

# How I Destroyed the Old Salt Lake Theatre

*Samuel W. Taylor*

YEP, IT WAS ME who done it. Me and the kid with the telescope. We were the cause of the historic theatre's demolition. Let me tell you how it happened.

I was living in Salt Lake City with widowed Aunt Ellen, my father's sixth wife, and working at the Baldwin Radio plant in East Mill Creek. As I remember, I was fifteen years old. After work I'd often walk the mile or so to Highland Drive, grab a streetcar to town for a big night, take in a movie, buy a magazine, or stand with the men on a corner watching the girls in short skirts get on and off the streetcars.

On one such expedition I picked up a copy of a new magazine, *Liberty*. A cartoon on its cover showed it marching with the two big weeklies, *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. I hadn't published anything yet, but I just knew I'd be in all three of them, wait and see. I didn't carry a lunch pail because I was an author, not a wage slave.

In those days, people sang "Among My Souvenirs," "My Blue Heaven," and, of course, Irving Berlin's tunes: his latest, "Blue Skies," and earlier classics, "Always" and "All Alone." Charles A. Lindbergh

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thrilled us by flying the Atlantic; Babe Ruth, Sultan of Swat, hit sixty home runs; Hollywood awarded the first Oscars; the Mormon prize-fighter Jack Dempsey lost the heavyweight fight to Gene Tunney with the disputed "long count"; and CBS began broadcasting the Salt Lake Tabernacle Choir.

An era of world peace was forecast when fifteen nations signed the Kellogg-Briand Anti-War Pact, agreeing that the resolution of differences would "never be sought except by pacific means." Al Jolson ushered in motion picture talkies with *The Jazz Singer* and the song, "Sonny Boy." A young cartoonist named Walt Disney introduced Mickey Mouse in *Plane Crazy*, and Clara Bow was the "It" girl.

In short, all was well in Zion. Then a New York musical, *Artists and Models*, arrived at the Salt Lake Theatre. I was there for the first night, clutching my four bits, in the queue waiting for the door to open at the outside stairway leading to the upstairs gallery. I found a seat in the first row, next to a teenager with a big telescope for viewing the stage far, far below. Before the show began the kid let me look through his telescope; the people in the front rows seemed so close I could almost touch them.

The show had a lot of pretty chorus girls, production numbers, and comedy skits. One skit, about a husband arriving home late at night, went about like this:

Husband: (Entering): Hello, honeybun.

Wife: My goodness, dear, it's late! (They kiss.)

Husband: Had to stay and finish up accounts. End of the month, you know.

Wife: You ought to have more help on that job.

Husband: Tell that to the boss. He's a slave driver.

Wife: I'll warm up supper, dear.

Husband: Never mind. Elsie brought me a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

Wife: She's rather cute, in a coarse sort of way.

Husband: She can type a hundred words a minute. That's what counts.

Wife: And the way she dresses! You'd think she was a call girl!

Husband: And she knows where stuff is in the files. (Yawns.) Boy, I'm bushed. Let's hit the sack.

Wife: I'll get your pajamas. (She gets them from closet as he takes off shirt.) Dear, where is your underwear?

Husband: I've been robbed! (Blackout.)

It got a big laugh. Pretty hot stuff, that one.

In the finale, a production number, an artist stood at his easel while a procession of gorgeous models posed one at a time on the dais as he tried to decide which one was the most beautiful subject for him to paint.

Well, the first girl stepped onto the dais wrapped in a robe that she held at her shoulder. She struck a pose, then opened the robe to reveal herself topless and almost bottomless. She held the pose a few seconds, closed her robe, stepped down, and exited.

Wow! I had twenty-twenty vision, and my eyes were the size of four-bit pieces. The kid with the telescope leaned out so far I thought he'd tumble off and land in the audience far, far below. With that telescope, he could practically reach out and touch those models.

One by one, the entire line struck a topless pose; and, as the curtain rang down, the gallery turned to bedlam.

Next day's *Deseret News* smote *Artists and Models* hip and—er—thigh. This sort of disgusting filth just wasn't appropriate in Zion. It was tasteless pornography, pandering to the basest human passions. It made sport of virtue and glorified sin. The entire production was a vulgar affront to moral standards. New York should know that Zion wasn't Sodom and Gomorrah.

The theatre had been criticized before for allowing shows that made heroines of fallen women, that weren't faith promoting, that didn't teach a moral lesson, that were a far cry from wholesome entertainment. The theatre was losing money; and after more than sixty-five years, the place definitely was shabby and in need of expensive rehabilitation.

More to the point, the Mountain States Telephone Company had made an offer for the property—an offer too good to refuse.

Because of the excoriating review, the theatre was a mob scene the next night as people, drawn by the lure of evil, clamored for tickets. I was there early, clutching my four bits in one sweaty hand and a borrowed pair of field glasses in the other. The kid with the telescope was right behind me in the long queue at the outside stairway to the gallery. By curtain time, there wasn't even standing room.

Then, what a disappointment! The chorus girls wore modest street dresses. The underwear skit was cut. And in the final, big production number, the models stepping onto the dais displayed less than you could see standing on the street corner watching girls step onto a streetcar.

The fate of the Salt Lake Theatre had been tentative for some time, and I'm sure *Artists and Models* was the straw that broke the camel's back. At the theatre's dedication, Daniel H. Wells had prayed, "O Lord, preserve forever this house pure and holy," and had asked that, rather than allowing "wicked influences to predominate or prevail . . . let it utterly perish and crumble to atoms." And that's what happened.

In the theater's place rose a service station grotesquely shaped like an aircraft with wings sheltering the gas pumps and air hoses. On the rear fence was a graffiti, "Built by a prophet and torn down for profit."

The historic playhouse, the oldest theater in Utah, was demolished for the protection of innocent youth, which means the likes of me and the kid with the telescope. I don't know if it saved him; in my case the damage was already done. I still think the underwear skit is funny. Worse than that, I treasure my memories of *Artists and Models*.

Many years later, with the vision of those topless lovelies still indelibly burned into my brain, I have just one regret. I wish I'd had a reason to use those field glasses the second night.