The Columbia Theatre: A Truly “Varied Career”

by Mara Gregory

Among the many historical postcards in the collection of the South End Historical Society, an undated postcard from “Amateur Night” at the Columbia Music Hall is particularly striking. The illustrated scene, labeled “one of Boston’s odd sights,” is indeed odd: an amateur ballerina dances on stage to uproarious applause and laughter, while a gentleman backstage gestures at her to stop and a man in the orchestra pit gleefully points a gun at her. This postcard – unexpected and humorous – raises a number of questions. Why would this type of entertainment be advertised on a theatre postcard? What did this image mean to historical audiences, and why might someone buy and keep such a souvenir? What really happened at Amateur Night at the Columbia? An investigation into the broader history of the Columbia Music Hall (also (continued on page 3)
Dear Friends,

Let us entertain you! This month’s newsletter comes to you with an eye towards popular amusement. With its rich landscape of theaters, galleries, and parks, the South End has many wonderful diversions to offer, something which has been true throughout the neighborhood’s rich history. We hope as spring breathes new life into the city, our newsletter will inspire you to explore the diverse entertainments the South End has to offer!

Our featured article, by SEHS newcomer Mara Gregory, takes a fascinating look at the Columbia Theatre, formerly at 978 – 986 Washington Street. Mara took her inspiration from a colorful (in more ways than one!) postcard of the Columbia found in our own collections. She discusses some of the most popular forms of entertainment to come through the theatre, with a close eye on vaudeville’s “Amateur Nights.”

Next, in honor of our upcoming carnival-themed South End Soirée, we bring you a piece about the origins of the traveling carnival written by SEHS intern Fay Charpentier. As the Soirée approaches, we bring you a piece about the origins of the traveling carnival, written by SEHS intern Fay Charpentier. As the Soirée approaches, we bring you a piece about the origins of the traveling carnival, written by SEHS intern Fay Charpentier.

Springtime brings beautiful blooms to the SEHS.

The last of our entertainments is from the world of literature! Former SEHS Executive Director, Hope Shannon, has been kind enough to write her reflections on the process of writing the upcoming book, “The Grand Theatre, with its sumptuous and elaborate surroundings, seemed to be as much a part of the spectacle as the performance itself.”

During its first decade in operation. In 1892, Lottie Collins – famous for her rendition of the vaudeville number, “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay” – sang and danced at the Columbia, and in 1894 the circus-like “Trained Beasts of Hagenback” appeared on stage. In this grand spectacle, pigs performed on a sea-saw, seals played tambourines, and a lion rode on a chariot pulled by tigers. To protect the likely fearful audience, a “great steel cage” had been built to surround the entire stage. This was not the only occasion when the Columbia used elaborate props to enhance the audience experience; in the summer months, for example, giant “pyramids of ice” were used to cool the auditorium.

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In 1899, the Columbia was converted into a Vaudeville Theatre and became one of the leading theaters in the country, “where every play would be a grand and elaborate production.”

The Columbia Theatre opened its doors on October 5, 1891, on the site of the former South Congregational Church at 978 – 986 Washington Street. The Boston Daily Advertiser described the new theatre as impressive and luxurious: its “Moorish style” towers rose high above the nearby buildings and its entrance was crowned by a “magnificent window of cathedral and stained glass.” Inside the large lobby, intricate stucco-work covered the walls and a broad staircase led to the balcony, flanked by “beautiful carved newel posts ... surmounted by Arabian figures holding handsomely designed gas fixtures and great bunches of incandescent lights.”

In its early days, the Columbia seemed to live up to expectations. Opening night featured “Men and Women,” a play by David Belasco and Henry deMillié, and attracted a large and “brilliant” audience. Following the initial run, later productions featured popular plays and a talented stock company that included future star Georgia Drew Barrymore. In addition to plays, the Columbia provided a number of other amusements...
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that included women. Indeed, the venue continued to attract fashionable audiences after its conversion to a music hall and, in 1901, the Columbia’s manager stated that, “the line of work will be such as to appeal to the great public and vulgarity will never have a footing.”

In 1904, the Columbia changed hands again and became formally known as the Columbia Music Hall, a burlesque and vaudeville house. In a glowing review of an early production, the Cambridge Chronicle proclaimed that “the handsome show girls, the talented comedians … the handsome prima donna; the beautiful costumes and brilliant ensembles all contributed to make the performance a thoroughly enjoyable one.” Amusements at the new Music Hall included farcical burlesques, song and dance, and acrobatic routines.

