EARLY AMERICAN AND BRITISH POPULAR AMUSEMENTS

An exhibit from the personal collection of Professor Emeritus Don B. Wilmeth supplemented by items from Brown’s Special Collections

The John Hay Library
September-October 2010

Seventh Annual
Wilmeth Lecture on American Theatre and Performance

Laurence Senelick

“Custard’s First Stand: The Origins of American Slapstick Comedy”

October 3, 2010
3 PM
The John Hay Library
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Fredric Thompson, one of the creators of the great turn of the century amusement parks on Coney Island, wrote about the showman’s challenge to “amuse the million,” and enterprising show people for centuries have sought to do just this. This exhibit focuses on some of the pioneer entertainment forms and entrepreneurs who dominated the amusement business in England and the United States before motion pictures slowly eclipsed or eliminated many of these and before some of the better known forms, e.g. vaudeville, the music hall, and the modern circus, came into vogue. For example, before there were amusement and theme parks there were pleasure gardens and annual fairs; before the circus there were equestrian demonstrations and dramas featuring animals; and before vaudeville there were rudimentary forms of variety such as the minstrel show and those created by the father of vaudeville, Tony Pastor. From the 18th century well into the 19th stage attractions frequently turned to novelties and unique innovations. So this exhibit demonstrates some of these tendencies with exhibition items on child prodigies, solo performers, the creation of full-length pantomimes in both England (Joseph Grimaldi) and the U.S. (George L. Fox), and the popular museum (represented in the exhibit by efforts of the great P.T. Barnum and Madame Tussaud and her wax works), among other phenomena.

Prof. Wilmeth’s collection focuses largely on broadsides/playbills and satirical prints. Consequently, these holdings have helped to determine the structure and content of this exhibit. Of special interest in the collection are hand-colored prints/engravings by such well-known artists as Richard Cruikshank (and other family members), Thomas Rowlandson, and James Gillray. An unusually large number of items on the actor/solo performer Charles Mathews can be seen.

Wilmeth’s collection is enhanced by key items from Brown’s own collections: some stunning sheet music covers, the Jenner theatre poster collection, and several illustrated rare books.

The exhibit, which will be in place through September and October of 2010, will be enhanced by the seventh annual Wilmeth Lecture on American theatre and performance. This special event will be held on Oct. 3 (Sunday) at 3 PM in the John Hay Library. The distinguished speaker is Laurence Senelick, Fletcher Professor of Drama and Oratory at Tufts University and an internationally-known authority on popular entertainments. His topic is “Custard’s First Stand: The Origins of American Slapstick Comedy.” A viewing of the exhibit will follow the lecture.

THE PLEASURE GARDEN

Before there were amusement parks, before there were theme parks, there were, primarily from the 18th century, pleasure gardens. This unique phenomenon was a major predecessor of the 20th century amusement park and could be found in or nearby most major cities of much of the world, from Copenhagen and Vienna to New York and London. Essentially, each was a commercial enterprise (dating at least from the 1660s until the mid-19th century in London). Regardless of location, these were gardens for relaxation, amusement, and often sexual dalliance.

The best known, and one of the earliest, in London was Vauxhall Gardens founded in 1661 and closed in 1859 (first called Vauxhall in 1785). Laid out on several acres of land it was comprised of straight walks, regular rows of trees, secluded areas for romantic assignations, supper-boxes (in the Chinese-Gothic style), various garden-buildings to heighten perspective, statuary, and more. Visitors were provided musical entertainment, food, drink, chances “for much ogling and quizzing,” and a wide variety of amusements from tightrope walkers to firework displays, hot air balloon ascents, etc. Its Rotunda was especially favored and its chinoiserie style (along with other buildings) were very popular.

Vauxhall Gardens, located in Kennington on the south bank of the River Thames, sold most of its land for building purposes. (There is tube stop called Vauxhall and on the site of the great pleasure garden is a small public park called Spring Gardens [Vauxhall’s original name].

Other popular gardens in London included Ranelagh, Chelsea (1742-1805), Cuper’s Gardens, Marylebone, Bagnigge Wells, Islington Spa, Royal Surrey Gardens, and Cremorne Gardens. Ranelagh (1688-89 built and demolished in 1895) had as its centerpiece a giant rococo rotunda (120 foot diameter). Mozart performed there in 1765. Other features were a Chinese pavilion (1750), ornamental lake, several walks. It is now a green pleasure ground, part of the grounds of Chelsea Hospital. A Ranelagh opened in NY to rival the city’s Vauxhall (both in the 18th c.); Paris also build in 1870 a Jardin Ranelagh. Cremorne (flourished between 1845 and 1877), a late comer among major pleasure gardens, was located by the side of the River Thames also in Chelsea. It never acquired the fashionable fame of Vauxhall and in fact became such an annoyance to some of its neighbors that a renewal of its license was refused (there is today a Cremorne Road).

1) Scene at Spring Gardens, Vaux-Hall; print and engraving by M. Ramano, May 1741. Published by G. Bickham. On the left a group of figures stand with speech bubbles appearing from their mouths with comments on the gardens, tickets, etc. In the center a seated man gazes across the table at a woman while their companions eat and drink. Along the lower margin is a verse on the gardens.

2) Unframed copper plate engraving with wash hues of the Vauxhall Chinese Pavillion and boxes. No date but based on a 1751 original painting by Samuel Wale (1721-1786). Wale also painted Ranelagh Gardens.
3) A view of the canal and Chinese Building and, in the background, Ranelagh’s famous Rotunda. The latter allowed Ranelagh’s to open in February, whereas most pleasure gardens opened at Easter. This hand-colored engraving represents a masquerade in process. What is unique about this view is its construction designed to be seen with light behind in order to show a night scene (illuminated vue-d’optique). No date indicated but probably c. 1765.

4) A second hand-colored vue-d’optique (Paris: Daumont, [c. 1780] of Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens. This view of the Rotunda (from a different angle than no. 4) and Ranelagh House, like no. 4 meant to be used with a boîte d’optique, depicts a crowd of revelers in the foreground during a costume ball held on 24 May 1759 to mark the birthday of George Prince of Wales (the future George III). Based on a view published by John and Carrington Bowles.

5) Pleasure gardens were not uncommon in the U.S. American colonials and later citizens quickly imitated European example with prominent examples in Philadelphia (Gray’s Vaux Hall, Tivoli, McAran’s) and New York (Palace Gardens, Vauxhall, Niblo’s). By the 19th century most major towns and cities had at least one. This included Providence with two major examples: Park Gardens and San Souci Gardens. The former, on Broad St. near Roger Williams Park opened June 24, 1878 (30 acres) and closed in 1883; the latter opened spring of the same year (near Broadway and La Salle Square) and closed in Sept. 1891. There are few extant views of these venues, though the Sans Souci program (June 6, 1884) on exhibit includes at the top a view of the entry to the gardens. Interestingly, on the inside of this program is an ad for Rocky Point, a popular resort then (picnic grounds, clam restaurant) which later became the site of RI’s largest amusement park on Narragansett Bay (1840s until 1995).

On the Wall:

1) Initially entry to Spring Gardens (Vauxhall) was free with food and drink sold to help support the venture. When the name was officially changed to Vauxhall Gardens in 1785, admission was charged to gain its numerous attractions. Here can be seen a rare paper ticket to Vauxhall dated 31 May 1792. Most extant tickets are for a full season and are engraved on silver (some designs by Hogarth).

Framed with the ticket is a well-known hand-colored engraving/aquatint of Vauxhall by Illustrator/caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) and architect Augustus Pugin (1762-1832). The drawing was created for Ackermanns Microcosm of London, 1809. Note the band on the second level.

2) Engraving of tightrope walker at Vauxhall: Madame Laqui, engraved by Alais and based on an original painting. Published Feb. 1, 1820. Also framed with this print is a handbill for Cremorne Gardens, June [1856]; features Chief Pe-to-e-kie-sic (ten American Indian performers from Walpole Island), and advertises a balloon ascent, a popular feature of pleasure gardens.
PRE-CINEMATIC OPTICAL AMUSEMENTS

Early cinema was a continuation of earlier 19\textsuperscript{th} century popular entertainment traditions. Live popular amusements were vital resources for early movies; as film absorbed its predecessors, the result was the ultimate decline and fall of live forms like vaudeville. Movies were, in fact, preceded by “actorless theatre”: peepshows, magic lantern exhibitions, and countless devices that attempted to create the optical illusion of movement (among them the Phenakisticope, Anamorphic lens (the Magic Mirror), Zoetrope, Praxinoscope, Vivisscope, Kaliedoscope, ad infinitum). The myriad devices that created optical illusions or gave the impression of motion, though the logical ending place for this exhibit, is largely outside the scope of the guest curator’s collection.

However, a few optical forms –as representative of the many - are included, primarily a few that were created for theatrical use and not, as many of the above were, for the parlor or for the simple projection of an image.

The Peepshow: This well-known device is ancient in origin. Peepshows were especially popular in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century when the peep showman and his box were a common sight on bustling city streets as well as quiet village greens and country fairs.

On the Wall:

Hand-colored aquatint by William Henry Payne, titled “The Halfpenny Showman” (framed), dated 1805: This classic peepshow can accommodate two customers at a time, and provides the illusion of depth, possibly of basic movement, and even the same scene viewed by day light or at night.

THE FAIR TRADITION

The Pleasure Garden was not the only predecessor of later outdoor amusement areas. Major fair traditions existed throughout Europe (especially France and England) and to some extent in the U.S. A similar tradition was the Carnival (not included in this exhibit). Fairs, dating at least to the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, incorporated most forms of early popular amusements, from rudimentary amusement rides (early carousels and ferris wheels, for instance) to portable theatres (called fit-ups or fairbooth theatres in the English tradition) and sideshows (with all kinds of attractions, ranging from freaks to puppets [e.g. Punch & Judy] to wax exhibits), gaming booths, food booths, and, of course, spaces for mercantile reasons (the first and prime purpose for the existence of fairs). Thus the importance of the fair cannot be overstated.

The layout of the typical fair encouraged what is now termed environmental entertainment. The late Brooks McNamara defined two varieties: 1) those that redefine for a short time an already existing area (such as a street fair) and 2) those that constitute a temporary or permanent self-contained environment (such as the “glass house” or “dark rides” in most modern carnivals and amusement parks). In the fair, all attractions operate simultaneously, with the spectator creating
his or her own organization by personal choice, in a specific order, or particular rides, stands, and booths. This exhibit will focus primarily on the English Country Fair, although it should be remembered that from the 18th century there were a number of Great London festivals centered around a seasonal fair (May Fair at the beginning of May; Tottenham Court Fair in early August, Bartholomew Fair at the end of August, and Southwark Fair in September). These attracted a vast number of showmen of every kind. Add to the London fairs a large number of suburban fairs. All of these were quite elaborate, most including theatrical entertainment (a tradition that continued in some locations well into the 20th century).

Between the great London fairs theatrical booths (as seen in several prints on exhibit) would spend the summer making the round of the country wakes, a festival tradition sustained for over 200 years. During the 19th century there were dozens of “portable theatres” that covered the country, and continued to do so even after the decline of the large fairs. Despite crudities, booths and portable theatres played a great part in carrying English drama throughout the countryside (and there seems to have been a similar history in colonial America, yet to be fully documented; also Germany, Russia, Spain and Italy).

“A Good Piece.” (Framed) Printed by William Holland (1757-1815). 50 Oxford St., Oct. 23, 1801. Aquatint with added hand coloring.”Give me a speedy Piece and soon/Ye Gods I ask no other boon.” This aquatint depicts a large woman wearing a turban with feathers, holding fan in left hand. Presumably this is an actress appearing in a traveling theatre at the fair represented in the background. She has not been identified, although one suggestion has been that she is possibly Dora Jordan (1761-1816), consort of the Duke of Clarence (later William IV). The illustration is most useful for its representation of a fair with show banners likely attached to canvas booths, including a parade advertising a Punch and Judy show (puppet or pantomime) and a wild animal menagerie, which is relevant to the next print.

Fire in a wooden theatre (“Sports of a Country Fair”). Handcolored print (framed) by Thomas Rowlandson. 1810. Printed by Thomas Tegg. This would appear to be a permanent or semi-permanent theatre located on the edge of a country fair. Such facilities would do good business at fair time. This might have been originally a barn or a public room over a market hall. In this instance a balcony gives access to the upper floor and might well serve also as a “parade” during fair time. Fire was always a hazard in theatres, partly due to their construction and also the use of naked flames for lighting and stage effects. The fire in Rowlandson’s print is realistic enough, but still provides opportunities for humor. As well as the comedy of fat people falling down (often depicted by Rowlandson), the artist has slipped in some jokes on the theatre’s bills. The Company is Cockburn’s, and the bill for Pizarro promises “a shower of red fire” and something infernal. Note the show booths in the background.

