the Magician, had closed the 1880-1881 season with a smashing success for himself, for

<sup>75</sup>New Orleans Bee, November 27, 1881.

<sup>76</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 5, 1881.

<sup>77</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 11, 1881.

<sup>78</sup>New Orleans Times Democrat, December 14, 1881.

the St. Charles, and for David Bidwell. This year David Bidwell scheduled Professor Seeman for the 1881-1882 holiday season. He opened on December 17, with only a week scheduled for his run, but again the audience gave him such a fantastic reception that he remained until December 31. Gifts were again given away during his performances.<sup>79</sup>

Bidwell initiated the New Year with a comedy company called the Hyde and Behman's Comedy Company. They arrived on January 1, 1882, to present a comic creation called Muldoon's Picnic. According to the review in the Picayune, "there was running through the entertainment a coarseness which merits condemnation. There is nothing actually vulgar in the performance, yet the by-play and the rough unrefined action displayed are hardly fitted for a stage like that of the St. Charles."<sup>80</sup>

Frank Mayo and the play The Three Guardsmen, a romantic melodrama, opened at the St. Charles on January 8. Frank Mayo had been a member of the Lyceum stock company under the direction of Daniel Frohman, but Mayo had not really come into his own until he played in Frank Murdock's Davy Crockett. Since that time, he had become a noted and respected actor throughout the country.<sup>81</sup> Although Mayo's cast was

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<sup>79</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 18, 1881.

<sup>80</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 5, 1882.

<sup>81</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, pp. 237, 297.

supposedly extremely talented, they were "not up in their lines causing the performance to be passing fair."<sup>82</sup> On January 10, The Three Guardsmen was deemed "a good play but the manner in which it was acted would have caused the author, were he alive, to seek refuge in the nearest mad house."<sup>83</sup> After the troupe presented The Three Guardsmen, they presented Virginus. Neither of the plays was well attended.<sup>84</sup> On Wednesday night, Macbeth was given, with Mayo as Macbeth and Mrs. Davenport as his leading lady. Even though the play was excellent, the Picayune explained the small attendance as the result of not having a good performance of Macbeth for years.<sup>85</sup> The Thursday night performance was a play written for Edwin Forrest by Judge Conrad called Jack Cade. Friday night's performance was The Robbers, with Mayo in the lead. Saturday night Mayo performed the play for which he was famous, Davy Crockett. This was the only play that drew a large audience. Mayo had set out with his troop to perform any acceptable play, tragedy or comedy, in order to do something for the American drama.<sup>86</sup> Like Joseph Jefferson in Rip Van Winkle and James O'Neill in

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<sup>82</sup>New Orleans Times Democrat, January 9, 1882.

<sup>83</sup>New Orleans Times Democrat, January 10, 1882.

<sup>84</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 10, 1882.

<sup>85</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 12, 1882.

<sup>86</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 15, 1882.

The Count of Monte Cristo, Frank Mayo was identified with Davy Crockett, and the audience would not accept his portrayal of other roles. Frank Mayo's identity with one role and his troupe's incapability of performing the supporting roles resulted in poor attendance for their productions. Mayo and company closed their financially unsuccessful run at the St. Charles with Streets of New York.

After thirty years away from New Orleans, Mme Adelina Patti returned to perform in the St. Charles. Adelina Patti had started her career in 1851 in New Orleans when only eight years old and went on to become one of the greatest singers of all time.<sup>87</sup> Mme Patti was to give several performances of Faust at the St. Charles; she chose to split her performances, two the first week and two the following week. The critic from the Picayune was most impressed with Mme Patti but not with her supporting company. He wrote,

The perfection of singing and expression had been reached with Patti, who is the prima donna par excellence. Her voice was as sweet and fresh as a young girl's. She was received with the wildest enthusiasm. Her support falls below average with the exception of the orchestra. This fact was painfully evident in the second part of the program. In the garden scene from Faust, Mme Patti was the only singer in the quartette whose intonation was correct. Signor Nicholini has some very good ringing high notes, but usually sings one eighth of a tone below pitch. Signor Selvon, the baritone, sings with too much expression, overpowering himself and the audience.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>New Orleans Times Democrat, January 17, 1882.

<sup>88</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 18, 1882.

For Wednesday night, the largest audience to attend a performance in the St. Charles was reported by the critic, who recorded that "The show did not begin until eight thirty because of seating the audience. The performance was wonderful."<sup>89</sup> Opera had once again filled the St. Charles, with tickets selling for five dollars each.<sup>90</sup>

Since Mme Patti chose to split her performances between weeks, Bidwell brought Annie Pixley and her group to the St. Charles to perform on the nights that Mme Patti did not. The Daily States's critic stated that "Miss Pixley is one of the surest drawing cards in the dramatic profession and nowhere is her popularity greater than in New Orleans."<sup>91</sup> Annie Pixley had filled the house the year before with her play M'liss; and because of her popularity, Bidwell brought her back in a new play, Nora, written by George H. Jessup and William Gill. The play had four acts, drew a large crowd, but did not come up to the standard set by M'liss.<sup>92</sup>

The tremendous performances of Mme Patti and Annie Pixley were followed by the Haverly Mastodon Minstrels, which with forty members was billed as the largest organization of its type in existence. The only thing worthy of note about

<sup>89</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 20, 1882.

<sup>90</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 27, 1882.

<sup>91</sup>New Orleans The Daily States, January 24, 1882.

<sup>92</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 29, 1882.

this performance was that it was visited by the professional boxer, John L. Sullivan.<sup>93</sup>

Following the Minstrels was the Rice Surprise Party. The Rice Company presented Cinderella at School, never before seen in New Orleans. This play was written by Woolson Morse and had been a hit in Daly's Theatre in New York. Cinderella at School introduced a new style of entertainment, that of musical comedy. The critic of the Picayune had this to say about the new style:

Comic opera had worn out; burlesque was overdone; farce comedies no longer attracted. . . . Musical comedy is the move in the direction of an entertainment more refined than burlesque. . . . Because the house was not full does not mean that the show is not good.<sup>94</sup>

This quotation taken from the New Orleans Daily Picayune suggests that the critic was knowledgeable in the field of theatre arts and aware that a change was needed in drama. But because of tradition and newspaper reporting in itself, rarely did a critic get a chance to express his views or elaborate on his one- or two-word opinions of a performance.<sup>95</sup> On March 2, 1881, an article in the New Orleans Daily Picayune on the American journalist characterized him as one who

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<sup>93</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 9, 1882.

<sup>94</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 16, 1882.

<sup>95</sup>Brander Matthews, A Book About the Theatre (New York, 1916), pp. 321-334.

. . . must be ready to write a leading editorial, listen to merits of the "boss of Amazon Troup," write a half column "obituary," must be able to carry in his head anything in the paper for a week. He must know French and German and struggle through an Italian publication and must give an intelligent idea of the construction and motive of a play.<sup>96</sup>

The critics were reporters who usually had to report on more topics than just the theatre, and this caused them to write under pressure and limitations of time and space, resulting in reviews some of which were careless, perfunctory, and cruel. Occasionally, however, they were careful, conscientious and clever. From the reviews recorded in the local New Orleans newspapers, there is no way of knowing if the critic had experience in drama, literature, acting, or theories of production; however, as a reporter, he probably was making statements in terms of the present, based on what he had viewed of the past. According to George Jean Nathan, this was basically what play reviewing was.<sup>97</sup>

The Rice Company went on to perform The Mascot, which was well received; The Babes in the Woods, a burlesque hit; Billie Taylor, a crowd winner bringing in a full house; and Patience, the Gilbert and Sullivan opera--which also played to a full house. The cast of the Rice Company was composed of Henry E. Dixey, Irene Perry, Eugene Clark, Ed A. Alken, George A. Schiller, Walter West, Rose Temple, Hamilton

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<sup>96</sup>New Orleans Times Picayune, March 2, 1881.

<sup>97</sup>George Jean Nathan, The Critic and the Drama (New York, 1922), p. 134.

Nicholis, Carrie Perkins, Jennie and Jessie Calef, Lulu Cambell, Minnie Flagg, Lizzie Richelle, Annie Waynn, and Annie King.<sup>98</sup>

Whereas the Oliver Doud Bryon Company had been sensational the year before at the St. Charles, it was not a success in the 1881-1882 season. It followed the Rice Surprise Party and did not attract the public. As before, they gave the plays Across the Continent and Ten Thousand Miles Away.<sup>99</sup>

On March 9, 1882, Frank Mordaunt played Captain Morline Weathergage in Robert Griffin's Old Shipmates. Since it was the two-hundredth performance of the play, souvenirs were given out at the door, drawing a fair crowd.

The Humpty Dumpty Pantomime Troupe returned to the St. Charles on March 12, after having played in St. Charles with considerable success the fourth week of the new season. As before, large audiences attended the matinee and evening performances.<sup>100</sup> On March 19, J. H. Haverly's Spectacular Pageant presented Michael Strogoff, a spectacle which had three hundred people on stage at one time. The play was called the dramatic hit of the season, and the troupe was invited by Bidwell to remain a week longer than originally

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<sup>98</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 16, 1882.

<sup>99</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 3, 1882.

<sup>100</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 12, 1882.

planned. The troupe changed its presentation for the second week from Michael Strogoff to the new ballet, Nymph and the Slave.<sup>101</sup> The troupe ended its run at the St. Charles with an overflowing benefit performance given for Mr. J. Kittredge, the treasurer of the St. Charles Theatre.

Bidwell's season ended with the Spectacular Pageant, but the St. Charles remained open for a benefit performance given for the Relief Committee, a civic organization dedicated to helping those in need. Bidwell had given the St. Charles and his staff's services free so that the Charles E. Ford Opera Company and the Citizens Relief Committee could present The Colonel and the second act of Olivette. The Ford Opera Company had given its time also in order to give the gross receipts to the Relief Committee. All the tickets were sold, but the house was only half filled.<sup>102</sup> This marked the close of the 1881-1882 season at the St. Charles Theatre and the first two seasons of Bidwell's management.

No definite pattern of theatrical activity in the form of entertainment offered or audience demands can be drawn from the first two seasons at the St. Charles Theatre. All forms of entertainment were offered and appealed to all theatrical tastes, but attendance was erratic. However, reliance on opera can be seen from the first season.

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<sup>101</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 25, 1882.

<sup>102</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 16, 1882.

Bidwell had chosen to initiate his new management of the St. Charles with the Tagliapietra Grand Italian Opera Company, followed during the first season by the Grand International Opera Company, the Alice Oates Opera Company and M. B. Leavitt's English Burlesque Opera Company. Some seventeen operas were given in the first season, with many of them presented two and three times. The operas consistently received good reviews in the newspapers and generally were well-attended by appreciative audiences. But the first season's emphasis on opera was not followed in the second season, when only seven operas were presented by the Hess Acme Opera Company, Crowley Barton Opera Company, M'me Adelina Patti and her company and Charles E. Ford Opera Company. There is no apparent reason for the opera decline. One can only surmise that the change was made for three reasons: first, Bidwell had relied on the successful history of opera from the very founding of New Orleans to reinstate the St. Charles Theatre; second, New Orleans currently had one theatre offering opera--the Grand Opera House--and, since he had acquired the St. Charles to promote dramatic productions, Bidwell's interest lay in finding the dramatic likes and dislikes of the audience; and third, large operas cost much more to produce than smaller dramatic productions.

The dramatic productions of the first two seasons under Bidwell introduced plays and actors who had established or were to establish themselves in the pages of history.

Hazel Kirk, written by Steele Mackaye, was first produced February 4, 1880, in Madison Square Theatre. In December of that same year Bidwell had it scheduled for the St. Charles. Hazel Kirk evolved into one of the most popular plays of its time.<sup>103</sup> The author, Steele Mackaye, is noted for his innovations in the theatre more than his contribution to drama. Hearts of Oak was also first produced in March, 1880, in Chicago. Bidwell booked the play in December of the same year.<sup>104</sup> James A. Herne collaborated on several plays but continued to make his largest contribution to acting. Hearts of Oak and James A. Herne both grew in popularity. Annie Pixley, a name not found in every American theatre history book, was quite popular in the 1880's. She drew a crowd for her performances and respected reviews from the newspapers. Sam'l of Posen, acted by M. B. Curtis, played in New Orleans in 1881, the same year it made its debut. The play was a success, and Curtis continued to repeat it for years. Frank Mayo, as already stated, created the role of Davy Crockett and became famous with the role and with the play, as Joseph Jefferson did with Rip Van Winkle. It is not known how David Bidwell chose his attractions for the St. Charles, but the fact that he booked new plays that later became popular indicates that Bidwell was progressive. He wanted to keep

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<sup>103</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama (New York, 1927), p. 126.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

up with the times by offering the newest attractions to the city of New Orleans.

The value of the newspaper reviews of the New Orleans critics is questionable. Genuine dramatic criticism was rarely seen in the newspapers of New Orleans. The reports seem to suffer under a traditional restraint. "Criticism is more of a report, tinged with partiality to the 'show' than a candid expression on the virtues and vices of the performance and the work of the players."<sup>105</sup> It cannot be determined if one person was assigned to the theatres or a rotation method was used. Nor is it established that the critic actually knew what constituted a good or poor performance. But, because the newspaper is the only source of information and because New Orleans was a leader in pre-Civil War opera and drama, an assumption can be made that from past experience the critic was relatively accurate in his critiques. Because the critic was not allowed by the tradition of news reporting to express himself fully, it is necessary to accept many one-word critiques.

David Bidwell's judgment cannot really be questioned as a theatrical manager. He had taken over the ownership and management of the St. Charles at a period in history when it was nothing but an old, run-down building offering low-class entertainment. The St. Charles Theatre had been without a

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<sup>105</sup>Rightor, Standard History, p. 284.

successful season since the outbreak of the Civil War, nineteen years prior to 1880. In undertaking the new business venture, Bidwell knew he could appeal to the public by bringing honor to New Orleans by having one of the most beautiful and comfortable theatres in the country. This he succeeded in doing by redecorating the old theatre before the opening of its first season. Bidwell realized that once the newness of the redecorated theatre wore off, he needed a variety of dramatic entertainment that would appeal to all types of theatre-goers in order to determine just what the public wanted. These were augmented by matinees, toy gift performances, and give-away programs for adults. The first two seasons, then, were experimental seasons to find out just what would bring success to the St. Charles and its manager.

