

# EARLY LANCASTER THEATRE.

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The Hon. W. U. Hensel a short time ago called my attention to an incident related by the eminent actor, James E. Murdoch, in the interesting volume of memoirs written by him, in which he relates some of the more striking events of his theatrical career. As the scene of the occurrence is laid in Lancaster nearly three-quarters of a century ago, it is presented here as a proper supplement to the articles on "Early Lancaster Playbills and Playhouses," published in our proceedings for November, 1902.

When I first read the story as told by Mr. Murdoch, I confess I was somewhat sceptical as to the truth of it. While I did not venture to think it altogether fictitious, I, nevertheless, believed Mr. Murdoch had given play to his imagination and padded a trifling incident to such an extent as to render it almost incredible, although at the same time attractive and readable.

Turning, however, to the article on our early theatres already referred to, I find that, in part, at least, the story told by Mr. Murdoch is entirely correct—that part relating to the construction of the theatre and his playing Romeo in it, with Miss Riddle as Juliet. The theatre in question was built in 1833 by John Landis, of Lancaster Museum fame. It was erected on the first square of West Chestnut street, south side, on the spot where Kieffer's old foundry used to stand. Prior to the foundry, however, the ground was occupied by a large brick barn, owned by the Reigart estate.

The late Alfred Sanderson, as quoted by Mr. S. M. Sener, in his notes on our early theatres, some years ago wrote an article on the "Theatres of Lancaster," in which he stated that he had witnessed early performances in the Landis Theatre, on Chestnut street, near Prince, the first building in Lancaster actually devoted to theatrical performances exclusively. The big barn—Murdoch says it was of stone, while Sanderson says it was brick—"was purchased for the purpose and enlarged by the addition of a frame structure for the stage. The internal arrangement, consisting of a gallery, pit and scenery, was considered to be an imposing affair." Mr. Sanderson stated that one of the scenes which impressed him most was a representation of North Queen street from the Franklin House to the old Court House, in the Square. He had seen James E. Murdoch and Miss Riddle perform there in "Romeo and Juliet," and also Thomas Apthorp Cooper in "Othello."

It will be seen, therefore, that at least one portion of Mr. Murdoch's lively narrative is fully confirmed, and, considering all the circumstances, it is not unlikely that the portion relating to "Crummie" and her horns may be correct, also. There appears, however, to be some confusion in the matter of dates. Alfred Sanderson was born in 1836. If the Landis theatre was built in 1833, he could not have seen the conversion of the old barn into a theatre. The date, in all probability, should be 1843, when Mr. Sanderson was a lad of seven years. The entire story forms an interesting episode in the early history of Lancaster county theatres.

## Actor Murdoch's Story.

"While yet a mere youth I was acting in the old city of Lancaster, Pa., during the vacation of the regular theatrical season, with a portion of the company attached to the Arch Street Theatre, Philadelphia. Miss Eliza Riddle, one of the most beautiful and accomplished actresses of the American stage, and a great favorite in Philadelphia, was the leading lady of the 'star combination,' as it is generally termed in provincial towns.

"Miss Riddle was afterward a popular star actress in the principal theatres of the South and West. She became the wife of Mr. Joseph M. Field, the eccentric comedian, and the witty editor of one of the popular papers of St. Louis. Their only child is our talented young countrywoman, Miss Kate Field.

"That my readers may realize the situation of affairs in connection with the incident to be related, I will state that the building in which we were acting was originally a barn, and had been fitted up, as the playbills say, 'regardless of expense,' to answer the purposes of a theatre. The rear stone wall, which formed the back part of the stage, still retained the large double folding doors of the barn, while the yard at the rear, with its sheds, was used for the accommodation of the proprietor's cows. The double doors were made available for scenic purposes when shut, having a rude landscape scene painted on the boards, and when they were open they afforded the means of increasing the size of the stage, which was done by laying down a temporary floor on the outside directly opposite the opening, a wooden framework, covered with painted canvas, forming the

sides, back, top of the extension. The play was Romeo and Juliet, Miss Riddle performing the part of Juliet and I that of Romeo.