Sports of a Country Fair (Pt. 3). Tegg’s Caricatures No. 41. Oct. 5, 1810. Drawn by Thomas Rowlandson and printed/engraved? by Tegg (framed). Handcolored. This significant print shows a stage and interior of a traveling or fit-up theatre with a tiger (part of a menager next door) bursting through the canvas wall, terrifying the audience. On stage the hero is just as frightened, knowing his wooden sword is useless. Particularly interesting is the view of the stage scenery with three “wings” and a castle backdrop with a bridge. Also note the
hoop chandelier with candles (one of those fire hazards mentioned above). This is a scarce early representation of a fit-up.

**Fairlop Fair. Handcolored etching published by Thomas Tegg in 1815.**
This is a typical English country fair with a fit up or booth theatre at the upper left. What is unique about this engraving is the use of the name Richardson. Richardson’s Fairground stage was the most famous of the 19th century and was synonymous with that of traveling theatre. In this setting, the gaudy booth of Richardson’s dwarfs the other fair attractions. On the stage (or the parade, as the frontage of the stage was called) can be seen the stereotyped figures of a Hero, a Clown, and a Harlequin performing to draw a crowd. By 1725 there was a fair at Fairlop - at first quite respectable. By 1736 prosecution of stallholders for gaming and illegal sales of liquor took place. In 1793 the Fair was banned briefly, but came back the following year. It ended in 1900.

Compared to other “country fair” views in this exhibit, this one is crudely colored, which seems oddly appropriate for the scene depicted.

**Greenwich Fair. Handcolored engraving by Alfred Henry Payne (1812-1902). Printed in Payne’s *Universum, or Pictorial World*. c. 1840.**
Greenwich Fair was one of the major suburban fairs. It was always connected with theatrical entertainments, particularly puppet shows. But note the mixture of types among the spectators in the foreground and the show banners before various booths: boxing match, menagerie, and especially Richardson’s traveling theatre on the right. This was the preeminent of booth theatres. Greenwich Fair was always a great institution and, as a rule, a riotous and disorderly gathering. There were two a year - in May and October. From the 17th century to the mid-19th century the Fair was quite notorious and after a riot of drunken soldiers in 1850 the Fair was suppressed in 1857.

**Illustration by Henry Alken from R.S. Surtees’ *Jorrocks Jaunts and Jollities* (1838; 1903 edition). Print probably c. 1850.**
Although a later fair drawing of scenes of the St. Cloud fair, it is fascinating for the images of early fair/carnival rides immediately recognizable: carousel/merry-go-round, ferris wheel (the first real Ferris Wheel was at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893), and giant swing. There are show banners and performers attracting audiences.

**On the Wall:**

**Plate 1 of “Country Fair” series: Published by R. Ackermann, Sept. 1, 1823. Hand-colored aquatint drawn and etched by W.H. Pyne (originally from Pyne’s *Costumes of Great Britain*, 1808, but reprinted by Ackermann with whom he was working at this later date). Framed.**
Shows a more ordered and respectable country fair, with a raised platform in front of a booth theatre with the banner “The Grand Pantomime.” Actors and an acrobat are performing to attract an audience. Other fairground activities can be seen on the ground below.
NOVELTIES OF THE STAGE

SOLO PERFORMANCE/ONE PERSON SHOWS

The phenomenon of one-person telling or acting out a story to a group has been with us for centuries. In the U.S. the popularity of the solo performer was given new impetus when actress-playwright Anna Deavere Smith (b. 1950-) began in 1983 to develop a series of unique pieces collectively called “On the Road: A Search for American Character.” This effort became widely known when in 1992 she first presented the 13th in the series, FIRES IN THE MIRROR: CROWN HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN, AND OTHER IDENTITIES (based on the 1991 stabbing of a Hasidic scholar by a group of young black men in Brooklyn), a human collage of more than 20 individuals.

Yet the performance technique of presenting numerous characters by one actor was not new with Smith. Various 18th century British satirical performers are immediate predecessors of solo performers in the U.S. today, and this practice has flourished in this country since the mid-19th century (and flourishes today).

For this exhibit three solo performers or performances are singled out as significant early solo pioneers:

George Alexander Stevens (1710-84) and his THE LECTURE ON HEADS, first presented in London in 1764 and subsequently copied and adapted by dozens of performers (with forty published editions, authentic and spurious).

Charles Mathews (1776-1835), an extraordinarily talented impersonator, quick-change artist, singer, and pantomimist, who wrote and performed a series of entertainments which he called “At Homes.”

Nicholas Marie Vattemore (1796-1864), French mime, exceptional ventriloquist, and quick-change artist, who caused a sensation across Europe through the 1820s with his ventriloquial polylogues. His most popular piece (billed as Monsieur Alexandre and seen widely in England) was THE ADVENTURES OF A VENTRILOQUIST, OR THE ROGUERIES OF NICHOLAS.

What makes these three (and Anna Deavere Smith) unique is that unlike many solo performers who have focused on their own autobiography or have depicted a famous individual (such as Hal Holbrook’s Mark Twain), these performers presented a group of individuals, from a half dozen to 20 or more.

George Alexander Stevens and THE LECTURE ON HEADS
Standing behind a long table covered with papier-mâché busts and wig blocks, Stevens satirized famous people and social stereotypes. Among his “heads” were: an Indian chief, Alexander the Great, a London Blood, a Billingsgate Fishwife, a Horse Jockey, a Conjurator, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, a Dutchman, a Quack Doctor, and a Methodist Parson, among others. Imitators took
advantage of no copyright laws and with the ability to perform the “Lecture” almost anywhere (small theatres, taverns, great rooms, fairs, etc.) the “Lecture” remained in vogue until the early decades of the 19th century. Colonial America also saw the “Lecture” (though there is no evidence that Stevens ever came here). A full history can be found in Gerald Kahan’s *George Alexander Stevens & The Lecture on Heads* (University of Georgia Press, 1984).

1) 1787 edition of *Lecture on Heads* with illustration. (Special Collections. John Hay Library, Brown University)

2) Two hand-colored engravings of busts and wigs for the Quack Doctor and the Methodist Parson. Published Oct. 10, 1793.

**Charles Mathews and his “At Homes”**

British-born Mathews was a unique comic actor who had myriad talents but owed most of his contemporary fame to his gift of mimicry (although he also called himself an impersonator and not a mimic). His specialty, though comic, was his portrayal of native types. In this regard, he was an enormous influence in the U.S. During 1813-17 Mathews perfected what was then an innovative notion—a stage vehicle in which he played all roles. This evolved into a famous series under the collective title “Mr. Mathews at Home,” an annual feature of his career from 1818 until its end. A combination of mimicry, storytelling, quick-change artistry, ventriloquism, comic songs, and improvisation, this series was equally popular in England and the U.S., which Mathews toured in 1822-3 and 1834. On his first trip he became the first performer to exploit the stage Yankee in two one-man pieces, *Trip to America* (1824) and *Jonathan in England* (also 1824). Mathews, as the exhibit illustrates, incorporated all “types” of Americans (not always sympathetically) in these particular vehicles.

1) Illustrations of various “At Homes” (there is no evidence that Mathews or his son, Charles Jr., also an actor, ever authorized one of his “At Homes,”” yet over two dozen exists. The count is difficult to ascertain since there were multiple editions of some, pirated versions of others, etc.) from various editions, all now quite rare. One of the special features of each is a hand-colored engraving—most by George Cruikshank. In the Wilmeth Collection there are some seven examples, including one with the actor Yates (Frederick Henry Yates managed the Adelphi Theatre with Daniel Terry in 1825. On Terry's death in 1829, he was joined by Charles Mathews). Mathews began each At Home sitting stage center behind a small table (seen in many illustrations) covered to the floor with green baize. Two lamps were usually found on the table along with some props. Near the table was a screen large enough to conceal the actor for quick changes. Though not all of these pamphlets are clearly dated, they are listed here in (more or less) chronological order:

- **MR. MATHEWS AT HOME! IN HIS YOUTHFUL DAYS.** London: M. Metford, 1822.
- **THE LONDON MATHEWS; CONTAINING AN ACCOUNT OF THIS CELEBRATED COMEDIAN’S TRIP TO AMERICA.** Philadelphia: Morgan & Yeager, 1824.
- **SKETCHES FROM MATHEWS’ INVITATIONS.** London: Edward Duncombe, [1826?]. Shown with this pamphlet is an uncolored print for INVITATIONS.
- **SKETCHES OF MR. MATHEWS’ INVITATIONS.** London: J. Limbird, 1826.
- **MR. MATHEWS’ . . . HOME CIRCUIT; OR, COCKNEY GLEANINGS.** London: J. Limbird, [1827].
MATHEWS’ THEATRICAL BUDGET. London: Hodgson, [1825].
MATHEWS & YATES AT HOME (Mathews in SPRING MEETING). London: J. Duncombe, [c. 1829]. See also framed items.

2) Other illustrations of “At Homes”:

*The Mirror of the Stage; or, New Dramatic Censor (1824).* The March 29 issue includes an overview of his career to date; the volume, as seen here, features a frontispiece of portraits (hand-colored) of characters in A TRIP TO AMERICA. The Yankee Jonathan is seen in the bottom panel, 2nd from the right (rifle on shoulder).

*Mathews’ Home Circuit; or, Cockney Gleanings, 1827.* See e. above. The uncolored print includes (in the bottom panel) an illustration of “Mathews’ Dream” with roles performed by famous actors who are in turn impersonated by Mathews (as those characters). See English Opera House playbill below.

3) Playbills and autographed note and letter signed.
Unframed, a variant bill for HOME CIRCUITS, 8 March 1827, Theatre Royal, English Opera House, London (Strand). Note that this version includes, as its afterpiece, MATHEWS’ DREAM; OR, THE THEATRICAL GALLERY! (with actors and roles illustrated in the first version print described above).

On the Wall:

*The Mathew-Orama for 1824, or, Pretty considerable d____d particular “Tid Bits from America being all well at Natchitoches* (framed). This is the best known of Cruikshank’s hand-colored illustrations of characters created by Mathews, who, in his own person, sits behind the table at center with the varied characters he created during the course of the performance on either side of him.

Two bills framed: the one on the left is an early representation of Mathews’ one-person performance dated 15 Sept. 1817, Theatre Royal, Haymarket. The middle offering—THE ACTOR OF ALL-WORKS—is a prelude to his “At Homes,” which as the other bills displayed indicate, represented the full evening’s entertainment. The bill on the right is for HOME CIRCUITS, OR COCKNEY GLEANINGS (see related items).

Hand-colored engraving of Mathews’ and Yates’ New Entertainment (an “At Home”) framed. Below the engraving is a brief note in Mathews’ hand; unframed is a another brief letter (undated) from Mathews to an unidentified person in an attempt to locate someone named Terry.

Nicholas Marie Vattermare and The Rogueries of Nicholas

Born in Paris, Vatteermare’s ventriloquial ability was developed at an early age and at eleven he entertained Napoleon Bonaparte. His parents persuaded him to take up a medical career and he became a surgeon at the St. Louis hospital in Paris. There he began to unnerve his colleagues when many of the corpses were heard to speak; he gave us medicine for a theatrical career. In
1820 he brought his talent to England where he billed himself as Monsieur Alexandre. Some believe his talent exceeded Mathews. He could imitate animate and inanimate sounds (such as the sawing of wood). In 1822, at London’s Adelphi Theatre, he presented The Adventures of a Ventriloquist, or The Rogueries of Nicholas. Like Mathews, Vattemare portrayed all thirteen characters, rapidly changing his face and costume for each (he assumed the voices of various characters who appeared to be conversing with him from off-stage; when he exited as one character, he would rapidly change his costume, conversing in several voices at the same time, giving the impression that there was another room from which the characters made their exits and entrances).


**NOVELTIES ON THE STAGE:**

Arguably, every item in this exhibit represents a novelty in its time. In fact, most of the forms and performance examples would be novel today, since most no longer exist as they are presented here. Most have evolved into amusements easily recognized today: The rudimentary fair rides shown in the exhibit have become our current roller coasters and other rides familiar at amusement or theme parks; equestrian performances are still popular in the modern circus and in performances that focus almost exclusively on horsemanship; wax museums are still popular, though the figures are mostly from today’s popular culture rather than from the past; in England, pantomime, in the form of Christmas panto remains as popular as ever, though much more anti-intellectual than the form of the early 19th century; and so forth.

The two examples singled out in the exhibit as novelties—solo performances and child prodigies—were unique in their time, in the forms on view. But the changes from then to today are really small, a matter of degree. As noted in the description of solo performance, this form of presentation is still very much with us, perhaps more so than in any time in modern history. And child prodigies of one kind or another have been around for centuries.

But as suggested above, all of the examples in the exhibit could be termed novel and as you examine the exhibit it would be well to think of them in this way. Perhaps the title of the exhibit should be “novelties of the stage.”
INFANT PHENOMENA, CHILD PRODIGIES, YOUNG ROSCIUSES - CHILD ACTORS/STARS

Long before the movies made stars of Jackie Coogan, Shirley Temple, Jackie Cooper, Deanna Durbin, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Margaret O’Brien and later Tatum O’Neal, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Drew Barrymore, among many others, there were children in the theatre. In fact, this phenomenon goes back centuries, most prominently in the late 16th and early 17th century (the boy players in London, for example).

