

## When the Gallery of the Boyd Theater Held Real "Gods"



Cecil F. Williams



Geo. A. Stover

Ralph W. Howard



Clyde Rock

By A. M. EASTERLING.



Morris Wallerstedt



Art Williams



L. E. Higgins



Roy C. Miner



Austin Braun

**B**ACK in the halcyon days when Nat Goodwin was only a slightly married man, and when the Gilbert and Sullivan operas were still reaping a harvest, a band of young "highbrows" in Omaha organized what for ten years was known as the Organized Gallery Gods. There were about thirty in the band. Their purpose was to redeem the gallery from its reputation of being infested with "lowbrows"—and incidentally, of course, to secure front-row gallery accommodations when high-class shows came to the old Boyd theater.

"We impressed the management by our numbers," said L. Earl Higgins, manager of a local cigar store, who was a charter member of the organization. "And they could always depend on us being there the first night. Sometimes we had to fight for the front seats, but we always won—with one deplorable exception—and we cleaned up the rowdiness of the gallery and taught the people that Henry Irving was about right when he said he always played to the gallery, knowing he would be a success if he pleased them."

Nat Goodwin was one actor who was not favorably impressed by the Gallery Gods. Those worthy highbrows were hovering in line, with their "steadies" well in the front, on Nat's opening night. The great actor clattered up in a cab, the auto being one of the things then unknown. The Gallery Gods recognized him, and as had been previously decided, they called out and notified him: he would be expected to make a speech. Nat looked up from under a rakishly tilted cap, viewed the young bucks rather scornfully and replied: "Speech? Lak hell!"

When the actor's state of mind became known later in the gallery—known to all the "gods" and their friends, acquaintances and associates—there was conceived a devilish plan. At the end of the second act the clamor for a speech began. Nat came forward and bowed gracefully. At the second curtain call he was yet more grateful, and his benignant face was wreathed in smiles; at the third call he was fairly beaming; at the fourth his smile began to fade; at the next his smile became fixed; finally he looked decidedly bored and at last got rather vulgarly angry. But the clapping continued and the cry of "speech" went right on during the entire intermission. But Nat won. He remained speechless.

Many of the Gallery Gods "suped." If mobs, soldiers or simple villagers were required, the manager gave the gods preference. And so when the all-star cast of "The Two Orphans" played, a larger number took supper parties. In the first act of "The Two Orphans" the scene shows the river Seine flowing placidly in the background. The crowd of supes were dispersing after their stunt when Verner Fensch, now in the Philippines with the Pacific Commercial company, walked right out on the water and was unaware of the fact until a frantic stage manager grasped him by the collar and demanded to know if he "thought he could walk on water."

Tom O'Connor, present police court clerk of Omaha, was a regular "god," but he ceased to "sup" after he had supported Richard Mansfield. The famous penchant for wrath by the mighty Mansfield was unknown to the accommodating Tom, but a cruel fate opened his eyes. During one of Mansfield's most "touchy" scenes, the awkward O'Connor ran across the actor's path, bumped into him and spoiled the high solemnity of the occasion. Mansfield made it a point of personal privilege to tell the young buck what he thought of him, and the Gallery Gods say the language

was quite unprintable, although most picturesque. "Never darken these doors again, sir," Mansfield shouted, and thenceforth O'Connor heeded that warning, and his stage career concluded ignominiously.

The big mob scene in "The Pit" called for 100 supes and the Gallery Gods were there in force. Wilton Lackaye had a strong scene, the same being a rough-and-tumble fight, which to the audience was one terrific struggle, ending with awful carnage. George Stover, a Gallery God, now claimant for the Burlington railroad, was fighting in the front of the mob when he met the wild-eyed Lackaye. Yells of "Soak him," "Kill him," "Smash him," were sounding on every side, and Lackaye made the fight most real. He planted Stover between the eyes, and the maddened Stover was rushing to retaliate, when fellow-supers elbowed him out of Lackaye's path.

