

FOLLIES: A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF KANSAS CITY'S FOLLY THEATRE

OPENING

"The Grand Old Lady of Twelfth Street" ...that's what we call her. 100 years old and looking better than ever.

You know her as the "Folly," a place where you come for concerts, dance, and even opera...all for a nice, respectable evening on the town.

But that's not the way it used to be. No, this lady has quite a history...and a reputation as colorful as the city she was built to entertain.

She opened in 1900, as the Standard Theatre, a roadhouse for vaudeville and burlesque. Now, you probably don't know what those are. Well...

Vaudeville was a variety show with a little something for everyone: juggling, acrobatics, songs and dances, skits, magic, and, my favorite, trained animals.

Burlesque was similar except that it always ended with a "Grand Finale" with a chorus line of beautiful girls. That would always bring the fellers in...

Why, here come some now. You boys here for the burlesque? For the vaudeville show? Well come on in!

Back then the theatre looked much different. The proscenium arch was higher by twelve feet, so high that folks in the second balcony could see the flying trapeze acts. Yep, there were two balconies which meant they could cram 2,400 people in here. (That's twice the seats you see today!) And cram they did...

Why, fellows came from all over "Cow Town." Most of 'em were just "regular Joes" wanting a little escape from their work-a-day worlds. Lots of 'em worked in the meat-packing houses down in the West Bottoms; some worked the docks and the railroad.

(Some worked it anywhere they could.)

Life was hard back then and few made it to their fiftieth birthday, but, at least, at the Standard Theatre they had a chance to enjoy themselves...

to spend a couple pleasurable hours with their buddies...

...yes, "buddies," for few women risked their reputation attending the popular theatre,

...a place frequented by "cheap people"...

...a place filled with laughter and applause, high kicks and

scandal... a place where "anything goes."

ANYTHING GOES

"Anything goes" could have been the motto of Kansas City for, in 1900, the city's pride and joy, the new convention center, burned to the ground, only to be rebuilt 90 days later—just in time to host the Democratic National Convention.

Almost as miraculous was the introduction of a new dining concept, the combining of breakfast and lunch into one fabulous new meal—"brunch"—

the perfect solution for the new midwestern metropolis.

Well, maybe not a metropolis, but Cow Town had indeed become a boom town, growing larger than Atchison and St. Joe!

At the end of the Civil War, only 5000 folks lived here but by the time this grand lady was up and running, there were almost 165,000! Why, everybody was coming to Kansas City!

KANSAS CITY

In 1901, just a few blocks away, the Coates Opera House burned and those folks ended up leasing our theatre and moving their shows here. But the Coates prided itself on being a "legitimate" theatre catering to people "of quality," and they changed the name—from the Standard to the Century—and started performing Shakespeare and Wagnerian opera.

All the good it did, because the next year, the Coates moved to a new theatre and the variety shows returned, bringing outrageous comedies and even boxing matches. Believe it or not, the great Jack Dempsey once fought here! (Does anybody out there know who Jack Dempsey was?)

Well, with the return of vaudeville, the theatre was again packed with fellows looking for a good time...rugged, hot-blooded young men...wild and woolly sons of the west

whose idea of fine music began (and ended) with something called "barbershop."

WILD AND WOOLY SON OF THE WEST

"BARBARA" SHOP/NELLY MEDLEY

That's not quite the way I remember "barbershop," but, evidently, there've been fellars wearing dresses in Kansas City since the 1800s.

Why, back in 1880, the first year *The Star* was published, they profiled some of these impersonators, but they called them "Strange Men." (*Shows article from the paper*).

C'est le vie, as they say...and, Lord knows, the Century brought in all sorts of entertainments...

for 20 years pretty much anything that would bring the crowds in, including the newest craze—moving pictures.

But the Century had something that no movie house had—real-life, living, breathing, beautiful girls.

Beautiful, yes, but not always dependable.

Fortunately, there were always a few young men waiting in the wings to try-out a new bit, joke, or magic act...or perhaps even an old, soft shoe routine.

OLD SOFT SHOE

Despite their popularity with us working class people, theatres like the Century were considered "second-rate" by society folks; some even called them "hotbeds of immorality" for including off-color humor and scantily clad female dancers.

But, I promise you, what happened on this stage was no worse than the stuff you see on TV today...at least in the early days.

Still, the "decent" people of Kansas City avoided the Century and went to their own theatres to see "refined" and "quality" entertainment.

PROUD MARYDRIGAL

The Roaring 20s brought big changes for Kansas City and this theatre.

First came the 18th Amendment, better known as prohibition.

For 14 years it was against the law to manufacture, sell, and transport intoxicating beverages. All alcohol was forbidden—even wine...

And so we had to get rid of ours. But that doesn't mean it should go to waste. In fact...

All this could be yours for a small investment venture of \$5 per ticket or \$20 for 5.

You can get your tickets in the lobby during intermission and we'll draw the winning number in the second half of our performance tonight. Thank you, Steve.

In 1922, the Century was leased to the Shuberts from

New York City. Yes. Once again, we had someone who wanted to bring "legitimate" theatre to Kansas City.

They lowered the proscenium arch and replaced the two wooden balconies with one big one made from reinforced concrete. They also employed the famous architect Herbert Krapp to redecorate the interior, which he did in reds, golds, and grays, and Kansas Citians could once again walk into this theatre and say with pride:

Chorus guy(s): "This place looks like Krapp!"

