

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The First American Theater

Monterey claims California's First Theater, the old building at the corner of Pacific and Scott streets which was first built for a sailor's rooming house by the late Jack Swan in 1846-47. In the fall of 1847 the adobe building became the scene of what was probably the first minstrel show on the Pacific coast, given by three Montereyans and four army volunteers. Shortly after that date several members of Colonel J.D. Stevenson's disbanded regiment persuaded Swan to convert part of his building into a theater and "Putnam – or the Lion Son of '76" was produced.

Sacramento holds in reverence the first building which was actually built for a theater, but to go back even before the event at Plymouth Rock, we read that the setting for the first dramatic production ever to be presented within the bounds of the present United States was not, as is commonly claimed, in Williamsburg, Va. Nor did this historically significant event occur in the year 1718.

A clipping has been sent to the Peninsula Diary from El Paso, Texas, relating the story of the first theatrical production on the banks of the Rio Grande, near the present site of Socorro, Texas. It was a drama-comedy, produced on April 30, 1598, 22 years prior to the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers and 120 years prior to what is claimed as the first dramatic presentation.

Cleofas Calleros, who accomplished the research necessary to make such a statement, writes that the drama's author was Captain Farfan de los Godos, a colorful combination of warrior, theatrical writer-producer, and gentleman of leisure. He had accompanied the famed Juan de Onate expedition into El Paso del Norte. Prior to the actual crossing of the expedition into what is now modern El Paso, Captain General, Governor and Adelantado Juan de Onate took possession of the new land in the name of Phillip II, King of Spain. At this time, before the actual toma (taking) of the land, a solemn high mass was celebrated by the Rev. Fray Alfonso Martinez, O.F.M., which was attended by the entire expedition.

The service was a magnificent and brilliant ceremony, followed by a pious and colorful religious procession,

the horsemen attired in their splendid accoutrements and glistening arms.

Then to complete the day, the drama-comedy was presented, its players, like the first performers in Monterey, were soldiers and ladies dramatically depicting the brave deeds of the Spanish conquistadores and "the priests coming to this land kindly received by the simple natives, who reverently approached on bended knees and asked to be received into the faith being baptized in great numbers."

Our informant describes the theater as: "Long, twisting forms of cacti, grey and green sagebrush, and a long line of smoky red hills was the outdoor theater for this primitive enactment. The stage which Captain Farfan de los Godos planned, as compared to the modern conception, was a strange one; from one great cottonwood tree to another stretched a yellow curtain."

And the spectators? An unusual crowd! From the perfumed Spanish dandy of the Spanish courts to the naked savages of the wild Mansos tribes. The ladies of the expedition were seated in the foreground, the drivers of the cattle and the horses in the rear. And the curtain rose on the first American play!

However, in tracing the drama from its beginnings in the Western Hemisphere, one must go back to the conquest of America by Spain and the representing of religious plays at the various feasts of the church. These were of two kinds, the auto and the coloquio. Speaking of this custom, Garcia Icazbalceta says: "The first mention of such representations I have discovered is found in the minutes of the Cabildo for January 9, 1526."

It is a matter of historical fact that prior to 1540, there were many theater buildings in Mexico City and other cities in New Spain where theatrical productions were regularly presented and attended by the new settlers and immensely enjoyed by the natives.