

# NATIONAL

*America's First Theatre*

1835

*Centennial*

*Program*

1935

*The*  
**PLAYGOER**

*A Magazine for the Theatre*

DECEMBER 2, 1935

# National Theatre

**PLAYGOER**

The Magazine in the Theatre

Official Program of the National Theatre

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## National Theatre Centennial One Hundredth Anniversary, December 7th 1835—1935

Washington—whose history is embroidered with picturesqueness and romance—has always been one of America's leading theatrical cities. Its stage history dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, and careful research discloses that this same picturesqueness and romance tintured its early footlight annals. As early as 1799 strolling players were visiting Georgetown, performing in halls, stables or taverns. They carried no scenery and very meager make-up appurtenances, acting under the glow of pear-pointed candlelight. That the early settlers were eager for amusements is evidenced by the fact that the first "real" theater was erected in 1804. It was situated on the corner of Eleventh and C streets, and bore no other name than "The Theater." It was followed by "The Washington Theater," built in 1821 on Louisiana avenue, just east of Sixth street. Both these houses played intermittently during the year, making it a policy to close for the racing seasons. No competition existed, and for a period of fifteen years they were the only amusement centers in the National Capital. However, they did not thrive. Full houses could not be hoped for except during the sittings of Congress.

In 1834 Washington was the most ill-conditioned city on the continent. One of magnificent distances, whose broad avenues were laid out, but not builded upon, and whose streets were unpaved and full of huge

holes and hog wallows. Pennsylvania avenue was, in winter and spring, a vast quagmire through which vehicles toiled with extreme difficulty; slush was king and mud monarch. Life was slow and the citizenry demanded diversion. So great was the unrest that a meeting on September 17, 1834, was held to determine the advisability of erecting a new, commodious and creditable playhouse, and so it was with the building of the National Theater that Washington's theatrical history really began.

In 1834, when Washington was in its swaddling clothes, a number of leading citizens urged the erection of a theater worthy of the name. True, two already existed; but they were, in reality, crude affairs without proper ventilation, lighting and comfort. The suggestion relative to a third playhouse won the approval of the infant city, and finally culminated in a meeting held September 17, 1834, when stock was subscribed for the enterprise, an association was formed, and Messrs. Henry Randall, Richard Smith, Cornelius McLean, Jr., George Gibson and William Brent were appointed a board of managers to select and purchase a plot of ground and erect a suitable building for the purpose. These gentlemen finally agreed upon lots 3 and 4, in square 254, which were purchased from John Mason on October 16, 1834.

So it came to pass that in the fall of

(Continued on page 11)

**W**HEN the National first opened its doors to an admiring public 100 years ago Washington was a rambling town of unsightly buildings on streets that were seldom anything more than dust, except when they were mud.

It had little to offer in the way of public transportation and patrons of the theater as well as others who travelled about the town suffered much inconvenience, at any rate as this generation looks upon their goings to and fro.

Now Washington has become known over the world for its imposing edifices of stone and marble, its stately monuments, fronting on wide, well-paved streets, the spacious, attractive communities around it.

In the march forward, public transportation has played a major part. From that day in '62 when the Washington & Georgetown Railroad Company first sent a horse car hurtling over its new-laid rails in Pennsylvania Avenue to the present, the public vehicle has been a mighty factor in the development of the Capital and its thriving, lovely suburbs.

After the horse cars came cable cars, those propelled by electricity, the gasoline motor bus; all have taken a role in the unfolding drama of the growth of a great city. Without them, without public transportation, regular, dependable, safe and inexpensive, such growth as Washington has experienced hardly would have been possible.

Stop their busy wheels for a few hours and what confusion would result, what paralysis of a city's life and movement. Distances from suburban—and thousands of intown—homes, to Government Departments, to offices, stores, hotels and theaters, only a few blocks not so long ago, stretch out now into miles, making the public vehicle an absolute necessity to tens of thousands. For their service, over a network of streets and avenues, this Company's cars and buses each week day travel 78,000 miles.

CAPITAL TRANSIT COMPANY

## George White's New Stage "Scandals," Boasting Cast of 100, To Open At National Theatre On December 9

With Rudy Vallee, Bert Lahr and Willie and Eugene Howard

The twelfth edition of George White's stage "Scandals" will begin a week's engagement at the National Theater on Monday evening, December 9, the producer announced from New York yesterday. The Broadway premiere of the new extravaganza will follow at the New Amsterdam Theater immediately after its local presentation here.

