

## University of Northern Iowa

---

Financing the National Theatre

Author(s): James S. Metcalfe

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The North American Review*, Vol. 180, No. 579 (Feb., 1905), pp. 198-209

Published by: [University of Northern Iowa](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25105354>

Accessed: 20/02/2013 06:48

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Northern Iowa is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The North American Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# FINANCING THE NATIONAL THEATRE.

BY JAMES S. METCALFE.

---

Six million dollars is the sum required sufficiently to endow a National Theatre and its dependent institutions. But, before explaining why this is the amount required, and before going into a consideration of how it may be obtained, it will be well to discuss briefly the necessity for such a theatre, and to determine whether it is a practicable idea or only a dream of visionary enthusiasts.

The objects of this endowment would be :

1. To construct in New York a theatre-building which shall be (*a*) an architectural ornament to the city; (*b*) safe; (*c*) comfortable; and which (*d*) shall possess on its stage all the modern accessories for the perfect presentation of any play;

2. Gradually to form and perfect the best and most thoroughly trained company of English-speaking actors in the world;

3. To acquire gradually a repertory of the standard plays in English, both classic and modern, and to present them in the best manner and with the nearest possible approach to artistic perfection;

4. To encourage American literature by giving production to adequate plays by American authors;

5. To choose, under scholarly advice, the best standard of pronunciation of our language, so that the usage of the National Theatre shall be a recognized authority and the preserver of pure speech;

6. To establish, in connection with the theatre, a conservatory, in which shall be taught the elements of acting, including elocution, pantomime, fencing, dancing and kindred necessities of the art;

7. To establish, in connection with the theatre, a library which

shall not only be of value to the theatre in making correct standards in details of scene and costume, but which shall be available for American dramatists and writers on dramatic subjects;

8. To set a correct and artistic standard which shall be a continual incentive to the improvement of dramatic art in America.

Taking these objects *seriatim*, the first represents conditions which should be characteristic of every theatre, but unfortunately are not; for a National Theatre they would be necessities. It would be fitting to a permanent and representative theatre that it should, both inside and out, be impressive and exemplify the best—not necessarily the most elaborate or costly—architectural art of our day. Safety and comfort would be essentials, and its stage would also, of necessity, be equipped and arranged for perfection in the smallest detail work, as well as for the greatest impressiveness in spectacle.

The next object, the forming of a perfect company, opens up a wide vista of argument, and includes the further object of the establishment of a conservatory, teaching all the things which aid in the art of expression, such as elocution, pantomime, dancing and fencing. The formation of the first company of the National Theatre would have to be from present acting material and in competition with the purely commercial theatres. These last would, of course, hold out higher inducements to actors in the way of immediate pecuniary return. On the other hand, the National Theatre, with its permanency, its higher ideals, its standard of fair-dealing and its rewards based only on artistic accomplishment, would hold out inducements which would win the allegiance and the loyalty of true artists and actors of the better class. Later on, the company would be recruited from the theatre's own conservatory. Maintained by the endowment, this conservatory would be under no obligation to accept pupils from mercenary motives. It would extend its training to persons with the natural qualifications and dramatic instinct, many of whom are now debarred from acquiring the education which would make them finished actors instead of the half-equipped performers we so often see. It cannot be doubted that a company so recruited would go on and on toward a higher degree of excellence, until the object of having in America "the best and most thoroughly trained company of English-speaking actors in the world" would eventually be attained.

The repertory of the National Theatre would at first naturally be drawn from the existing stores of classic and semi-classic plays. In some quarters, a fear has been expressed that the stage of the National Theatre would be given over exclusively to Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, D'Annunzio and other modern writers who have a limited following of enthusiasts. With Shakespeare and the classics to draw on, and besides these a long line of minor dramatic writers reaching down to our own time, it is not to be believed that a rational management of a National Theatre would give over its facilities completely, or even to any great extent, to the adherents of any one class of writers.