Around this time, amateur nights also became popular events at the Columbia. Comedian Fred Allen, well known for his radio and television career, got his start in show business as an amateur juggler and comedian performing at the Columbia and other local venues. In his memoir, Allen recalls that amateur nights were extremely popular at this time, and the Columbia had “the biggest Amateur Nights in Boston.” More than an informal gathering of local talent, these nights were actually quite a business in Boston. According to Allen, this business was dominated by Sam Cohen, a talent agent with a grumpy office on Court Street where hopeful amateurs crowded the waiting room. Those selected by Cohen were booked at various amateur nights throughout Boston, and the best were taken to the Columbia.

While some amateurs had talents in singing, dancing, or juggling, Allen remarks that many employed other strategies to appeal to the audience. Knowing that audiences enjoyed the “sympathy act,” some performers would cut holes in their socks or pants to appear impoverished. Other performers, intentionally or not, were known as “lemons.” These amateurs appealed to the audience for their comical lack of talent. Sam Cohen played off of these poor performances with numerous gags and practical jokes. He often used “The Hook,” a long pole with a large hook at the end, to snare bad performers and pull them offstage. Other times, he would pop out from behind the curtain to slap a performer’s backside with a wooden slaptick or wallop him with a giant stuffed fish. Allen remembers that such antics often had the audience in hysterics, and the audiotoriums on amateur night echoed with “screaming, whistling, or raucous laughter.”

Could this explain the image on the postcard from Amateur Night? It seems likely that this illustration depicts the performance of a “lemon,” with the audience reacting favorably to the ridiculous antics surrounding the dancer: the gun pointed in jest; the harried stage manager gesturing at her to stop. Viewers of the postcard likely knew of the Columbia’s famous Amateur Nights and understood that the image was a comical depiction of the oddity and hilarity that occurred on these nights. While the scene on the postcard is certainly not one of highbrow theatre, it is significant to note that the audience is fashionably dressed and includes women. This type of popular entertainment, the postcard image suggests, was appropriate for respectable audiences. In fact, the audience on the postcard takes up more visual space than the performer, implying that much of the fun of Amateur Night was due to the participation and reaction of the spectators.

The history of the Columbia theatre is not all glitz and gaiety, however. The building itself faced a number of challenges. In 1901, the Washington Street elevated railway opened adjacent to the theatre, and, according to the Boston Daily Globe, the loud passing trains made it difficult for audiences to hear the performers. Then, in February 1917, the Columbia was damaged in a fire. The venue reopened after repairs as the New Columbia Theatre (then part of the Loews theatrical syndicate), and featured vaudeville performances and motion pictures. Although the theatre’s heyday was over by the end of the first decades of the twentieth century, the Columbia continued to run burlesque, vaudeville, and motion pictures for many years. In the late 1930s, the theatre became a last-run movie house, and it was ultimately demolished in 1957.

The postcard of Amateur Night, for whatever reason it may have been originally bought and saved, preserves for us today a glimpse into the spectacle, the laughter, and the variety provided by the Columbia Theatre to a multitude of patrons over the years. X

The Marquee at the Columbia Theatre framed by the Washington Street El, from the South End Historical Society Collections
Carnivals have their roots in medieval agricultural fairs and festivals, yet the traveling carnival as we know it today did not emerge until the 1890s. The 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago captured the imaginations of people throughout the country and the world and paved the way for American traveling carnivals. The Chicago World’s Fair was neither the first nor the last large-scale fair in the United States, but its timing and unique spectacles still distinguish it from other events of its kind.

Due to its timing, the fair focused heavily on recent technological advances, namely the advent of electricity. The Chicago World’s Fair’s Midway Plaisance, a mile-long strip of parkway featuring mechanized rides including the world’s first Ferris Wheel, games of chance, sideshow attractions, and food vendors, set the precedent for the traveling carnivals that followed in the Fair’s wake. The varied spectacles of the Midway Plaisance were heavily covered by media outlets throughout the country, drawing the eyes of Americans, who in turn desired to see these spectacles in person. Following the World’s Fair closure in October 1893, traveling shows and carnival companies began popping up throughout the United States, latching on to the popularity of the Chicago World’s Fair’s Midway Plaisance, and hoping to deliver electrified excitement to communities throughout America by literally bringing the traveling show to them.

Some of the first post-Chicago World’s Fair traveling carnivals and shows grew directly out of the Chicago area. For instance, Otto Schmidt, who worked as a showman at the Fair, founded the Chicago Midway Amusement Company following the Columbian Exposition. His traveling show, which toured the Northeastern United States increased from 17 to over 300.