### CHAPTER III

#### EMPHASIS ON DRAMATIC PRODUCTIONS,

1882-1885

The 1882 season opened at the St. Charles with emphasis on dramatic offerings. The theatre opened with a new drop curtain. The scene painted on the curtain showed a little old town of Germany with its grand castle, trees, a good sun, and delicate cloud effects in detail.<sup>1</sup> The curtain was first opened for the play Joe Thatcher's Revenge by John Habberton. Edwin Booth had achieved immense popularity in the lead role when the play had its run in the Booth Theatre in New York. Joseph F. Wheelock, who played the supporting role to Booth, took the lead for the performance in the St. Charles.<sup>2</sup> The play opened on October 16, 1882, with a good performance which was well attended, but, after the official opening of the season, the play failed to draw an audience.

Following the failure of Joe Thatcher's Revenge, a company from the East arrived to perform in a play called Money Bags. This play was adapted by J. W. Shannon from a German play called Gelt Socke. For the second straight engagement of

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<sup>1</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 15, 1882.

<sup>2</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 16, 1882.

the 1882-1883 season, the house was not filled.<sup>3</sup> But the failure of the first two attempts to entertain the audiences at the St. Charles was changed to success by the musical comedy, Fun in a Boarding School, written by Charles P. Brown. The review verifies the pleasure which the audience received from the musical. "There was no plot. It was just a play for fun."<sup>4</sup> In spite of the hot weather, it opened on October 29 to a lively, laughing audience.

Miss Jeffrey Lewis appeared in the next attraction at the St. Charles in David Belasco's La Belle Russe. The Daily Picayune said that Miss Lewis "made an impression on the audience but it was unpleasant to refined eyes, for the play was wicked but then its wickedness was what made the play more attractive."<sup>5</sup> The company was labeled excellent and continued to play for a week.

There was one more dramatic production, Edgewood Folks, starring Sol Smith Russell, before the Charles E. Ford Opera Company arrived to perform a number of operas.<sup>6</sup> The Ford Opera Company started its engagement with the Merry War on November 16. It was this company that had closed the 1881-1882 season with a benefit performance in the St. Charles,

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<sup>3</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 23, 1882.

<sup>4</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 30, 1882.

<sup>5</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 7, 1882.

<sup>6</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 13, 1882.

given for the New Orleans Relief Committee. The critic for the New Orleans Picayune reported that the company was equal to last season's or perhaps even better. The first opera was received by a very appreciative audience, but later in the same week, Olivette was said to be only fairly good, and Mascotte was not good at all.<sup>7</sup> The Black Cloak was staged as a benefit performance, ending the schedule of the Ford Company's appearances. This benefit attracted a larger audience than had any of the operas performed on the previous nights.<sup>8</sup> After the closing of the Ford Opera Company, the St. Charles remained dark for a week, no troupe having been engaged to fill it.

The theatre reopened with the Madison Square Theatre Company of New York. For the third consecutive year the company came to the St. Charles to present a drama. This year's drama was Esmerald, a play written by Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett in collaboration with William Gillette. This was a rather sentimental play of family life, set partly in North Carolina, but chiefly in Paris. It represented one of the earliest attempts at dramatizing the "folk" of the Carolina mountain region. As in previous seasons, the Madison Square Theatre Company did fine business while at the St. Charles.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 27, 1882.

<sup>8</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 2, 1882.

<sup>9</sup>New Orleans Bee, December 11, 1882.

Frank Mayo met defeat in New Orleans in the 1881-1882 season. Except for his well-known version of Davy Crockett, the public had not attended his productions the previous year. Mayo, despite the record of the year before, returned to New Orleans with a company of artists under the management of Sheridan Corbyn. For his opening night, he played to a large audience in Davy Crockett. Again, the audience dwindled throughout the remainder of the week until Streets of New York had only a fair attendance.<sup>10</sup>

On December 24, the Vienna Comic Opera Company arrived with its star, Marie Geistinger, to entertain during the holiday season. They presented Donna Juanita, Light Cavalry, La Belle Galatea, Boccaccio, The Bat, Fatinitza, La Grand Duchesse, La Vie Parisienne, Trompette, and Three Pairs of Shoes over a two-week period.

Donna Juanita opened to a small but enthusiastic audience, followed by Trompette and Boccaccio, which were sung in German. "The troupe made a favorable impression on the music loving people of New Orleans, for they felt that an opera troupe thoroughly organized and perfectly drilled had arrived."<sup>11</sup> The highlight of the whole schedule, according to the Picayune, came on the night that The Bat was performed. The reported stated,

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<sup>10</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 23, 1882.

<sup>11</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 24, 1882.

The Geistinger Vienna Comic Opera Company, to use an expression of the street, was "caught on." The audience was represented last night by the wealthiest and best Germans of the city. The opera was a happy combination of comedy and music. Madame Geistinger was elegantly costumed, and sang and acted with the skill of a trained artist.<sup>12</sup>

The Vienna Comic Opera Company concluded the first week of production with the presentation of Fatinitza, which was "strongly cast" and "correctly costumed."<sup>13</sup> Three Pairs of Shoes, in which Marie Geistinger played the part of four characters, began the second week. The second week consisted of repeat performances of Donna Juanita, which was the best performance the troupe had given thus far during its engagements, The Bat, Boccaccio, and Trompette.<sup>14</sup> On Friday night a benefit was given for Marie Geistinger, who for two weeks had been gaining the admiration of the people of New Orleans. When the announcement appeared that a benefit would be given for Madame Geistinger, people rushed to buy tickets in order to show their appreciation for her talents. The tickets were completely sold out before Friday, a rarity in the St. Charles Theatre and in New Orleans. Miss Geistinger chose La Belle Galatea and Our Hussars for her benefit, which brought the comment from the press that she had been at her

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<sup>12</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 28, 1882.

<sup>13</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 29, 1882.

<sup>14</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 2, 1883.

best all week, but the benefit was superb.<sup>15</sup> Two more shows were given before the troupe left the St. Charles. On the final night of the Vienna Comic Opera Company, a benefit was given for Adolph Link, the comedian of the troupe.<sup>16</sup> Marie Geistinger and the whole troupe left New Orleans knowing they had won the respect of the New Orleans theatre people.

On Sunday, January 7, the following announcement appeared in the paper:

M'me Christine Nilsson, the eminent songstress, sings at the St. Charles Theatre next Tuesday and Thursday nights and Saturday afternoon. She is surrounded by a talented troupe of vocalist and instrumental performers and the sale of seats indicates that large and fashionable audiences will be present at each concert. Nilsson stands next only to M'me Patti in the musical world today. Nilsson is the Jenny Lind of the present time. . . . It is better to hear Nilsson once than to see a negro minstrel show three times.<sup>17</sup>

This appearance was Christine Nilsson's first in New Orleans. Large enthusiastic audiences attended the three concerts, showering her with floral arrangements. Hundreds rose at one point and cheered to acknowledge her magnificent performance.<sup>18</sup> On January 10, 1883, the Daily Picayune published this statement:

Christine Nilsson is a great singer whose voice has conquered the most critical in this and

<sup>15</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 6, 1883.

<sup>16</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 9, 1883.

<sup>17</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 7, 1883.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

the Old World. Simplicity and goodness, with a face heavenly as human, are among the greatest charms of Nilsson. The audiences would not let her go. She acted, sang, and seemed to feel and to make her audiences feel her songs. The tones varied by her were flute like and pure; they died upon her lips, and dying so must have gone direct to heaven.<sup>19</sup>

Brooks and Dickson's production of The World followed the concerts of M'ne Nilsson. The World was a spectacular drama. The critique stated,

It has been a wonderfully successful play, not from the particular merit it possesses as a literary work, but because it has a few catching scenes that have taken the public eye. The large stage at the St. Charles Theatre affords ample room for the working of the elaborate scenes.<sup>20</sup>

The success of this play indicated that the people of New Orleans would patronize good entertainment in any form at the St. Charles, for operas, concerts, and dramas in succession had attracted large attendance.

M. B. Curtis and the play Sam'l of Posen were no strangers to the St. Charles by 1883. Even though Mr. Curtis had played in the St. Charles during two previous seasons in the play, it still drew large family-type crowds.<sup>21</sup>

Tickets were sold two weeks in advance for the English beauty, Lily Langtry, and her company. The promotion in New Orleans for The Honeymoon, An Unequal Match, As You Like It,

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<sup>19</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 10, 1883.

<sup>20</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 14, 1883.

<sup>21</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 24, 1883.

and She Stoops to Conquer had stressed Mrs. Langtry's beauty but not her acting.<sup>22</sup> The critic expressed his views of Mrs. Langtry's opening night in New Orleans as a "field day for the curious, those who make up the great throng of people who run after everything and anything novel and out of the usual way."<sup>23</sup> In the play The Honeymoon the critic from the Picayune said that her costumes were beautiful and "displayed her exceedingly graceful figure to advantage. The classic shape of Mrs. Langtry's head is one of her strong points, and the Langtry coiffure should be adopted only by women with pretty heads."<sup>24</sup> The productions as a whole were labeled as "ordinary amateur performances"; therefore, "the Langtry excitement died a natural death" by the last night.<sup>25</sup> The decreasing audience by the end of the week indicated that the people of New Orleans wanted quality entertainment and would not support inferior attractions that did not come up to their standard.

Lily Langtry completed her engagement before Mardi Gras celebration. Whitley's Hidden Hand Company was signed to fulfill this particular week. This group had been put together solely for the purpose of putting this one piece of

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<sup>22</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 25, 1883.

<sup>23</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 30, 1883.

<sup>24</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 1, 1883.

<sup>25</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 4, 1883.

work on the stage. Appearing in the Picayune was the article that related that "Hidden Hand does not appear to be appreciated at this theatre. The donkey is good, the pony clever but the actors are unknown to fame and their work is very crude."<sup>26</sup> It started off with good audiences but could not sustain its attraction through the week.

The theatre reopened after one week for the engagement of Annie Pixley in Zara, a new play written for her by Fred Marsden. After having two successful appearances at the St. Charles, it was predicted that she would be the strongest attraction of the season.<sup>27</sup> The press review after the first performance of Zara said that

Annie Pixley, more than any other actress, carried her audience with her. Her hearers laugh when she laughs; when she sings, they lean forward and open their mouths . . . She is a much better singer and a better actress than when she first came here in M'liss.<sup>28</sup>

As predicted, the theatre was filled for each performance.<sup>29</sup>

Opening on the 25th of February was the Kiralfy Brothers Company in The Black Crook, a spectacular drama which had become the sensation of the 1860's. This play, according to Hughes, provided the inspiration for burlesque.<sup>30</sup> It had

<sup>26</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 7, 1883.

<sup>27</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 15, 1883.

<sup>28</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 16, 1883.

<sup>29</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 19, 1883.

<sup>30</sup>Glenn Hughes, A History of the American Theatre 1700-1950 (New York, 1951), pp. 199-308.

been produced at the St. Charles during the DeBar management, and at that time people "professed to be scandalized at the display of feminine pulchritude which was the chief feature of the play . . . but they flocked to the theatre to see just how wicked the allegedly wicked entertainment was."<sup>31</sup> David Bidwell acquired exclusive regional performance rights for The Black Crook in 1873 and toured his section with a large organization giving performances of the play.<sup>32</sup> In 1883, after an absence of some years, the "pictorial, romantic, supernatural, musical, beautiful, baldheaded old original" was brought back to the St. Charles.<sup>33</sup> The ownership had changed over the years for now the Kiralfys held exclusive rights to The Black Crook. The St. Charles was filled to capacity, with many standing throughout the performances.<sup>34</sup> The old play had not lost its appeal.

Sunday night ended the regular dramatic season at the St. Charles with the annual benefit given for the St. Charles treasurer, Mr. J. Kittredge. The St. Charles Theatre did not close at that time, for on March 5, the Midgets, General Tom Thumb, his wife, and an entire company of "refined" artists came to New Orleans. Because they had

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<sup>31</sup>John Smith Kendall, The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre (Baton Rouge, 1952), p. 515.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 570

<sup>33</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 25, 1883.

<sup>34</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 28, 1883.

been constantly turning people away from their performances, David Bidwell booked them for a two-week period. The theatre was packed to its 3,800 seating capacity to see and hear Chinese songs and dances, Dutch impersonations, magicians, a ventriloquist, stump speech, song and dance on parlor skates, and an exhibition of educated canary birds.<sup>35</sup> The Thumbs filled the St. Charles throughout their two weeks, closing on March 17, 1883. The last event in the St. Charles was a championship wrestling match between the American champion, Duncan C. Ross and Professor Bauer, champion from Europe. It was a best-two-in-three-falls in Greco-Roman style.<sup>36</sup>

The New Orleans Daily Picayune summed up the 1882-1883 season by stating, "The good attractions have been well patronized; the side shows have received blows in the neck."<sup>37</sup> Evidently the side show remark made by the critic referred to the Lily Langtry attempt to make a career on the stage when she had nothing to offer the public but her good looks and to Whitley's Hidden Hand production, which the critic said should have remained hidden. The statement made by the critic that the good attractions had been well patronized indicated that Bidwell again had put together a successful season for his public.

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<sup>35</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, March 7, 1883.

<sup>36</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 17, 1883.

<sup>37</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 18, 1883.

The 1882-1883 season ended in March as had the two previous seasons. This allowed Bidwell plenty of time to organize the entertainment for the following year. But before the opening of the 1883-1884 entertainment season at the St. Charles, Henry Ward Beecher, preacher and author, visited New Orleans for the first time. Beecher was, among other things, known for his statement, "God intended the great to be great and the little to be little."<sup>38</sup> Beecher claimed a laborer should be able to support a family on a dollar a day, unless he insisted on smoking and drinking beer. His first lecture in New Orleans was entitled "Reign of the Common People" and was given on Monday evening, October 9; on Tuesday, he lectured on "The Moral Use of Luxury and Beauty."<sup>39</sup>

J. H. Haverly's Spectacular Mastodon Minstrels officially opened the 1883-1884 season of entertainment under a new dome ceiling over the auditorium.<sup>40</sup> The minstrels, said to be among the best companies organized, performed a musical comedy sketch called The Princess of Madagascar. The minstrels opened the season with large crowds attending

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<sup>38</sup>T. Harry Williams, Richard N. Current, and Frank Freidel, A History of the United States to 1876 (New York, 1960), p. 61.