Modern examples are most prominent in the 19th century, prior to laws regulating the employment of children, at a time when child actors were popular novelties, often flashes in the pan with brief but spectacular careers. Most, like many child actors in films, failed to make the transition into the adult world as performers. But what makes the four examples in this exhibit especially unique is that these young actors either played adult roles (William Henry West Betty and Kate and Ellen Bateman) while still pre-teen or in their teens (not prominently the parts of children, though some of their repertoire might include younger roles) or played the role of a child and continued to do so well past their youthful prime (Cordelia Howard and Lotta Crabtree).

Betty (1791-1874) first appeared on the stage at Belfast (he was born in Shrewsbury) before he was 12-years-old, as Osman in Aaron Hill’s Zara. As a child it is said that in three hours of study he committed the part of Hamlet to memory. Billed as the “Young Roscius” (after a young Roman actor) Betty, for two seasons (1804-6), threw the London theatre into an undignified flutter. He seemed to outshine the stars of the day, including actor-manager John Philip Kemble at Covent Garden, threatening that theatre with bankruptcy when he was tempted over to Drury Lane. Major actors of the day - such as George Frederick Cooke - were forced to give up roles with which they were identified (such as Richard III) and supported this child prodigy. For this short period Betty played Macbeth, Hamlet, Romeo, Rolla in Sheridan’s Pizarro and Young Norval in John Home’s Douglas (all by age 13). In the course of a few brief years “Bettymania” dwindled and audience came to their senses. An attempted comeback in 1812 failed; an attempted suicide followed in 1821, and by 1824 he had retired into obscurity. Betty, it should be noted, was an exceptionally beautiful boy (and his greatest fans were men) - his appeal drew on a Romantic belief in the proximity of childhood to unadorned nature. And then, of course, his father and tutor were masters at ballyhoo.

Kate (1843-1917) and Ellen (1844-1936) Bateman were two of four actor daughters of Hezekiah and Sidney Bateman. The elder Bateman first relied on his child-prodigy daughters before managing London’s Lyceum Theatre. Kate, the most famous of the children, made her New York debut at age five or six, toured as a star with sister Ellen, and retired in 1856 (though she returned to the stage in 1860). While a child star, Kate played Portia, Richmond, and Lady Macbeth opposite Ellen’s Shylock, Richard III, and Macbeth. Ellen retired at a young age, while Kate continued to act into adulthood, prominently as Leah in Leah, the Forsaken and as Julia in Sheridan Knowles’ Hunchback (first performed in 1832; Kate played the role first in 1862).
Charlotte (Lotta) Mignon Crabtree (1847-1924), born in New York but grew up in San Francisco. At six years old this tiny, red-haired, dark-eyed elf, jigged and danced to clapping hands of gold miners in the Sierra of Northern California. After returning to San Francisco she became known as “Miss Lotta, the San Francisco Favorite.” In 1864 she went East and toured major cities, playing in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and ultimately finding her most popular vehicle in Little Nell and the Marchioness (1867) based on Dickens’s The Old Curiosity Shop. With her petite size she always looked younger than she was, and thus (although 19 in 1867) became a favorite for her portrayals of children, especially Nell (in her New York Times obituary she was called the “eternal child.”) By 1875 she was touring successfully with her own theatre company. When she retired in 1891, having never married, she was quite wealthy. In time she bought the Brewster Hotel in Boston, where she lived until her death at the age of 77. She left the bulk of her estate, estimated at $4,000,000 to veterans, aging actors, and animals.

Cordelia Howard (1848-1941) was the niece of George L. Fox (the great clown seen elsewhere in this exhibit) and a member of a successful acting family. The Howard company toured New England in shortened versions of The Drunkard and The Factory Girl with interludes of songs and dances. The tiny, dark-haired charmer Cordelia was only four and a half when she first played Little Eva in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a role she performed or returned to for several years (her mother, Caroline, played Topsy, although too old for the role), becoming the star of the family. Cordelia also created the role of Katy in Katy, or the Hot Corn Girl and Little Gerty in The Lamplighter. She also appeared in The Death of Little Eva, a shortened version of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and as Tom Tit, a comic slave boy, in a dramatic version of Stowe’s Dred:A tale or the Great Dismal Swamp. Cordelia retired at thirteen years of age with 80 years ahead of her.

CHILD ACTORS: William Henry West Betty

1) Three associated Betty items framed:
- An etched portrait, “Master Betty, Surnamed Young Roscius, in the Character of Selim, on his first appearance at Covent Garden.” London: Tomkins, [1804]. Hand colored. Produced two days after his 1 December 1804 premiere at Covent Garden. Full length, standing, in the costume of Selim in Brown’s Barbarossa. Below the title are five lines of dialogue.
- Below the portrait are two souvenir tokens with profile portraits on both; in honor of Betty. Both dated 1804. The larger of the two in white medal was created by T. Webb. Above the head is “The Young Roscius,” His date of birth, Sept. 13th 1791 is given; on the obverse these words: “Not yet mature yet Matchless” and MDCCCIV. The smaller (copper) medal includes with the portrait his name and date of birth. On the obverse: “British Tragedian. He Astonished the Judicious observers of Human Nature” and the year 1804. Both of these are quite rare and unusual.

2) Betty and John Philip Kemble. Handcolored, framed engraved caricature: “Theatrical Leap Frog” by Thomas Rowlandson. [London]: R. Ackermann, 1804. The rivalry between Master Betty and the Kemble family is the subject of many caricatures. In this one Kemble stoops, with hands on knees, while a young and sprightly Betty bounds up to leap over the older actor’s head. Kemble says: “Alas! Is it come to this. Ah! Woe is me Seeing what I have seen. Seeing what I see!! Oh Roscius.” Kemble wears theatrical dress and Betty’s costume includes
tight pantaloons and boots (mimicking those of Kemble). The look is typical of other drawings of Betty, including the previous caricature.

3) Unframed satirical caricature and broadside: “Melpomene in the dumps; or, child’s play defended by Theatrical Monarchs.” Published London: Ackermann, [1804]. This handcolored print by Thomas Rowlandson is associated with the rivalry between Master Betty and the Kemble family. Mrs. Siddons is leaning back in her chair, majestically resentful. She addresses Thomas Harris (see 3 above), patentee and manager of Covent Garden, who stands before her, hat in hand. In between is the statuesque John Philip Kemble, Siddons’ brother (dressed as Hamlet?) with one hand on his sister’s shoulder. The actress leans one elbow on a table on which are three books: SALARY BENEFITS, THE RIGHT OF WOMAN, DUTY OF MAN, and a bust of herself looking reproachfully towards the group. The 35 lines of text is a debate: Siddons complains to Harris of neglect on account of Master Betty’s popularity; Harris answers, “if John Bull chooses to feed on slink calf, instead of roast beef, yet consents to pay for the roast, it is not for me to complain. . . .”, and reminds the actress of her ample salary; Kemble supports him and ends, “Public taste. . . is now in second childishness, and when mere oblivion takes place, then you shall make a sally, and should the Town require a fillip [Philip] I will be at your elbow.”

4) Two variant images of Master Betty: From European Magazine, 1 May 1805. In the character of Douglas; a second image in the same play (hand-colored print; no additional information given but likely c. 1804 or 1805). Character likely Norval.

On the Wall:

Large black and white (framed) print titled “Vain Attempts to see the Young Roscius” with the quote: “but like a Comet I was wondered at” (Shakespeare). Published Jan. 1, 1805 by S/W Fores, Piccadilly. This is a satire of “Bettymania”--one among many! A crowd attempts to enter the theatre to see Betty but because of the crush they are losing items of clothing, mates, a crutch, and more.

Satirical print, “Theatrical Amusement or Tossing-up for the Young Rosius.” Published Dec. 5,1804 by W. Holland in the Haymarket. Printed by Thomas Rowlandson. Hand-colored. Framed. Betty is seen at center flipping a coin (symbolic of the contest for Betty’s services) to determine whether the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden (represented on the left by prime owner Thomas Harris) or TR, Drury Lane (manager Richard Brinsley Sheridan on the right) would gain his services. Betty would win in either case and, ultimately, he appeared at both patent theatres (1804-6) for some months in 1805. While at Covent Garden he outshone manager/star John Philip Kemble (see next two items) and then was tempted over to DL. A footnote: prior to his London debut, it would appear that neither Harris nor Sheridan had ever seen Betty act but were still willing compete for his services.
CHILD ACTORS: Kate and Ellen Bateman

- **Print** with Ellen as Richard III and Kate as Richmond (both in Richard III) Engraved by Hollis from Daguerrotype by Mayall. Published by The London Printing and Publishing Co. n.d. (c. 1851 or 2).


CHILD ACTORS: Cordelia Howard

- Image of Howard as Tom Tit; cover from sheet music “Oh, I’m a little slave boy.” NY: Horace Waters, 1856. (Special Collections, John Hay Library, Brown University)

- **A card game, published in Providence by V.S.W. Parkhurst; called UNCLE TOM AND LITTLE EVA. 1852.** Cost 25 cents. A notice states “consists [of] the continual separation and reunion of families.” “Families,” though, referred to the 5 numbered groups into which 20 of the game’s 21 cards were grouped, and “reuniting” meant melding them. The directions are explained on a 21st card called “Justice.” The directions are not easy to follow but it is clear that the Legree, Tom and Eva cards had special value. (Special Collections, John Hay Library, Brown University)

CHILD ACTORS: Lotta Crabtree

A collection of c. 40 photographs of Lotta, many in the role of Little Nell, ranging from carte de visites to cabinet photos, a gravure based on an early photo, and a stereoscopic dual image to be used in a stereoscope. Many of these are unidentified and undated. Other roles among the images are from Pet of the Petticoats (in male attire and top hat). La Cigale (the photo of Lotta standing next to a chair in the corner of a room or setting with paintings on both walls include the comment: “First dress in La Cigale—this is my favorite picture”), The Little Detective, etc. One photo shows Lotta with an extraordinary necklace around her neck. On the reverse is the comment: “Lotta wearing necklace of diamonds and turquoise given by her by Grand Duke Alexis [of Russia] while she was appearing in New Orleans.” They did in fact meet in New Orleans in 1872 and Lotta’s biographers refer to the gift of a bracelet but not this necklace.

This appears to have been a personal collection in the possession of Crabtree; several of the photos have handwritten comments on the back that strongly suggest this.

HIPPODRAMA OR EQUESTRIAN DRAMA:
Precursor of the modern circus
A.H. Saxon, author of the definitive book on this unique form, defines hippodrama as “a play in which trained horses are considered as actors, with business, often leading actions of their own, to perform.” Although horses dominated this form, other kinds of trained animals (especially dogs and monkeys, the latter often actors in monkey costumes) were used as well, as a few of the playbills on exhibit illustrate. Most hippodramas blended horsemanship display with popular melodrama theatre. Although horses were seen on stage at least as early as the 17th century, the great popularity of this form of theatre, especially in London (but elsewhere as well - especially in Paris), was developed at Astley’s Amphitheatre, the Royal Circus, and in Paris at Cirque Olympique beginning in 1803, among other venues (in London, equestrian plays were soon seen at the two patent theatre, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, both forced to embrace hippodrama in order to compete with the purpose-built theatre for the form. Venues like Astley’s, which began as a riding school, ultimately became (see prints on display) hybrids that combined proscenium stages with dirt-floored riding arenas separated by orchestra pits, the two performances spaces connected by ramps.

**Philip Astley** (1742-1814) began his riding school with various public displays in the 1760s; after a fire he built a new space on the south bank of the Thames that sat 2500 spectators. Although he never used the word circus, a rival, Charles Hughes, who built the Royal Circus in 1782, did, even though Hughes also specialized in hippodrama. After Astley’s death his amphitheatre had several names and other equestrian stars emerged: William Davis, William Batty, William Cooke, and, above all Andrew Ducrow (1793-1848), the subject of a major biography by Saxon.

Most equestrian dramas were written specifically for various management, although some very popular vehicles were adapted from well-established plays. Cooke, for example, turned Shakespeare’s *Richard III* into an equestrian drama, giving Richard’s horse, White Surrey, a leading role. Astley’s lasted into the 1890s. In the U.S. a number of venues (after the end of the Napoleonic Wars) specialized in equestrian drama, in particular NY’s Lafayette Circus (1825). One American became especially famous in one particular equestrian role: **Adah Isaacs Menken** (1835?-68), an eccentric actress and poet, in 1861 appeared in flesh-colored tights and minimal drapery, bound to a “wild horse of Tartary,” in Milner’s melodrama *Mazeppa*, based on Byron’s poem of the same name. The role won her renown as the “Naked Lady” and made her a star. In 1864 she appeared as Mazeppa at Astley’s.

