

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

Shakespeare’s phrase denotes the comparison of life to a play, and it is often used to suggest that people are like actors, playing different roles in different situations. The number of what could be called amateur actors was very prevalent in communities in this area, beginning in the late 1880s. Dramatic Clubs were a part of schools, Granges and communities offering not only a means of entertainment but also a way for those participating to learn and practice public speaking and gain in self-confidence, the ability to work with others, take direction and, of course, have fun.

Our local Village Dramatic Club was formed in 1885, performing during the winter months at Union Hall (Elk Opera House) with a different play presented monthly. The plays ranged from drama to comedy, from one to four acts, and participants varied depending on the roles. Examples of some of their offerings were given in the MERCURY write-ups of 1890, beginning with two plays written by George Melville Baker who was a prolific Boston playwright during the 19th century, publishing over ninety plays. Following are the descriptions of those presented in January and February of that year:

“The people of the village and vicinity were treated to the opportunity of seeing the performance of the Richfield Springs Dramatic Association in which they presented, in a most admirable manner, that popular two-act drama ‘Among the Breakers’. That the cast of characters was an appropriate one was fully demonstrated by the pleasing manner in which the parts were acted. It is only once in a long time that our town is visited with even a professional company which could give better satisfaction than did the company of our village people who played in this performance.”

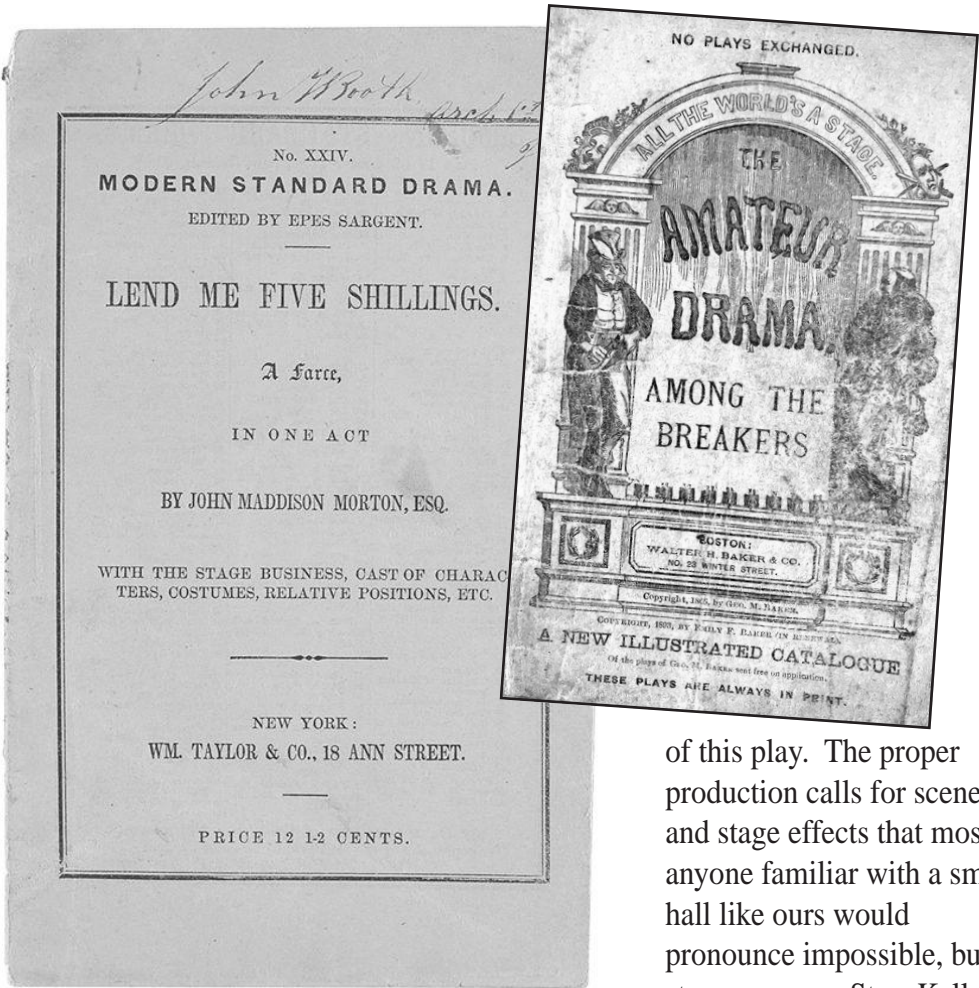
The premise of the play revolves around a Fairpoint lighthouse, its keeper and assistant keeper. The main location is the keeper’s house during a fierce storm with, of course, a murder and shipwrecked survivors to add interest.