<sup>39</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 10, 1883.

<sup>40</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, October 31, 1883.

their productions. They entertained their audiences and were rewarded with frequent applause.<sup>41</sup>

During the run of the minstrels, two things of special note took place. The first was an announcement by David Bidwell that matinees during the remainder of the season were changed from Wednesday to Tuesday. This change was made to prevent the conflict with the matinees of the Academy of Music. The second was the invitation by David Bidwell to the visiting Fire Engineers to be guests of the management for the Wednesday night performance.<sup>42</sup> This was a very good public relations move on the part of Bidwell.

Louise Sylvester, with her play A Mountain Pink, was the next attraction of the season. The St. Charles Theatre Programme stated that "Miss Sylvester is one of the best actresses in the country and her character is an extremely interesting creation."<sup>43</sup> It was performed for a week and caught the interest especially of the gallery and dress circle. A copy of the song "A Mountain Pink" was given to each lady in the audience at both the Saturday performances.<sup>44</sup> This was another clever device of Bidwell's in that it gave special attention to the ladies.

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<sup>41</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 22, 1883.

<sup>42</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 23, 1883.

<sup>43</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, October 28, 1883.

<sup>44</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 1, 1883.

The first opera company to appear this season opened November 4.<sup>45</sup> It was the Duff Opera Company presenting Heart and Hand, Faust, Patience, and Lakme over a two-week period. This company surprised the critic of the Picayune, for he wrote, "Monday night's performance of Heart and Hand was an unexpected excellence and worthy of the price of admission."<sup>46</sup> Tuesday night his surprise lay in the fact "that a company organized to do comic opera could be equal to the demands of grand opera, Faust."<sup>47</sup> The other presentations were noted as "grand," "good," "fine," "excellent," and "better than one is accustomed to hearing from the Italian Grand Opera Companies."<sup>48</sup> All came up to the standard set by Heart and Hand and Faust, except for Lakme, which received a rebuff by the same critic. For this performance he said, "the treatment of the opera was fair, but should not be attempted by a traveling company, no matter how good they are."<sup>49</sup> Heart and Hand closed the remarkable engagement of the Duff Opera Company.

Carrie Swain appeared in Cad, the Tomboy after the opera company departed, but the excellence of the operas was

<sup>45</sup>The Crescent News Programme, November 4, 1883.

<sup>46</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 6, 1883.

<sup>47</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 9, 1883.

<sup>48</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 4-18, 1883.

<sup>49</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 12, 1883.

difficult to follow.<sup>50</sup> Even though the play opened to the largest house of the season, only a small audience came to see the show during the remainder of the week.<sup>51</sup>

The Charles E. Ford Comic Opera Company came to the St. Charles with a new repertoire consisting of Bluebeard, Rip Van Winkle, The Beggar Student, and Girola; or, The Miller's Bride. The company this year included Alice May, Manie Taylor, Louise Eissing, Genevieve Reynolds, Marie Bockwell, Sam Reed, Edward Chapman, Phillip Bronson, G. R. Bunting, and W. H. Kohule.<sup>52</sup> Bluebeard had a successful run, although it was said to be not opera at all but a burlesque. Rip Van Winkle was attended by only a fair audience. Edward Chapman played Rip Van Winkle and the newspaper account criticized his performance. "If there was any music in the score for Rip, it did not come through him."<sup>53</sup> The other plays for some unknown reason were not reviewed in the local newspapers.

Jane Eyre, with Charlotte Thompson in the lead role supported by George Leorock, was the next presentation at the St. Charles. Charlotte Thompson specialized in Jane Eyre, made her fortune, and spent most of her life on her

<sup>50</sup>The Crescent News Programme, November 18, 1883.

<sup>51</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 19, 1883.

<sup>52</sup>New Orleans Bee, November 24, 1883.

<sup>53</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 29, 1883.

plantation in Alabama and her country estate in New York State. Her grandmother was Clisbia Thompson, a distinguished actress in England. Her father was Lysander Thompson, also an English actor, who crossed the Atlantic to identify himself with the theatre in the United States.<sup>54</sup> There was a large audience to receive Miss Thompson and the play, and they enjoyed a good performance.<sup>55</sup>

On December 9, the Imperial Troupe of Japan, a novelty group touring the United States under the management of William R. Hayden and Harry Phillips, arrived to entertain large audiences at the St. Charles. Their engagement was comprised of novel and interesting acts, including juggling, dancing, wire walking and a ballet.<sup>56</sup>

Another foreign traveling troupe followed the Japanese group. It was The Royal Marionettes from the Crystal Palace in London, England. Their performances, the first in New Orleans, consisted of specialty acts: minstrel, pantomime, and burlesque shows. The group consisted of about one hundred artists that delighted audiences large and small for a week preceding Christmas.<sup>57</sup> This type of traveling group was ever increasing its staff to better its competitors, but

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<sup>54</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 381.

<sup>55</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 3, 1883.

<sup>56</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 10, 1883.

<sup>57</sup>New Orleans Bee, December 17, 1883.

one hundred was an exceptionally large cast. The size of the St. Charles could easily accommodate the troupe.

Bidwell had made his Christmas toy matinee into an annual event, and for this Christmas he presented the Hanlons in a funny show called Le Voyage En Suisse. The show was applauded "lavishly" by a large theatre crowd.<sup>58</sup> It was such a success that Bidwell invited them to remain at the St. Charles for another week.

The C. D. Hess Grand Opera Company, no stranger at the St. Charles now, arrived with a repertoire of Fra Diavola, Martha, Chimes of Normandy, Bohemian Girl, Pirates of Penzance, Iolanthe, Maritance, Fatinitza, Olivette, and Faust. Not one opera received a bad review covering the two-week engagement.<sup>59</sup>

Following the opera company, a New York company composed of thirty actors and twenty stage hands came to the St. Charles to present a romantic melodrama, The Romany Rye by George R. Sims. The first performance was met by a full house, and the play continued to fill the house throughout its engagement of two weeks. To start the second week, a silver souvenir was presented to each lady present.<sup>60</sup>

Annie Pixley, by now a New Orleans favorite, opened on Sunday, February 3. This year she presented both plays for

<sup>58</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 19, 1883.

<sup>59</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 5-19, 1884.

<sup>60</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 25, 1884.

which she was noted and loved, M'liss and Zara, and again she drew large enthusiastic audiences.<sup>61</sup>

M. B. Leavitt opened with the United Gigantean Minstrels, who failed to attract a good audience during their two-week engagement. They even changed their show from specialty acts to a program called The Power of Money--still the troupe did not attract a house.<sup>62</sup>

Bartley Campbell was one of the most popular dramatists from 1879 to 1885. Many critics considered him one of the best. In 1882 he wrote a sensational melodrama called The White Slave, which toured the country coast to coast after its initial success in New York. The White Slave, based on Dion Boucicault's 1859 melodrama The Octoroon, was written to please the public and had no claim to artistic merit. The three elements used to win popularity for The White Slave were the public's craze for melodrama, magnificent spectacle and a lurid, thrilling aggregation of incidents.<sup>63</sup> On February 17, 1884, the play arrived at the St. Charles, with Isabel Morris and R. J. Dillon to play the leads. The plot concerns Lisa, the illegitimate child of the Judge's daughter and loved by Clay, the Judge's adopted son. They are kept apart by the assumption that Lisa has Negro blood.

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<sup>61</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 4, 1884.

<sup>62</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 15, 1884.

<sup>63</sup>Bartley Campbell, The White Slave and Other Plays, edited by Napier Wilt (Princeton, 1941), p. xxix.

When the Judge dies, to settle his debts, the slaves are sold to Lacy, the villain. Lisa goes to work in the field rather than meet Lacy's demands. Finally, it is proven that Lisa is not Negro, and Clay comes to her rescue.<sup>64</sup> The play opened to an audience that filled the house. The critic from the Picayune said that the play was "good" and "well acted."<sup>65</sup>

On February 24, the St. Charles offered the people of New Orleans the treat of James O'Neill, the father of Eugene O'Neill, in the play The Count of Monte Cristo. This play had been presented many times but had taken on a new life when James O'Neill began to act the title role. He started with the play at the Booth Theatre in New York in 1883, then toured throughout the country, becoming identified with The Count of Monte Cristo as Joseph Jefferson did with Rip Van Winkle.<sup>66</sup> The scenery and especially the acting were complimented by the audiences and the newspapers. One review even went so far as to state, "Not in a long time has any drama at that theatre found so much public favor."<sup>67</sup>

With a presentation of The Count of Monte Cristo for the benefit of Mr. J. Kittredge, another season of the St.

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<sup>64</sup>Walter J. Meserve, An Outline of American Drama (Totowa, N.J., 1865), p. 181.

<sup>65</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 18, 1884.

<sup>66</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 268.

<sup>67</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 28, 1884.

Charles closed. Although not as many dramatic productions had been produced this season, those that were produced, for the most part, were well received. Two foreign companies had visited during this season, which helped make it a successful one.

Because of the success of the 1883-1884 season, Bidwell was able to make some repairs before the 1884-1885 season began. The New Orleans Evening Chronicle recorded that the repairs, alterations, and general renovation were nearing completion, and on October 12, the "Old Drury" would present the appearance of a brand new dollar. The outside had received a new coat of paint. Electric lights had been installed and could make the place look like it was a new one. The aisles had been rearranged so that there were now three central passages where formerly but two existed, and these with the side aisles gave five passageways through the parquette. The posts that made the seats in the rear of the parquette undesirable had been removed and a clear view of the stage could be afforded from every part of the house. All the chairs had been newly gilded, the railings around the parquette and dress circle freshly treated to coats of gold paint and fresco.

On the stage itself the changes that have been made are almost equivalent to building that portion entirely new. The fly gallery, where all the immense scenic efforts are worked, has been made 30 feet higher, the roof having been taken off and raised that much. The huge pieces of

scenery and the transformation apparatus are thus given the greatest amount of scope for their workings. All of the latest improvements in stage fixtures have been put in, and in fact, the whole stage modernized in every particular. Dressing rooms to accommodate 100 performers have been provided, new carpets fitted to the immense stage and, in short, Mr. Bidwell has so thoroughly overhauled the St. Charles that nothing further can be asked.<sup>68</sup>

The first attraction of the new season was a melodrama, The Bandit King, an original creation of James H. Wallack, who also played the lead. The play also included acting horses.<sup>69</sup> The James H. Wallack of The Bandit King should not be confused either with James W. Wallack, who made his debut in New York in 1818 and who went on to become a leading actor-manager of his time, or his son John J. Wallack, nicknamed Lester, who followed his father in the management of the Wallack Company. James H. Wallack, a cousin to Lester Wallack, was a fine actor, capable of drawing an immense audience in his own right.<sup>70</sup>

The Bandit King was followed by the Devil's Auction.<sup>71</sup> The critic frowned upon the Devil's Auction because it was not a play but rather a group of novelty and variety acts; nevertheless, the show attracted large houses.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup>New Orleans Evening Chronicle, October 2, 1884.

<sup>69</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, October 12, 1884.

<sup>70</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 13, 1884.

<sup>71</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, October 19, 1884.

<sup>72</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 20, 1884.

Frank Mayo, noted primarily for his portrayal of Davy Crockett, appeared on the St. Charles stage in a new play called Nordeck, based on the novel Vienta, by Werner.<sup>73</sup> It had been adapted into play form by Frank Mayo and John G. Wilson. The audience filled the St. Charles to see Frank Mayo more than it did to see the new play. The account in the newspaper stated that "Frank Mayo was remarkably good. He has gotten away from the role of Davy Crockett."<sup>74</sup> Before leaving, Mayo gave one performance of Davy Crockett to a full house.<sup>75</sup>

With the first four attractions of the season the St. Charles had seen a profit with its capacity crowds. The fifth attraction was also a play, called The Pavements of Paris. It had a large cast, with many of its members being cited for outstanding performances.<sup>76</sup>

The first failure of the season of 1884-1885 for the St. Charles was a company called the Adamless Eden Company. This show had an all-female cast, which drew a full house, but it was so bad that hundreds left even before the final curtain. The performance was described as "not witty, not musical, and not even wicked."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, October 26, 1884.

<sup>74</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 28, 1884.

<sup>75</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, November 1, 1884.

<sup>76</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, November 2, 1884.

<sup>77</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 10, 1884.

On Monday, November 24, a large audience attended the performance of Romany Rye. After the first performance, the newspaper predicted that the play would not have a good run; this proved to be inaccurate, and the play actually stayed for two weeks.<sup>78</sup>

The St. Charles was next visited by a ballet troupe headed by the Kiralfy Brothers, who were known throughout America for their extravaganzas stemming from Wheatley's production in the Niblo Garden of The Black Crook.<sup>79</sup> They did not disappoint the audience, for at one point in the second act of Around the World in Eighty Days over two hundred people were on stage. This show ran for two weeks. Then the show bill changed to The Black Crook. After another two-week run, the schedule changed again to S.I.E.B.A., and the Seven Ravens, which was new to the New Orleans audiences.<sup>80</sup> The whole engagement had been so successful that Bidwell asked the troupe to stay another week. This concluded a six-week stay at the St. Charles, one of the longest runs under the management of Bidwell. All of the shows drew large audiences, for it was one of the best companies that New Orleans had seen in a number of years.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 24, 1884.

<sup>79</sup>George Freedley and John A. Reeves, A History of the Theatre (New York, 1958), p. 318.

<sup>80</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, December 4, 1884.

<sup>81</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 18, 1884.

