Town and Gown: Entertainment and Changing Culture

Michigras Parade
1954

PROCLAIMED A "SHRINE OF ENTERTAINMENT" WHEN IT OPENED IN 1928, THE MICHIGAN THEATER BOASTED AN ARMY OF UNIFORMED USHERS.

The 1954 Michigras parade, with elaborate student floats, passed the Michigan Theater on its way up Liberty Street. The parade and the theater were part of an entertainment tradition of "gown" and "town" coming together to shape Ann Arbor's cultural identity.

In the nineteenth century local acts and touring companies played in downtown ballrooms, churches, the courthouse, and Hangsterfer's Hall. Students, faculty, and townspeople contributed talent and enthusiastic audiences. In 1871 Ann Arbor's first real theater, Hill's Opera House with 2,000 seats, opened on Main Street. Local actors in "The Spy of Shiloh" packed the house. On campus that same year the cornerstone was laid for University Hall, with a 3,000-seat auditorium for concerts, graduations, and the town's largest events. Many celebrated guests appeared, including lecturers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Susan B. Anthony, and Mark Twain, actress Sarah Bernhardt, and dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. After 1913 audiences attended the new and larger Hill Auditorium.

The Michigan Theater opened in 1928, dedicated to "the faculty and students of the University of Michigan and the residents of Ann Arbor." A full orchestra and the Barton theater organ accompanied live shows and silent films. The following year, Broadway stars first performed in Lydia Mendelssohn Theatre in the UM's new Michigan League. The Ann Arbor Symphony, Civic Theater, and UM Gilbert and Sullivan Society continued the tradition of combining town and gown through the twentieth century.

CATERING TO THE DANCE CRAZE SPAWNED DURING PROHIBITION, THE RITZ DINE AND DANCE OPENED AT 209 STATE STREET IN 1930 FEATURING "MUSIC AND DANCING AT ALL HOURS." ONE COULD DANCE NEARBY AT THE HUT, THE DEN, DRAKE'S SANDWICH SHOP, AND GRANGER'S DANCING ACADEMY.

"MICHIGENDA," MICHIGAN UNION OPERA'S FIRST PRODUCTION, WAS STAGED AT THE WHITNEY THEATER, FORMERLY HILL'S OPERA HOUSE, IN 1908.

IN 1859 LES SANS SOUCI (BELOW), WHICH ALSO CALLED ITSELF THE UNIVERSITY BAND, WAS ONE OF SEVERAL EARLY MUSICAL GROUPS ORGANIZED BY STUDENTS. FREDERICK ARN (FAR LEFT) WAS KILLED THREE YEARS LATER AT THE BATTLE OF SHILOH IN THE CIVIL WAR.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BENTLEY HISTORICAL LIBRARY