Dreariness and unattractiveness are also prophesied as likely to characterize the repertory of the National Theatre, with its artistic ambitions. This is as much as to say that what is artistic and of high merit would necessarily be disagreeable. It must be confessed that, if the National Theatre is expected to present plays which will compete with the horse-play, evanescent jokes and frequent lubricity of some commercial theatres, the expectation would be disappointed. Outside of scholarly tragedy, which would interest from the perfection and impressiveness of its presentation, there are unlimited stores of lighter dramas and comedies, many of them of contemporary interest, which are worthy of the highest artistic effort, and which would fall well within the province of a National Theatre.

The life, manners, tragedy and humor of our own time would find their way to the stage of the National Theatre through another avowed object of its proponents. The encouragement of the American author, of course as a subsidiary and by no means exclusive idea, should at times bring to its boards fresh material of rapidly increasing excellence. The commercial manager is debarred, by the great cost of their production, from making experiments with plays by authors untried in dramatic writing. Although this is the most remunerative field of literary work, our best writers do not enter it because of their fear that they cannot answer the demand of the commercial manager for material which shall surely appeal to the great multitude. The writer who is dependent on his pen, and who has a fixed market for his wares, is not tempted to work on the chance of satisfying such a demand.

The National Theatre would naturally require a technical library for the use of its own stage-managers, artists, designers,

costumers and pupils. There can be little doubt that this would in time grow to become an institution of great value to every one in America working for, or interested in, dramatic art. Its value is so obvious, and its support would come from so many sources, that it could not help growing into an institution of large importance. In fact, it would seem that to-day a public dramatic library could be easily and successfully established as a separate enterprise, later on to be connected with the National Theatre when the latter shall have become a fact instead of a hope.

Two objects remain for comment, and it is a question which is the more important; these are, first, the creation in the National Theatre of a standard of acting and theatrical production which shall be the highest possible, and by example raise the standard of every other theatre in America; next, the insistence in the National Theatre on such purity of pronunciation and diction in the use of our language that its usage shall be authoritative and preserve our language from the corruptions which assail it on every side. The stage stands for so much in the teaching of speech and manners by example that it seems a high duty of the American people to establish for it the highest possible standard. As a teacher in these things it certainly ranks above the churches, and almost as certainly above the schools, with their varied standards. It is doing its work every week of the year and almost every day of the week. It should have a fixed standard, derived from the very best authorities. If we leave this tremendous influence in the hands of the ignorant and the uncultured, we are neglecting a most potent instrument of national culture and improvement to let it become an influence against, instead of for, refinement and good manners.

The above shows in brief detail what a National Theatre seeks to accomplish. Broadly speaking, does there exist any necessity for providing the six million dollars which shall make the National Theatre an actuality? To any one acquainted with the tendencies of the commercial theatre, there can be but one reply: that it is a vital necessity in the life of the American people; that nowhere else can a sum so small, compared with other expenditures for educational purposes, be used with the promise of securing such far-reaching benefits. Naturally, only a small proportion of our great population would ever witness its performances, but its influence would be felt in every theatre in the country, and from

them would extend into the every-day life of all the people. No university and no group of universities, with endowments vastly exceeding that required for a national theatre, can reach as speedily and with such immediate educational effect into every part of our national life. The tendency of the theatre to-day is downward; downward in its literature, in its morals, in its manners, in its arts, and in its speech. We are an easy-going people, and in our amusements take things as they are provided. To-day, money-getting is the main motive which animates the purveyors of our theatrical entertainment. Until there can be set for our theatres a higher standard than that based chiefly on money-getting, we must expect the downward tendency to continue. An endowed National Theatre would set that standard.

Why are six million dollars necessary for the endowment of a National Theatre, when commercial theatres are successfully capitalized on a much smaller basis? For the simple reason that the commercial manager is willing to gamble on the chances of temporary success (and often fails), and the National Theatre seeks to become a permanent institution. It cannot take the risk of being destroyed by a failure, or a succession of failures, especially in the early days of its existence when failures, in the commercial sense, are naturally to be expected. An endowment of six million dollars does not in any way mean the expenditure of that amount. In fact, it would remain virtually untouched in the hands of its trustees. Regarded as an investment of so much capital, there is no reason to believe that it might not eventually earn a handsome return. For instance, the net profits of the *Comédie Française* for 1903 were \$130,000.