The St. Charles Theatre was overrun by Indians, Scouts, and Cowboys when the Wild West Show of Buffalo Bill came to town. The show was called The Prairie Waif, starring William F. Cody, the one and only Buffalo Bill, who had earned his reputation by slaughtering 4,280 buffalo in eighteen months.<sup>82</sup> The Wild West Show rounded the people up, for it played to overflowing audiences.<sup>83</sup>

Two years had passed since the St. Charles had had the honor of presenting M'me Adelina Patti. She arrived in New Orleans to perform the first opera of the season on January 25, 1885. Following the first opera, M'me Patti appeared in La Traviata, Il Trovatore, Mitella, and Semiramis. The critic in the Daily Picayune was very complimentary to M'me Patti, stating,

The St. Charles was crowded last night from pit to dome by a most fashionable audience, eager to welcome M'me Adelina Patti. . . . As might have been expected her reception was most enthusiastic and the applause was almost continuous. Were all singers like Patti, the critic's occupation would be gone. There are doubtless finer voices in existence, some few artists sing equally well, others are gifted with dramatic power, but Patti combines all these qualities. . . . Time has gilded over her without leaving any appreciable trace of its passage. M'me Patti is said to command a very large price for her service . . . but there is only one Patti.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>Williams, Current, and Freidel, History of United States, p. 147.

<sup>83</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 17, 1885.

<sup>84</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 28, 1885.

A catastrophe was avoided during the Tuesday performance of M'me Patti when part of the plastering began to fall from the dome ceiling onto the audience, starting a panic among those who feared that the building was falling. A few people who realized what really was taking place prevented the panic from getting completely out of hand.<sup>85</sup>

The Grand Opera House of New Orleans had offered Mamzelle for a week, and, after the troupe finished its engagement at the Grand Opera House, Bidwell engaged them for the St. Charles to present the same play.<sup>86</sup> Bidwell capitalized on the success of another New Orleans theatre by making arrangements to bring the attraction to the St. Charles for further performances.

Madame Rhea was the next regular attraction at the St. Charles. She appeared before large audiences, taking the leading role in a play called An American Countess.<sup>87</sup> Madame Rhea's performance schedule was interrupted when on February 4, Frank Mayo returned to the St. Charles to present Nordeck, the same play he had presented earlier in the same season. Again, he chose to close his visit with his Davy Crockett. After Mayo closed, Madame Rhea returned to complete her obligation at the St. Charles. This time she was engaged to

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<sup>85</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 3, 1885.

<sup>86</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 1, 1885.

<sup>87</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 9, 1885.

perform the following plays: Arcadia, An Unequal Match, An American Countess, School for Scandal, Camille.<sup>88</sup> For reasons unknown, reviews were not given for this series of plays.

Following Madame Rhea, Lizzie Evans was highlighted in three plays, Fogg's Ferry, Dewdrop, and Maud Miller. The first two plays were a success, both with the audience and the critics, but the third--Maud Miller--received an adversely critical review from the Picayune, which stated that Maud Miller was a "sad symphony played on one string that had had its day."<sup>89</sup> Lizzie Evans completed a very successful run in spite of the review of the last play, which apparently did not discourage people from attending.

The Lorellas, managed by the three Lorella brothers, put on Mishaps, or Batterby's Baby. They were dancers and acrobats that had put their routine into play form. A few of the group were good, but the performers as a group were weak. The play was handicapped by "a senseless play and a group of people who did not belong on a stage of a first-class theatre."<sup>90</sup>

A romantic drama had been playing at the Academy of Music at the same time the Lorellas had been performing at

<sup>88</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 23, 1885.

<sup>89</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 7, 1885.

<sup>90</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 11, 1885.

the St. Charles. As soon as the Lovellas left, Bidwell transferred the romantic drama, Called Back, to the stage of the St. Charles. One reason for the transfer was that the larger stage of the St. Charles permitted the beauty of scenery to be better displayed. Called Back finished its run and was followed by Eben Plympton in Lynnwood. Both plays were seen by large audiences.<sup>91</sup>

On March 30, the Wallack Company, under the management of Charles Frohman, began a two-week engagement.<sup>92</sup> The first week they performed Victor Durand, and the second week they performed Lady Clare. The shows had been rated as excellent, and they had been played for two weeks before large audiences. Bidwell announced that the Wallack Theatre Company would remain at the St. Charles until further notice, presenting a new play each week.<sup>93</sup> The third week opened to a full house with La Belle Russe, by David Belasco.<sup>94</sup> The fourth week, another play of Belasco's was presented called Diplomacy, which ran for two weeks instead of its scheduled one. It was with this play that the annual benefit was given for Mr. Kittredge on May 8.<sup>95</sup> The St. Charles closed

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<sup>91</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 15 and March 25, 1885.

<sup>92</sup>New Orleans Bee, March 30, 1885.

<sup>93</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 9, 1885.

<sup>94</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 13, 1885.

<sup>95</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, May 9, 1885.

its season with the Wallack Theatre Company in its seventh week, performing The World. David Belasco, director of The World, met Charles Frohman, the manager of the Wallack Theatre Company, in 1882, when Belasco was traveling the mining camps acting, in addition to writing, adapting, and rewriting over one hundred plays. Charles Frohman had had no training in the theatre but had the ability to recognize theatrical appeal and saw this in Belasco's melodramas. He began to commission Belasco's melodramas, which met with a phenomenal success, as evident by the reaction of the people of New Orleans.<sup>96</sup> This melodrama and its excellent cast closed the season at the St. Charles on May 15, 1885. This was the longest season the St. Charles had ever had. Usually, the theatre closed earlier in the year because of the miserable weather conditions.<sup>97</sup>

The Wallack Company, under the management of Charles Frohman, performing David Belasco's plays, was the very highlight of the past three seasons. The fact that the company stayed at the St. Charles for seven consecutive weeks drawing capacity crowds is a direct indication that David Bidwell, the St. Charles, and the people of New Orleans were in harmony with the changing dramatic movement of the nation. The twenty years before 1900 and the ten years or so that

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<sup>96</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 238.

<sup>97</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, May 16, 1885.

followed were known as the Age of Melodrama.<sup>98</sup> Augustine Daly, William Gillette, James A. Herne, and David Belasco were the playwrights contributing to this type of entertainment. They used the melodrama to promote the use of realism in the theatre. Realism in drama came about because people were tending to look at life more realistically. The drama was actually reflecting the literary trend toward realism, as shown in the works of Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James.<sup>99</sup>

Following the change to melodrama and stimulated by the realism movement, the style of acting, as well as the entire procedure for producing a play, underwent changes. An awareness of detail, of the art of acting, and of the mechanical techniques of production became primary aspects of a theatrical presentation. With the social and economic developments of the spreading country, the need for entertainment grew and new kinds of theatre entertainment developed, realism and melodrama leading the way.<sup>100</sup>

David Bidwell's insight into the development of theatre entertainment actually began at the very onset of the 1882 season at the St. Charles. He had made several physical improvements to the theatre since he opened in 1880--a new

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<sup>98</sup>Meserve, Outline of American Drama, p. 174.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>100</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Dramas from the Civil War to the Present Day (New York, 1927), pp. 1-7.

drop curtain, the new dome ceiling over the house and the heightening of the fly gallery over the stage. From the success of his first two seasons without these improvements, Bidwell could have justified omitting them since they obviously were only incidental to success. The fact that he did make these improvements indicated that Bidwell was financially prosperous to the point of having money to spend on nonessentials for the theatre.

His managerial aptitude was just as evident in the seasons from 1882 to 1885. He took every opportunity to assure success which was available to him--such as signing popular performances from other theatres in New Orleans, offering gifts of songs and silver to the women in the audience, presenting annual toy gift matinees for children, extending invitations to visiting groups to attend a performance, changing the matinee to Tuesdays to prevent conflicts with other theatres, and providing entertainment that would appeal to the New Orleans people. The last was quite evident from the fact that out of eighty-eight reports on audience attendance, sixty-eight were well attended and only twenty were not.

The drama critic of the Daily Picayune had not yet begun to criticize the dramatic productions as to moral, technical, or literary aspects. He still was basically commenting on the way plays were given, and these comments were still in general terms, such as "fine," "good," "excellent," "weak,"

"fair," and "poor." However, on four occasions he was very cutting. Because the cutting remarks occurred only these four times, the regular critic might not have been the one who reviewed the plays, or perhaps the regular critic was really affected to such a degree that he felt justified in his comments. The four comments referred to are as follows: "The classic shape of Mrs. Langtry's head is one of her strong points, and the Langtry coiffure should be adopted only by women with pretty heads";<sup>101</sup> "The treatment of the opera was fair, but should not be attempted by a traveling company, no matter how good they are";<sup>102</sup> "If there was any music in the score for Rip, it did not come through him";<sup>103</sup> and "[Maud Miller] was a sad symphony played on one string that had had its day."<sup>104</sup>

Although operas continued to receive good attendance, the emphasis in the first season on opera had completely vanished in the 1882-1885 seasons. For the third season, Bidwell had engaged only two opera companies in comparison to seventeen plays. The number of dramatic productions that were well-received by the audience indicates that drama was

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<sup>101</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 1, 1883.

<sup>102</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 12, 1883.

<sup>103</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 29, 1883.

<sup>104</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 7, 1885.

definitely on the upswing in New Orleans. During the fourth season only one play drew a small audience. In the fifth season David Bidwell had increased the schedule to include twenty-five plays. The plays usually ran for a week or more, with the Wallack Company performing for seven weeks. The emphasis had definitely changed to drama at the St. Charles by Bidwell's booking policy. This was not just a local attitude but a national one. Melodrama had captured the country, and realism was, for the first time, being seen on the American stage. Credit must be given to David Bidwell for sensing the national dramatic movement and making the St. Charles Theatre a part of the movement by emphasizing drama.

## CHAPTER IV

### BIDWELL'S STAR DRAMATIC COMPANY,

1885-1887

The approach to dramatic presentation in America had undergone a series of changes by 1885. Originally, actors formed small groups and travelled at random to various communities scattered throughout the country. Where they found enthusiastic support, the travelling company frequently settled in the community and thereby established a permanent stock company. The function of this permanent stock company was to perform, using only its own talent or work as a supporting company for a visiting star. It was expected that the visiting star would entice a large audience to the theatre by adding interest and glamour to the productions. However, the system caused the deterioration of the permanent stock company because gifted members were relegated to supporting the visiting star. Talented actors and actresses left the permanent companies to become visiting stars themselves. The performers who could not become stars were left to staff the stock companies, thereby lowering the quality of the companies' performances.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Smith Kendall, The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre (Baton Rouge, 1952), p. 64.

As late as 1875, Ben DeBar was still operating the St. Charles entirely as a star theatre with a mediocre stock company.<sup>2</sup> The established custom of the theatre was that the manager of a theatre would provide a supporting company, the theatre, the stage hands, the lights, and the advertising. For a performance the star was paid a percentage of the gross receipts, depending upon the position the star occupied in the theatrical world. Kendall designated the stars' status as new--just becoming known in the theatrical world, mediocre--established stars with only a certain amount of talent, and the higher class players--those who gave a superb performance and had made a name for themselves. A new star would receive about 25 percent of the gross receipts; a mediocre star would draw 40 percent. The higher class players could demand 65, 75, or even, in some cases, 80 percent of the gross.<sup>3</sup>

Because of excessive concern for a single star, the theatre suffered from a lack of good supporting actors. An additional difficulty of the star system was that the star rarely arrived in time for adequate rehearsal with the stock company.<sup>4</sup> Also, frequently duplication in the stars' repertoires caused the audience to see the same plays staged repeatedly during one season. Theatrical attendance decreased

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 542.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>4</sup>Walter J. Meserve, An Outline History of American Drama (Totowa, N.J., 1965), p. 119.

radically due to the pernicious effects of the star system. No longer able to support stock companies, the managers began to engage road companies to provide entertainment.

It was during the latter quarter of the century that the stock company began to vanish and the road company grew steadily in popularity. New York was the point from which the majority of road companies' tours originated. It was hard to entice the companies to come as far south as New Orleans, which was at that time the only city in the South where a traveling dramatic organization could expect to spend a profitable week. However, it was an economic necessity for the road companies to play one-night engagements on the way to and from New Orleans.<sup>5</sup> Because the actors disliked one-night engagements, managers found it necessary to incur the added expense of bringing the touring companies directly from the Eastern cities to New Orleans. Bidwell recognized the advantage of establishing a permanent stock company at the St. Charles rather than endure this economic strain. With the New Orleans public crying for a permanent stock company to give regular performances and because thousands had quit regular theatre-going on account of the atrocious companies that had been worked off on the local managers, Bidwell established a stock company in the St. Charles for

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<sup>5</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 572.

the 1885-1886 season.<sup>6</sup> Bidwell gave this system the last trial it was to have in the St. Charles.<sup>7</sup>

For the new season, improvements had been completed, making the St. Charles the largest and safest theatre in the country.<sup>8</sup> Although Bidwell had organized the stock company for the St. Charles, he chose not to begin the season with their performances. The 1885-1886 season, then, was opened by the Charles Yale Company, which presented Devil's Auction on October 11. The play was a combination of ballet, drama, and variety features, but it did not draw a good audience, even though it was the first offering of the season.<sup>9</sup>

The Ford Company made its appearance early this season, following the Devil's Auction with a production of The Mikado; or, The Town of Titipu. The Mikado was introduced in New York on August 14, 1885, and ran for nearly two years.<sup>10</sup> It was not the first time that a Gilbert and Sullivan musical had appeared on the American stage. H.M.S. Pinafore had its American premiere in Boston on November 25, 1878. David Ewen in The Story of America's Musical Theatre stresses that this date could mark the beginning of American musical

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<sup>6</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 29, 1885.

<sup>7</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 573.

<sup>8</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 11, 1885.

<sup>9</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 12, 1885.

<sup>10</sup>Hesketh Pearson, Gilbert: His Life and Strife (New York, 1957), p. 112.

theatre.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Pinafore proved that musical stage presentations could be a wholesome and refined form of theatre entertainment.<sup>12</sup> Patience had played in the St. Charles's 1883-1884 season; therefore, the New Orleans audiences were familiar with Gilbert and Sullivan and their type of work. The fame of Gilbert and Sullivan had spread throughout the United States. The very fact that The Mikado made its first appearance in the United States in August, 1885, and the fact that the St. Charles presented it in October of the same year indicates that the very best entertainment offered to the public was being presented in the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans.