At the same time, towns and cities increasingly established permanent fairgrounds to host their own as well as traveling events and attractions. Streetcar companies monopolized on the popularity of electrical rides and attractions by funding the construction of America’s early amusement parks, promoting the use of public transportation to reach leisure activities. Based on similar foundations as the traveling carnival, amusement parks offered thrilling rides, bizarre attractions, enthralling shows, and addicting games to an emerging middle class with newfound time for leisure activities. Amusement parks, however, were able to take their electric rides and flashy lights to a higher level than traveling carnivals, as they had permanent locations.

Leading up to the South End Soirée in early May, we will continue to share carnival history through our blog, Twitter, and Facebook. Be sure to check these out to learn more about carnivals before the event! For more information about the South End Soirée, please visit the Soirée website at www.southendhistoricalsociety.org/soiree.
Reflections on Writing about the South End
by Hope Shannon

I am thrilled to announce that my new book, Legendary Locals of Boston’s South End, will be released on May 5th. Part of Arcadia Publishing's Legendary Locals series, which has profiled residents of neighborhoods, towns, and cities across the country, Legendary Locals of Boston's South End features both former and current South End residents and spans nearly two hundred years of neighborhood history.

In preparation for writing the book, I spent several months researching local residents, business owners, inventors, and passersby. I immersed myself in both the recent and distant past and enjoyed the interesting juxtaposition of nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century South End residents. Over time, I found that I preferred studying the lives of twentieth-century South Enders and, when possible, I met with them or their families and heard stories about friendships, crime, children, tragedy, and struggle. Though many are now scattered between city and suburb, I was struck by the strength of their devotion to the neighborhood and the ties that have survived decades of change.

All research projects have hiccups and setbacks, and this was no different. I struggled to find pictures for many of the profiled residents and, in some cases, searched several repositories until I finally found an acceptable image. In addition, I selected too many people to profile and the information that I wanted to include in the book far exceeded the maximum word count I was allowed. Deciding which profiles to shorten and which to cut from the book was a painful process. Who am I to decide whose story is more or less interesting or significant than another’s?

These experiences contain important lessons about researching the history of the South End. It’s filled with people whose stories are important, either to friends, families, or those beyond the neighborhood’s boundaries. I hope that this book will encourage South Enders to talk to each other about their lives and memories and that it will inspire them to dig into historical materials and seek the South End’s many pasts. By collecting and building histories, we help to create a more diverse and valuable historical record.

For more information about the book, please email me at hopejshannon@gmail.com or visit the website at www.southendlegendarylocals.com.

Hope Shannon was the Executive Director of the South End Historical Society from August 2009 until August 2013. She holds a B.A. in history and archaeology from Boston University and a M.A. in history from Simmons College. She left the SEHS in August 2013 to pursue her doctorate in the Joint Doctoral Program in American History and Public History at Loyola University Chicago.

Join us for the launch of Legendary Locals of Boston’s South End!

Friday, May 16th, 6:30 PM
The Harriet Tubman House, 566 Columbus Ave.
We’re thrilled to host author Hope Shannon as she discusses and reads from her new book, Legendary Locals of Boston’s South End, to be followed by a reception and book signing!
South End Then and Now

41 Worcester Square
Then: The Dwight School (1850s)
Now: Subway Sandwich Shop (2014)

160 Appleton Street
Then: Abandoned cleaners (1972)
Now: Residential Addition (2014)

115 West Springfield Street
Then: The Dwight School (1850s)

84-94 West Dedham Street
Then: Assorted commercial and residential buildings (1972)
Now: Plaza Betances at Villa Victoria (2013)

393 Mass Ave.
Then: Empty facade over commuter rail tracks (1972)
Now: Entrance to Southwest Corridor Park, Mass Ave T stop visible on the right (2014)

429 Columbus Ave
Then: Charlie’s Sandwich Shoppe (1972)
Now: Charlie’s Sandwich Shoppe (2013)

407 Shawmut Ave
(Royal Arcanum Building)
Then: Boarded up Salvation Army Harbor Light (1972)
Now: Construction on “The Royal” condominiums (2014)

Charlie’s Sandwich Shoppe... some things never change!
Volunteer Opportunities

Want to be more involved with the SEHS?
We always need new volunteers! We have opportunities for volunteers in: the SEHS newsletter, fundraisers (Spring Ball and/or House Tour), collections, office tasks, preservation, history related projects, programs and events
Interested or have questions?
Call Stacen Goldman at 617-536-4445 or email her at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org.

Cast Iron Questions?
Need help restoring, repairing, or replacing your cast iron fence? The South End Historical Society can help!
Call or email us at 617-536-4445 or admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org for more information.