1) **Handcolored contemporary print of the interior of the Royal Circus, Blackfriars Road, St. George’s Fields, London, 1782.** Opened by Charles Hughes and Charles Dibdin. It introduced not only equine performers to the London stage but also was the first venue for canine actors. After 1809 it produced primarily melodramas (rather than equestrian or circus acts). After extensive remodeling—removing the ring—it was renamed the Surrey Theatre.

2) **Colored aquatint engraving of (Philip) Astley's Ampitheatre in London (framed) as drawn by Thomas Rowlandson (responsible for figures in the space) and Augustus Pugin (as an architect, he drew the physical structure) for Ackermann's Microcosm of London (published 1808).** The Amphitheatre opened in London in 1773, burned in 1794, rebuilt the next year; burned again in 1803 and was replaced with a splendid new house, seating 2500 spectators in 1804. By the middle of the 19th c. equestrian drama was on the decline, as was Astley’s. A
second hand-colored image of Astley’s (unframed) was drawn by Robert Wilkinson and published, London, in 1815. This image includes a picture of the front exterior.

3) Satirical print (framed), handcolored. Print made by Samuel De Wilde (c. 1751-1832); published, like the next print, by S. Tipper, 1807, for The Satirist. Like the next print, this one, titled “The Monster Melo-Drama,” is a satire on the neglect by the London theatre manages (of the Patent houses) of standard dramatic works. Though not specifically a satire on the fad for equestrian performances, pantomime and popular drama are the major objects of interest here.

A four-footed monster, with four human heads, the elongated hairy body likely that of a dog, stands in an open space in front of Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres. The three main heads are those of R.B. Sheridan (Drury Lane; saying “Ha, ha, ha”), John Philip Kemble (Covent Garden; saying “Oh!!!! with a tragic expression), and Clown Joseph Grimaldi with typical painted face and blue wig (saying, “Nice Moon”). A dagger is thrust into Kemble’s neck, blood gushing from the wound. A fourth head, that of a Harlequin, looks over the back of the monster. The monster wears a Harlequin jacket over its forelegs and front part of its body. Its long barbed tail is inscribed A Tail of Mistery [sic] and its forepaws rest on a paper: Regular Dramas Congreve Beaumont and Fletcher Colman. A hind foot rests on Shakespear’s Works. Under the beast stand a number of dramatists of the day, some of whom suck from its many teats. Some are identified by the titles of the plays by which they stand. Frederick Reynolds bestrides a large dog (Carlo) by The Caravan. A man sits on the shoulders of a monk with cloven hoofs in order to reach a teat and the monk (Lewis) stands on Wood Daemon. T. Holcroft stands on the Road to Ruin. Skeffington, wearing long striped pantaloons, stands on his Sleeping Beauty. On the right the foppish Dimond stands on his Hunter of the Alps. Five other men are not identified. Behind, and to the left, Samuel Simmons as Mother Goose, drives a flock of geese past the arcade of Covent Garden Theatre.

Satirical print (etching), handcolored (framed). Print made by Samuel De Wilde (c. 1751-1832); published by S. Tipper, 1808, for The Satirist. This is a scathing commentary on playwright R.B. Sheridan’s poor management and the necessity of ignoring legitimate drama for performing dogs and spectacle. A fantastic scene on the stage of Drury Lane [going back to 1780s?], one of the two patent houses in London: tragedy and comedy are being done to death by the management, while dogs and imitation animals are made ready to perform. A rough gallows made of a plank inscribed “Board of Management” rests on two logs. A man on a ladder, said to be the President of the Board of Management, and perhaps C. Ward, prepares to hang Thalia, or Comedy, a buxom woman with a (broken) comic mask suspended from her neck. Melpomene, “Moll Pominy,” or Tragedy, is stretched on a bench with a dagger thrust through her hand; Thomas Sheridan (d. 1788), R.B.’s father, in back view, forces her to drink a cup of “Mello dram”; a paper, “Caractacus,” projects from his pocket. At her feet R.B. Sheridan, very disheveled, lies in a drunken sleep, holding a glass. His arm rests on a pile of books and papers: on the top are Forty Thieves and Pizarro; beneath are his famous plays: Rivals, Duenna, open on the ground are Critic and School for Scandal. With these are empty bags inscribed “Treasury Bag” and an overturned bottle of “Cherry Bounce.” On the right actor Richard Wroughton (1748-1822) is the center of a semicircle of dogs on their hind legs wearing coats, with a cat playing a tambourine. Beside them (r.) is the door under a stage box, in this stands Folly, a man dressed as a fool in cap and bells, applauding the happenings on the stage. Behind, a man paints
black spots on a white dog wearing a collar inscribed “Carlo” [a famous performing dog in *The Caravan*]. Behind are imitation animals: an elephant whose body is not yet completely covered with canvas, an unconvincing dromedary, with two conical humps, and framework showing under his neck. A man inflates with bellows the seamy skin of a so-called bear. There is a background of forest scenery.

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**Aquatint (sepia) and etched caricature (framed), “The Centaur-ian Manager.” The Satirist, 1811.** This print is typical of the satiric treatment of the equestrian performances at Covent Garden, one of the two patent houses in London, in 1811 (and afterwards). The rage began with a successful revival of *Blue Beard* with a troupe imported from Astley’s. It was denounced as a disgraceful lowering of the theatre’s stature. Actor-manager John Philip Kemble, as a centaur, serves as mount for his sister actress Sarah Siddons. He extends his bare arms to a company of performing cats and dogs, saying “I will engage you all for the present Season and—I methinks I shall do well, to engage the devil to play Lewis’s Wood Daemon.” The animals are on their hind-legs, fashionably dressed; beside them stands a satyr-like Devil. Under Kemble’s arm is a book: Emendations of Shakespeare by I.P.K. Under his hooves are open folios and a portrait of Shakespeare torn in half. Siddons, as a tragedy queen, raises a dagger and spills the contents of a goblet. Behind the centaur’s kicking hind-legs lies Comedy (a young woman holdings a smiling mask) on her back. Harlequin kneels at her feet flourishing his slapstick as Pierrot stoops over her head. To the rear right two asses, on hind legs, confer while holding
[The] Manager’s Last Kick between them. Both wear fashionable clothes and one has an opera hat tucked under an arm.
Framed hand-colored print drawn by Cooper and engraved by Scott; published by J. Wheble, London, 1822 of equestrian William Davis (fl. 1789-1824) as the Georgian Chief in *Timour the Tartar*. Davis appeared at Astley’s as early as 1789. *Timour* (by “Monk” Lewis) premiered on 29 April 1811. It was repeatedly revived for the next half century.

A lithograph of “Mr. Ducrow, as St. George in the Grand Spectacle of St. George and the Dragon, Performed at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane.” Published London: G.W. Gear, [c. 1834]; colored by hand. This is a well-executed image with excellent original color. The scene is the moonlit mouth of the Dragon’s cave. Ducrow, in armoured costume, sits astride a bucking white horse and thrusts his sword at the writhing and menacious monster. On the floor of the cave are bones of previous victims; upper right the flailing figure of Princess Sabra chained to the cliff side. This equestrian spectacle was revived at Drury Lane for the Christmas season of 1833-4.

**Playbill, Theatre Royal, Dublin, February 1835:** St. George and the Dragon. Framed. This marks an appearance by Andrew Ducrow as St. George of England, plus additional equestrian attractions (The Circle, Masked Ball, Irish Boy). At the top are two wood block illustrations of Ducrow as St. George. Note: for the afterpiece Blue Beard a procession features the “Living Elephant” (Tippo).

**Playbill, Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, December 22, 1837:** Raphael’s Dream. Framed. Andrew Ducrow, in addition to his accomplishments as an equestrian, was an accomplished pantomimist and appeared in numerous tableaux vivants or living pictures. His depiction of various statues included, as part of Raphael’s Dream, The Dying Gladiator, The Mummy, and Samson. These were more than still poses; Ducrow pantomimed a full action in order to depict the final pose. A Scots critic this season described his scenes as being given “with a fidelity and vividness of expression and an energy of action we have never seen excelled by any other actor or pantomimist whatever.” This bill is especially noteworthy because of the three wood-cuts that represent Ducrow in three of his final poses.

Accompanying the last playbill in the section on the wall are die cuts of Mazeppa (possibly the actress Adah Isaacs Menken [see playbill below]) and Dick Turpin. From the early 1800s publishers produced picture sheets that were uncolored or, at extra cost, hand colored and sold by stationers and booksellers. Scraps, stamped embossed reliefs, chromos or die cuts are small paper images printed by the process of chromo-lithography and embossed. The colorful embossed reliefs beloved of Victorians originated in German bakers’ shops where they were used to decorate cakes. From this early beginning scraps were later used as decorative additions to Christmas cards and valentines. They were also used to illustrate historical as well as popular events of the time, including theatrical scenes or characters. The immediate forerunner of the embossed scraps were sheets containing small chromos printed in a rectangular format to be cut out in exactly the same way as the first penny postage stamps. In the Victorian home a popular pastime was to embellish the folding screens that the draughty living rooms required. Also included is a photo of Menken.
After printing of the scrap the sheets were coated with a gelatine and gum layer which gave the finished sheets a glossy surface, embossing came next giving the scrap their three-dimensional look. The final production process was to pass them through a punching / stamping press to cut away the unrequired areas of paper from the design leaving the individual images connected by small ladders, often bearing the name or initials of the maker.

**Assorted playbills:** Group of 1814 Covent Garden bills featuring “Equestrian Troop”; Double playbill, St. James’s Theatre, May 14, 1839, featuring Herrn Schreyer’s Troop of Monkeys and Dogs (45 in number). Printed on a pale blue stock. The left side is devoted to a catalogue of the feats of the animals - dancing, acrobatics, exercises on the tightrope, etc. The right side features the ballet *La Sylphide*, which followed the mammalian wonders (an indication of popularity and prominence of acts!).

Bill for the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, July 14, 1841, featuring the wonderful dogs Carlo and Neptune. Note that the 1827 bill described above also featured a Carlo. The main piece in the evening’s bill is *The Forest of Bondy or, the Dog of Montargis*, one of the most popular of canine dramas of the 19th century. This drama also stars W.H. Payne, a famous pantomimist of the day who trained under Grimaldi (and others), who performed for 35 years at Covent Garden, and died in 1878.

**On the Wall:**

Two framed playbills featuring animal performers, real or imagined. The first, Theatre Royal, Birmingham, 8 Aug. 1827, starring Mr. Blanchard as well as Mr. Simpson & “his Wonderful DOG.” The latter appears in *Woodman & his Dog, Or, The Castle of Rocella*, a melodrama written expressly for the famous performing dog, Carlo (see plot summary on bill). The final scene represents “The Castle in Flames, In which surprising Feats of Sagacity will be displayed by the WONDERFUL DOG CARLO.” See also last bill described below.

**Second bill is for the 18 Jan. 1822, London’s Surrey Theatre, originally, as above, the Royal Circus.** Main offering is *Pirate or the Wild Woman of Zetland*; but featured is “The Wonderful Ape” on the “Corde Volante” and an afterpiece with “a real Horse.”

Large framed Astley’s playbill, printed in red and blue (rare), Feb, 12, 1844 (under William Batty): *The Battle of Waterloo!*, one of the greatest and, next to *Mazeppa*, the most frequently performed drama in the entire history of Astley’s. First performance was on 19 April 1824 (initial run of 144 consecutive performances); revived, both in England and the U.S. until well into the second half of the 19th c.

**Playbill for Cooke’s Royal Circus, June 26, 1846. In Truro, Cornwall.** See next item for background on the Cookes and their involvement with the British circus. This bill is unique for its woodblock print. Equestrian acts dominate the bill, plus slack rope vaulting, contortionists, etc.

**Unusually long, framed narrow bill for Cooke’s Circus, Bristol, England. Dec. 17, 1849?**The name Cooke was long associated with equestrian performance and the early modern
circus. This fascinating bill is likely the circus originally managed by Thomas T. Cooke (1782-1866) whose father Sir Thomas Cooke was the original head of the circus. This Cooke came to the U.S. in 1836 (with his son William (1808-86) with a circus (the earliest circus of note in the U.S. dates from 1793 under the direction of equestrian John Bill Ricketts) and returned to the UK in 1840, with William. Thomas performed in equestrian spectacles until his death at 84, having sired between 13 and 19 children. William, likely the Cooke here, was a rider, acrobat, clown, rope walker, and strong man. Cooke is featured in several equestrian roles on this bill. The major supporting player is H. Brown, a clown and “Shakespearian Wit.” While circuses were relatively small, “talking” clowns (like standup comics today) were common.