The knowledge of the work of Gilbert and Sullivan brought a large turn-out to see their new play. The company provided its own costumes and scenery, a full orchestra, and chorus. In the Daily Picayune, the company was reviewed as "great."<sup>13</sup> The cast consisted of the following:

The Mikado of Japan	E. W. Raymond
Nanki-poo	Joseph Armand
Ko-Ko	George W. Denham
Pooh-Bah	Louis Carlberg
Pish-Tush	Sherwood Royston
Nee-Bon	W. L. Vess, Jr.
Yum-Yum	Mabel Hans

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<sup>11</sup>David Ewen, The Story of America's Musical Theatre (New York, 1961), p. 8.

<sup>12</sup>David Ewen, Complete Book of American Musical Theatre (New York, 1959), p. xxiv.

<sup>13</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 18, 1885.

Pitti-Sing  
Peep-Boo  
Katisha

Marie Commeyer  
Caprice Von Lissa  
Alice May

The life of an actor was depicted by Miss Olive Logan as a very demanding one, "for the duties of an actor comprise a study of new parts, recovery of old ones, attendance at rehearsal and a performance each evening."<sup>14</sup> The whole company was exhausted from its trip from New York. Blanche Chapman replaced Alice May in the cast when she became ill. Miss May returned to the cast only to relapse and be replaced again. One actress left the company and another had to assume her part. But the misfortunes and problems of a traveling company must be surmountable, and the show must go on. The Mikado was performed for two weeks before leaving New Orleans.<sup>15</sup>

Two plays that came next in the St. Charles were not reviewed in the local papers. Burr Oakes, the first of the two, was a romantic drama, and Zozo, the Magic Queen, was the second. Each was performed for a week.<sup>16</sup>

Beginning on November 15, 1885, the melodrama Forty-Nine, a great drama of pioneer life by Joaquin Miller, was performed on the stage of the St. Charles. The setting for the play was the West, but the writer demonstrated little

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<sup>14</sup>Olive Logan, Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes (Philadelphia, 1870), p. 306.

<sup>15</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 25, 1885.

<sup>16</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 1, 1885.

knowledge of this territory in his play.<sup>17</sup> Because the play did not maintain a good business, the schedule was changed in order for the company to produce The Danites in the Sierras. Again, the company failed to interest the people in New Orleans.<sup>18</sup>

James H. Wallack, who had entertained the audiences in the St. Charles during the 1884-1885 season, arrived to perform for them again with the drama The Bandit King. Wallack had appeared in the same play during his former visit. The review in the local newspapers did not comment on the acting of the company but, rather, on the trained horses. "The trained horses were part of its specialty."<sup>19</sup>

David Bidwell's stock company had been formed, but as yet it had not been viewed by the public. The stock company opened on November 29 with the play Taken from Life. The Picayune reported,

Tonight a new era commences in the record of this house. It will be the first appearance of a stock company which comes to remain for the season. It is in a sense an experiment, for stock companies have not been tried in this city for some years. The company that comes to the St. Charles tonight will be the best. . . . This can be said in advance of the first performance because its artists are well known, and it is known what they can do.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Meserve, Outline of American Drama, p. 132.

<sup>18</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 15, 1885.

<sup>19</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 23, 1885.

<sup>20</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 29, 1885.

Joseph Wheelock played the lead male role. He was well-known to the people in New Orleans, for earlier in his career he had belonged to the stock company of the Grand Opera House in New Orleans. Wheelock had supported Edwin Booth on several occasions, played Romeo to Daelaide Neilson's Juliet, and had been engaged for the famous production of The Two Orphans at the Boston Theatre in December, 1875. Kendall refers to Joseph Wheelock as "a fine type of the old-style stock company actor."<sup>21</sup>

Marie Wainwright had the honor of playing the female leading roles. She also was a familiar actress to the theatre-goers of New Orleans. She had made her first appearance in New Orleans in the season of 1879-1880, the year that the St. Charles opened under the management of David Bidwell. At that time, she was a member of the Collier's Union Square Company. After her first visit, she returned to the city many times, becoming a favorite with the New Orleans audiences.<sup>22</sup>

Barton Hill was another favorite with the people of New Orleans. He and his wife had first appeared in New Orleans in 1854 as members of the stock company at the Varieties, one of the other theatres in New Orleans. Barton Hill had the reputation of being one of the ablest, albeit

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<sup>21</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 461.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 556.

the youngest, leading men of the country. After leaving the Varieties, he became a manager of the California theatre in San Francisco, where he was to give M'me Helen Modjeska her start on the American stage.<sup>23</sup>

Other members of the stock company were Charles B. Welles, who played the juvenile leads; Charles Wheatleigh, who played the old men; Harry Hawk, Minnie Monk, Louise Muldener, Emma Madder, J. W. Hague, George Bakus, Olive Berkley, Percy Brooke, Andrew Bowers, Louis Filbert, Kate Matthews, Louise Dickson, Harry Hazletine, Jenny Scolly, W. F. Blande, Frank Bowers, A. Spencer, Bessie Vivian, Helen Ogelvie, and Anne Scully, who made up the remainder of the cast, were used in the parts best suited for them.

The stock company's first play, Taken from Life, a London drama, had had its first appearance in New York at the Wallack Theatre. The review of the play at the St. Charles from the Daily Picayune stated that the play "had enough plots for several plays."<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the company impressed the critic and the large audience; the next day, the newspaper reiterated the success of the stock company. "In the St. Charles' Stock Company, New Orleans has at last found a dramatic company again worthy of praise of the traditions

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 550-552.

<sup>24</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 1, 1885.

of the stock companies of other days in the city."<sup>25</sup>

The second play that the stock company undertook was the social comedy Divorce, adapted from Anthony Trollope's novel by Augustin Daly in 1871. Divorce was a satire on the hypocrisy of divorce lawyers and is a harbinger of realism in the American theatre. In the plot, Louise Ten Eyck marries an old, but wealthy gentleman named Dewitt, while her sister marries Alfred Adrianse, a childhood beau who has just inherited his father's fortune. Three years later, Louise and Dewitt are about to separate and so are Alfred and Fanny. The lawyers of the two couples try to create good cases for the divorces but fail when the two couples forget and forgive.<sup>26</sup> In this social comedy of marriage and divorce problems, Daly contributed to the two important trends of the late nineteenth century, the rise of realism and the development of social comedy.<sup>27</sup> Meserve, however, felt that Daly failed to make Divorce a social comedy, but, rather, through his manipulation of characters and action made it into a melodrama.<sup>28</sup> However scholars and critics were to delineate the play, the people of New Orleans filled the St. Charles for the performances. The critic went further than the usual one-word critique and committed himself in

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Meserve, Outline of American Drama, p. 149.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

the Picayune by saying, "This performance was the best performance that New Orleans has seen."<sup>29</sup>

Divorce, performed by the stock company, was immediately followed by another of Daly's so-called comedies which reflect a rather melodramatic style. The play was Pique, adapted in 1875 from the English novel written by Florence Marryatt. The story is suggestive of melodramatic development. In this plot, the heroine is refused by the man she loves because she has no money. Instead, the young man turns his attention to the heroine's stepmother. The heroine, reacting impulsively and in pique, marries another man. Several years after the marriage she tells her husband the circumstances. At this point, the plot becomes melodramatic: her husband leaves, their child is kidnapped, but she foils the villains. She and her husband reconcile, and her original intended marries the stepmother.<sup>30</sup>

A large audience turned out again to see the stock company in this turgid action.<sup>31</sup> Such acceptance of the melodrama establishes further the fact that New Orleans theatrical taste was in accord with the times, for, in the nation, it was the Age of Melodrama.

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<sup>29</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 7, 1885.

<sup>30</sup>Meserve, Outline of American Drama, p. 147.

<sup>31</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 15, 1885.

Youth followed Pique; it also played to large audiences.<sup>32</sup> Every member of the stock company was used in a part in this play and performed for almost two weeks. The company revived Taken from Life and presented it to complete a two-week run of entertainment.

It was not until December 27, 1885, that Bidwell gave a name to the stock company. The company was designated the Star Dramatic Company.<sup>33</sup> On January 4, for the first time under the name of the Star Dramatic Company, the stock company presented Man and Wife.<sup>34</sup> This was another of Daly's plays adapted in 1870 from Wilkie Collins's novel.<sup>35</sup> The cast received only praise for its performance.<sup>36</sup>

On January 10 the Star Dramatic Company presented Two Orphans, a melodrama written by two French playwrights, d'Ennery and Cormon. This play earned historical significance in 1874 when it ran for 180 nights at the Union Square.<sup>37</sup> Kate Claxton, who played the part of blind Louise, bought the rights to the play and toured with it for twenty years.<sup>38</sup> The Picayune extolled it, saying "All other performances of

<sup>32</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, December 23, 1885.

<sup>33</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 27, 1885.

<sup>34</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, January 8, 1886.

<sup>35</sup>Glenn Hughes, A History of the American Theatre 1700-1950 (New York, 1951), p. 262.

<sup>36</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 5, 1886.

<sup>37</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 233. <sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

this play by other companies have been inferior to this. The entire cast was excellent in their roles; even the small ones were made strong and meaningful."<sup>39</sup> This opinion was reiterated on January 17 by the critic who said that the Two Orphans cast was the "best cast in America."<sup>40</sup>

The World, under the direction of David Belasco had closed the 1884-1885 season. This same five-act melodrama was given by the Bidwell stock company on January 17, 1886, playing to a large audience, with the compliments of the newspaper going to the special scenic effects.<sup>41</sup>

The stock company gave one more performance, Pavements of Paris, before it moved out of the St. Charles. As had become the custom, the cast played to a full house.<sup>42</sup> The stock company then moved to the Grand Opera House, located on the corner of Canal and Burgundy Streets to present Victor Durand.<sup>43</sup> The stock company had played for two full months at the St. Charles. Inasmuch as the organization of a stock company had been an experiment for Bidwell, he may have scheduled the road companies ahead of time in case he lost money with the stock company. The stock company had been

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<sup>39</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 11, 1886.

<sup>40</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 17, 1886.

<sup>41</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 18, 1886.

<sup>42</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 25, 1886.

<sup>43</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 31, 1886.

such a success that Bidwell let them go to the Grand Opera House. In this way, he would continue to receive the profit of his stock company as well as the profit, if any, of the road company. Whatever Bidwell's reason, the Star Dramatic Company was absent from the St. Charles while it was host to a number of road companies.

After the stock company left the St. Charles, the first road company to appear in the theatre was the dear old favorite of New Orleans, Annie Pixley in M'liss. The people once again turned out to see the production, although they had seen it year after year by the same actress.<sup>44</sup>

Fanny Davenport became a well-known personality of the stage in 1874; although this was not her first time to be on stage, it was the first time her talents had been generally recognized. Fanny Davenport thrilled audiences from coast to coast. Her success was credited to Mrs. John Drew and to Augustin Daly, who gave Miss Davenport her first chance to star. She stayed with Daly for a number of years before leaving him in the 1880's. She then formed her own company and made extensive tours, which brought her to the people of New Orleans.<sup>45</sup> Although a hotel robbery had detained her in Memphis, Tennessee, Fanny arrived February 8 to perform in

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<sup>44</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 1, 1886.

<sup>45</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 261.

Fedora.<sup>46</sup> One of Fanny Davenport's greatest successes, Fedora was a melodrama written by Sardou, a French writer. She enthralled large audiences all week with her excellent acting and her beauty.<sup>47</sup>

The next play was also written by Sardou, but it was not performed by Fanny Davenport. Instead, a M'me Janish and her company arrived to present Princess Andrea on February 15. For the first time this season, some four months after its opening, a play received a bad review from the local newspaper. The Picayune stated that the play was "poor."<sup>48</sup>

Lotta followed the appearance of Madame Janish. Lotta, whose real name was Charlotte Crabtree, was one of the most popular comediennes in America in the 1880's. Her popularity was based largely on her winsome personality. She became a symbol of youthful charm throughout America and wisely avoided heavy drama, for she was not in the mold of classic actresses.<sup>49</sup> For her New Orleans engagement, Lotta had chosen four plays: M'lle Nitouche, Little Detective, Little Nell and the Marchioness, and Musette.<sup>50</sup> Lotta opened in the comedy M'lle Nitouche but had to close for a few days

<sup>46</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 8, 1886.

<sup>47</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 14, 1886.

<sup>48</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 17, 1886.

<sup>49</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 261.

<sup>50</sup>New Orleans Bee, February 23, 1886.

because of illness.<sup>51</sup> Little Detective was performed next and was followed by Little Nell and the Marchioness. Little Nell and the Marchioness was a play adapted from Charles Dicken's The Old Curiosity Shop. This play brought the greatest success to Lotta, who kept this piece in her repertoire until her retirement.<sup>52</sup> The critic of the Daily Picayune, however, was not impressed with her performance, for he wrote that "there is no reason for Lotta to try two opposite parts. She fits Nell, but she is too little and sweet for Marchioness."<sup>53</sup> Lotta's company ended its stay in the St. Charles on March 5, with an inferior production of Musette.<sup>54</sup>

On March 13, Bidwell's Star Dramatic Company returned to the St. Charles to present three plays in succession: Called Back, The Romance of a Poor Young Man, and Tickets of Leave. None of these three plays was seen on the previous schedule of the stock company. Large audiences were present to welcome the company back to the St. Charles.<sup>55</sup>

One more road company visited the St. Charles before the stock company closed out the season. The Charles L. Andrews

<sup>51</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 24, 1886.

<sup>52</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 261.

<sup>53</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 4, 1886.

<sup>54</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 5, 1886.

<sup>55</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 25, 1886.

Combination presented the play Michael Strogoff. As a whole, the company did not impress its audience with its acting. A few of the main characters were good, but the majority of them needed polishing.<sup>56</sup>

The 1885-1886 season came to an end with the Star Dramatic Company presenting T. W. Robertson's "cup and saucer" drama, Ours. A "cup and saucer" drama was a term to describe a play with natural dialogue that was popularized in New York in the 1866-1867 season.<sup>57</sup> Ours was first produced in the Wallack Theatre in 1866 and was credited as the most acceptable production of the season. As usual, the last performance was for the benefit of Mr. J. Kittredge, but this year it was given by the St. Charles's own stock company.<sup>58</sup> The benefit was a success, the stock company was a success, and the whole season for Bidwell was a success.

