

**THE MORMONS AND THE THEATRE
OR THE HISTORY OF THEATRICALS
IN UTAH. WITH REMINISCENCES
AND COMMENTS, HUMOROUS
AND CRITICAL**

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The Mormons and the theatre or The history of theatricals in Utah. With reminiscences and comments, humorous and critical by John S. Lindsay

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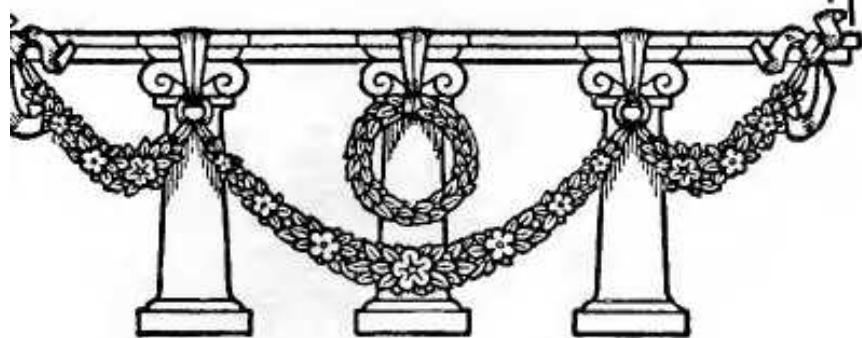
JOHN S. LINDSAY

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The Mormons & The Theatre

By JOHN S. LINDSAY





*Yours truly
John S. Lindsay*

*The Mormons and the
Theatre*

OR

The History of Theatricals in Utah

With Reminiscences and Comments
Humorous and Critical

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SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

1905

CHAPTER I.

In rather sharp contrast to other Christian denominations, the Mormons believe in and are fond of dancing and the theatre. So much is this the case that Friday evening of each week during the amusement season is set apart by them in all the settlements throughout Mormondom for their dance night. Their dances are generally under the supervision of the presiding bishop and are invariably opened with prayer or invocation, and closed or dismissed in the same manner, with a brief return of thanks to the Almighty for the good time they have enjoyed.

The theatre is so popular among the Mormon people, that in almost every town and settlement throughout their domains there is an amateur dramatic company.

It is scarcely to be wondered at that Salt Lake has the enviable distinction of being the best show town of its population in the United States, and when we say that, we may as well say in the whole world. It is a well established fact that Salt Lake spends more money per capita in the theatre than any city in our country.

Such a social condition among a strictly religious people is not little peculiar, and is due, largely, to the fact that Brigham Young was himself fond of the dance and also of the theatre. He could "shake a leg" with the best of them, and loved to lead the fair matrons and maidens of his flock forth into its giddy, bewildering mazes. Certain round dances, the waltz and polka, were always barred at dances Brigham Young attended, and only the old-fashioned quadrilles and cotillions and an occasional reel like Sir Roger de Coverly or the Money Musk were tolerated by the great Mormon leader.

That Brigham Young was fond of the theatre also, and gave great encouragement to it, his building of the Salt Lake Theatre was a striking proof. He recognized the natural desire for innocent amusement, and the old axiom "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," had its full weight of meaning to him. Keep the people in a pleasurable mood, then they will not be apt to brood and ponder over the weightier concerns of life.

There may have been a stroke of this policy in Brigham Young's amusement scheme; but whether so or not he must be credited with both wisdom and liberality, for the policy certainly lightened the cares and made glad the hearts of the people.

Although Salt Lake City has been the chief nursery of these twin sources of amusement for the Mormon people, to find the cradle in which they were first nursed into life, we will have to go back to a time and place anterior to the settlement of Salt Lake. Back in the days of Nauvoo, before Brigham Young was chief of the Mormon church, under the rule of its original prophet, Joseph Smith, the Mormon people were encouraged in the practice of dancing and going to witness plays. Indeed, the Mormons have always been a fun-loving people; it is recorded of their founder and prophet that he was so fond of fun that he would often indulge in a foot race, or pulling sticks, or even a wrestling match. He often amazed and sometimes shocked the sensibilities of the more staid and pious members of his flock by his antics.

Before the Mormons ever dreamed of emigrating to Utah (or Mexico, as it was then), they had what they called a "Fun Hall," or theatre and dance hall combined, where they mingled occasionally in the merry dance or sat to witness a play. Then, as later in Salt Lake, their prophet led them through the mazy evolutions of the terpsichorean numbers and was the most conspicuous figure at all their social gatherings.

While building temples and propagating their new revelation to the world, the Mormons have always found time to sing and dance and play and have a pleasant social time, excepting, of course, in their days of sore trial. Indeed, they are an anomaly among religious sects in this respect, and that is what has made Salt Lake City proverbially a "great show town."