An illustrated double playbill, London’s Royal Pavilion Theatre, also known as the Eastern Opera House (located on the Whitechapel Road in Stepney), for The Life and Death of Dick Turpin and Mazeppa, or the Wild Horse of Tartary. 16 December 1864. Unusual size; printed in blue. The Pavilion opened in 1828 and became an active “minor” theatre presenting a variety of popular entertainments—burlettas, pantomime, equestrian drama, etc. (by 1843 and the repeal of monopoly held by the Patent houses , it was one of about 2 dozen). Its location was amidst a poor artisan and seafaring community. The first structure burned in 1856; it was rebuilt in 1858 and reconstructed in 1874 (at its height it had a capacity of 3,500 people), and altered again in 1894. It closed its doors in 1934. The featured performer—a minor star who was first seen in NYC in 1852 and at one time supported John Wilkes Booth—was Charlotte Wyette. The roles played here were popular equestrian parts often played by women (see Menken below). The wood engravings are of the highwayman Dick Turpin leaping the tollgate and of Mazeppa lashed to the back of the escaping wild horse.

Rare double playbill, Astley’s, probably Nov. 1864. With Adah Isaacs Menken (1835?-68), who first appeared there in 1864 and returned in 1867). Wood-block engraving of the climatic moment of the play. Framed. Known as the “Naked Lady” for the scandalous flesh-colored tights she wore while bound to a “wild horse of Tartary” in the male role of a Polish nobleman (based on a poem by Byron). At the climactic moment of the play adaptation she appeared in this state and the thronging public was appropriately shocked and titillated, Menken was also a poet, publicity hound, and self-proclaimed bohemian. She died suddenly—after a scandalous personal as well as professional life—of peritonitis. Recently, Renée Sentilles has dissected her life and times in Performing Menken (2003).

EQUESTRIAN/HIPPODRAMA: THE AMERICAN WILD WEST SHOW

It might seem odd to include this phenomenon under Equestrian Drama, yet in reality these exhibitions (and the most famous one, under the management of W.F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody [1846-1917] was never called a show but always an exhibit) were in many respects closer to equestrian demonstrations than to circuses (with which it is most often mistakenly grouped). First traveling in 1884, Cody, a former Indian fighter, buffalo hunter, and scout (among other talents), believed that his exhibition (which lasted until 1913) were re-creations of American frontier life and skills popular in the late 19th century (somewhat late for this exhibit but
nonetheless connected). Cody’s and his “exhibition” have never ceased to appeal to the imagination and new books, films, documentaries, etc. appear every year. The most recent book is Steve Friesen’s *Buffalo Bill: Scout, Showman, Visionary* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2010).

On display are a small number of Cody/Wild West items and images of the hundreds to be found. The rarest item is the original 1884 program for Cody’s first tour. This like so many other ephemeral collectibles was printed on inexpensive and poorly produced paper; most early Wild West programs have disintegrated and turned to dust. An insert in the souvenir program is an early portrait of Cody (the 1884 program is printed on the obverse). Also seen is a 1907 “souvenir booklet” with photos and a 1908 program (sans cover); a photo card with a facsimile autograph given out at his show (1909 copyright).

**PHINEAS TAYLOR (P.T.) BARNUM  (1810-91)**
America’s First Great Showman

Connecticut-born Barnum, though not a talented performer himself, was a great entrepreneur, promoter, and hard-headed businessman. Although his name is popularly associated with the circus, he in fact made his name as a result of his extraordinarily popular museum at Broadway and Ann St. in NYC. The museum opened in 1841 and ended after two fires, the final one in 1868. Barnum operated his museum with deceit (he called it humbug) and innovative methods of publicity to promote both popular and high culture (yet he NEVER said “a sucker is born every minute”). Although not the first popular museum (that credit goes to Charles Willson Peale and his museum in Philadelphia [1786]). Barnum’s venue (originally Scudder’s Museum) quickly became a city landmark, appealing to all ages and classes and combining real and fake curiosities along with an assortment of human freaks and oddities, plus concerts and light entertainment in a “Lecture Room” (rather offending some by calling it a theatre). In 1849 this space was expanded into a well-equipped performance venue and housed a series of moral plays in a moral manner. Barnum’s various attractions had been housed in separate venues and environments. By presenting all of this in one facility with instruction and moral uplift, Barnum’s became a first. At its peak, the museum was open fifteen hours a day and had as many as 15,000 visitors a day. Some 38 million customers paid the 25 cents (children under ten, 15 cents) admission to attend the museum between 1841 and 1865. Despite its admission price, Barnum’s became the inspiration for small museums throughout the country (called dime museums). In 1865 Barnum’s American Museum burned to the ground; Barnum moved to 559 Broadway and opened his second museum, but it too burned after only a few years.

Barnum actually retired in 1855 but soon resumed his business. His circus activity really does not begin until 1871; in 1881 he merged with James A. Bailey to create “The Greatest Show on Earth,” a combination of circus, menagerie, and sideshow—essentially an extension of his old museum. His greatest attraction in his circus was Jumbo the elephant, purchased in 1882 from the London Zoo. While touring with Barnum & Bailey Jumbo was killed when hit by a train in Ontario in 1885.

Barnum certainly loaned his name to other ventures and attractions. On exhibit is a handbill signed by Barnum promoting “The Colosseum” at Broadway and 35th St. It puffs the so-called
panoramic facsimiles of Paris and London (recently brought over from England) and dated May 5, 1874. See panoramic section elsewhere in the exhibit.

**P.T. BARNUM’S ATTRACTIONS**

Arguably, of Barnum’s hundreds of attractions, the three most prominent—or best known—were **General Tom Thumb, Jenny Lind, and the original Siamese Twins.**

**Tom Thumb [Charles S. Stratton] (1838-83)** Barnum discovered the diminutive Stratton in 1842 in Bridgeport, CT, and overnight he became Gen. Tom Thumb, an 11-year old marvel who had just arrived from Europe—basic Barnum humbug! Tom stopped growing after 6 months old—25 inches tall. Barnum quickly made him a headliner, touring him for the first time when he was five (singing, dancing, joking, miming and impersonating famous people). In 1844 he first toured Europe and became an international celebrity—appearing twice before Queen Victoria. In 1847 he began to grow again (ultimately, he was 3.3 ft. tall and weighed 71 lbs. On Feb. 10, 1863, he married the dwarf Lavinia Warren at Grace Episcopal Church in NYC, with George Washington Morrison (“Commodore”) Nutt as best man and Lavinia’s sister Minnie Warren as maid of honor (they can be seen in one of the wedding carte de visites in the exhibit; there is also a cdv with the Strattons and a baby—they had no children—this was another Barnum humbug). Stratton became very wealthy and when Barnum was in financial straits Tom Thumb bailed him out. His last appearance in England was in 1878. He died of a stroke at 45 years old and is buried in Bridgeport’s Mountain Grove Cemetery.

**On exhibit:** 1) various carte de visites (as in introduction); 2) bio of TT sold in London (1871); 3) an original hand-colored image of a youthful Stratton (mid 19th c.) used in a valentine (framed); 4) and a rare white metal medal created by Allen & Moore, 1844. The medal depicts, in profile to right, a coach with coachmen and postillion drawn by four ponies, with this legend above: “General Tom Thumb’s Carriage. The Equipment cost £400.” In the lower third: “Whole height 40 in. body 20 in by 11 in/Ponies 28 in crest rising sun/Arms Britannia and Liberty/Supporters Lion and Eagle/Motto, “Go-a-head. Pub. P.T. Barnum.” On the obverse are profile busts of “Sherwood E. and Cynthia Stratton/Parents of Genl. Tom Thumb. (See postcard of similar carriage - or the same - previously at the Hertzberg Circus Collection in San Antonio). A.H. Saxon, in his definitive bio of Barnum, records “that the carriage was ready in July 1844 (with four matched ponies, trained by William Batty, then proprietor of Astley’s Amphitheatre), when the lease on the Egyptian Hall expired [where TT appeared] and the Tom Thumb Troupe started on a grand tour of Britain. . . . this fairylike equipage, in which the General was driven about in all the towns they visited, became one of the principal means of advertising the show.”

**Jenny (Johanna) Lind (1820-70)** Known as “The Swedish Nightingale” for the magic and magnificence of her Nordic voice, she was hired by Barnum solely on her reputation and the Jenny Lind mania in Europe (she was Queen Victoria’s favorite singer). Her American debut was at Castle Garden, reached from NY’s Battery Park by a bridge, on Sept. 11, 1850. She gave 93 concerts in America for Barnum and earned over $250,000 (Barnum netted some $500,000. One of her stops was in Boston at the Tremont Temple (in June and again in November 1851) for seven concerts (see program, ticket stub, and special newspaper promoting her visit). She returned to Europe in May 1852. Lind became the subject of several films and an opera.
Chang and Eng [Bunker] (1811-1874) the original Siamese Twins (they were actually Chinese brothers born in Bangkok), unlike other Barnum attractions, were not in need of Barnum for promotion. They were well known after having been “discovered” in 1829 and touring extensively in Europe and America (primarily in various Peale Museums, predecessor to Barnum’s Museum). Barnum’s contact with them did not occur until 1860 (after they had actually retired). That year they first appeared at Barnum’s, but the twins and the showman never liked the other (Barnum, in part, because he had no control over them). After their six-week engagement they never returned to the American Museum, although between 1868 and 1870 they did tour Great Britain under Barnum’s management. At the beginning of their careers as performers the conjoined twins Chang and Eng appeared in London at various venues (in particular the famous Egyptian Hall, home of numerous stage magicians). One of their venues was Lewis’s Great Sale Room, a gigantic hall rented out for all kinds of exhibitions. On exhibit is a rare handbill for that engagement in 1830.

BARNUM-RELATED ITEMS

Three Barnum associated pieces in frame:

- **letter in Barnum’s hand**, dated March 3, 1855, in which he accepts a speaking engagement (he spoke frequently), the subject to be “the philosophy of Humbug.” He explains his timetable from New York to Middletown (CT?). He explains that his talk will last from 8:15-9:30 or 9:45. Barnum letters are now fairly rare and valued by collectors.

- **Playbill, dated Nov. 16, 1863**, for Barnum’s Museum: this is actually a two-sided bill; the side on view is for the musical drama *The Child of the Regiment* as well as *Marriette*, which features “the great Spectral Illusion” *The Ghost*. The side not on view lists some of the novelties/freaks on view: Anna Swan, the giant girl from Nova Scotia; the 8 foot-tall Giant Boy, The Lilliputian King, The Wonderful Albino Family, “Moving Wax Figures, an automaton writer, and The Lightning Calculator, among others.

- **a colored chromolithograph** of the burning of the first American Museum on July 13, 1865, based on a painting by C.P. Cranch (1813-1892).

Also on exhibit:

- **Barnum’s Hieroglyphic Puzzle**. No date given but likely c. 1860, the date Barnum introduced “The What Is It?” or “Man-Monkey” (real name was William Henry Johnson and he was an 18-year-old microcephalic black dwarf). He is advertised, along with the Albino Family (introduced from Holland in 1857), at the top of the column on the left. This large broadside was either sold for a nominal price or distributed free as a means of advertising the Museum. Research suggests that this is a rare Barnum collectible.

- **Full page announcement from Harper’s Weekly, March 29, 1873**: After the burning of Barnum’s second Museum in 1868 Barnum planned a tour, which is billed here as a combination of Museum, Menagerie, and Hippodrome. This is truly the beginning of his circus; he mentions “three distinct rings” in the Hippodrome department (circus!).

- **Engraved drawing of parade for the above**. This is the beginning of Barnum’s extravagant circus parade. In the previous document, Barnum writes about “The Great Street Procession, three miles long, takes place every morning at half-past eight o’clock.”
He notes that “It consists of trains of elephants, camels, dromedaries, zebras, and elks in harness; nearly one hundred gold, enameled, and cerulean chariots, vans, dens, and cages; Arabian horses, trick ponies, three bands of music, and a more marvelous display of gymnastic, automatic, and musical performances in the public streets.”

- **Colosseum** puff (see Barnum bio); handbill dated May 5, 1874.
- **Early newsprint programs from Barnum’s early circus ventures**, including a program starring Jumbo (from Keene, NH) and a program from Providence. 1870s-1890s
- **Auction catalogue, Dec. 11, 1894, Barnum and Bailey**. Held in Bridgeport, CT, then the winter quarters of the Greatest Show on Earth. Extensive listing of items used by the circus. The sale includes extensive wardrobe for spectacles, COLUMBUS, OR THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA; MOSES, OR THE BONDAGE IN EGYPT; MOTEZUMA, OR THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO; NINEVEH; NERO; 1776, OR THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION (See sample pages for sale items relating to COLUMBUS).
- **Group of early Barnum and Bailey programs (1903 and 1916); also a Ringling Bros. (1917)**. The two circuses were combined in 1919.
- **Spalding & Rogers New Orleans Circus**. Rare, small December 1860 playbill for this pioneer American circus. Gilbert Spalding and Charles Rogers went into partnership in 1848. In 1852 performed on the river boat, Floating Palace (Ohio and Mississippi Rivers). This circus was installed in 1860 in New York’s Bowery Theatre and, in addition to circus acts (featuring, note TONY PASTOR), they presented equestrian dramas and pantomimes (here Monster of St. Michael or Harlequin and the Gold Sprite of the Sulphur Mine (with Dan Castello, Pastor, and other circus pioneers). This partnership dissolved in 1865.