Not since he startled Broadway into a burst of feverish enthusiasm over the initial "Scandals," has George White assembled a cast and production so worthy of his managerial reputation as in his forthcoming extravaganza which he has peopled with a galaxy of stage and screen stars for what he believes to be his peak musical revue.

"The new 'Scandals,'" states producer White, "has been a year in the making. Dozens of sketches, dozens of production ideas and dozens of songs have been written and rewritten before each individual item in the program was finally accepted as worthy of the newer and greater 'Scandals' I have been assiduously laboring to produce. An instance in point is my chorus ensemble, always noted for its rare beauties. Having set a high mark with my gorgeous dancing girls in the past, I

determined to outdo myself on this occasion and interviewed upwards of five thousand beauties before I selected the seventy-five which now comprise my 'Scandals' chorus. All in all, it is my sincere belief that from a standpoint of talent, sketch and song material, as well as in costume, lighting and settings, I have eclipsed anything I have heretofore done in the field of extravaganza.

"It is an honor, indeed," concludes Mr. White, "to bring 'Scandals' here before the Broadway showing, for here, as has been definitely proven in the past, I am assured of enthusiastic reaction on the part of theater lovers who appreciate the living theater at its glorified best."

The new "Scandals" is in two acts and thirty-five scenes and boasts a cast of more than one hundred. Rudy Vallee, Bert Lahr, Willie and Eugene Howard, Cliff Edwards, and the ever delightful Gracie Barrie head the brilliant array of stars gathered by Mr. White for the new "Scandals." Others in the cast of more than one hundred include Shea & Raymond, Jane Cooper, Harold Willard, Hal Forde, Three Wiere brothers, Sam, Ted & Ray; Stanley Twins,

*(Continued on page 33)*



An actual performance photograph of the George White beauty chorus singing one of the song hits in "Scandals"

(Continued from page 3)

1835 the spacious edifice was completed, and at a meeting of stockholders on November 3, the subject of a fitting title was broached. Each member spoke and suggested a title, and after a vote was taken, it was found that a unanimous poll favored calling the new playhouse "The National."

#### Debut of the New House

The theater was opened in December, 1835, with "The Man of the World," which was followed by Junius Booth in "Hamlet." During 1836 the National was visited by Madame Celeste, who offered a week of sweeping melodrama, playing "The French Spy," "The Death Plank," "The Tongueless Pirate Boy" and "The Moorish Page." The season of the following year saw the return of Junius Booth in "Richard III," and the coming of William Burton in "The Fine Old English Gentleman."

The great J. H. Hackett as "Falstaff," played the National in May, 1838. In 1839 came Edwin Forrest, the Apollosque matinee idol of the period, followed by Miss Ellen Tree in Shakespearian repertoire.

#### From 1840 to the Fatal Fire of 1845

Beginning with 1840 and continuing for the next five years, the National housed the best that the stage had to offer. Fanny Eissler, the famous danseuse of her day, took Washingtonians from their seats by the magnificence and beauty of her terpsichorean efforts. Booth and Forrest played return engagements—during the Christmas holidays of 1841. J. W. Wallack, Herr Cline, Mlle Jasitro and Mr. Llewellyn followed during the winter and spring and the season closed in 1842.

"Damon and Pythias" with Adams as star opened the fall season of 1843; soon after "Baboon" with Signor Henrico Nano followed; but this year was marked by a certain lethargy as far as worth-while theatrical fare were concerned. In January of 1844, J. H. Hackett returned, but the theater had been experiencing financial difficulties. Stock dropped in value; affairs came to a crisis; and the National Theater, which cost \$45,000 in its erection, was sold for \$13,500 to Gen. Van Ness, Hon. Benjamin Ogle Tayloe and Richard Smith, all well-known Washingtonians. The theater was reopened in February of 1844, but not to success. In March it closed. Meanwhile

(Continued on page 13)

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(Continued from page 11)

S. M. Emery, of the Holiday Theater, Baltimore, Md., became its lessee, and Mr. Vandenhoff of Convent Garden, London, England, came in "Hamlet," followed by the Italian opera troupe from Havana, Cuba.