They renamed it the Missouri Theatre and reopened it in 1923, with a production of *Why Men Leave Home*. Now I have my own theories on this subject: one is that fellers just can't resist the draw of the big city.

Why, by the mid-1920s Kansas City had 19 Piggly Wiggles, 140 beauty parlors, and a new place to shop called the Country Club Plaza. What fellow could resist?!

To top it off, the Missouri offered top-rated performers—some you'd recognize today: Shirley Booth. Yes, our favorite TV maid Hazel...and also the Marx Brothers, and even Humphrey Bogart.

My favorite, though, was the big musical productions they'd bring in on the railroad direct from Broadway, including the latest hits by a feller named George Gershwin.

GERSHWIN MEDLEY

By 1929, the Shuberts had given up their hopes of transforming this place into a "legitimate" theatre so they subleased the place to a burlesque company.

Once again, "The Grand Old Lady of Twelfth Street" was home to the "beautiful girls" of the bur-lee-que...

Ladies and Gentlemen, in praise of the many beautiful women who have graced our honorable, respectable, and law-abiding stage.

IN PRAISE OF WOMEN

I'll let you in on a little bur-lee-que secret: whenever that red light would come on, we'd know that we needed to be careful because there was someone in the house who might not appreciate our special kinda program. Why, in 1926, we had all sorts of government people here when they dedicated the Liberty Memorial.

And so we'd switch to Plan B—something that nobody'd object to—something inspiring and patriotic.

SOLDIER'S CHORUS

In 1932 the Missouri closed. With the Depression going on, folks had little if any money for entertainment.

And even though Kansas City had a population of 400,000, most seemed to prefer the "talkies"—you know, motion pictures with sound.

Vaudeville and burlesque just weren't popular anymore and all those theatres built before 1900 were torn down.

All except this one. But the fate of the Missouri seemed bleak; without shows and audiences, surely her days were numbered. In darkness she waited for someone or something to save her...that she might once again wake and reign as "The Grand Old Lady of Twelfth Street."

INTERMISSION

Well, our "Grand Old Lady" survived the Depression, partly due to luck, but more likely due to the outbreak of a second world war. Now I can't stand here and tell you that any war is ever good, but I can tell you, in this case, that that war, or rather the men who fought it, saved this theatre.

I'm talking soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines...everywhere you looked.

Up to 200 passenger trains a day going through Union Station and as many as 10,000 fellows stranded in Cow Town wondering what to do with themselves.

For many of them (not all, mind you), the newly reopened and rechristened Folly Burlesque was just the answer.

ARMED FORCES SALUTE

During the 1940s and 50s, the Folly became famous, or should I say infamous, for its strippers—"ecdysiasts" as they were called then. Now how you picture a stripper today probably isn't fair to many of the ladies who performed here. The most famous were quite classy and left most of the stripping to your imagination. Each had a particular trademark or gimmick that made her show unique: there was the "World's Tallest Exotic" and "Miss Perpetual Motion."

Perhaps the greatest stripper of all was Miss Sally Rand, who tantalized her audiences with 8-pound feather fans while dancing to the "Claire de Lune." Beautiful music, great choreography, and feathers forever...what more could a boy want?

BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

With girls who look like that, it's little wonder that most of us here are "confirmed bachelors." But I have no

doubt that those gals would look lovelier after a glass of wine...well, several glasses, no several bottles of wine...

Not all the Folly girls were that beautiful and classy; in fact, some were just down right nasty and the Folly eventually became known as a pretty sleazy joint. By the late 1960s the place was run-down and filthy; the balcony was in such bad shape that it had to be shutdown, and the ceiling threatened to collapse under 19,000 pounds of pigeon poo.

One of the chorus guys who made the "Krapp" comment earlier makes a "crap" remark here.

Eventually, to make ends meet, the Folly began showing X-rated films, but that did little to help. The crowds grew sparser and seedier and in 1974 the Folly Burlesque closed its doors and awaited the wrecking ball.

I'M STILL HERE

And she's still here...thanks to the Performing Arts Foundation of Kansas City, millions of dollars, and scores of Kansas Citians resolved to preserve such an important part of our past.

She reopened in 1981 as the "Folly Theatre," the name under which she has proudly hosted world-class performers such as the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre, Itzak Perlman, Kathleen Battle, Yo Yo Ma, and Wynton Marsalis in addition to quality local talents, such as the Folly Jazz Series, and Folly Children's Series, and, of course, the Heartland Men's Chorus.

Last year, the Folly closed again, though only briefly, as part of a 2 1/2 million dollar campaign to restore and maintain the theatre. With refurbished seats and new curtain, restored moldings and refreshed painting, the Folly reopened last fall, just in time to celebrate her 100th birthday.

Who'd have ever imagined she'd make it this far? Probably no one. But then, who would have thought back in 1928 that a 16-year old girl named Rose Louise Havoc would debut here...on this very stage...and one day become the famous Gypsy Rose Lee? Well, she did.

For Rose Louise...Gypsy...and the Heartland Men's Chorus, this "Grand Old Lady of Twelfth Street" is intrinsically tied to a future...a future promising bigger and better things...a future where "everything's coming up roses!"

EVERYTHING'S COMING UP ROSES