**On the Wall:**

**Engraved drawing of parade for announced 1873 tour**. This is the beginning of Barnum’s extravagant circus parade. In the previous document, Barnum writes about “The Great Street Procession, three miles long, takes place every morning at half-past eight o’clock.” He notes that “It consists of trains of elephants, camels, dromedaries, zebras, and elks in harness; nearly one hundred gold, enameled, and cerulean chariots, vans, dens, and cages; Arabian horses, trick ponies, three bands of music, and a more marvelous display of gymnastic, automatic, and musical performances in the public streets.”

**WAX MUSEUMS**

Of all the various forms of popular museums (the prototype being Barnum’s American Museum) and environmental amusements, none is as ancient or still as popular as the wax museum. Dating of the earliest wax effigies or modeling of the human form in some type of wax (beeswax among the earliest substance) is virtually impossible, yet we know that wax images of all kinds have been used since the beginning of recorded time for a variety of reasons ranging from black magic to the funeral images of dead royalty. Public wax exhibitions were on view on the Continent as early as mid-15th century.

Waxworks enjoyed their greatest popularity in England (and the U.S.) in the 19th century, first as one of many traveling shows (ranging from cabinets of curiosity to menageries to wax museums) and then in permanent locations. Secular wax exhibits were known in England as early as the mid 17th century. A waxwork was known to have existed at Bartholomew Fair in 1647 and then frequently at subsequent London fairs. By the 18th century there were numerous waxwork...
proprietors appealing to the broad taste of a popular audience. Among the most prominent was Mrs. Salmon’s Waxwork on Fleet St (her husband was in business as early as 1693). The complex story of these waxworks is told in Richard Altick’s wonderful book, *The Shows of London* (1978).

Of all the many proprietors of waxworks the oldest and most famous is Madame Tussaud’s, still considered the supreme example of this ancient art. Madame Tussaud inherited her husband’s waxworks (she was also an accomplished wax artist) at the end of the 18th century. She traveled for a number of years (in France and England) and in 1802 settled in London (in its current Baker St. area in 1835, moving to its current address in 1884). Mrs. Tussaud died in 1850 and members of the family have been involved since then. In 1925 the exhibition was destroyed by fire and in 1940 it was damaged during World War II. As a result of both events, records were destroyed and displays had to be recreated. Also as a result, guides to annual exhibits are often difficult to find.

- **Complimentary Lenten order for Meech’s Royal Exhibition of Mechanical and Wax Figures, 1874. Located at 50 & 52, Kennington Road, near the Westminster Road.** The order describes the attraction: magnificent life-size models in costly costumes of eminent persons. The automaton flute player, with the wonderful mechanical groupings, works of art, and the performances of Professor Burman, the wizard, (from the Egyptian Hall). A broadside bill at the British Museum provides more detail.

- **Handcolored print of Madame Tussaud’s Exhibition in its Portman Rooms, Baker St., 1840.**

- **Assortment of guides to Madame Tussaud’s: 1879, c. 1890, 1892, 1897, 1933, c. 1950 (two, including a souvenir), and two contemporary guides (1980s & 1990s).**

- **Guides to New York’s Eden Musée (founded in 1883; moved to Coney Island in 1915; destroyed in 1932 by fire): c. 1884, 1892, 1910.**
  For some 30 years Eden Musée was New York’s answer to Madame Tussaud’s. It was located on 23rd St. between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, with a 75’ frontage. Though primarily a waxworks exhibit, secondarily it was a concert hall and variety house. There were Eden Musées in other cities, such as #7.

- **Program, undated (pre. 1915), for concerts of orchestral music at Eden Musée**
-  **(Sunday afternoon and evening). Good illustration of establishment on cover.**
- **Catalogue: Eden Musee and Chamber of Horrors, 727-729-731 Washington Street, Boston. C. 1907.**
  There were branches of the Eden Musée in Boston and Chicago. Both cities (and others) had numerous similar establishments, many in storefronts or as temporary road shows, known as **dime museums** (for the price of admission).

Also on exhibit:

Group of six unidentified **cabinet photos of a snake charmer**, most likely, given the theatrical setting, in a dime museum or a variety house. Note her various stage costumes, including one rather exotic, and the more sedate pose in street dress. Photos taken in San Francisco.
Bill/broadside for Detectives’ Museum, 914 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, July 12, 1878.
Though later than most items in this exhibit, this is a good representation of the many dime museums that existed in the U.S. well into the 20th century. Black print on yellow paper is unusual. Note that the price of admission is 10 cents. A.W. Scott, the proprietor of this exhibit, may have been a Pinkerton detective. Press endorsements at the bottom of the bill would suggest that this was a traveling exhibit and had been seen in Portland, Maine; Providence, RI; and Bridgeport, CT (and likely elsewhere). History of Scott and/or the exhibit has been difficult to locate.

On the Wall:

Rare undated broadside advertising Ewing’s Wax Figures. Based on figures on display (Lord Nelson, George IV, Napoleon,) and Battle of Corunna (1809), this likely dates c. 1810-30. Location: Unicorn Yard, North Street, Brighton, UK.

Ewing’s was a venerable show which was as reliable a fixture at major fairs as Richardson’s theatre booth. Indeed, Richardson paid Ewing’s rent, erected his booth, and took half of his profits. Ewing’s was one of many similar exhibits in and around London in the 19th century.

VARIETY ENTERTAINMENT: THE MINSTREL SHOW

Variety entertainment is one of the largest categories of popular amusement, incorporating any form that depends on a varied selection of entertainments or compartmental structure. The most dominant forms in the U.S. and the U.K. include the medicine show, vaudeville, the circus, the music hall, burlesque, and, the first uniquely American of show business variety forms, the minstrel show.

This exhibit focuses on the earlier, pioneer forms of amusement, so historically the first organized, structured, and widely popular form was blackface minstrelsy. Racist though it often was, and responsible for many negative stereotypes, the minstrel show nevertheless was enormously popular throughout the country and abroad (the U.K. had a tradition of “blacking up” that lasted even longer than it did in the U.S.). The social and political ramification of minstrelsy is an enormous subject, the topic of dozens of major studies in recent years.

Basically, it began when enterprising white showmen, looking for an innovative new way to present their talents, claimed to incorporate African-American dialects, songs, dances, and jokes (though the material of minstrelsy often had little to do with this life) to entertain its audience. The black mask (blackface makeup) became an essential ingredient and the source of much stereotyping that endured long after the shows had disappeared.

Initially the name for these entertainers was “Ethiopian delineators” and as the form developed into a major stage entertainment its impact was great with influences on vaudeville (America’s most popular variety form after minstrelsy), burlesque, and other entertainment successors (including radio and television). From the 1840s and for the next fifty years, minstrelsy was the dominant variety form in the U.S. Blackface entertainers were, in fact, popular well before the minstrel show—in circuses, between the acts of plays, at dime museums, etc. While condemning
minstrelsy, it is also worth remembering that minstrels were showmen and not anthropologists and never intended to offer accurate reflections of the life and culture of black Americans. Their objective was to amuse, and the black mask offered a way to create routines different from anything else on the American stage. Space does not permit a full evaluation of minstrel shows here, but a few additional details can be related as associated with items on exhibit.

**Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” (“Jim Crow”) Rice (1806-60):** Rice was an early blackface performer (“Ethiopian delineator”) and, though he never appeared in a minstrel show, he is considered the “father of American minstrelsy”; certainly he popularized blackface entertainment (most often in solo performances) and the Jim Crow character, whose actual origin is lost to legend. Between 1828-1831, according to tradition, Rice (possibly in Louisville, KY; Rice himself was a New Yorker) observed a crippled Negro stableman sing a refrain and dance with a jerky jump - thus “Jump Jim Crow,” after the slave’s name. Rice then developed full-length entertainments from a single song and dance. His influence was enormous, including the British Isles where he toured in 1836, 1838, and 1843.

On exhibit are several Rice items

- a rare Providence Theatre playbill, Oct. 26, 1841. This theatre - the only one at the time in the City - was on the east side of Dorrance St., between Pine and Friendship streets; it opened in Oct. 1838. This bill features Rice as Sip Larkins in *Sich a Getting Up Stairs*, and, between plays, Rice sang and danced “Jim Crow.” Rice also appeared in Providence in 1849 (or 50) and 1853.
- an unusual and scarce small color lithograph of Rice (“Rice’s Crow”) with the head of Rice (sans makeup) on the body of a crow.

**Other Minstrelsy-related items:**

1) **Early minstrel sheet music cover (from the John Hay’s African American Sheet Music Collection).** As Ethiopian delineators gained in popularity, they looked for even more distinctive material. By the early 1840s a small group of entertainers (likely the Virginia Minstrels, numbering four) joined forces, took the name of the most famous Southern state and added “minstrels” in order to cash in on the recent popularity of the touring (from Europe) Tyrolese Minstrel Family. They became a rage and a flood of competitors followed. The two cover here provides an excellent idea of what early minstrels looked like on stage: 1843 Endicott lithograph (“Cudjo’s Wild Hunt”) depicts the Boston Minstrels (six in number) in two contrasting costumes and poses (and stereotypes): “dandyism of the North” and “Ethiopians of the South (Special Collections, The John Hay Library, Brown University)

2) **Assortment** of minstrel songsters, joke books, stump speeches, Bryant’s programme & songs, Skiff & Gaylord’s Minstrels program: 1852-1883.

**On the Wall:**

Two minstrel show playbills, 1851 and 1869:

- **Horn, Wells & Briggs’ Ethiopian Serenaders, May 12, 1851, Chestnut St. Theatre, Philadelphia.** Scarce. Noteworthy for its wood-block print of “Bruder Bones”. Eph Horn (1823-77) was an early blackface minstrel star; he joined the Virginia Serenaders in 1837 and
later visited California with the original E.P. Christy Minstrels. He was so popular that when he traveled to England in 1865 he was besieged with offers of star engagements. S.A. Wells and T.F. Briggs had also been members of Christy Minstrels. This is a superb company and follows the usual three-part division for a minstrel show, beginning with the full company in the “walk around” followed by the variety or olio section, and finally part three, the afterpiece or finale.

- **Cool (Colin) Burgess Minstrels and Rollin Howard’s Opera Bouffe Company, April 16, 1869, Providence City Hall.** Although 18 years later than “a”, the structure of his performance is also a tripartite, concluding, as minstrel shows often did, with a one-act skit. Canadian-born Cool Burgess (1840-1905) was a famous performer and manager; his major position was as Bruder Bones. His best-known routine was “Nicodemus Johnson,” featured in this bill. His last regular year as a performer was 1890, by which time he had moved into vaudeville. Rollin Howard (d. 1879) was a famous wench (prima donna) impersonator and an accomplished musician (arranger and composer). The first published “cakewalk” was Howard’s 1871 hit “Good Enough”. This bill also features a wood-cut print - Burgess as a civilian (center) and on his right in the guise of “Bruder Bones” and on the left most likely Nicodemus Johnson

**PANTOMIME: British and American:**
George L. Fox - Joseph Grimaldi - The Ravels and Others

The term “pantomime” has undergone drastic changes over the years. In ancient Rome it referred to a performance that consisted of representation by means of rhythmical gesture alone; it was a serious art form. Ultimately, pantomime had seven meanings or uses:

- Roman pantomime, as above.
- 18\textsuperscript{th} century ballets with subjects from classical mythology (ballets-pantomimes); seen in France and England (thinking they were recreating ancient pantomime).
- A Christmas entertainment (though not limited to Christmas!) seen throughout the British empire; based originally on comic dances of Arlequin (who becomes Harlequin) at Parisian fairs. The most famous artist in pantomime was Joseph Grimaldi, known as “Clown.” **Christmas or British panto is the most enduring of all forms, still popular today.** Its current form (which has a complicated history) evolved during the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Today it is a traditional show, based on a fairy tale, with music, dialogue, standard characters (the Dame—played by a man; the Principal boy—played by a female; and usually a pantomime animal—see sample playbills on display).
- Wordless Pierrot plays.
- Melodrama presented in dumbshow. These began to appear in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century as a result of monopolies in both England and France which forbade spoken dialogue except at sanctioned, royal theatres (in England, “patent houses”). Unlicensed theatres presented wordless spectacles, displays of pageantry, which developed into tales of adventure with songs, recitatives, and notice-boards or scrolls to explain the plot in between battles or single combat. Their popularity led the sanctioned houses in London (Drury Lane and Covent Garden) to engage special pantomime companies to act “afterpieces” in imitation
of their humble rivals: they often chose the terms “ballet d’action” or “serious pantomime” to give their version more class and sophistication. The form continued into the early 19th century, even though some scenes were given with dialogue and some “in pantomime.” Even brief wordless versions of famous melodramas were highly popular in the early British music halls at a time when dramatic sketches with dialogue were still forbidden; pantomime became the last relic of the stage monopoly.