The amount of six million dollars is reached after careful computation of what is needed to place a National Theatre on a secure basis of permanency, and to supply an income to carry it through its stages of experiment and imperfection. It could not be expected to come into the world *Minerva-like*. Complete artistic perfection is not achieved instantly, and the first years of the National Theatre, while showing a vast improvement on present methods, would, from the very condition of dramatic art as it is, fall short of the accomplishment it would eventually reach.

The National Theatre would have, first of all, to be adequately housed and within the reasonable access of its patrons, as well as in a location where it would be of value as a public ornament.

A careful estimate of the cost of site, of the erection of the theatre itself, of preliminary expenses in the way of administration, and for interest lost during the process of building, would make the cost of a well-located, perfectly and artistically constructed theatre, turned over ready for use, amount to twelve hundred thousand dollars.

The annual fixed charges of operating such a theatre, regardless of the salaries of a company and the cost of the actual production of plays, have been carefully figured on the basis of similar disbursements in existing theatres, and amount to seventy thousand dollars a year. This includes such salaries as those of a director and assistant director, stage-managers, musicians, business assistants, doorkeepers, ushers, electricians, carpenters, scene-painters, costumers, wardrobe-keepers, property-men, engineers, firemen, stage-hands and watchmen. It is only fair to say that this expenditure of seventy thousand dollars includes yearly salaries, and implies that the theatre is playing a full season. In the beginning of its existence, before its repertory was a large one, the season would, of necessity, be short, and there would be some reduction in this amount.

The yearly cost of the conservatory has to be estimated, and it is believed that twenty thousand dollars is a very generous amount for this purpose and would secure the highest class of instruction. That the amount is excessive, rather than scant, seems reasonable when it is considered that in many cases the cost of instruction could be reduced by utilizing the services of highly qualified persons employed in the theatre in other capacities.

The sum of twenty thousand dollars a year is allowed for taxes, repairs and insurance. On a fire-proof building the insurance rate would not be high; ordinary repairs would be taken care of by the salaried mechanics of the theatre, and it would not be too much to ask the State and City of New York to lighten the burden of taxation on an institution not run for profit and of such great educational value to the people at large, as well as of value in fixing New York's position as the metropolis of America.

The expense of maintaining an adequate company must also be, for the most part, estimated. Eventually, the salaries of the members of the company of the National Theatre would be based

on yearly engagements, and a generous estimate makes the salary list something under one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars a year. This provides for no exaggerated payments to stars. As the National Theatre would claim its superiority on the excellence of its *ensemble* work, the star would not be essential to its existence. This does not necessarily mean that the greatest artists would not be seen upon its boards, but this would be by special arrangement, which would not be considered in planning the theatre's business.

The cost of the production of plays would vary in each case with their character. It goes without saying that the productions at the National Theatre should be the best that could be given, in each case the expenditure not being expenditure simply for expenditure's sake, but for producing impressiveness, spectacular effect, artistic detail and historical accuracy, as might be required. The number of yearly productions would, at first, be limited by the income from the endowment, unless the patronage of the public should enable the management to go beyond that limit. As a tentative proposition, it is supposed that, in the first year of its existence, the theatre would make four productions, one at a cost of thirty thousand dollars, one at twelve thousand, one at seven thousand and one at five, making a total of fifty-four thousand dollars. In its second year, it would have these four plays in its repertory and could produce four others, thus from year to year increasing its repertory, lengthening its season and increasing its gross income.

We have, then, as a reasonable and safe basis of annual expenditure for the maintenance of a National Theatre, the following items and total:

|                                    |           |
|------------------------------------|-----------|
| Fixed expenditures .....           | \$ 70,000 |
| Salaries of company .....          | 125,000   |
| Taxes, insurance and repairs ..... | 20,000    |
| Expenses of conservatory .....     | 20,000    |
| Cost of four productions .....     | 54,000    |
|                                    | <hr/>     |
| Total.....                         | \$289,000 |

After defraying the cost of land and building, we have left, of the six million dollars endowment, four million eight hundred thousand dollars. Invested at four per cent. this would yield \$192,000, leaving \$97,000 to be provided for by sales of tickets. If the endowment fund could be safely invested at 4½ per cent.,



the amount to be made up by sales of tickets would be reduced to \$73,000.

