

DOUBTS AS TO HISTORY

What was most curious to me, however, was the doubt whether the Belasco could be rebuilt into a first-rate theater—whether in fact it had ever been one. There was a general impression that the theater, built in 1895, became an oddity, a durable relic, in 1896, or shortly thereafter. When I remembered Barrymore as Hamlet in the Belasco in the early 1920's, it was suggested that I was thinking of the Poli's.

I am no antiquarian, but I was certain that I recalled scores if not hundreds of shows I had seen at the Belasco in my youth. Opera, Broadway shows, and even a resident company dedicated to weekly productions of musical comedy. Three or four of the yellowest clippings in a fat file on the theater here at the Star extended my memory backward two-decades. Whatever the Belasco may not have, it has a history.

The Lafayette Square Opera House opened on September 30, 1895, with a production of the opera "La Tzigane," written by Reginald de Koven for Lillian Russell. The show was warmly received and the theater greatly admired, though the Star critic notes that Miss Russell's first solo "is not so satisfying as it should be." The cant of criticism is not new.

A HOST OF THE GREAT

Francesca Lawson, who was at last week's meeting, remarked that she had sung Micaela in "Carmen" at the Belasco, and that she had heard Tetrizzini there. The Star files confirm her memory—not only Tetrizzini, but Caruso. Schumann-Heink, Jenny Lind, and Amato sang there. It was the Washington home of the Metropolitan Opera, the "swankiest place in all Washington," according to John J. Daly, in an article in the Star published in 1940. Helen Hayes and Ruth Chatterton both made their debuts at the Belasco. Ina Claire was often there; also David Warfield, Mae West, Weber and Fields, Walter Hampden, De Wolfe Hopper, John Drew, Maude Adams, Edna Wallace Hopper (from whom all proper young boys of my generation hoped we could learn about sex—a misconception curiously based on the fact that her shows were advertised "for women only"), Will Rogers, Al Jolson, and probably many others.

Ziegfeld first saw Will Rogers at the Belasco, and signed him immediately in his dressing room for the Follies. A story about Rogers of that time shows that all his jokes were not wildly funny and also that Eisenhower is not the first to find that many Americans believe a President on a golf course to be somehow incongruous with proper decorum.

WILL ROGERS VERSUS HARDING

"Will Rogers that week," recounts the old Star clipping, "encountered the first and only objection to his humor, which was registered from the White House. Among his drolleries was this: 'The American public will never get much accomplished until they get a President who gets seasick and who can't play golf.' * * *

"A Secret Service man called at the Belasco and conveyed word that the White House would appreciate it if Mr. Rogers would eliminate the joke. As it was an important part of his routine and got appreciative audience response, Rogers refused."

Several months later when Rogers was in town in another Ziegfeld show he tried to get an invitation to a White House reception and "was politely informed none was available." Whereupon, Rogers added a few lines not in the script to his next performance. "All my life I have been making humorous observations and comments about the great and the near-great. Invariably, they have accepted it in a spirit of fun and with an appreciation that no malice was intended. I regret that I have offended President Harding, but I can also say he is the first prominent man to publicly object to my stage liberties. I am sorry he can't take a joke."

Later in his career, I suspect, Rogers would either have left it out or tightened it up, but nevertheless the incident is perhaps an indication that our Presidents, among whom Harding, Wilson, Coolidge, and Hoover were fans of the Belasco, do not invariably find a theater at the front door of the White House an unmitigated blessing. I, for one, devoutly hope that future Presidents will have an opportunity to give the Belasco another chance.