From the profits of the previous season, David Bidwell provided the theatre with a new coat of paint and installed new carpets for the 1886-1887 season. The season opened October 17 with the production of Flash Light, a comedy that exhibited the talents of the leading male and female. Marion Booth, the female lead, played Polly Willard, and James O. Barrows played J. Adolphus Boggs, the male lead.<sup>59</sup> Robert

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<sup>56</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 29, 1886.

<sup>57</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 198.

<sup>58</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 11, 1886.

<sup>59</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 18, 1886.

Downing appeared in the next attraction at the St. Charles. He was seen in the title role of Spartacus, the play that had originally been written for Edwin Forrest. The Picayune said, "There will be only one Edwin Forrest, but Downing was great and the show was a hit."<sup>60</sup>

Devil's Auction was once again presented in the St. Charles. A completely new company arrived to present the play to a full house.<sup>61</sup> This play did not impress the critic or the audience.

Florence Bindley followed Devil's Auction with her performance of A Heroine in Rags. Florence Bindley had started her theatrical career as one of the few child stars of her day. According to the paper, the play was not a hit because of inadequate talent in the company. If it had been up to the critic, Miss Bindley would not have had the major role. "Miss Bindley had no business playing the role."<sup>62</sup> The company had to struggle all week to maintain an audience..

On November 15 a road company arrived at the St. Charles to present Dagmar. Louise Balfe, described as a "strong actress," achieved success in the play. The play, a powerful drama, was given some credit for the success.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 25, 1886.

<sup>61</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 1, 1886.

<sup>62</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 8, 1886.

<sup>63</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 16, 1886.

Zozo, the Magic Queen, had been seen by the people of New Orleans several times during the past few years and had never been successful. The road company, starring Blanch Curtisses, presented the play once again for the theatre-goers of New Orleans. This time it was a partial success, according to the newspaper. Blanche Curtisses's acting was acclaimed in her part of Zozo, and Edward Gignere was applauded loudly for his interpretation of Tommy Tucker. Even the scenery received special recognition for its beauty.<sup>64</sup>

For the first time in the 1886-1887 season, a large and enthusiastic audience welcomed a new attraction to the theatre. James H. Wallack and company arrived to present The Cattle King. The actor was already established as an accomplished performer, but the play was to be introduced for the first time. Again, it was a circumstance where, after the first night, the play drew the attendance rather than the actors. Apparently, James Wallack was the only one of the company who could act. Whereas in the last season the horses had received special recognition for their part in The Bandit King, this season the special recognition went to the banjo player, Fred Lyons. The play and the banjo player were the two factors that brought crowds to the performances throughout the week.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 22, 1886.

<sup>65</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 1, 1886.

On December 5, approximately two months after the start of the season, David Bidwell's Star Dramatic Company made its first appearance. The stock company chose as its first presentation Lancashire Lass. No longer were the leads of the previous season with the stock company, and many of the minor characters had been replaced. This year the company was comprised of Osmond Tearle, Hart Conway, Charles Wheatleigh, Luke Martin, Edgar Selden, Lewis Mitchell, Junius B. Booth, Jr., H.C. Brinker, Samuel Rodgers, Hugh Tennis, J. H. Twing, Barton Hill, Minnie Conway, May Brooklyn, Emma Madder, Isabelle Waldron, Pauline Duffield, Kate Freeman, Little Alice Duffield, W. A. Whitecar, A. Scrogges, Annie Sommers, and Kate Barret.

After their opening night with Lancashire Lass, Osmond Tearle was said to be "great," Wheatleigh and Luke Martin "excellent," and Barton Hill "good." All of the ladies were said to have been "perfect and charming."<sup>66</sup>

Lancashire Lass was followed by Martyr Mother. No comments were expressed in the news media concerning this play, except that this play--as well as the first one by the company--was well-attended and successful.

The Star Dramatic Company presented Almost a Life as its third play. The acting team of Hart and Minnie Conway took the honors with their perforamnces; Osmond Tearle and May

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<sup>66</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 6, 1886.

Brookly followed close behind on the honors list.<sup>67</sup> For one entire week patrons crowded the theatre to see the productions.

The stock company had a night off when the celebrated M'me Patti came to the St. Charles for a one-night operatic concert. Her fans filled the St. Charles until it could hold no more. The concert was deemed "tremendously successful."<sup>68</sup>

The Star Dramatic Company went back to work the following night and presented a play called Dot, first performed in the Varieties Theatre in New Orleans in 1859. It was a hit at that time and ran for months, a long stay for New Orleans.<sup>69</sup> Dot was Dion Boucicault's play based on Dickens's The Cricket on the Hearth.<sup>70</sup> The New Orleans Crescent stated that Dot depended on scenery and machinery for its effectiveness more than any other play.<sup>71</sup> The role of Dot was played by the leading female actress for the stock company this season, Minnie Conway. Originally the part of Dot had been played by Charlotte Thompson. This particular play was an ideal choice for the toy gift matinee for the children on December 24. It was so successful that Bidwell extended the production two additional weeks.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 13, 1886.

<sup>68</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 21, 1886.

<sup>69</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 386.

<sup>70</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 190.

<sup>71</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 385.

<sup>72</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, December 28, 1886.

The New Year of 1887 was ushered in at the St. Charles with the play False Shame, an adaptation by William Dunlap of a play by August von Kotzebue, a popular German dramatist of the eighteenth century.<sup>73</sup> False Shame, or The American Orphan in Germany, as it was first titled, was extremely successful, especially with the middle-class. The plot concerned lost daughters, lost sisters, confused lovers, and mistaken identities. One character's false shame was a physical deformity and another's poverty. Everyone was happy, married or reconciled, and singing for the finale.<sup>74</sup> The farce opened to a small house, but the following nights large audiences came to see the production. Osmond Tearle was praised for having given a "superior" performance.<sup>75</sup>

The Star Dramatic Company next performed Colleen Bawn, by Dion Boucicault. Before Colleen Bawn, Boucicault had written other Irish plays, but their purpose had been to emphasize the amusing speech and antics of the Irish. With Colleen Bawn, Dion Boucicault changed his tactic, and his Irish plays began to emphasize qualities of character.<sup>76</sup> Minnie Conway, who had the part of Eily O'Conner, became ill the day of performance. "Minnie Maddern took her place and learned the part and songs between three and seven o'clock

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<sup>73</sup>Meserve, Outline of American Drama, p. 25.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>75</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 5, 1887.

<sup>76</sup>Meserve, Outline of American Drama, pp. 94, 95.

on the afternoon of the performance."<sup>77</sup> Even with the change of the lead female role, the play went on and was "perfect." The demands of being in show business were met by Minnie Maddern, for by tradition an audience must never be turned away. The show must go on.

After Colleen Bawn, Henry Byron's Blow for Blow, a romantic drama, was performed. This play consisted of a prologue, followed by the drama.<sup>78</sup> Another Dion Boucicault work was presented after Blow for Blow.<sup>79</sup> This melodrama was Arrah-na-Pogue, a hit of 1865.<sup>80</sup> The Picayune stressed that Arah-na-Pogue was the best show of the season. "The matinee was so crowded that after 2,500 people were seated, the selling of tickets was stopped to keep the theatre from being overcrowded."<sup>81</sup>

An often-repeated play, The Marble Heart, was the next attraction of the stock company. The play was first introduced to New Orleans people in 1854 at the Varieties.<sup>82</sup> After that, Ben DeBar offered the play almost every season in the St. Charles. The people of New Orleans were familiar

<sup>77</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 12, 1887.

<sup>78</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 17, 1887.

<sup>79</sup>St. Charles Theatre Programme, January 19, 1887.

<sup>80</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 333.

<sup>81</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 30, 1887.

<sup>82</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 328.

with the play even if they had not all actually seen it. After this performance, the Bidwell stock company left the St. Charles. They had performed steadily for two months, introducing new plays each week. The stock company left the stage which was to be occupied next by Fanny Davenport and her troupe.

This year Fanny had in her repertoire School for Scandal, Fedora, As You Like It, London Assurance, Oliver Twist, Much Ado About Nothing, and Lady of Lyons.<sup>83</sup> Sheridan's School for Scandal and Shakespeare's As You Like It and Much Ado About Nothing were classics of the drama. London Assurance, written by Dion Boucicault, was a relatively new play. It was this play that started Boucicault's career as a playwright when it was produced in October of 1841.<sup>84</sup> Not only did London Assurance start his career, but it was credited also for starting Fanny Davenport's. Augustin Daly cast Fanny Davenport in the role of Lady Gay Spanker. In 1869-70 Miss Davenport was declared to be the best actress yet in the famous role.<sup>85</sup> Oliver Twist had been popularized when both J. W. Wallack and E. L. Davenport starred in the same production of the play.<sup>86</sup> Lady of Lyons, written by

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<sup>83</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 8-17, 1887.

<sup>84</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 14.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>86</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 387.

Bulwer-Lytton, had made its American premiere in May of 1838, with Edwin Forrest and Charlotte Cushman in the leading roles.<sup>87</sup> Fanny Davenport again presented Fedora, the play that had such success the season before when she appeared at the St. Charles. All of the reviews had praised Fanny Davenport; there seems no doubt that she was a favorite with the New Orleans people.

Fanny Davenport's engagement ended and the Star Dramatic Company returned to the St. Charles to present three plays in the closing weeks. The first play was Duke's Motto, presented on February 20. It had been repeatedly performed during Ben DeBar's tenure in the St. Charles.<sup>88</sup> It was well-performed, and the audiences still appreciated it.<sup>89</sup>

In 1860, before the Civil War, The Romance of a Poor Young Man had been introduced to the theatre people of New Orleans.<sup>90</sup> The stock company chose to revive it for the company's second engagement after its return to the St. Charles. The company ended its second commitment season at the St. Charles with a production of Taken from Life, which had already been performed once in the St. Charles. F. H. Hanlon, with Fantasma, arrived at the St. Charles for the

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<sup>87</sup>Hughes, American Theatre, p. 204.

<sup>88</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 547.

<sup>89</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 22, 1887.

<sup>90</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 389.

final week of the season. The critic for the Picayune described the play as having no plot, "but being constructed in tableaux like an English Christmas pantomime."<sup>91</sup> The amazing stage effects drew large crowds and the show was successful. This year the Hanlons gave the benefit for Mr. Kittredge, which marked the end of another season of entertainment at the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans.

David Bidwell had finally realized his ambition, to buy the St. Charles in order to develop dramatic entertainment again in New Orleans. His previous seasons had been so successful with the dramas offered by the road companies that he had the people of New Orleans asking for a local stock company at the St. Charles in order to provide a quality performance of which they could be proud. Although the stock company had been organized as an experiment, it was so welcomed by the people that Bidwell maintained the organization for the following season. However, the stock company did present one problem for Bidwell. After the first season of the stock company, the majority of its members went on to other opportunities, and Bidwell was left to organize an almost completely new company for the following season.

Bidwell's stock company, Star Dramatic Company, presented twenty-five plays during two seasons. This selection of American plays reflects the maturing of dramatic writing ✓

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<sup>91</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 14, 1887.

in this country and its increasing acceptance. Until the middle 1800's, American managers and actors depended upon British dramatists for their material. America was almost devoid of dramatic literature. One reason for the absence was Puritanical prejudice against all things theatrical. A more potent reason for the absence of early American literary works in the theatrical field was that writers fully realized the difficulties of dramatic construction, that drama has a technique of its own.<sup>92</sup> There was little incentive for the Americans to write for the stage because they were seldom, if ever, paid.<sup>93</sup> When Edwin Forrest started the practice of offering monetary prizes for suitable plays, an incentive was given to the development of national American drama.<sup>94</sup> By the 1880's, according to Gassner, American people required a play that only titillated them, and this encouraged the writing of melodramas. The people were content with these plays that were devoid of thought.<sup>95</sup> The older melodrama demanded neither probability nor possibility, but from the old melodrama developed the new. The new melodrama demanded probability and was not satisfied with mere situations, but attempted character drawing and even concerned itself with

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<sup>92</sup>Arthur Hornblow, A History of the Theatre in America, II, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1919), 49, 50.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p. 71

<sup>95</sup>John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1940), p. 633.

the social problems of the day.<sup>96</sup> Bidwell's Star Dramatic Company's presentations were melodramas of both the old and the new style by American dramatists, Boucicault, Daly, Belasco, Wallack, and Herne.

Drama in New Orleans had suffered severely because of the Civil War. The St. Charles Theatre had closed for several years and when reopened failed to provide quality entertainment because of economic restrictions on manager and public. The effect of the Civil War upon the theatres of New York, Philadelphia and Boston was disturbing, but was not of long duration. By 1862 these theatres were playing to good business.<sup>97</sup> When Bidwell took over the St. Charles, he continually strived to bridge the gap of the drama in New Orleans where it had ceased in 1861 to the contemporary drama of the 1880's offered in the Eastern theatre. Bidwell, in the 1885-1887 season finally accomplished the task, making the St. Charles a theatre offering contemporary drama.

Further evidence that the St. Charles and Bidwell had been recognized as leaders was the appearance of such stars as Fanny Davenport and Lotta and the presentation of a new release of Gilbert and Sullivan by the Ford Opera Company. Not one novelty act or variety show appeared on the stage of the St. Charles in the seasons dominated by the stock company.

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<sup>96</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama (New York, 1927), p. 101.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., pp. 3, 4.

The one opera company which did appear did not present a classical opera but, rather, an operetta, The Mikado. M'me Patti appeared during the second season of the company, but only for a one-night concert. Large audiences attended the St. Charles night after night. The fact that the public kept filling the theatre was indicative of the pleasure afforded them by David Bidwell's management.

David Bidwell's realization of the benefits afforded both financially and artistically by the formation of a stock company, and his creation of such a company contributed greatly to his success as a manager. After five years, the St. Charles deserved the recognition of being one of the best theatres, and David Bidwell was recognized as one of the finest managers in the United States.