On the night of March 5, 1845, a fire originated in the oil room, in the back part of the theater, while "Beauty and the Beast," a burletta, was being performed. The theater was quickly consumed by flames, and the audience, fortunately enough, having been warned shortly after the blaze was discovered, escaped uninjured. After the smoke had cleared away only the four bare, blackened walls remained.

#### The Second Opening

In 1860, Jenny Lind was at her height; she had subjugated all Europe, and had come to America to conquer with her divine voice. Washington must hear her; that was the decision of the residents of the National Capital. But no music hall was available. The situation was acute, and two prominent Washingtonians, Messrs. Willard and Reeside, took the matter in hand. They built upon the ruins of the recently destroyed National, a music hall—hurriedly and haphazardly—to afford the famous Jenny Lind an opportunity to come to Washington during the Yuletide season.

#### Third Opening and Second Fire

Early in December, 1852, the National theater was rebuilt for the third time, and officially opened its doors on the night of December 15, 1852, with Matilda Herron, in "The Hunchback." During the period 1852 to 1856 the theater was closed several times; however, Julia Dean, Lola Montez, Charlotte Cushman, the Seguin Opera Company, Emma Fitzpatrick, The Ravel Family, Grisi and Mario, and Edwin Booth in "Richard III" and "The Merchant of Venice," visited Washington during these four years and the theater enjoyed a moderate prosperity.

January 12, 1856, saw another year dawn upon the National, and John E. Owens and Mrs. Melinda Jones celebrated it by appearing in "Self," followed by "A Kiss in the Dark." As the curtain fell upon the unthinking multitude indulging in uproarious merriment, none could have

(Continued on page 15)



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Connecticut Avenue at S Street

(Continued from page 13)

guessed that it would never rise again. The players, fagged out, hastily donned their daily costumes, removed their makeups and hurried back to their hotels, never stopping to cast a glance at the building. The silence of night fell; the lights were out, and the theater was clothed in darkness.

A second fire broke out in the property room, and within a few hours nothing but the four black walls remained.

For six years its dismantled walls were all that remained to mark the site of the National. For a few years following its destruction a financial depression swept over the country; amusements were, to a great degree, dispensed with, and no attempt to rebuild the playhouse was made. Rumors of internal strife were filling the land; bitterness between the North and South was smoldering. The National Capital was close to the border line of the slave States, and the United States was rapidly dividing itself into two great sections, which were destined in a few years to engage in a civil war, born of avarice and hate.

### W. W. Rapley Becomes One of the Theater's Owners

Meantime the property has passed through various hands and a part of the ground now occupied by the theater had been sold to Allison Nailor. Finally, in 1862, the entire property passed into the control of W. W. Rapley and W. E. Spaulding for a consideration of \$35,000. A new theater was speedily erected. No well-known stars appeared during the first two years; the Civil War took away all thought of entertainment, and in 1864 the theater closed. It was reopened in the early fall of the same year and continued until the third fire in 1873. During this period John Wilkes Booth, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Keene, Joe Jefferson, Lydia Thompson, Frank Mayo in "The Streets of New York," Lester Wallach, Christine Nilsson and innumerable lesser famed stars played at the National.

### The Third Fire—Rapley Encounters Great Losses

In 1873 the National burned a third time. The origin of the fire remained a mystery.

(Continued on page 17)

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Or National Theater Boxoffice Friday Afternoon

(Continued from page 15)

Insurance did not pretend to cover the losses incurred and W. W. Rapley, who had in the meantime become sole owner of the playhouse, lost \$98,000. Mr. Rapley lost no moments in repining against fate, or railing at fortune—but before the ruins actually had cooled he was busy rebuilding the theater.

A gala reopening occurred in 1874 and during the next six years the National played the greatest attractions and stars available in the United States. Sothorn in "Lord Dundreary," Salvini in "Ingomar," Adelaide Neilson, John T. Raymond in "Col. Mullberry Sellers," Clara Morris in "Camille," Mary Anderson, Frank Bangs, Agnes Booth, Laurence Barrett, William F. Cody in a Western thriller, "Lost and Won," Joe Jefferson and Dion Boucicault in "The Shaughraun," visited Washington several times. In 1879 "Pinafore," the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, made its first Washington appearance.

#### The Divine Sarah

The event of the season came on the night of April 8, 1881, when no less a cele-

briety than Sarah Bernhardt opened in "Frou Frou." This great French artist had struggled from the lowest rung of the ladder. In 1881 she had reached the pinnacle of fame.

