

# The Jefferson Theatrical Family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania

By James Henke, Ph.D.

In the summer of 1831, a notice appeared in the *Lancaster Journal* that Joseph Jefferson II (the son of the famous actor Joseph Jefferson I, and father of Joseph Jefferson III who became famous for his portrayal of Rip Van Winkle), had engaged the theatre on West Chestnut Street, and that extensive alterations were being made to the building. As a part of this renovation windows were placed in the walls for ventilation, boxes were erected, and a ceiling was added to aid acoustics.<sup>1</sup>

During the following week this notice appeared:

We are requested by Mr. Joseph Jefferson II, to state that the theatre on Chestnut Street, this city, which has recently been fitted up and improved in matters of convenience and comfort, as well as of ornament and decoration, will be opened with a favorite play and farce on tomorrow evening, the 10th instant.

It gives us great pleasure to add, that we were yesterday surprised and astonished at the alterations and improvements, which in the course of a few days, have been made in the interior of the theatre. It seemed like enchantment, we could scarcely credit, and cannot describe it. The ornaments and draperies are in the chastest style, rich but not gaudy, and not inferior, in general effect, to those in the theatres in our Atlantic cities. The whole will be heightened and finished by a beautiful drop curtain from the graphic pencil of Mr. Jefferson, which we are confident, cannot fail to please all having pretensions to taste in these matters.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, these alterations could not be completed in time for the announced opening. The *Lancaster Journal* of Friday, September 16, 1831, reported:

The theatre on Chestnut Street, in our city, was opened on Monday last [September 12th], by Mr. Jefferson's company, with the favorite play of the "Mountaineers," and the farce of "He Lies Like Truth." Our old friends were received with hearty greetings, and acquitted themselves in their usually accurate and interesting manner. The additions to the company are Mrs. Mackenzie, and Messrs. Palmer and Gilmer. . . . The entertainments for this evening are highly attractive: Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice," and the laughable farce of the "Irish Tutor." The exertions made by the company to please are very great; and they will, we hope, receive that countenance and support which they certainly merit from a liberal and literal community.

The evening performance of Friday, September 23, 1831, was advertised as *Rob Roy*, a dramatization of Sir Walter Scott's novel, and the *Irish Tutor*. On the following Friday evening, *Ways and Means, or a Trip to Dover*, a comedy by George Colman, was scheduled to be presented, followed by a melodrama, *The Blind Boy*.<sup>3</sup>

Editorial comment in the newspaper supported the generally excellent quality of the performances:

We are happy to find that the exertions of Mr. Jefferson and his company at this establishment, have drawn full and fashionable audiences, who have all been, apparently, gratified by the creditable manner in which every play attempted has been performed. Indeed, it is a great merit, and one almost peculiar to this company, that they attempt nothing which they are not capable of doing justice to.

The tragedies and comedies that they have given us, have been well sustained throughout, and many of the best farces in the language have been played with a vivacity and spirit that could not have been imparted to them without the combined talents of [Joseph] Jefferson I, John Jefferson, Mrs. S. Chapman and Mrs. Joseph Jefferson II, formerly Mrs. Burke.<sup>4</sup>

The Jefferson company continued its success with a performance of *Zemбуca, or the Net Maker and His Wife*, preceded by a repeat performance of *He Lies Like Truth*, on Friday evening, October 7th.<sup>5</sup>

This performance also was successful, for the *Lancaster Journal* of Friday, October 14, 1831, contained the following:

The exertions of Mr. Jefferson to merit the patronage of our theatrical population are certainly such as to entitle him to the highest commendations and success. Not only has the theatre been handsomely fitted up and embellished with tasteful decorations, but a variety of entertainments, of the first order, have been brought forward, and in a manner eminently recommending them to, as they have received, public support. We need but instance the popular melodrama of "Zemбуca," which, independently of its intricate claims to favor, has been "gotten up" (to resort to the established theatrical phrase) in a style of splendor serving to evince that neither pains nor expense have been spared. The scenery was rich and costly, reflecting great upon the skillful artist, Mr. Joseph Jefferson II.

*The Flying Dutchman, or the Phantom Ship*, was advertised to be presented in Lancaster for the last time on Friday evening, October 21st. The evening

was to conclude with *The Budget of Blunders*. This same edition of the *Lancaster Journal* contained the following from a contributor, who signed himself "I":

It is but a act of justice to speak of the truly splendid style in which, during the past week, the melodrama of the "Flying Dutchman" has been brought forward. I had the pleasure of attending its first presentation, and to say that the scenery far surpassed anything of the kind ever before attempted in Lancaster, is but a feeble tribute to the skill and industry of Mr. Joseph Jefferson II. No degree of labor appeared to have been spared, and expense was entirely disregarded. The Fairy Grotto, with its corals and spars, was indeed magnificent. The rear scene in the second act, attracted the highest admiration, the tossing of the stormy billows, the rolling of the troubled ship, were extremely natural . . . I perceive, with regret, that it has been announced in the bills that this week will close the performances for the season. I hope that the worthy manager may be prevailed upon to remain at least until himself and family shall have taken benefits. They are entitled to overflowing houses, and, on such occasions, their deserts, I cannot permit myself to doubt, would be substantially acknowledged.

However, the *Lancaster Journal* of the following week carried a brief obituary concerning the death of John Jefferson:

Died, suddenly on Tuesday last [October 25th], in this city Mr. John Jefferson, comedian, (son of the veteran comedian of that name), in the 26th year of his age. He was an actor of much promise and of great versatility of talent. Upright and honorable in deportment, kind and affectionate in disposition, he was beloved by his friends and esteemed by his acquaintances. His remains were interred in the Episcopal burying ground on Wednesday last, followed by his weeping friends and a very large concourse of our most respected citizens.<sup>6</sup>

This incident spelled the end of the Jefferson Company's appearances in Lancaster. There is no mention of further performances by the Jefferson troupe in Lancaster. Within two years, Joseph Jefferson I died in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The Jefferson troupe continued under the direction of Joseph Jefferson II, traveling to Chicago and later through the South.

## Endnotes

1. *Lancaster Journal*, September 2, 1831.
2. *Lancaster Journal*, September 9, 1831.
3. *Lancaster Journal*, September 30, 1831.
4. *Lancaster Journal*, October 7, 1831.
5. *Lancaster Journal*, October 7, 1831.
6. *Lancaster Journal*, October 28, 1831.