CHAPTER V  
INCREASE OF VARIETY ENTERTAINMENT,  
1887-1888

After five years of steadily building the dramatic aspect of entertainment at the St. Charles Theatre, the season suddenly changed from primarily dramatic presentations to include more variety entertainment. Despite the success of the stock company at the St. Charles, it does not appear to have been in existence for the 1887-1888 season.

Prior to 1888, David Bidwell had suffered from gout. This disease, complicated by others, warned Bidwell that his days were numbered.<sup>1</sup> At that time, he was the oldest active manager in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Because of his age, sixty-eight, and because of his failing health, Bidwell could no longer fulfill his demanding responsibilities to maintain the St. Charles as the leading theatre in New Orleans. During the season of 1887-1888, Bidwell had to turn over some of his theatrical duties to others. Bidwell's illness did not permit him to plan a new season nor supervise a permanent stock company. This was the reason the Star Dramatic Company

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<sup>1</sup>John Smith Kendall, The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre (Baton Rouge, 1952), p. 571.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 572.

did not reappear after completing two successful seasons. If the personnel of the stock company changed for the third season as it had between its first two seasons, David Bidwell would not have been able to seek the necessary talent. Thus, he returned to the use of road companies as the primary entertainment at the St. Charles.

Many of the touring companies which Bidwell engaged for this season presented variety entertainment. The shift away from drama was not a deviation from the trend of the theatrical activity in the nation. Not only were these years the Age of Melodrama, they were also the years that variety was capturing the interest of the nation as a predecessor to vaudeville. Variety in its early days was risqué, and its audiences were predominantly male. A new era had been inaugurated on October 24, 1881, when Tony Pastor offered a clean variety show suitable for family audiences. It took time to develop a following for this new type of variety and to spread the idea to other entertainment groups.<sup>3</sup> Variety was a term used to designate a theatrical performance composed of specialty acts unrelated to each other, with the emphasis on comedy. As a form of entertainment, variety had an ancient origin, but it was not until the latter nineteenth century that special theatres were set aside for such

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<sup>3</sup>Glenn Hughes, A History of the American Theatre 1700-1950 (New York, 1951), p. 305.

performances.<sup>4</sup> The popularity of this form of entertainment could have been another reason that Bidwell turned to variety. Because the preceding season had been profitable, the switch to the use of variety entertainment was not prompted by financial difficulties.

The 1887-1888 season opened with the road company of Professor Bristol and his troupe of twenty-two educated horses, ponies, and mules.<sup>5</sup> On October 23, 1887, the New Orleans Daily Picayune stated, "An important theatrical event in New Orleans is the opening of the Old Drury each October for the coming amusement season."<sup>6</sup> The October 23 opening of the theatrical season was a later date than usual. Bidwell previously began his season at the St. Charles at the first of the month. This rather late beginning was probably due to his poor health and resultant inability to organize the new season.

After the opening of the season at the St. Charles, Professor Bristol remained for two weeks, playing to large audiences. The Ignacis Martinetti Company arrived to present the Devil's Auction and the Golden Branch.<sup>7</sup> The Picayune

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>5</sup>Crescent City Illustrated, October 30, 1887.

<sup>6</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 23, 1887.

<sup>7</sup>Crescent City Illustrated, November 6, 1887.

related that the house was packed and it continued to be packed as long as the company was scheduled for the St. Charles.<sup>8</sup>

Heverly's Mastodon Minstrels appeared next in the theatre. The entertainment was arranged into three parts: music, variety, and an act called the Hustling, which ended the performance. The company even incorporated a local talent group to appear with them to help draw an audience. They were successful in filling the theatre all week.

The Juvenile Opera Company arrived to present Von Suppe's Fatinitza to the people of New Orleans.<sup>9</sup> This opera received a good review from the local newspaper, which said that the company, with its "good scenery, make-up, and costumes" had a "great little" cast and "good" chorus.<sup>10</sup>

When Bidwell first began his management of the St. Charles Theatre, he had relied heavily on several companies. The Rice Company was one of these upon which he depended, but for several years, when the emphasis had been more on drama, the Rice group had not appeared in the St. Charles. The Rice Company, an old favorite, returned to the St. Charles with the play Evangeline.<sup>11</sup> A play that had a

<sup>8</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 7, 1887.

<sup>9</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, November 20, 1887.

<sup>10</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 12, 1887.

<sup>11</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, November 27, 1887.

special meaning to the people of New Orleans and South Louisiana, Evangeline was taken from the very history of the French-Canadians who had settled in that part of the country. Alice Butler played the lead role of Evangeline. Large audiences came to see the show all week.<sup>12</sup>

On Sunday, December 4, the Carleton Opera Company arrived to present Merry War.<sup>13</sup> This production also filled the house for all of its performances. After the cast had received such a warm welcome from the people, they stayed on at the St. Charles to present Erminie and Nonon. Nonon was said to have been brilliant, with a strong chorus and good male support.<sup>14</sup> However, Erminie received the top honors of the opera company's stay at the St. Charles.<sup>15</sup> According to the Picayune, Erminie was one of the brightest and most successful comic operas at the St. Charles in recent years.<sup>16</sup> Some of the outstanding actors and actresses of this company were Fanny Rice, Jay C. Taylor, W. T. Carelton, and Lily Post.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, November 28, 1887.

<sup>13</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, December 4, 1887.

<sup>14</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 7, 1887.

<sup>15</sup>Crescent City Illustrated, December 8, 1887.

<sup>16</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 9, 1887.

<sup>17</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 7-9, 1887.

On December 11, William Gillette and his play Held by the Enemy arrived at the St. Charles to perform for one week. William Gillette was a playwright whose chief interest was in realistic acting. Almost all of the melodramas which he wrote contained a character who was quiet, quick, clear-headed, calm and effective in very trying circumstances. He wrote twenty plays but only acted in nine, and Held by the Enemy, written in 1886, was one of the plays in which he acted.<sup>18</sup> It was a Civil War play, with a plot concerning the love of two men for the same woman and the heroism of a Southern spy.<sup>19</sup> Large audiences attended and the veterans of the Confederate Soldiers' Home were guests of Bidwell and the St. Charles for the Tuesday matinee.<sup>20</sup>

Joseph Grismer and Phoebe Davis were the next stars who attracted the people of New Orleans to the St. Charles. They appeared in Called Back and both received good reviews. During the week of Christmas, they changed their show to Streets of New York, which was also performed for the toy matinee for the children. After the performances of the plays Called Back and Streets of New York, the St. Charles closed because no attraction had been scheduled by Bidwell.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Walter J. Meserve, An Outline History of American Drama (Totowa, N.J., 1965), p. 139.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>20</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 14, 1887.

<sup>21</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 30, 1887.

A large audience welcomed the theatre's reopening by attending the play Taken from Life. The lead was played by the actress Phosa McAllister. Phosa and her company entertained at the St. Charles for two weeks. After the first play, the company presented Blinding Flash. Several members of the cast were acknowledged for their performances. Phosa McAllister, Little Vivie, Charles Stanley, Harry S. Ellis, and H. S. Duffield received that recognition.<sup>22</sup>

Charles and Thomas Jefferson brought the show they were managing, Shadows of a Great City, to the St. Charles stage.<sup>23</sup> It opened on January 22 to an immense audience, for the cast was the original one from New York. The members of the cast were W. A. Whitecar, H. W. Herman, George R. Edison, W. W. Allen, W. H. Burton, Edward B. Tilton, Percy Plunkett, R. Stanfield, W. C. Wells, W. B. Coulon, Miss Clyde Hanron, Annie Ward Tiffany, Clara Rainford, and Little Lillian. The reviews had little to say about the play or the company. Only a general comment was made by the critic, "[The] acting was reported to be up to standard."<sup>24</sup> After the company finished its engagement in the St. Charles, the theatre remained dark for the second time this season because

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<sup>22</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 16, 1888.

<sup>23</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, January 22, 1888.

<sup>24</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 24, 1888.

Bidwell had again failed to arrange an attraction for the St. Charles Theatre.<sup>25</sup>

Frank Mayo had entertained at the St. Charles season after season, but he finally retired, turning over his theatrical company to his son, Edwin F. Mayo. Edwin opened in the St. Charles in the play for which his father was noted, Davy Crockett. A good audience turned out to see Frank's son in the title role. Edwin was reported by the Daily Picayune to be "the replica of his father in the part."<sup>26</sup> Louise Hamilton was also singled out from the cast as giving a good performance.

After the Edwin Mayo presentation of Davy Crockett, Charles L. Andrew's Minuet Carnival Company opened at the St. Charles with the play Michael Strogoff. The play drew a large audience at the beginning of the week, but it could not maintain profitable attendance with its poor performance.<sup>27</sup> The St. Charles went dark for the third time after the engagement of the Andrew Minuet Carnival Company. This time the theatre remained closed for two weeks, the longest period since Bidwell had taken over the ownership in 1880.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, January 29, 1888.

<sup>26</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 6, 1888.

<sup>27</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 12, 1888.

<sup>28</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, February 18, 1888.

Hallen and Hart's Ideals was the next attraction after the theatre had been closed. This company was known throughout America as the Representative Vaudeville Company of America. The local newspaper ran this review of the company:

Ideals opened to a large audience. It is a good variety show, with musical sketch cleverly done by Mr. Fritz and Miss Webster. Ella Wesner is a good artist who gave her impersonation of several young men. John and James Russel did an amazing Irish Chambermaid act. Alfred Clives has a dog act. A Southern comedy, Highest Bidder, was presented by Fred Hallen and Miss Enid Hart. Miss Jutan, assisted by George W. Brown, did an elegant trapeze act. The Orien Trio, Edward Warren and the Fulton brothers, New Orleans boys, closed the program with their fire trick cottage act called "A Hot Chase."<sup>29</sup>

From the review in the paper, one can surmise just what kind of entertainment a company such as the Representative Vaudeville Company had to offer the public. Large audiences saw the show throughout the week. The critic even said that "Joe Hart's playing of the banjo and singing was as good as Edwin Booth playing Hamlet."<sup>30</sup>

The St. Charles once again closed its doors. This time it stayed closed longer than two weeks, reopening on March 25 for Milton and Dollie Nobles's appearance in From Sire to Sea. The cast was announced in the paper, but no comment was published about the play or the acting.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 2, 1888.

<sup>30</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 8, 1888.

<sup>31</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, March 25, 1888.

Professor Bartholomew on April 1 opened his Equine Paradox Show of twenty educated horses. Bartholomew was the originator of this style of entertainment.<sup>32</sup> He remained at the St. Charles for two weeks. After his show closed, the newspapers failed to mention the St. Charles or to review any entertainment in the St. Charles until April 22, 1888, indicating that once again the St. Charles Theatre had been idle. On April 22 an announcement appeared that the Gilmore Band would arrive in New Orleans to present three concerts at the St. Charles. The concerts were to be held May 10, 11, and 12. Fourteen soloists and a chorus of one hundred fifty members were to accompany the band to New Orleans.<sup>33</sup> With the concert on May 12, the St. Charles closed for another season, and this ended the management of David Bidwell.

Bidwell's health had grown increasingly worse. He spent time in his summer home in Pass Christian, Mississippi, in hopes of recuperating, but his ailments became so acute that he needed constant attention from a doctor whose care was unavailable at the little hamlet town of Pass Christian. Consequently, Bidwell and his wife were forced to move back into the city. Bidwell died at ten o'clock on December 18, 1889, in the apartment over the Phoenix, where he and his

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<sup>32</sup>New Orleans Daily Picayune, April 1, 1888.

<sup>33</sup>New Orleans Theatre Gazette, May 10, 1888.

wife had their New Orleans home.<sup>34</sup> Bidwell's death came somewhat unexpectedly, although his condition had been grave for some time.

From the time that David Bidwell took over the ownership of the St. Charles until his death, the theatre had held a position of respect in the theatrical circles of New Orleans. Bidwell was an institution in the city, for his connections with the local theatres kept his name constantly in the newspapers. Moreover, he had a truly marvelous faculty for making friends. Children who had been taken as little girls and boys to the matinees when David Bidwell first entered theatre management with the Academy of Music grew up and had children of their own, and in that way every man, woman, and child in New Orleans who had an interest in public amusements knew him personally.<sup>35</sup> David Bidwell was truly a remarkable man. He was known in the theatrical world as a man who kept a stout heart and who made a gallant fight for the place in the theatre which he eventually won. He was a good loser, and reverses did not daunt his spirit. When his fortune did come, profits of \$60,000 and more for one season in New Orleans, prosperity did not spoil him. Bidwell was known to be loyal to New Orleans, for it was there he kept his business. His business methods were those of the old school,

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<sup>34</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 565.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 570.

sound but not unusually aggressive and not at all speculative. His word was known to be better than most people's bond. His ways were brusque and his speech positive, and he sometimes made enemies by the vehemence with which he maintained his opinions. In 1879 Mr. Curtis Waldo wrote this character sketch of David Bidwell:

Bidwell's success is due to the fact he always gives the public the worth of their money. He is enabled to present attractions because he always acted justly and honorably with the companies who have appeared on his boards. This has given him a high stand in the profession, which enables him to pick and choose the combinations for each season. Among his fellow citizens, Mr. Bidwell is esteemed for integrity, liberality and enterprise. Socially he is the best of companions.<sup>36</sup>

After ten years of further service as a theatrical manager, the same character sketch applied to David Bidwell, for during those ten years he accomplished many deeds of kindness among the unfortunate members of the theatrical profession.<sup>37</sup>

David Bidwell was extremely happy in his married life, but he and his wife had no children.<sup>38</sup> When Bidwell was unable to continue the business affairs of the 1888-1889 season, Mrs. Bidwell courageously attempted to carry on the business as though nothing had occurred to interrupt it. She was the daughter of a soldier who had served in the United

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<sup>36</sup>J. Curtis Waldo, Illustrated Visitor Guide to New Orleans (New Orleans, 1879), pp. 51-52.

<sup>37</sup>Kendall, The Golden Age, p. 571.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 572.