- Acrobatic-cum-scenic spectacles; a mix of Christmas panto and the wordless Pierrot plays. Represented, especially in the U.S. in the 1860s to the 90s, by traveling troupes such as the Ravels or Hanlon-Lees that excited astonishment with their nightmare spectacles featuring amazing acrobatics and pantomime. George L. Fox, though a true original, can be placed in this category.

- The word is also used to describe what is seen in acting or dancing, applied to scenes or passages in plays when ideas are silently conveyed.

PANTOMIME:
George L. Fox as Clown in the American Pantomime

*Humpty Dumpty*

**Items on exhibit:**

- **Carte de visite** of the Sarony’s photos used in the poster on display.
- **Program** for 1001st performance of *Humpty Dumpty*, June 11, 1872, Olympic Theatre (cover the original; interior and back page photocopied for exhibit).
- **Large format program**, week of May 24, 1873. Includes useful synopsis of scenery, incidents, etc.
- **Advertising card** for Tony Denier’s version of *Humpty Dumpty*. Denier, one of the more prominent Fox imitators, toured for decades in the part. In 1871 he played Fox’s role with C.K. Fox in the cast at NY’s Wood’s Museum and Metropolitan Theatre. He died in 1917 penniless.

**On the Wall:**

**Poster of Fox and a composite of various expressions by his alter ego, Humpty Dumpty (Clown).** A lithograph by Rothengutter, based on photographs by Napoleon Sarony, c. 1869.

Between 1846 and the late 1870s (According to Fox’s biographer, Laurence Senelick, he was committed to an asylum after recurring fits of insanity) Fox appeared frequently in Providence, most often at the Opera House. The place and dates (but no year) have been added to this stock poster. The year was likely sometime between 1870 and 1875.

Fox (1825-77) was an American comedian who also managed. Between 1862 and 1867 he staged pantomimes at the Old Bowery Theatre in NYC, with himself as Clown and his brother C.K. Fox as Pantaloon. With his unique expressive face and body and his expressive drollery, Fox created a purely American brand of pantomime, culminating in 1868 with the enormously popular *HUMPTY DUMPTY* at the Olympic Theatre, which ran for more than 1,200 performances. Fox was influenced by the mime family the Ravels (see playbills elsewhere in the exhibit), yet Fox, with
his Americanization of locales and his violent slapstick (unlike the Ravel’s acrobatics and grace), though widely imitated into the 1880s was never equaled. The British born Hanlon-Lees did revive interest in acrobatic comedy in the 1880s and 90s. After Fox the word pantomime (not always silent) became generic for any entertainment that mingled variety acts, ballets, and traditional harlequinade characters (Harlequin, Pantaloon, Clown, etc.). In time their popularity was largely superseded by that of the extravaganza and the quickly evolving musical comedy.

Large playbill/broadside for *Humpty Dumpty*, Sept. 30 & Oct. 1, 1873?; place not given but possibly Albany or Rochester (bill printed in Boston). Corinthian Hall was a common name for large public performance spaces in U.S. cities in the 19th century.

Red and white lithographic poster for *The Ravel New Humpty Dumpty* with James R. Adams (1856-1915), British-born clown who came to the U.S. in 1870. Printed by Allen Print, Beverly, Mass. One of numerous attempts to resurrect interest in Fox’s creation. No date but likely late 19th century.

**PANTOMIME: Other than Fox. . . .**

Fox, though the most esteemed of 19th century American pantomime artists (and unlike others, American born), was not the only member of a famous troupe of pantomime artist (and in the case of others of this ilk, acrobats, mimes and dancers) to appear prominently on the American stage.

**The Ravels (five prominent family members)** were both contemporaries of Fox and also a strong influence on him. Originally from France, they first appeared in the U.S. in the mid 1830s and beginning in 1842 became fixtures at Niblo’s Garden (off and on until 1860). Even after the family members retired from the stage other troupes “borrowed” the Ravel name, or, in the case of the Martinetti family (see bill in exhibit), combined their name with the Ravels.

Toward the end of the Ravels time in America the British troupe, the Hanlon Brothers (six of them), were first seen in America and, by the 1880s had become the leaders in the field, producing a series of spectacular pantomimes: *Fantasma* (1884) and *Superba* (1890). *Le Voyage en Suisse* (1879), a farce comedy loaded with mechanical stunts, played Paris, London, and New York. Somewhat related to the lavish work of the Hanlons were the productions undertaken by the Kiralfy family, a Jewish Hungarian family of five dancers and producers of lavish musical spectacles. They entered the American scene in 1869 and continued to offer their unique spectacles into the 1890s: *A Trip to the Moon* (1877), *Excelsior* (1883), *The Fall of Babylon* (1890), and *Columbus* (1892), among others. These popular amusements preceded later examples, such as those produced by the flamboyant showman Billy Rose during the 1920s and 1930s, and at World Fairs in 1939-40 (New York) and in 1940 (San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition).

- **Niblo’s Garden. Nov. 20, 1849:** Ravels in a comic pantomime, tightrope displays, and the ballet, *La Sylphinde*; advertised for the next night are the Christy’s Minstrels.
• Boston Theatre. Jan. 24, 1857. Wonderfully ornate bill, featuring the child rope walker “Young America” (four years of age) and members of the Marzetti family. Major attraction the comic pantomime Robert Macaire!

• Boston Theatre. Nov. 28, 1859. Another appearance in Magic Pills, a frequent favorite of the Ravels, with other attractions (notably, Marietta Zanfretta on the tight rope).

• Springfield (Ohio?) Opera House. Jan. 22, 1873. This is a late bill for the Ravels and, in fact, none appear on the bill. Rather it is the Martinetti family that fills out almost all roles in various attractions. Most prominent is the appearance of Paul Martinetti as Jocko, the Brazilian Ape in Jocko! Gabriel Ravel (d. 1882) was the most famous artist to essay the role of this capering ape, a role that required exceptional resilience and flexibility. Jocko, who has a tear-jerking death scene, drew more tears from the audience, according to one contemporary source, than Camille, Little Eva St. Clare, and Little Nell combined.

PANTOMIME:
Joseph Grimaldi (1778-1837) and British Pantomime

• Harlequin and Mother Goose; or, The Golden Egg. Laurie & Whittle, March 25, 1807.

• A hand-colored engraved “Notesheet” [i.e., intended for a calligrapher or child to write in the central blank space; in this copy the central space is filled with a mirror—the framed item was purchased in a gift shop in the 1970s]. With a panoramic scene at the top, eight small scenes border the two sides with a “prospect” at the foot, each with a title relating to a scene in the pantomime. A scarce and much valued print.

• Accompanying the print is a playbill/broadside for a production of the pantomime at London’s Covent Garden for April 13, 1807 (two weeks after the publication of the “Notesheet”), and featuring the actor/clown Joseph Grimaldi as ‘Squire Bugle (after the transformation, “Clown”). The premiere production was at Sadler’s Wells on Boxing Day 1806 and ran for 111 performances, an amazing record for the early 19th century. The CG performance is its 71st. Grimald’s performance in this production changed forever the part of Clown in all pantomimes during that century. And hence forward ALL clowns have been called Joeys after Grimaldi. His father and son were also Clowns but with far less success and renown. Joe had an unremarkable singing voice but audiences still loved his songs (e.g., “An Oyster Crossed in Love” or “Hot Codlins,” the latter sung by Joe in many pantomimes). As actor, acrobat, dancer and singer he was the most popular entertainer of the day. Although he did outlandish things on stage, in his hands they seemed extravagantly natural; he was also a master at pathos. He retired in 1823, ill and prematurely old.

Note that two scenes on the right in the “Notesheet” are set at the entrance and in the interior of Vauxhall Garden, the famous pleasure garden displayed elsewhere in this exhibit. Those scenes were painted by the scene painter Whitmore, who also helped paint the Covent Garden scenery (along with Hollogan, Phillips, Hodgings, and Grieve).

Grimaldi has been the subject of several biographies, including a famous memoir by
Charles Dickens. The most recent biography is Andrew McConnell Stott’s *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi: Laughter, Madness and the Story of Britain’s Greatest Comedian* (2009); it recently won the Freedley Theatre Book Award.


- **Original watercolor by British artist William Spry.** Though undated, this was likely painted c. 1840. It depicts the character of Clown and Harlequin on stage. Likely not a portrait of Grimaldi (who died in 1837), it does provide a typical pose, costume, and makeup for the pantomime Clown.

- **Assortment of pantomime playbills:** the two framed bills (1818 and 1825) feature as Clown Joe Grimaldi in *Harlequin Gulliver; or, the Flying Island* and his son, J.S. Grimaldi, in *Harlequin and the Dragon of Wanty; More, of More Hall.*

The unframed bills range in date from 1796 (Drury Lane) to 1830 (Covent Garden). They illustrate the increasing status and centrality of pantomime in London (and throughout the UK).

**On the Wall:**

**Hand-colored print of Grimaldi (Clown) and Richard Norman (Pantoloon) in *Harlequin and the Red Dwarf; or, The Adamant Rock.*** Text by Charles Farley. Scene is a satire of the Epping Hunt in which a llama was chased around the stage by a motley group of huntsmen on a bizarre array of steeds (including Clown and Pantaloon, seen here). Opened at Covent Garden, Dec. 26, 1812.

**Two theatrical streamers for pantomime, 1858 and 1882.** Though much later than most documents in the exhibit, these two quite extraordinary bills/streamers provide a great sense of the magnitude of the pantomime during the second half of the 19th century. The first is for the Theatre Royal, Birmingham: *The Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood; Harlequin Boy Blue & The Fairy of Happy Land.* Note the amount of detailed production information supplied on this ephemeral streamer. The second item is for the Theatre Royal and Opera House, Brighton, 1882. The pantomime is the ever-popular *Dick Whittington and His Cat; or, Harlequin the Pretty Alice.* A wood-block illustration of Whittington and his cat is prominent. This panto is quite typical of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Note that Whittington (the principal boy) is played by the actress Julia Warden, and Idle Jack by music-hall star G.H. Chirgwin. The panto’s cast is composed of Demons, Fairies, and Mortals. In the course of the performance there are a number of variety acts: trick bicyclists, acrobatics by the Lauraine midgets, the Drury Lane clown W. Simpson (a latter-day Clown), a so-called aesthetic ballet (“the Limp Maidens”), and Chirgwin (also a star of the minstrel stage) as “the White-Eyed Musical Kaffir” (his signature make-up included a white diamond over his right eye).

**TONY PASTOR: “The Father of Vaudeville”**
Pastor (1837-1908) was a variety performer and manager who began his career in 1846 as an infant prodigy at Barnum’s American Museum. He later traveled as a circus clown, minstrel, and ballad singer. His repertory included 1,500 songs, which he continued to perform throughout his career. His entrepreneurial career began at the American Theatre at 444 Broadway in 1861. This was a rather rowdy variety house and Pastor longed to attract a respectable audience, so he moved to the Volksgarten at 201 Bowery in 1865, renaming it the Opera House and advertising it as “The Great Family Resort” (with women and children invited to special matinees). This venue had little luck attracting the audience Pastor desires, so he moved his clean bill of variety to 585 Broadway in 1875; then in 1881 to 14th St. (between 3rd Ave. and Irving Place). Finally his attempt at promoting clean vaudeville to a family audience succeeded, paving the way for the vaudeville empire of B. F. Keith and Edward F. Albee, pioneers in vaudeville (including vaudeville theatres in Providence and Boston) and ultimately controllers of the most extensive vaudeville theatre chain in the U.S.

Pastor had a unique persona: he was large man with a waxed moustache (seen in the images on display), a jaunty step and a strong singing and speaking voice. A devout Catholic, Pastor kept a shrine backstage, paid low salaries, and lost most of his stars to more progressive managers.

- **Lillian Russell (1861-1922) cabinet photographs, 1890s.** Russell, singer and actress, was a Pastor favorite, billed as “The English Ballad Singer” in 1880. She was also a star with Weber and Fields’s celebrated troupes (1899-1904). Russell was renown for her physical and vocal charms.

- **Program for Pastor’s 14th Street Theatre, Week of Dec. 21 and Dec. 28, 1891.** This bill included Maggie Cline and singer Lydia Yeamans. Cline (1857-1934), known as “The Bowery Brunhilde,” was especially popular in the 1890s.

**On the Wall:**

**Poster of Pastor “America’s Own Comic Vocalist” and poster of Pastor and M.B. Leavitt.** Leavitt (1843-1935) was a Polish-born manager and impresario, and, like Pastor, spent part of his career as a black-face minstrel (1850s). He is credited with having created the first fairly reputable early burlesque show (see Madame Rentz’s poster under the minstrel show). Leavitt’s version of burlesque, unlike earlier burlesque (as parody and satire), had greater suggestiveness and lusty humor. He retired in 1912 and published that year a lengthy and chatty memoir. (Poster Collection, Special Collections, The John Hay Library. Acquired through the generosity of C. Lee Jenner)

**Playbill, April 21, [c. 1876], with portrait of Pastor.** This is a bill for an annual tour (these began in the 1870s after his move to 585 Broadway). Location unclear (Mechanics Hall, Salem?). Pastor continued to tour almost every spring and fall until the end of his career (end of his annual excursions came in 1898).
VAUDEVILLE

Vaudeville, as it developed, lasted until c. 1932 (the end of NY’s The Palace as the pinnacle of vaudeville). Its history is long and complex. Its period of greatest growth was before 1925, although by 1890 it was America’s dominant form of entertainment. Circuits of vaudeville houses covered the U.S. and Canada, each circuit controlled by a specific management (like Keith-Albee). Since this exhibit focuses on earlier forms, only a few items on vaudeville at its height are included.

