

## **Short-lived performance hall once city's finest**

For a few years after the end of the Civil War, the Academy of Music was Bloomington's most elegant concert and theater hall. And though destroyed by fire three-and-a-half years after its 1868 opening, the academy made a lasting impact on the city's rich cultural history.

Notwithstanding its name, the Academy of Music often played host to national theater companies, with stops lasting anywhere from the traditional "one night only" to upwards of two weeks. A traveling company's repertoire might include Shakespeare tragedies, maudlin morality plays, sketch comedy, immigrant tales, minstrel reviews, historical pageants, picturesque travelogues and farces.

Located near the southeast corner of Main and Market streets on the north end of downtown, Frederick Niergarth's brick, four-story, dome-topped "amphitheater" had room for 1,500 paid theatergoers. Surrounding the "parquette" or main floor were two levels of seating (see accompanying image), with second level supported by 14-foot iron columns. Tickets for floor seats, known as the "dress circle," were more expensive than those in the "family circle" above. Illuminating the whole affair were 150 gas fixtures with crystal glass globes and pendants.

Under the parquette was a 45-foot diameter ring large enough to accommodate a traveling indoor circus or "menagerie" (animal show). For such events the floor was dismantled into sections and rolled (the undersides were equipped with rollers) beneath the 50-foot wide by 24-foot deep stage.

It was 75 feet from the circus ring to the top of the dome, high enough for any type of 19th century daredevilry. Animals were ushered into the building through a large entryway off the rear alley, and then kept under the stage in a stable large enough to accommodate 50 head of horses.

On April 8, 1868, the new performance hall held a grand opening with hundreds of local residents strolling through the building to the strains of Kadel's Band. The evening served as a fundraiser for Niergarth, though just why is unknown, with tickets going for \$3 per couple (the equivalent of more than \$56 today, adjusted for inflation). "The beauty and fashion of the city were there," noted *The Pantagraph*.

There was still unfinished work, evident in the unpainted (or rather, un-bronzed) columns, though many of the touches, such as the hand-painted scenic drop depicting Italy's Gulf of La Spezia, received admiring looks all evening.

After some welcoming remarks, the crowd (“ladies and all”) then got to vote on a name for the new venue, with “Academy of Music” coming out tops. The evening ended with dancing into the midnight hour. “We think the Academy of Music may now be safely set down as the place that will draw the beauty, fashion and large crowds of this city,” surmised The Pantagraph.

One public figure less than impressed with the new theater was Herman Schroeder, proprietor of an opera house on the east side of the courthouse square. He reminded Pantagraph readers that while the Academy of Music was now open ... his opera house was decidedly not closed! Schroeder further noted the “repainting and retrofitting” underway at his place, and the fact (likely exaggerated) that its capacity was 300 to 400 more than any hall in Bloomington, including Niergarth’s.

Edwin Forrest, considered by many the greatest actor of his generation, appeared at the Academy of Music over three successive nights in early April 1870, first in “Richelieu,” then “Jack Cade” and ending with “King Lear.” Tickets were \$1 or 50 cents (25 cents extra for reserved seating), with a “full house, composed of the elite of Bloomington and Normal” for the first night’s performance. The 64-year-old Forrest still drew favorable notices. “Though advanced in years,” commented The Leader, a long-gone Bloomington daily, the famed thespian presented “the same calm majesty, the identical voice of thunder—in its low register, and the faultless clearness of enunciation, which render him peerless among actors of this or any country.”

Katie Putnam and the Metropolitan Star Company held the Academy of Music stage for eleven straight days in September 1870, offering something new nearly every night and a few matinees in between. “Katie has lost none of her vivacity and sprightliness; she is as bewitching as ever,” observed The Leader. “It is impossible to describe her satisfactorily. There is a grace and finish in her acting ... She is inimitable in her impersonations, and is by far the very best comedienne that ever visited Bloomington.” Metropolitan Star Company productions included an “opera comique” titled “The Daughter of the Regiment,” “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” “The Youth Who Never Saw a Women,” “Poor Pillicoddy,” “The Little Detective” and “Sketches in India.”

On May 25-26, 1871, the academy welcomed the “famous young character comedian” Joseph K. Emmet in “Fritz, Our Cousin German.” As the absurdly named Fritz von Vonderblinkenstoff, Emmet offered “charming characteristic mélange, songs, dances and instrumental solos.” And on May 27, the Philolethian Society staged the temperance melodrama “The Drunkard; or the Fallen Saved.”

Beginning on August 29, Varney’s Comedy Company, with star attraction Annie “The Queen of Song and Dance” Ward in tow, appeared for four nights, with the shows including “Andy Blake; or the Irish Diamond.” The company also included two dozen dramatic and minstrel performers, as well as “Prof. Gilbert’s Juvenile Cornet Band.”

Less than two weeks later, September 9, 1871, the Academy of Music was lost in a fire that claimed the entire downtown block bounded by Main, Market, East and Monroe streets, excepting a small blacksmith shop. Described as “one of the most destructive fires which ever visited Bloomington,” the intense heat was such that it buckled a nearby section of streetcar track along Main Street.

“The high wind which prevailed rendered the scene magnificent,” reported The Pantagraph. “The flames leaped high in the air, twisting into spiral shapes as they were caught by the circling eddies of wind; then, shooting off to the west and south, they would dart towards other buildings, as if seeking new victims for their demonic rage.”

Three days after the fire, The Pantagraph reported that Niergarth was “unable or indisposed to build at present,” as insurance covered only \$12,000 of the concert and theater hall’s \$30,000 loss. There would no rebuilding effort in the future as well. Niergarth, who was no stranger to money woes, almost certainly knew by then that the fire represented the Academy of Music’s final curtain call.