

3-1-1928

Comment

John Ely Briggs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Briggs, John E. "Comment." *The Palimpsest* 9 (1928), 119-120.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol9/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Comment by the Editor

THE STAR SYSTEM

There may have been a "golden age" in the history of the American theater, but it was not during the fifties of the last century. Probably the stage was then at its lowest ebb, particularly after the financial crisis of 1857. That was a period of hard times for everybody: professional entertainers were no exception. When food and clothing consume the income, people are not so likely to spend their money for frivolity — or art if you prefer, though dramatic art as presented at Iowa theaters in the fifties was generally crude, despite the appearance of some of the ablest metropolitan stars. But the stars came alone, depending upon the stock company of the local theater for their supporting cast.

This "pernicious star system" was the principal factor in the decline of the theater. The stock company players were barely tolerable, though usually one or two possessed real talent. In addition to their natural limitations, these local actors were required to take parts in totally unfamiliar plays that happened to be in the repertoire of the visiting star. And since a different play was staged every evening, they often had no longer than a day in which to learn the lines and rehearse the stage business.

Prodigious feats of memory were performed. Andrew Jackson Neafie, who played at the People's Theater of Dubuque in 1857, once learned over thirteen hundred lines "dead-letter perfect" in one afternoon. Sometimes five or six plays were in the process of rehearsal at once. What hectic nights for the prompter! A finished production under such circumstances was impossible, no matter how brilliant the star might be. Yet if the star system had not been in vogue, very few of the leading actors would have played in Iowa. Transportation was too expensive and uncertain for troupes to tour the country with a single play.

Another fault of the star system was the poor pay of the local players. Ten dollars a week was normal wages for a utility man, character actors and the leading lady got a little more, while the star took the lion's share. To supplement their regular compensation, benefit performances were arranged for favorite players whereby they received part of the profits of the evening. Stars demanded one or more benefits for themselves during an engagement.

But again it should be noted that Iowa playgoers profited by the low theatrical wage scale, for it compelled capable actors to seek employment at provincial theaters during the summer when the St. Louis, New Orleans, and eastern stages were idle. This influx of more experienced players was a boon to the local stock companies.

J. E. B.