

CHAPTER XIII

DEVELOPMENT OF MIAMI'S THEATERS

MIAMI's pioneers had to be contented with makeshift playhouses and primitive amateur performances. The performances following the travestied minstrel show, which has been described in a preceding chapter, were staged in a one-story frame structure which was known as "Budge's Opera House" and which was located on East Flagler Street, between First and Second avenues. That apology for a theater was built of uprights with spaces between them for admission of air and light. A little later in the history of the city a more pretentious theater was built on Northeast First Street, between Miami and First avenues, which was known as "Prout's Opera House" (now the "Havlin" building). Having been unable to secure professional entertainers, owing to Miami's distance from the booking centers, and as most of the local parodists had been killed off, this opera house was soon converted into an armory, and subsequently into

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an arena for boxing matches and basket-ball games.

The year 1906 marks the advent of Miami's motion-picture shows, which were soon followed by vaudeville and stock companies. The first movie theater was opened by a Mr. Kelly, in the "Hatchet" building, on East Flagler Street, between Miami and First avenues. About one year later a Mr. Stanton started a movie theater in the east storeroom of the "Daniel" block, on East Flagler Street near First Avenue. That improvised theater was known as the "Alcazar." That place of amusement, or rather house of torture, was shortly after its opening purchased by two local men, namely, W. F. Miller and C. O. Richardson. The storeroom, in which this movie was located was better suited for a Turkish bathhouse than for a place of amusement. The only ventilation obtainable was through the front and rear entrances. The former, however, was obstructed by the cashier's booth, and the latter by an impervious screen. On the opening night, under the new management, it was discovered that no audience but that composed of moles or ground-hogs could sit out an entire performance without suffering asphyxiation. In

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order to surmount this difficulty, the ingenious Mr. Miller elevated the auditorium floor, and filled the space underneath with a carload of ice, installed a powerful electric fan, which forced the cooled air up through the cracks in the floor, and thus by a slow-freezing process of the limbs of the audience, succeeded in rendering the victims unconscious of the upper strata of heated air enveloping their heads and bodies. And inasmuch as the crude pictures of that period did not impel undivided attention, the audience passed their time enjoying the pleasing sensation of placing warm hands upon ice-cold limbs.

The adroit Mr. Kelly, in order to excel his ingenious competitor, added vaudeville features to his one-reel movie show and soon put the limb-cooling theater out of business. Noting the victor's apparent prosperity, one of our pioneer boys, Henry Chase (recently elected sheriff of Dade County), opened a movie theater in an old shack which stood on North First Avenue, where now stands the First Trust and Savings Bank building. That caricature of a theater served as a retreat for somnambulists and victims of insomnia.

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About a year later a real theater was built for Mr. Kelly, which was located on West Flagler Street (now the Wayne building). This was subsequently purchased by a former wealthy Miamian, named James McQuaide, husband of a noted actress, known as "Gertie Reynolds." This theater which was named in honor of the latter, produced legitimate plays by stock companies. Among the most popular of the visiting troupes was the "Pickerts." Mr. Pickert's talented family made a great hit with the Miami public — and Miami made a hit with the Pickerts. After retiring from the stage Mr. and Mrs. Pickert wisely selected Miami Beach as their place of residence for the remainder of their days.

The legitimate plays at the "Gertie Reynolds" theater having proved unremunerative, the place was finally converted into a movie which was managed by Mr. Kelly until 1912, when he opened the former "Dixie" theater on North Miami Avenue, between First and Second streets. About that period another movie was opened in the "Hunter" building on East Flagler Street, between First and Second avenues, called "The Wigwam," by the late Clifford Brown.

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Mr. Brown excelled his competitors by equipping his theater with a mirror screen and by giving away pianos and automobiles to the lucky winners among his patrons. Mr. Brown was succeeded by the firm of Hickson & Whitner. This firm later opened a movie and vaudeville theater on the Rickmer corner, at East Flagler Street and Second Avenue, and subsequently leased Dr. Jackson's corner, across the street from the former, where they built a fairly modern theater building.