“As David Murray, the lighthouse keeper, Mr. Star S. Keller did some very creditable acting. John McCaffrey was at his best in the character Larry Divine and had he been acting in the real character of life, he could not have appeared more natural. Hon. Bruce Hunger was represented by Mr. Henry Greenman with skill and pleasing effect. Clarence Hunter, his ward, was the part taken by Mr. George Hyde and it was well taken. Peter Paragraph, the newspaper reporter, was well acted by Dr. F. E. Easton. Soud, Hunter’s servant, could not have been better acted by Mr. H. E. Guiwits. His appearance was eagerly looked for by the audience and every act of his was greeted with the most enthusiastic applause. Miss Minnie Daze, Hunter’s niece,, was the part assigned to Mrs. J. D. Cary, and her conduct was well directed to suit the part she took. Miss Bess Starbright, cast up by the waves, was rightly assigned when it was given to Miss Agnes Sitts, who always plays with pleasing effect. Mother Carey, a reputed fortune teller, was done to perfection by Miss Gertrude Chamberlain. Biddy Bean, an Irish girl, could not have been better acted than it was by Mrs. P. E. Bush. It was the verdict of all that the entire performance was without fault. Music was furnished by the Waiontha orchestra.”

Included as part of the script for each play were directions and suggestions for costumes, properties, scene plots and stage directions. For example, to create the sound and visual effects needed for this production, it was suggested that thunder could be produced by shaking a large sheet of iron, holding it by the corner; lightning could be caused by blowing powdered rosin into the flame of a candle using a common ‘peashooter’. A rain box could be made by driving pegs of wood into the bottom of a box about 18” long, 6” wide and 6” high. Into the box throw a handful of dried peas, fasten the cover and copious showers can be produced by letting the peas slowly rattle along the box from end to end.

Added to the entertainment for the evening was a farce of one act entitled ‘Lend Me Five Shillings’ (written by John Maddison Morton). “In this performance, Mr. J. D. Cary distinguished himself as the society man who wanted five shilling very badly in order to make his plans go on as he desired. The farce is one of the most genuinely laughable plays in use by dramatists and its rendition was without the least sign of fault.”

The next play entitled ‘Past Redemption’, also by George M. Baker, was given in February for the benefit of the Waiontha Bicycle Club. “The members of the Dramatic Club are doing an immense amount of work for the production



of this play. The proper production calls for scenery and stage effects that most anyone familiar with a small hall like ours would pronounce impossible, but stage manager Starr Keller is

undertaking to give the village theatre goers a treat in scenic effect and promises that every scene will be novel. There are also a number of songs to be introduced in solos, quartettes, double quartettes and choruses that greatly add to the charm of the romantic story. Mr. Keller has placed the music in charge of Henry Greenman and the latter has induced some of our best musical talent to give their services.”

“Elaborate preparations were made for the four vignettes for the stage. The first was an interior barn scene arranged for a husking bee with stalls, old harness, loft, etc. The second set was in a country dooryard with rustic seats. The third scene represented a city barroom and was a faithful portrait of such place. The fourth and last set of the drama was set in a parlor in this area with artistic style displayed in the arrangement of handsome furniture, a profuse collection of pictures and a most realistic fireplace, while through the windows, trees could be seen covered with snow and the jingle of sleigh bells adding a novelty. There was no delay in scene changing and the curtain went up as soon as the orchestra had finished their selection. In casting the characters for this play, excellent good judgment was displayed, and the various artists took their respective parts with splendid effect and in the matter of costumes, no unusual amount of talent was displayed.”

“This play is set on a rural farm and follows the romantic entanglements of two suitors who get themselves involved with a young woman. Mr. Henry Greenman and Mrs. P. E. Bush characterized the aged farmer and his wife in a natural manner and with perfect make-up. To Starr Keller was assigned the most disagreeable character of the play, but he added laurels to an already high reputation. Mr. J. D. Cary took the part of the wild young son and his presentation of one afflicted with the trembles was so realistic that the audience was deeply moved. Dr. Easton was the country beau and George Hyde as the city coxcomb did a creditable piece of acting in trying to win the hand of the giddy Kittie, a character that was splendidly taken by Mrs. J. D. Cary. Dr. Jewell brought down the house with his typical presentation of a farmer. John McCalley was the famous Captain Bragg and his lordly ways and exploits in killing a rooster with a musket that was not loaded was a pleasing feature of the evening. Miss Agnes Sitts is always at home on the stage and her part as the wife of Harry Maynard was exceedingly well taken. Miss Chamberlain appeared at her best as Mrs. Charity Goodall and she was seconded an enthusiastic encore after her singing. But Guiwits - where was he? Why, he had the part of the farmhand and kept the audience in a roar all evening. I fact, the presentation throughout was a genuine success and nothing but praise is heard for the entire company.”

These were only two of the many productions presented by the Dramatic Club and their efforts were recognized by others as they were often asked to repeat their presentations in neighboring areas. Through their efforts, they not only provided entertainment for all who came to see the productions, but also raised funds to benefit many of the village’s organizations.