Vaudeville inspired enormous interest in parlor amusements and amateur performance, ranging from ventriloquism to conjuring and joke telling. Sheet music flourished, as did guides/handbooks. Hundreds of examples of all these can be found in Brown’s Smith Collection of Conjuring and Magicana, the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays, and the Sheet Music Collection.

A few samples from the Wilmeth Collection can be seen here. These date from the 1880s and 90s into the 1900s.

“JOHN BULL” and THE OPERA

The status of opera in England, especially the Italian variety, had a mixed history during the 18th and 19th centuries. Italian opera as a whole did not establish itself as firmly in England as it did in France and Germany. Henry Purcell (1659-95) and George F. Handel (1685-1759), had some luck with their Italianate operas on the English stage. Yet the cultivation of foreign opera by the aristocracy became both a fact and an object of satire, lasting until the early years of the 20th. Our British cousins were of two minds: many of the better healed believed that only foreign musicians were of any worth and that Italian was the only language suitable for opera. English singers thus assumed foreign names and non-Italian operas retooled with Italian names were popular. On the other hand, a large number of the population were drawn to satires of opera, such as John Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera (1728), and to caricatures satirizing the Italian opera rage. Some English were set against any musical form that was not native and cast their lot with native-born musical artists. Somewhat ironically, only the comic works of Gilbert and Sullivan (beginning in 1877) achieved both immediate and lasting success.

Two caricatures illustrative of the two attitudes described above by two of England’s greatest artistic satirists: James Gillray (1757-1815) and Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827). Gillray was a printmaker and caricaturist who specialized in political and social satire. The later included music and the theatre. Rowlandson was also a caricaturist and a prolific illustrator. Much of his work dealt with sexuality and nudity, though the theatre was a frequent subject as well (examples are seen throughout this exhibit)

abounded that the duke paid Billington for private appearances at his estate, called Bulstrode. Gillray portrays Billington as a stout homely woman and the older duke as a thin older gentleman, highlighting the substantial age difference between the two. They sit side by side on a settee—she sings to him, he listens ecstatically (with clasped hands, his head turned to gaze upon Billington with amorous intensity). She holds her music, but looks alluringly at the Duke. Notes of her song ascend until lost in the upper part of the design.

Billington, born in London, was the daughter of a German musician; her mother was a popular vocalist; her brother a talented violinist. A child prodigy, in 1783 she married James Billington, a double-bass player (d. 1794). She went to Italy in 1794 (her husband died during the tour), returning to England in 1801, which caused a sensation. Portland was a former prime minister and Home Secretary when Billington gave her private concert at Portland’s estate.

Rowlandson, “John Bull at the Opera.” Hand-colored print. Originally published Oct. 2, 1805; this copy dated Oct. 2, 1811. Rowlandson, in the tradition of his illustrious predecessor Wm. Hogarth, was a confirmed John Bull (despite strong familiarity with the Continent) as was Hogarth and similarly ridiculed the tastes of the fashionable public who patronized and petted exotic artists to the neglect of native talent. The former, often obscure aliens, were paid exceedingly well, while native talents were left to struggle without acknowledgement of their abilities. Rowlandson, as he does here, trades on the national spirit and holds up the foreign singer to contempt and ridicule. The singer is seen with a face suggestive of a good-looking youth, the leading figure in the eccentric humors of an Italian Family (1792), a portrait likely recognizable at the time. The English patrons (the John Bulls) do not appear much at home at the Italian Opera (which was the case with many who felt obligated to attend): the spectators are divided between gigglers and gapers. The young imported performer likely affords his audience little unequivocal enjoyment (it is more likely that they would prefer native performers in burlettas or comic operas).

ADELPHI THEATRE and THE BURLETTA

Playbill/Broadside, covering the period Dec. 16-23, 1822.

London’s Adelphi Theatre first opened on The Strand in 1806 (then called the Sans Pareil); its name was changed to the Adelphi in 1819. In 1821 it attracted sudden attention with the opening and lengthy run (the first to exceed 100 performances) of W.T. Moncrieff’s Tom and Jerry, a zestful adaptation of Pierce Egan’s documentary novel Life in London, or Days and Nights of Jerry Hawthorne and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom. It held the stage at the Adelphi during much of 1821-23. In due course, the Adelphi became the home of, first, aquatic drama, and then of well-staged strong melodramas. The building was rebuilt twice—in 1901 and in 1930. The playhouse, which is still an active venue, was, during period of control by the two patent houses, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, one of the more successful of the so-called “minor houses,” those theatre forced to specialize in novelties that would not be categorized as “regular,” legitimate (such as revivals of Shakespeare) or spoken drama.

One of the most successful “new” forms was the burletta, which, ironically, was first seen on a patent theatre stage in 1764. By the 1780s it became a staple of the minor theatres, including the
Adelphi and especially the Olympic Theatre, drawing large audiences who applauded lively musical treatments of subjects that, as historian Phyllis Dircks notes, “ranged from the antics of Tom Thumb and Dick Whittington to the glories of the British navy.” By the time of Tom and Jerry, the term burletta came to be a catch-all covering anything the minor theatre chose to produce (a long distance from what was originally an exotic miniature operatic piece), often with little or no music but still able to skirt the law. In reality, the British use of this term became so debased that a clear definition of the 19th century form is almost impossible. The Licensing Act of 1737—the cause of this and other popular inventions (including burlesque, melodrama, and the equestrian drama)—was repealed in 1843 and the term quickly declined in usage.

This wonderful playbill, which terms Tom and Jerry a “celebrated Out and Out Classic, Comic, Operatic, Didactic, Moralistic, Aristophanic, Localic, Analytic, Tersichoric, Panoramic, Camera Obscuratic, Extravaganza BURLETTA of FUN, FROLIC, FASHION, and FLASH, in Three Acts...”. The bill is full of information on this production (and the afterpieces to follow), including a detailed outline of the progression of the 21 scenes in the three acts and brief descriptions of the scenery. The bill also alludes to plates that were drawn by I.R.(Robert) and George Cruikshank, whose work is represented throughout this exhibit. These ultimately were used to illustrate Egan’s novel in its many editions.

“BRING ON THE GIRLS”

The title of P.G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton’s coauthored autobiography (recounting their experiences as creators of musicals in the teens through the 1930s) is appropriate in the context of pioneer efforts in popular amusements in the U.S. and the U.K., for women were integral and significant players in the creation of early forms that were to evolve into musical comedy, burlesque, music hall, and vaudeville. Furthermore, they were given prominent roles in numerous early forms and venues, from booth theatres on fairgrounds to pleasure gardens, and as performers in dime museums, equestrian drama, and pantomime (as seen elsewhere in this exhibit). Space limits our coverage, but in this section can be seen representative items that illustrate the role of women (from the Wilmeth Collection, unless otherwise indicated) in popular forms. We focus on three: Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes, Madame Rentz’s Female Minstrels, and the production of The Black Crook.

• Poster of Lydia Thompson. The Springer Litho Co., NY (C. Lee Jenner Collection, Brown). Thompson (1836-1908) was a British-born actress/dancer who by the 1850s was appearing in British burlesques and pantomimes. The Thompson variety of burlesques were actually travesties or parodies of existing forms or more legitimate stage vehicles (for example, she was famous for performing a parody of a famous and extraordinary Spanish dancer [Perea Nina]). By the 1860s she was an established comedienne and dancer in London, the Provinces and in Europe (especially Germany). In 1868 she brought her troupe of “British Blondes” to New York and her production of Ixion; or, The Man at the Wheel (considered by some as the first burlesque in more than one act) combined the older form of burlesque with pulchritude in tights to create, as Senelick has noted, the “leg show.” Along with The Black Crook, a musical extravaganza seen in NYC in 1866 (and for years thereafter), Thompson helped to create

- **Photo of Thompson** as Robinson Crusoe in the burlesque of that name, 1877.

- **Playbill** from the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Oct. 25, 1871 (Thompson as Sinbad the Sailor).

- Also on exhibit is an example of sheet music for *The Black Crook* waltzes (1867): note the star Bonfanti at center in costume. (Special Collections, the John Hay Library, Brown University)

**On the Wall:**

**Poster for Madame Rentz’s Female Minstrels. N. Defries & Co. Litho. London, n.d.** This was the first name of what became the first American burlesque show; created by entrepreneur Michael B. Leavitt in 1870, he first feminized the traditional minstrel show (under the title of the poster). The name was suggested by a European circus; he then added variety acts (the traditional olio of the minstrel show) and, as a third act, a musicalized travesty or afterpiece, adapting the tripartite minstrel formal. One of the first stars, Mabel Santley, helped establish the model for most reputable burlesques of the 1880s and ’90s, and under her influence it became known as Rentz-Santley Novelty and Burlesque Company (see undated handbill on display). See also the poster of Leavitt and vaudeville pioneer Tony Pastor in the section on “Vaudeville Pioneers.” (Special Collections, The John Hay Library, Brown University. Acquiried through the generosity of C. Lee Jenner).

**THE PREMATURE PASSING OF FRED LESLIE – and the BIRTH OF MODERN MUSICAL THEATRE!!!**

Musical theatre, in the modern sense of the term, could well be included in our exhibit, yet for physical and practical reasons it is not, at least not in a focused way. Throughout the exhibit there are remnants of what became ingredients of 20th century musicals, from minstrelsy to THE BLACK CROOK and early vaudeville. The John Hay mounted an exhibit on the musical theatre some six years ago and images can be found on the Brown Library website.

The temptation to include the one unique and rather strange item(s) related to the musical, shown here (and from the guest curator’s collection), however, could not be ignored. Certainly the cast of characters involved in this bizarre episode belong somewhat indirectly to the musical’s history.

First, there is a cabinet photo, signed, of one Frederick Hobson Leslie (1855-1892), better known as Fred Leslie, arguably the greatest star of early British musical comedy. His stage debut was in 1878, but it was his first appearance at the Gaiety Theatre in 1885 that pointed the direction for his brief future. The Gaiety was home of comic burlesque, a form of early musical comedy that parodied established characters or stories: Leslie was successful early in his Gaiety
career in a burlesque of *Rip Van Winkle*. Later he toured extensively with his leading lady Nellie Farren (1848-1904) (including *Monte Cristo, Jr.*, the program seen here), including trips to the U.S. and to Australia. Leslie and Farren were the pillars of Gaiety Theatre burlesque and true pioneers in the development of early musical comedy (Leslie also wrote a number of burlesques).

Second related item is the Gaiety Theatre program for *Monte Cristo, Jr.* Leslie does not play Edmond Dantes, afterwards the Count of Monte Cristo, but rather that is Nellie’s part. Leslie is Noirtier, “conspirator & criminal investigator.” As the program indicates, the lessee and manager of the Gaiety was George Edwardes (1852-1915), Irish-born manager whose first important job was managing London’s newly opened Savoy Theatre in 1881. There he supervised the staging of three early Gilbert and Sullivan operas. In 1885 he moved to the Gaiety, and Leslie was his first hire (as leading comedian). As famous as Leslie were the Gaiety Girls, Edwardes’ musical chorus line, chosen as much for their legs and looks as their singing and dancing ability. Later Edwardes would manage other important London theatres.

And finally, the third item is a letter from Leslie to a Philadelphia newspaper man named Harry (H.L.) Taggart. And this is the heart of the story.

On August 14, 1889, an obit for Fred Leslie appeared in the *New York Times*, and likely elsewhere, a most complimentary piece (somewhat critical of the material that starred Leslie). But Leslie “was constantly amusing in spite of his text.” Please note that Leslie’s letter is dated December 10, 1889, four months after his death!

The letter explains: “I have just found time to answer your kind letter so full of congratulations on my ‘second nativity’ and to thank you for it and the accompanying ‘obits’.” He continues: “The experience of ‘living a dead man’ had one charm, it enabled me to discover how really large hearted my American Friends (capital F) were over & above the very large size I gave them credit for. It is a great country and the hearts of its people are commensurate with its dimensions.”

The mystery for this great error remains; the curator has yet to discover an explanation for the premature announcement of Leslie’s passing. However, the really sad and even tragic part of this story is its end. Leslie certainly was fine in August 1889, yet in December, only three years later, this versatile, agile, superb mimic, talented baritone, and good dancer, died suddenly of typhoid fever in London at the age of 38. Premature indeed!
Some Suggested Sources on Early American and British Popular Amusements:
compiled by D. Wilmeth