In 1910 F. E. McVeigh opened what was then known as the "Marco" theater, where the "Fotoshow" is now located. Mr. McVeigh made a success from the very outset. He wisely studied the public taste and gave his patrons what they liked. After amassing a little fortune, he sold out to Harry Tuttle in 1913, who, in turn, sold out to a Mr. Boss, who one year later sold half interest to William Leach. In 1916 Boss and Leach opened the "Paramount" theater, and a year or so later Mr. Leach bought his partner's interest in both places.

In 1912 Captain Frank Jaudon and his youngest brother, the late Ivan Jaudon, reopened the theater in the "Hatchet" building, which

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they named "The Arcade." This firm later built an airdome on the adjoining lot, where now stands the Kress building. Two years later the Jaudons associated themselves with Dunworth & Armstrong in the operation of the "Strand" theater, on the corner of North Miami Avenue and First Street, which was subsequently acquired by the Leach interests. In 1913 another theater, called "The Vaudette," was opened at the corner of North Miami Avenue and Third Street, which was operated by a federation of workmen, aiming at supplying wholesome entertainment for its patrons at a minimum cost.

In 1920 "The Mank" theater (now the "Park") was opened by Burton Mank, who previously operated Hickson & Whitner's "Airdome," as a vaudeville theater. Mr. Mank was succeeded by Fred A. Armstrong and associates who operated this playhouse as a vaudeville and stock company theater, and incidentally as a boxing-match arena. During this period the Lynch syndicate entered the Miami theatrical field and jointly with William Leach & Sons took over all of Miami's theaters.

In 1922 the process of evolution in Miami's

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theatrical industry, while not completed, had reached a highly advanced stage of development in the erection of a modern theater which was named "The Fairfax." This attractive playhouse was erected and operated (until recently) by "The Bradford Amusement Company," and was subsequently sold to the Lynch Amusement Corporation. This firm's latest acquisition forms the last link in its present chain of Miami's theaters.

The progress of the local theatrical business, as in all other pioneer ventures, was by no means free from exasperating difficulties. Owing to the crudity of the playhouses, and the imperfect pictures thrown upon their screens, the public protested when the price of admission was raised from a nickel to a dime. Then, too, the irregularity of express deliveries in those days compelled the managers to repeat the same reels, day after day until new shipments were received. In spite of these objections, the Sunday-night shows attracted multitudes of patrons whose waiting lines congested the sidewalks contiguous to the theaters.

The popularity of the Sunday shows elicited strong protests from Miami's pulpits, which

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finally developed into a vigorous church crusade against the keeping of theaters open on Sundays. In this memorable fight the Rev. S. P. Merrill and the late Edwin Nelson took leading parts and succeeded in closing the theaters for several Sundays. To retaliate, the managers demanded the cessation of all Sunday activities, including the closing of drug stores and the suspension of train service (some of the bolder theater proprietors even demanded the discontinuance of Sunday church collections). This strategic move resulted in the resumption of the Sunday shows, without further interference from the officials who were rendered impotent in their efforts at law enforcement.

The foregoing portrayal of the development of Miami's theaters, while unrelated to the visits in this city, a number of years ago, of the late B. F. Keith, the theatrical magnate, it should be recorded that Mr. Keith, in response to his local physician's (Dr. J. M. Jackson, Jr.) intimation that this growing town was badly in need of a Y.M.C.A. institution, had given the latter a check for \$5,000 as a donation which formed the nucleus of the fund of \$125,000 which was subsequently raised locally and expended in the

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erection of the magnificent "Y" building, at the corner of Northeast Third Avenue and First Street.

This institution was founded in 1917, and has been in charge of William S. Frost from its very inception. It is administered by a board of directors representing the various Protestant churches of the city. Mr. Frost, its executive secretary, assisted by a highly efficient organization, is directing the important work of the physical and moral upbuilding of Miami's boys who patronize this institution in large numbers.