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Way Off-Broadway: Live Theater in Northwest Ohio



Toledo's Valentine Theater had the largest stage in the country when it was built in 1895. Today, the 900-seat theater has been completely renovated and serves northwest Ohio as a live performing arts venue. The Toledo Symphony, Toledo Opera, Toledo Ballet, Toledo Jazz Society, Masterworks Chorale, and area schools and colleges all use its facilities.

In a time when motion pictures and television bring the work of professional entertainers into our neighborhoods and homes, it is sometimes difficult to remember that most small towns once had an "opera house" for live music and dramatic productions, and large cities were filled with theaters competing for audiences. While many manuscripts at the Center for Archival Collections refer to entertainment seen in the community, others were compiled by performers, critics, and fans, each providing a unique opportunity for researchers to study live entertainment in northwest Ohio during the 19th and 20th centuries.

American public entertainment during the 19th century developed gradually. Entertainers traveled from place to place giving concerts or performances. Lectures were very popular, both as an informal means of adult education and as a forum for civic, social, and moral reform. During the

1850s, stage adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* took the nation by storm. Well into the 20th century, some traveling companies specialized in performing dramatic presentations of this novel. Included in the [Ely Family Papers \(MS 787\)](#) are datebooks documenting the work of one such company. The play's explicitly Christian theme eased the qualms many people felt about the morality of attending a stage play. Once that barrier was overcome, the late nineteenth century saw a flowering of many kinds of live entertainment.

The interior of the Valentine Theater, seen in this early 20th century view features a large proscenium arch framing the stage. Popular in theater design since the 17th century, this arch puts a kind of picture frame around the action on stage.

Theatrical centers like New York or San Francisco began to nourish original dramatic work and could support resident populations of actors and musicians. The highlight of a trip to these cities was to attend a series of plays, and many visitors continued to follow the careers of their favorite actors through popular magazines. One such example is the *Nettie Willard Lincoln Scrapbooks (MMS 1768f)*. Most commercial theaters around the country, however, booked traveling troupes or individual performers to fill their schedules. The theater and arts scene in Toledo was lively enough to allow *Blade* owner [Robinson Locke \(MS 332\)](#) to write as its drama critic, "Rodney Lee." The collection gives an idea of the remarkable amount of high quality entertainment available in northwest Ohio and documents changes in popular taste over some forty years.



Catering to a middle-class audience, vaudeville houses featured programs of unrelated variety acts ranging from song-and-dance, comedy, and music, to acrobatics. Each act was individually booked by each theater, and each theater might strive to vary its offerings with public lectures, a play performed by a traveling troupe of actors, or a performance by a touring star. Eventually, "circuits" of associated theaters provided access to a variety of performers, whose hope was to play the Palace Theater in New York, the most prestigious venue in the business. From there, it might be possible to make the jump to "legitimate" theater and appear in conventional dramatic productions. The CAC includes several manuscript collections documenting the life of traveling troupes: The **John Himmelein Papers (MS 184)** documents "The Ideals", a troupe managed from Kelly's Island at the turn of the century; the **Kinsey Komedie Kompany (MS 23mf)**, a family-centered Ohio troupe which flourished for over fifty years; and the **Ginnivan Dramatic Company (MS 58mf)**, another long-lived organization which featured professional performances of popular plays. The careers of individual performers such as **Dorothy** and **Lillian Gish**, **Jean Arthur**, and **Maidie Norman**, who all honed their acting craft on the stage are documented in the **Gish Film Theater Collection (MS 741)**.

While professional acting troupes or vaudeville acts traveled from theater to theater in the nation's larger towns, much smaller towns also filled their public halls with the occasional lecturer or concert. Often, however, these halls served as the stage for amateur variety shows, fund-raisers, and school recitals or theatrical presentations. Public speaking was an important part of American secondary education, and end-of-term recitals, with students reciting poetry or famous orations, became standard fare by the end of the 19th century. It was a small step from there to the production of dramatic scenes or complete plays, with scripts provided through theatrical publishers.

"Green Stockings" was presented by the students of the Normal College on the evening of May twenty sixth. This play is at present the most popular for amateur production of any given in the United States. It is a lively comedy of contemporary life setting forth the complications resulting from the effort of the spinster member of an English family to free [her]self from the undesired pity of her relatives.--Bee Gee News, June 15, 1921, p. 10.

This interest continued when students entered college. Bowling Green State University began to offer a course on drama just a few years after its founding. Inevitably, the students were eager to try their hand at a full production, and a long tradition of high quality plays at BGSU was begun. In fact, the university numbers among its most famous alumni Oscar-winning actress **Eva Marie Saint** who appeared in many productions here during her student days, as well as actor-comedian Tim Conway.



The success of the speech and drama program was such that in the summer of 1949, the **Huron Playhouse** opened its doors for its first summer season. It is now Ohio's oldest continuing summer theater and for over half a century has continued to provide actors and the community a well-balanced season of comedies, dramas, mysteries, melodramas, Shakespeare, children's theater, and musicals. Like similar theaters, it offers professional-level experience. A number of other summer stock theaters and repertory companies can be found in this region, usually in larger cities or resort areas.

Amateur theater productions continue today in many northwest Ohio communities, whether single-performance dinner theaters or musical revues raising funds for church or charity, or as community organizations mounting a season of entertainment. Still other organizations work with youth, performing children's plays for young audiences or introducing children and teens to the excitement of live performance. **Bowling Green's Black Swamp Players (MS 305)** have been active since the 1960s, and are just one of over a dozen community theater organizations in the CAC's nineteen-county region. Live theater is alive and well in northwest Ohio!

--Lee N. McLaird

Community Theater Organizations in Northwest Ohio

- Archbold. **Archbold Community Theater**
- Bowling Green. **Black Swamp Players**
- Bucyrus. **Bucyrus Little Theater**
- Defiance. **Fort Defiance Players**
- Findlay. **Fort Findlay Playhouse**
- Lima. **Amil Tellers of Dramatics, Inc.**
- Montpelier. **Williams County Community Theater**
- Oregon. **Oregon Community Theater**
- Port Clinton. **Playmakers Civic Theater**
- Tiffin. **Ritz Players**
- Toledo. **The Village Players Theater**
- Toledo. **Toledo Repertoire Theater**
- Van Wert. **Off-Stage Productions**