Mormonism during the Nauvoo days had numerous missionaries in the field and many converts were added to the new faith. Among others that were attracted to the modern Mecca to look into the claims of the new evangel, was Thomas A. Lyne, known more familiarly among his theatrical associates as "Tom" Lyne.

Lyne, at this time, 1842, was an actor of wide and fair repute, in the very flush of manhood, about thirty-five years of age. He had played leading support to Edwin Forrest,

the elder Booth, Charlotte Cushman, Ellen Tree (before she became Mrs. Charles Kean), besides having starred in all the popular classic roles. Lyne was the second actor in the United States to essay the character of Bulwer's Richelieu—Edwin Forrest being the first.

The story of "Tom" Lyne's conversion to the Mormon faith created quite a sensation in theatrical circles of the time, and illustrates the great proselyting power the elders of the new religion possessed.

Lyne, when he encountered Mormonism, was a skeptic, having outgrown belief in all of the creeds. It was in 1841 that George J. Adams, a brother-in-law of Lyne's, turned up suddenly in Philadelphia (Lyne's home) where he met the popular actor and told him the story of his conversion to the Mormon faith. Adams had been to Nauvoo, met the prophet and become one of his most enthusiastic disciples. Adams had been an actor, also, of more than mediocre ability, and as a preacher proved to be one of the most brilliant and successful expounders of the new religion. Elder Adams had been sent as a missionary to Philadelphia in the hope that his able exposition of the new evangel would convert that staid city of brotherly love to the new and everlasting covenant.

In pursuance of the New Testament injunction, the Mormon missionaries are sent out into their fields of labor without purse or scrip, so Elder Adams, on arriving at his field of labor, lost no time in hunting up his brother-in-law, "Tom" Lyne, to whom he related with dramatic fervor and religious enthusiasm the story of his wonderful conversion, his subsequent visit to Nauvoo, his meeting with the young "Mohammed of the West," for whom he had conceived the greatest admiration, as well as a powerful testimony of the divinity of his mission.

Adams was so convincing and made such an impression on Lyne that he at once became greatly interested in the Mormon prophet and his new revelation. This proved to be a great help to Elder Adams, who was entirely without "the sinews of war" with which to start his great campaign.

The brothers-in-law put their heads together in council as to how the campaign fund was to be raised, and the result was that they decided to rent a theatre, get a company together, and play "Richard III" for a week. Lyne was a native of Philadelphia and at this time one of its most popular actors. It was here that Adams had met him a few years before and had given him his sister in marriage.

The theatrical venture was carried through, Lyne playing Richard and Elder Adams, Richmond. The week's business, after paying all expenses, left a handsome profit. Lyne generously donated his share to the new cause in which he had now grown so deeply interested and Elder Adams procured a suitable hall and began his missionary labors. His eloquent exposition of the new and strange religion won many to the faith; one of the first fruits of his labors being the conversion of Thomas A. Lyne.

Such an impression had Adams's description of the Mormon prophet and the City of the Saints (Nauvoo) made upon Lyne that he could not rest satisfied until he went and saw for himself. He packed up his wardrobe and took the road for Nauvoo. With a warm letter of introduction from Elder Adams to the prophet, it was not long before Lyne was thoroughly ingratiated in the good graces of the Mormon people. He met the prophet Joseph, was enchanted with him, and readily gave his adherence to the new and strange doctrines which the prophet advanced, but whether with an eye single to his eternal salvation or with both eyes open to a lucrative engagement "his deponent saith not."

The story runs that after a long sojourn with the Saints in Nauvoo, during which he played a round of his favorite characters, supported by a full Mormon cast, he bade the prophet and his followers a sorrowful farewell and returned to his accustomed haunts in the vicinity of Liberty Hall.

During his stay in Nauvoo, Mr. Lyne played quite a number of classical plays, including "William Tell," "Virginius," "Damon and Pythias," "The Iron Chest," and "Pizarro." In the latter play, he had no less a personage than Brigham Young in the cast; he was selected to play the part of the Peruvian high priest, and is said to have led the singing in the Temple scene where the Peruvians offer up sacrifice and sing the invocation for Rolla's victory. Brigham Young is said to have taken a genuine interest in the character of the high priest and to have played it with becoming dignity and solemnity. Here was an early and unmistakable proof of Brigham Young's love for the drama.

Mr. Lyne, while relating this Nauvoo incident in his experience to the writer, broke into a humorous vein and remarked:

"I've always regretted having cast Brigham Young for that part of the high priest."

"Why?" I inquired, with some surprise.