On the small expectation that the four productions of the first year would provide a season of only twelve weeks, with total receipts of sixty thousand dollars—very far from an extravagant estimate—an actual deficit of only thirty-seven thousand dollars would be carried over. With a repertory of eight plays and a longer season, the second year should not increase the deficit; and it would seem very bad management if, out of eight productions, one at least should not be sufficiently successful in the commercial sense to wipe out the deficiency, allowing the third season to start with a considerable repertory and the prospect of a season which should return a profit.

It will not be difficult to criticise these figures; but, wherever it has been possible, they have been drawn from existing conditions; wherever they are only estimates, the estimates have been made on the safe side. A shrinkage or an excess in one item may be offset by an excess or a shrinkage in another. In many ways, economies will be possible which are not shown here, and which may be practised without in any way interfering with the excellence of the general result. In the productions of an endowed theatre, extravagant display need not be counted on as an attraction, although it will be a necessity to make large expenditures in mounting some plays, to give their settings the needed impressiveness.

Having shown briefly what are the objects sought to be achieved in the endowing of a National Theatre, and what that endowment should yield to fortify the institution against failure, it may be well to show why the same results cannot be obtained by the commercial theatre. The same complexity which has entered into modern life in other matters has affected the theatrical art more strongly than it has other arts. With the same expenditure for paint and canvas, the painter of to-day can produce, if he has the genius, as great a picture as could Raphael or Titian. This also holds good with music and sculpture. But the dramatic author and the actor find themselves confronted with demands, in the presentation of their art, which did not exist when audiences were content to sit in barnlike structures, and see plays presented amid crude surroundings and in most primitive settings. The increased requirements of the theatre-going public

have made the commercial manager a greater necessity, and the art itself of less importance, than formerly. The housing and staging of plays have become almost the most important thing in their production. Business ability has come to be of even greater importance than genius. Business competition has made the business man more powerful than the actor and author combined. These latter to-day cannot exist without the former; but the former, if he cannot make terms with the actor and author of the highest ability, can find others less gifted who suit his commercial purpose practically as well. The result is apparent to any one, especially in America, where the business of managing theatres and producing plays has become in effect a business monopoly. Our theatres are increasing in number, in magnificence and in cost. Stage mechanics are improved and elaborated in possibilities and expense. On the other hand, dramatic authors and actors and plays of the best class are yearly becoming scarcer and scarcer. Art does not thrive in the cruel atmosphere of business and money-getting. We hear that art which is worth while will push itself to the front, no matter what the circumstances. The history of the world shows that, in periods of military, religious, or commercial activity, this has not been true. Certainly, it has not been true in the case of dramatic art.

The great question of where to secure the six million dollars to endow a National Theatre comes next. When one considers the value of the institution as an educator, and remembers that education is the great conservator of our nation, one might think that, with a people which is enormously rich, individually and collectively, and which claims to be a practical people, this would be a question easily answered. The first thought would be that the Nation or the State would gladly assume the comparatively small burden. This is as unlikely to occur, as it would be unfortunate if it did. In our politics, partisanship and demagogism cut too large a figure to make governmental interference desirable in matters where education, taste and refinement should be controlling influences. Joseph Jefferson put this concisely when he said that it would hardly do to have a National Theatre when we would have only Republican actors under one administration and Democratic actors under another.

Those millionaires who have shown themselves ready to supply endowments in large amounts have been the next source thought

of, from which should come this great public benefit. Unfortunately, those millionaires who have shown this disposition are hounded to death and have slight patience to investigate the merits of new channels of beneficence. But there are other millionaires who could provide this endowment out of hand, and almost without feeling it. One would think that the certainty that by establishing such an institution he would send his name down to posterity as its founder, would appeal to some one of these. Because of early religious training in which the theatre was considered an influence for evil only, and because of a certain unsavoriness which has sometimes attached to the connection of rich men with the stage, and perhaps because the matter has never been properly presented to the right man, none of these has yet made his views heard in the matter.