States Army in the Mexican War. She seemed to have exhibited something of that fighting spirit by taking over as manager the two New Orleans theatres. She depended chiefly on traveling companies to keep the St. Charles and the Academy of Music filled. Mrs. Bidwell often was compared to Laura Keene and Mrs. John Drew, as one of the three women who had borne the responsibility of active control of a first-class theatre.<sup>39</sup> After David's death, his widow wearied of the struggle after three years of striving to continue the activities of the theatres. In that time she had depended heavily on Jefferson, Klaw, and Erlanger, the theatrical agents. She failed to create a stock company, but Erlanger, who had received his start in show business from David Bidwell, provided Mrs. Bidwell access to the best current traveling attractions. In 1893 Mrs. Bidwell made arrangements with Jefferson, Klaw, and Erlanger to assume the lease on both her properties.

The firm of Jefferson, Klaw, and Erlanger consisted of C. B. Jefferson, the oldest son of Joseph Jefferson; Mark Klaw of New York; and Abraham L. Erlanger. With the facilities commanded by the firm, the two New Orleans theatres were easily supplied with admirable attractions.<sup>40</sup> Although the Academy of Music and the St. Charles continued to be operated

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 573.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 574.

by the Jefferson, Klaw, and Erlanger firm after the death of Mrs. Bidwell in May of 1897, they actually leased the theatres from Dr. George K. Pratt. Dr. Pratt was a well-known New Orleans physician, who purchased the St. Charles from Mrs. Bidwell's estate and the Academy of Music from the Lawrason heirs. It was from Dr. Pratt that the firm leased the theatres until 1899. In that year the firm left these two theatres to occupy new theatres that they had erected for their own purpose.

After the evacuation of the theatres by the Jefferson, Klaw, and Erlanger firm, Dr. Pratt leased both theatres to J. S. Hopkins, a theatrical man whose main office was located in New York City. His business was almost entirely in the South, although his office was in New York, the better to view new talent and organize new traveling troupes. The Academy and the St. Charles Theatres were very important to Hopkins, for adding these two theatres to the number he already controlled in the South made him able to weld the whole series into what was called a "circuit." After leasing the theatres, Hopkins did not manage them himself. He sent "Parson" Davies to manage the New Orleans theatres. Davies was not known in the theatrical world as a theatre manager, but, rather, as a promoter of prize fights and similar forms of public entertainment. Some theatrical gossip had it that

Davies had bought his way into the Hopkins company but just to what extent was not known.<sup>41</sup>

Davies, on behalf of Hopkins, operated the St. Charles as a low-price theatre, reserving the Academy for attractions of somewhat higher quality. The attractions at the St. Charles were definitely inferior. According to Kendall, the situation at the St. Charles was a sorrowful one after so many noteworthy attractions and personalities had visited its stage in the past. Kendall romantically interprets the fate of the St. Charles: "The old building seemed aware of its disgrace. It endured the presence of fly-by-night dramatic companies and cheap vaudeville for a brief period, and then by the final, despairing, desperate expedient of suicide--it escaped the further penalties of dishonored old age. On June 4, 1899, it burned to the ground."<sup>42</sup>

The fire that destroyed the St. Charles was thought to be arson, but no evidence was ever found to substantiate the claim. Twice before during the same year, fire had been discovered before serious damage had occurred. On the same night that the St. Charles burned to the ground, flames were discovered in the Academy of Music. The damage to the Academy was slight, but it was supposed that the fires were set by the same person or persons seeking revenge. Because

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 575.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

arson at the St. Charles and Academy could not be proven, Kendall in The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theatre probably furnishes as good an explanation of the catastrophe as any other by stating that the St. Charles simply committed suicide.<sup>43</sup> The once leading theatre of New Orleans and the South was no more.

The 1887-1888 season started a steady decline of the St. Charles Theatre that ended in its demise in 1899. Fewer attractions appeared at the St. Charles Theatre during the 1887-1888 season than during any season under David Bidwell's management. The season started late in October of 1887 and continued until the middle of April of 1888. During these months the theatre was idle five times because no attraction had been scheduled. This was the first time since the beginning of Bidwell's management that the theatre had been closed during a season. The explanation for the late opening and the closing of the theatre during the season lay in the fact that David Bidwell's ill health prevented him from giving his complete attention to the management of the St. Charles.

The Star Dramatic Company was no longer a permanent stock company at the St. Charles. The schedule consisted of road companies, seven of which were variety shows. During the existence of the stock company at the St. Charles, dramatic entertainment was highlighted both by the stock

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 576.

company and by the traveling road companies. Not once during this time did a variety show appear. The appearance of the seven variety shows did not come about because drama was unsuccessful, but rather the change was due to disablement of the manager. No longer able to contend with the business of organizing and maintaining a stock company, Bidwell turned to any type of road entertainment that he was able to book. This variety entertainment was included to help fill the schedule of the 1887-1888 season. This change did not hurt his business at the St. Charles because variety was the beginning of an entertainment movement in the theatrical world that eventually led into vaudeville.

David Bidwell's illness became so acute that it forced him to relinquish his management of the St. Charles Theatre, and seven months after the close of the 1888 season David Bidwell's life ended. For eight years he had managed the St. Charles, bringing it from an abused theatre to one of esteem. The success of the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans from 1880 to 1888 was due to the ability of its manager, David Bidwell.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

David Bidwell's management from 1880 to 1888 was an important era in the history of the St. Charles Theatre of New Orleans, for it restored the St. Charles to a position of reknown. Bidwell gave the people a physical plant which they were proud to attend, entertainment which appealed to a broad segment of theatre-goers, and currently popular plays with well-known stars. He gradually de-emphasized opera and variety in order to promote drama and formed a permanent stock company in the St. Charles.

Bidwell assumed management of the St. Charles at a period when the people of New Orleans once again felt secure in their business ventures. The Civil War had brought failure to the New Orleans's economic system. During the years of Reconstruction, the people did not have time, interest, or money to support the arts. This pattern of behavior is inherently American: only after the struggle for survival can there be public entertainment. A shrewd businessman, Bidwell recognized the awakening of interest in the arts and at an opportune time bought the St. Charles.

Consequently, David Bidwell opened the St. Charles as a business venture in which he felt sure of success. The

people, after their struggle, merely wanted to be entertained. To satisfy the people's interest, Bidwell returned to that type of entertainment which the people of New Orleans knew best--opera, variety and drama. He was not an innovator in the St. Charles for the first two seasons, but, rather, relied on the pre-war accepted entertainment.

For the 1880-1881 and 1881-1882 seasons, Bidwell depended completely on road companies, using no local talent whatsoever. He furnished the public and the performing companies with the St. Charles Theatre that had been restored to its former grandeur. To appear in the newly decorated theatre, Bidwell engaged the Tagliapietra Opera Company, M. B. Leavitt English Opera Company, Grand International Opera Company, Alice Oates Opera Company, C. D. Hess Acme Opera Company, Crowley-Barton Opera Company, and M'me Patti and her company. They performed such operas as La Favorita, Trovatore, William Tell, Lucia di Lammermoor, Faust, Carmen, Orpheus, La Fille de Tamour Major, Mefistofeles, Bohemian Girl, Fra Diavolo, Aida, Olivette, and Madam Favort.

The novelty and variety performances of the first seasons were given by the M. B. Leavitt Rentz-Santly and Burlesque Company, Professor Herrmann and his company, Professor Seeman, the Humpty Dumpty Pantomime Company, Haverly Mastodon Minstrels, the Rice Surprise Party, Hyde and Behman's Comedy Company, and J. H. Haverly's Spectacular

Pageant. Several of these companies made more than one appearance during the two seasons of 1880-1882.

Dramatic productions were given by C. A. Walkins Dramatic Organization, Madison Square Theatre Company of New York, James A. Herne Company, Annie Pixley's Company, Oliver Doud Bryon Company, Jarrett and Rice Dramatic Company, Mr. Frederick Paulding's Company, Milton Nobles Company, M. B. Curtis Company, Widow Bedott Company, Baker and Farron Company, Frank Mayo's Company and Frank Mordaunt Company.

The following three seasons Bidwell brought New Orleans back into the main stream of American theatre. The 1882-1883, 1883-1884, 1884-1885 seasons were heavily scheduled with dramatic productions. Forty-seven dramas, as opposed to five opera companies, five variety companies and one ballet, were staged during these three seasons.

Bidwell was a shrewd manager, for he realized that his New Orleans audiences were ready for more thought-provoking material, rather than the superficiality of variety entertainment. He turned to the material produced by contemporary playwrights who were beginning to write about the American way of life. Among the dramas were works by David Belasco, who wrote, collaborated and adapted a great number of melodramas; William Gillete, who introduced realism in action; Dion Boucicault, one of the leading playwrights in America who was a master of theatrical effectiveness; and Bartley Campbell, a notable creator of frontier drama. These men

were beginning to use realism in their melodramas, giving serious treatment to social, economic and political issues of the day. Belasco's La Belle Russe, The World, Diplomacy; Gillete's Esmerald; Boucicault's Streets of New York; and Campbell's The White Slave were presented during these seasons.

Some of the noted productions which appeared during this time were Jane Eyre, with Charlotte Thompson; The Count of Monte Cristo, with James O'Neill; Davy Crockett, with Frank Mayo; and Zaza, with Annie Pixley. The New Orleans public welcomed this fine entertainment and showed its approval by supporting the theatre.

The success with the touring dramatic companies influenced Bidwell's decision to form a permanent stock company at the St. Charles. The Star Dramatic Company was organized for the 1885-1886 season, with Joseph Wheelock and Marie Wainwright as its principal actor and actress. The company presented Divorce, Pique, Man and Wife, Taken from Life, Two Orphans, Pavement of Paris, Called Back, The Romance of a Poor Young Man, Tickets of Leave, and Ours.

After enthusiastic approval by the audiences, Bidwell retained the stock company at the St. Charles for the following season. The personnel of the company changed, and Osmond Tearle and Minnie Conway starred in the lead roles of Lancashire Lass, Martyr Mother, Almost a Life, Dot, False Shame, Colleen Bawn, Blow for Blow, Arrah-na-Pogue,

The Marble Heart, Duke's Motto and Taken from Life.

Bidwell completed the schedule with road companies. Three engagements of significance were School for Scandal, As You Like It, Much Ado about Nothing, London Assurance, Oliver Twist, Lady of Lyons, and Fedora, with Fanny Davenport; M'lle Nitouche, Little Detective, Little Nell and the Marchioness and Musette, with Lotta; and the Mikado, which was presented soon after its release in New York.

Beginning with the 1887 season, Bidwell turned again to complete dependence on road companies to bring entertainment to the theatre. Variety entertainment returned after an absence of two years with companies such as those of Professor Bristol, Professor Bartholomew, Haverly's Minstrels, Andrew's Minuet Carnival, Hallen and Hart's Ideals, and the Gilmore Band. The absence of the stock company and dependence on road companies were due to David Bidwell's age and illness. He could no longer shoulder the responsibilities of choosing plays, selecting members and organizing an entire season for a stock company. The progressiveness of the stock company gave way to the convenience of traveling companies. The traveling companies were scheduled until Bidwell's death in 1889 at the age of sixty-eight.

Bidwell's management lasted but eight years. However, in those brief eight years, he progressed from offering pure entertainment of opera and variety to offering drama of

social significance with a resident stock company. His death marked the conclusion of the St. Charles Theatre's leadership and dramatic activity in the South. The span of time of his management was too short to develop an associate to take over the St. Charles and continue the theatrical excellence for which Bidwell had set a precedent. The St. Charles was a one-manager theatre; with no one to take his place, his theatrical venture ceased to exist.

A strong theatre depends on a strong manager. The history of the St. Charles under David Bidwell bears this out. After Bidwell's death, the St. Charles's prominence deteriorated. The same thing happened in more recent years with the death of Margo Jones. Her theatre in Dallas, Texas, survived only a few seasons after her death. An audience cannot perpetuate a strong theatre, for no matter how much it desires a successful theatre, it cannot produce one without a strong manager.

David Bidwell's success as a manager of the St. Charles was no accident. New Orleans's strong interest in cultural activities dating from its establishment by the French in 1718 was interrupted by the Civil War and Reconstruction. After this void in dramatic activity, David Bidwell re-established the theatre as an influential part of New Orleans life. He entered business with the St. Charles, but went further than just making the St. Charles a financial success.

He capitalized on the uniting of the French and English factions of New Orleans and made the St. Charles a cultural center. Bidwell started with opera and variety but moved to plays that offered their audiences significant social drama. Although Bidwell offered the theatrical world nothing in the way of new plays or new promising stars, he was an innovator in the theatre, for he was one of the first regional theatrical managers to book successfully the contemporary dramas. Bidwell made his theatre a cultural center for the acceptance of the contemporary plays--a definite reflection of the artistic expression desired by the people of New Orleans.

In terms of historical significance, Bidwell's management was not of exceptional distinction. He has never been widely recognized in the nation for unique contributions to the theatrical world. But his contribution to New Orleans theatre is significant. By reopening the St. Charles, Bidwell revitalized the culture of the city by providing the entertainment which his New Orleans public wanted. In passing, it can be recalled, for example, that the Pittsburgh Playhouse folded because it did not provide entertainment suitable to the people of that city. The late demise of the Theatre Atlanta is due to similar reasons. A manager, even in Bidwell's time, had to know his public, for his theatre was a reflection of his society.

Therefore, Bidwell's management is, indeed, significant when viewed as a vital link in the development of New Orleans theatre. Bidwell had set a strong tradition for theatre excellence, and a little over two decades after his management, the Le Petit Theatre Du Vieux Carre was formed. This community theatre has been in existence for fifty-three seasons, the oldest performing community theatre in America. Today, New Orleans has one of the most successful educational and cultural programs in America. A New Orleans Repertory Theatre, financed by Titles III and IV of the Elementary and Secondary Act, is a venture designed to establish a permanent professional theatre in New Orleans. It is bringing living theatre to some 42,000 students in public and parochial high schools in the New Orleans metropolitan area. Not since the Federal Theatre Project of the 1930's have government funds been utilized to support theatre in America. It was not by chance that New Orleans was picked for this experiment, because interest in dramatic presentations shown by New Orleans's participation in this program is a continuance of the interest and support for theatrical excellence which David Bidwell stimulated in the years of his management. The historical study of David Bidwell's crusade in the St. Charles testifies that he rebuilt theatrical activity during his management and kept alive the drive for theatrical excellence that still exists in New Orleans today.

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