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Review of Opera Houses of the Midwest

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Opera Houses of the Midwest. Edited by Judith Zivanovic. Manhattan, Kansas: Mid-America Theatre Conference, 1988. Photographs, introduction, bibliographies. iii + 115 pp. \$8.95.

During the last third of the nineteenth century opera houses sprang up across the mid-western frontier in every town and village that had any pretense of becoming a city. Some were elegant structures of three to five stories, constructed with the hope of actually staging grand opera there; others were small theaters, often located on the second floor of a business establishment, with little chance of presenting anything grander than an occasional play; still others were simply community halls that from time to time served the function of a playhouse. All were multi-purposed facilities that became viewed as the social and cultural heart of a town and helped define its sense of community. While "opera house" proved a generic term, applied to a wide variety of architectural types, each served a common purpose—to take advantage of urban frontiersmen's need for camaraderie to enhance the cultural development of a populace whose lives were otherwise shaped mainly by home, church, and school and who had little time for reflective thinking.

Opera Houses of the Midwest catalogues these structures, focusing on four states: Iowa, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. Although many of the frontier theaters were destroyed by fire, turned into movie houses, or razed to make way for

"progress," the publication edited by Judith Zivanovic identifies the ones remaining. In Iowa alone more than three hundred opera houses still stand, and over half of Zivanovic's volume is devoted to describing them, even though an estimated twice that number have ceased to exist in the state. Nebraska constitutes the second longest section of Zivanovic's compilation, whereas for North Dakota only twenty-one buildings are listed. Many of South Dakota's frontier theaters were clustered in the Black Hills, where the gold strike occurred, but every community in the state of any size boasted a similar structure. Some of these opera houses were used almost exclusively for local talent shows, graduation exercises, lectures, town meetings, agricultural exhibits, literary guild meetings, and celebrations, but larger communities on the railroads regularly hosted touring dramatic companies and even occasional grand opera troupes.

Each section of Zivanovic's volume contains a brief introduction on the opera houses of that state, followed by a description of the buildings listed, arranged by county. Included are the address, the date built, the name of the builder, the size, a brief description, the extent of any remodeling, the current status and usage, and the present owner. In frequent cases information reported seems contradictory, some of it is based on speculation and hearsay, and there are a number of assumptions and uncertainties. Descriptions vary in length, and the data presented is far from uniform. Often the tone borders on antiquarianism, while much recent scholarship is ignored. Although its approach is dated, *Opera Houses of the Midwest* will serve as a useful bibliographic tool, valuable to the layman as well as the professional historian.

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