It was in "The County Chairman" that the Gallery Gods won a reputation as scappers. In the mob scene in that play such a rough house was started by two members who "got sore" because they were treated with too little consideration, that the stage manager had to ring down the curtain. The fight was finished with much noise, while the audience waited for the play to proceed.

Sometimes the best-laid plans of the Gallery Gods would be disrupted and then followed nerve-racking procedure. When the musical comedy "Woodland" played, the Gallery Gods, who had kept their men in line all day in order to buy first seats and get in the front row were confronted with an equal number of united students from Creighton college, also determined to secure first row. Earl Schaeffer, now dead; Reed Hanchett, now a traveling salesman; Clarence Bonce, now of the treasurer's department of the Union Pacific; Clyde Rock, now manager for the Western Buyers' association, and Higgins held a conference, but it was one-legged Tony Constanzo who had the bright idea. Tony hobbled up the stairs, talked turkey to the ticketman, and just before the sale of tickets started, being known to the ticket man, got by, stretched his crutches across as many seats as he could in the front row and held the fort until his gang came, bringing his ticket and relief.

On another occasion, when Blanche Walsh was playing in "Resurrection," the "gods" had but one man at the head of the line when the management passed around word that but one ticket would be



sold to a person. It had been the custom for one of the gang to purchase tickets for all. As before, one man was sent up to hold the seats. He held them, but a lively row was raging when the rest of the "gods" arrived and settled it by taking possession of the seats he had held by force.

When "Ben Hur" came, the waiting crowds in the gallery line extended for several blocks. The jam on the stairs leading into the gallery became uncontrollable and the doors were broken down, and the Gallery Gods were given permission to "use their flats," which they did to good advantage. The crowd was attempting to break into the gallery without paying, because the congestion was so great about the ticket window. During this disturbance Jack Ryan, the only one of the Gallery Gods who became an honest-to-goodness actor, was arrested, but the "gods" secured his release, in time for the first curtain.

Questionable strategy had to be employed a time or two by the Gallery Gods. Thus, when it became known that a man at the head of the line was buying tickets for a big gang, Stover hired a messenger to rush to the waiting man with a life-and-death telegram, and the man left his place

in line to answer the call. That was the last seen of him that night.

The one time that the Gallery Gods suffered defeat was when the Boyd management permitted a large number of women to go into the front row seats in the gallery. The "gods" had stood in line since early morning, and so they were peevish and "struck." They refused to budge and refused to buy tickets. The line, a block long, was held up by King Reed Hanchett's orders. Eddie Monaghan, then house manager, was called, and in turn called W. J. Burgess. Mr. Burgess arrived at 8:15, expressed his regret that his regular patrons should have been treated with such scant courtesy and assured them it would never happen again. And it didn't.

Songs, teamwork and imitations of famous actors became one of the order's specialties. Austin Braun, now manager for a large lumber company, and Stover, specialized in a Montgomery & Stone take-off and were a "scream" as the "Scarecrow" and "Tin Woodman." A quartet composed of Morris Wallerstedt now in Los Angeles; Stover, Braun and Fensch, could "pull off" anything from grand opera to ragtime. Bonce was the Irish

comedian and Higgins was the Shakespearean characterist.

Slowly the order lost its strength and dissolution was inevitable. Some of those who belonged to it and have not been mentioned were: Ben Benson, son of E. A. Benson, now a ranch foreman in Florida; Roy Miner, who has strayed away to where the "gods" know not; Albert Hancock present claim agent for the Union Pacific railroad; Gus Toman, with the Cudahy Packing company; Floyd Rathburn, now in the automobile business in Chicago; Carl Hahn, with the Oregon Short Line, at Salt Lake City; Al Goebel now in New Orleans; George Perry, now with a crockery concern; Cecil Williams and Art Williams, printers; Ralph Howard, in the insurance business.

Although the Gallery Gods have strayed to strange countries the majority of them have kept up a correspondence, and a plan for a big reunion is being made. This plan would call for support from "Old" Cooper, the Boyd's former gallery ticket man, if he were alive and knew of it, for he was the "gods" chief go-between, and so much did they appreciate him that before the order disbanded he was presented with a fine gold watch.