#### Years of Prosperity—1881 to 1895— The Great Fire

By this time the National Theater had become the foremost in the Capital. During the next five years, following the engagement of Sarah Bernhardt, the National brought to Washington stars and plays of a high order. Bob Ingersoll delivered his lecture, "The Great Infidel and the Devil"; Thomas W. Keene presented the cream of Shakespeare; Mary Anderson returned in classic renditions; Joe Jefferson came back with "Rip"; James O'Neil appeared in "Monte Cristo," and John McCullough, Maggie Mitchell and John T. Raymond played their new, as well as their old roles, to crowded houses. In 1884 Henry Irving and Ellen Terry stepped before the National footlights in "Louis XIV."

The last play to be performed on the boards of the old National was "Victor Durand," by Wallack's New York company. About three hours after the end of the performance, February 27, 1885, the National caught fire from some unexplained cause and was soon in ruins.

(Continued on page 19)



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(Continued from page 17)

Work of rebuilding was commenced in April, 1885, and on Monday evening, October 5th, 1885, the great emotional actress, Mme. Rhea opened the New National in "Lady Ashley."

"The Wizard of Oz," Joe Weber, Nat Goodwin, Maxine Elliott, Thomas Jefferson, Lew Fields, Sothern and Marlowe, Sam Bernard, Ethel Barrymore, Fritz Scheff, "The Prince of India," Grace George, Forbes-Robertson, Richard Mansfield, William Faversham, "The Follies of 1907" (the first of the Ziegfeld series), Eleanor Robson, the Metropolitan Grand Opera Company (with Caruso in 1908, it being his last appearance in the capital), Walter Hampden, "The Yankee Prince" (with George M. Cohan), Anna Held in "Miss Innocence," Julia Sanderson, Lillian Russell, and Otis Skinner were among the stars and attractions that occupied the other side of the National footlights in the next twelve years.

#### The National in Recent Years

In more recent years, within the memory of the younger generation of theatergoers, the National has played Mary Pickford in "A Good Little Devil" David Warfield in "The Music Master" and "The Return of Peter Grimm," George M. Cohan in "Broadway Jones," Frances Starr in "The Easiest Way," Otis Skinner in "The Honor of the Family," "Ben Hur," Billie Burke in "Caesar's Wife" and "The Intimate Strangers," Elsie Ferguson in "Outcasts" and "Sacred and Profane Love," George Arliss, Maude Adams in "A Kiss for Cinderella," Lou Tellegen, Jane Cowl in "Lilac Time," Mitzi in "Sari," Leo Dietrichstein, "Going Up," Ina Claire in "The Gold Diggers," Fred Stone in "Chin Chin," "Jack o' Lantern" and "Tip Top," Helen Hayes in "Bab," and Alfred Lunt in "Clarence."

#### National Theater of Today

In 1922 the present modern playhouse was erected on the sight of the old "New National Theater" and the stars and attractions that have been presented during the last thirteen years are well within the memory of the average theatergoer.

And no history of the theater would be complete without a word on the "The National Theater Players," Washington's own stock company. Conceived and sponsored by our worthy manager of today, Steve Cochran, back in the spring of 1923, "The National Theater Players" have long since become a Washington institution.

#### What the Theater Stands For

Though the structure has changed the glory and traditions of the playhouse remain. On December 7, 1935, the National celebrates its one hundredth birthday. It is the oldest of Washington's theaters, and its history represents to a great degree the historic growth and development of the American stage.



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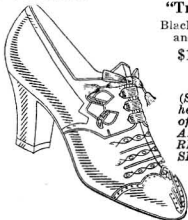
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### CAST

(In order of their appearance)

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Elisha J. Whitney	Paul Everton
Billy Crocker	William Gaxton
Bellboy	Gilbert Landry
Reno Sweeney	Benay Venuta
Reporter	Edward Delbridge
First Cameraman	Chet Bree
Second Cameraman	Neal Evans
Sir Evelyn Oakleigh	Leslie Barrie
Hope Harcourt	Irene Delroy
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Babe .....	Vivian Vance
The Foursome .....	{ Marshall Smith, Ray Johnson, Dwight Snyder, Del Porter
The Ritz Quartette .....	{ Chet Bree, Bill Stamm, Neal Evans Ed. Delbridge
The Alvin Quartette .....	{ John Walsh, Robert Burton Richard Nealy, Gilbert Landry
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