"The extra staging described had been set up in the barnyard and enclosed by the canvas walls, and thus room was obtained for the 'Tomb of the Capulets.' The front part of the tomb was formed of a set piece, so called, painted to represent the marble of the sepulchre, in which were hung the doors forming its entrance, and at the top was painted in large letters 'The Tomb of the Capulets.' Within the tomb, and against the canvas which formed the rear wall, was a small wooden platform, on which was placed a compact mass of hay, shaped like a pallet and nicely covered with black muslin, and on this hay-stuffed couch was to rest the body of the dead or drug-surfeited Lady Juliet.

"In view of the gloomy surroundings of the tomb, and particularly of its close proximity to the barnyard, it would not be considered, under any circumstances, a pleasant resting place for a young lad", especially of an imaginative turn of mind. Before the rising of the curtain on the fifth act, however, I had carefully inspected the premises and looked after the proper disposal of Juliet in the tomb, so that when the doors were to be thrown open in sight of the audience there might be no obstacle to the full view of the sepulchred heroine.

"Everything was pronounced in a state of readiness, and receiving from Miss Riddle an earnest request to hurry on the scene which precedes the catastrophe of the tragedy, I left her, her last words being, 'Oh, do hurry, Mr. Murdoch! I'm so dreadfully afraid of rats!'

"The curtain rose. Romeo received the news of the death of his Juliet, in despair provided the fatal poison, and rushed to the graveyard. Here he met and despatched his rival, the county Paris, burst open the doors of the tomb, and there, in the dim, mysterious light, lay Juliet. The frantic lover rushed to her side, exclaiming:

"Oh, my love! my wife!  
Death, that hath sucked the honey of  
thy breath,  
Hath had no power yet upon thy  
beauty:  
Thou art not conquered; beauty's en-  
sign yet  
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy  
cheeks,  
And death's pale flag is not advanced  
there.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ah, dear Juliet,  
Why art thou yet so fair?"

"Here, observing strange twitchings in the face and hands of the lady, I stooped during my last line to ask her in a stage whisper what was the matter, to which she sobbingly replied: 'Oh, take me out of this; oh, take me out of this, or I shall die!'

"Feeling assured of the necessity of the case, and wishing to bring the scene to a close, I seized upon the poison and exclaimed:

"Come, bitter conduct, come unsavory  
guide!  
Thou desperate pilot, now at once run  
on  
The dashing rocks, thy seasick, weary  
bark!"

Smothered sobbings and repressed mutterings of 'Oh, Mr. Murdoch, take me out! you must take me out!' came from the couch. Now fully alarmed, I swallowed the poison, exclaiming:

"Here's to my love!"

Then, throwing away the vial and with my back to the tomb, I struck an attitude, as usual, and waited for

the expected applause, when I was startled by a piercing shriek, and, turning, I beheld my lady-love sitting up wringing her hands and fearfully alive. I rushed forward, seized her and bore her to the footlights, and was received with shouts of applause. No one had noticed the by-play of the tomb, nor did the dying scene lose any of its effects, for Juliet was excited and hysterical and Romeo in a state of frantic bewilderment. The curtain fell amid every manifestation of delight on the part of the audience.

“And now for the scene behind the curtain. All the dead-alive Juliet could gasp out was: ‘Oh, oh, the bed! the bed! Oh, oh, the rats! the rats!’ I ran up the stage, tore open the pallet, and there—oh horrors!—sticking through the canvas walls of the tomb were the head and horns of a cow. Though the intruder had smelt no rats, she had in some mysterious way scented the fodder, and after pushing her nose through an unfortunate rent in the canvas proceeded to make her supper off the hay which formed the couch of the terrified Juliet.”

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