The six million dollars which will endow this theatre, it should be remembered, are not to be expended for the purpose of running a theatre, thus to be scattered and disappear. The only part of the endowment which would be actually expended is that which would go into land and building, things which would be valuable and permanent in themselves. The remainder would be invested and kept intact, only its income being used for the deficiencies of the institution. This income would certainly be needed at first, and it should always be available in case the theatre should fall into periods of unwise or mistaken management. After the theatre's early years, when its repertory became large and its company a thoroughly trained one, there can be no doubt that what would be the best theatre in America would become self-sustaining and even profitable. At that time there could be no objection to returning the surplus and unneeded income to those who had provided the endowment, to their heirs, or to their assigns. A plan to secure an endowment of the National Theatre must disregard the Government and the individual millionaire. But it seems not impossible that there are in America enough persons of large means and enlightened patriotism to furnish by association the insurance fund necessary.

A rough plan has been made of a suitable theatre which shall contain, in part of its auditorium, fifty comfortable boxes arranged in two tiers, and an estrade containing one hundred especially roomy chairs, all possessing equally good views of the stage. These boxes and seats are reached immediately from a

large and impressive foyer reserved exclusively for their occupants.

These fifty boxes and one hundred estrade chairs, in a manner to be discussed further on, would form the basis for the endowment of the theatre. In addition to them, there would be from five hundred to a thousand orchestra chairs, more roomy and comfortable than those to be found in the commercial theatres; similar seats in the first gallery, immediately over the upper tier of boxes; and others in a second gallery. From this generous seating capacity, it might be thought that the plan calls for an extremely large, and therefore barnlike, theatre. On the contrary, a theatre built on this plan would bring the entire audience close to the stage, making the work of the actors easy, and would be admirably arranged, in seeing and hearing properties, for the audience in every part of the house. As an educational scheme, the National Theatre must furnish good seats at moderate prices for a large part of its constituency, and this would be very feasible under the plan proposed. The upper foyer, for box-holders, and the lower one, for the use of the audience from the other parts of the house, would be foyers in the European sense of the word, and with convenient access to the auditorium would attract the entire audience between the acts.

In making boxes and seats a basis for subscription to the endowment, it is with a thorough understanding that a box at the opera has uses which could never go with a box at any theatre. One can sit through frequent repetitions of a musical work, because the enjoyment of music is a more sensual pleasure and one which can be enjoyed over and over again. Bearing in mind that the necessities of a theatre call for runs of plays of some duration, and that a box-owner would not care to use it very often during the run of a play, it is proposed, in order to make the ownership of boxes and estrade chairs attractive, that they shall be held on the following basis:

1. That the owners shall be entitled to their boxes or chairs on the occasion of all first presentations;
2. That, at any other time when they shall wish to do so, they shall have the right to use them for themselves or friends;
3. That when owners shall not indicate that they wish to use their boxes or chairs, the same shall be placed on sale to the general public, the proceeds to be set apart and, when the theatre

shall have paid its running expenses, to be divided on an equitable basis among the subscribers to the endowment.

The *cruz* of this plan to secure an endowment for a National Theatre lies in the possibility of securing fifty subscriptions of one hundred thousand dollars each and one hundred subscriptions of ten thousand dollars each, not an extravagant possibility in this country of many large fortunes. Each subscription would be represented by a certificate transferable by assignment or bequest, those for the larger amount representing the rights to a box, and for the smaller, to one of the estrade chairs. In addition, these certificates would represent the owner's right to a pecuniary return on the subscription when the endowed theatre should show an income exceeding its running expenses and the cost of its productions.

This return to their subscribers, or their heirs or assigns, would eventually be a handsome one, but the appeal for subscriptions to the endowment must be based on a higher motive than this expectation. With the endowment rigidly safeguarded, as it would have to be, subscribers could be sure that their generosity would insure to the American people, for all time, an educational institution of the highest value and that it would be an enduring monument to the public spirit and patriotism of its founders.

According to the census, in one year of the last decade three hundred million dollars were expended upon schools, colleges and other educational institutions. One-fiftieth of that amount would endow a National Theatre. Its education, its influence in purifying our speech and in refining our manners, would be felt the country over and for all time, without distinction of creed or cult. Is that not good education? Is it not education needed in a country given over to absorption in the pursuit of material things? Is it not a practical idea? And, above all, is it not a patriotic idea, which should appeal to those who have found in this country the opportunity to accumulate large fortunes and the privilege to enjoy them?

JAMES S. METCALFE.