

What the St. Louis Municipal Theatre Is Doing With Opera

By OLIN DOWNES.

St. Louis, July 1.

WHEN a Westerner suggested a trip to the Western coast with one of the objectives the orchestral concerts in Hollywood Bowl, which are said to have been attended by as many as 50,000, this writer very reasonably protested. Who would want to listen to an orchestral concert on the outer rim of an audience of 50,000? "But," said the Western emissary, "suppose I told you that you could hear the orchestra when it played very softly, standing up there on the rim of the 50,000?" This remains to be seen. Mountains and advertising are not the only things that the West appears to pursue on a large scale. But certainly, through the strange and swift adaptability with which nature endows the human race, the traveler becomes more credulous and less amazed at things with every mile the train drops eastward. Here in St. Louis is the Municipal Theatre, where they give a twelve weeks' season of light opera through the Summer. The theatre seats, roughly, three times as many as the Metropolitan Opera House, but it is so planned that the stage is neither remote nor inaudible to those in the topmost seats. Its seating capacity is 10,000—dimensions which have already come to look small! Eighteen hundred of the cheapest seats cost 25 cents, the best seats \$1.50. And the 10,000 come to a theatre in a park which could accommodate New York's famous parkway in one of its corners. Of course, if it were only size such an institution would be a passing detail of a trip across country. But there is more than size. The municipal opera itself has not only played an important part in the artistic progress of the city; it is now in a state of transition—though this may not be fully realized by some of its supporters—to greater things.

One of its offshoots is a private enterprise, the Garden Theatre, originated and financed by Flint Garrison, which opens on Monday—July 6—with Margaret Anglin's performance of Sophocles's "Electra." There will also be given at this theatre Humperdinck's opera, "Hansel and Gretel," in English; the St. Louis Fashion Show, of which more later, and, finally, two weeks of a Garden Theatre revue, consisting both of dramatic, instrumental and operatic offerings. This theatre seats "only" 3,000, is simply and nobly planned, equipped with the most modern lighting devices that could be obtained, and has the best lines of sight and elevation of seats, &c., that the writer has seen in Europe or America. It also is set in a parkway outside of St. Louis, in University City, with thick woods for background, playing fountains and shrubbery outside, and the stage almost embraced by great trees that rise from each side and nearly meet over the classic portals that were placed for the tragedy of the daughter of Agamemnon. Livingston Platt was superintending the preparations for the Monday opening this afternoon and telling us of the exhumation of the body of Ægisthus in Greece. The resonance of the theatre permitted the conversation to be continued as he moved freely about from place to place, the last words of farewell being spoken in a conversational tone by Platt on the stage and his visitors standing at one of the furthest and highest points at the back of the theatre.

Endless interesting details of the construction of this, which may well become one of the finest art theatres in the country, could be supplied here. But the significant thing to a musical recorder is not the technical equipment of these institutions. It is the spirit and the quality of the ideas that have gone into their making, and the

manner in which they reflect the astonishingly rapid artistic advance of certain American communities. Their development has come about through that not infrequent combination of executive ability and genuine idealism that animates a good many people in America.

The St. Louis Municipal Theatre was inaugurated in 1916 by Margaret Anglin with a performance of Shakespeare's "As You Like It." It was then a slope of green grass. It was founded two years after the St. Louis Masque and Pageant, to the stimulus of which its existence is due. In 1917 the city commenced the construction of the present theatre. It became the place, among other things, for the St. Louis Fashion Show, a spectacle having, of course, commercial purpose, and becoming each Summer a headquarters for manufacturers, buyers and the like from virtually every American State. These shows, continuing in the practical interests of manufacturers and their clients, nevertheless assumed more and more of an artistic quality, due not only to competition among designers and makers of costumes, but also to various features of artistic entertainment added to attract visitors and local public. The annual fashion show became one of the principal features and assets of the new theatre.

Meanwhile, in 1917, Guy Golterman of St. Louis and New York gave a week of seven performances of "Aida." The following year he gave a season of equal length, which proved popular, of performances of "Pagliacci" and a ballet. These performances were probably instrumental in giving rise to the idea of a Summer season of light opera. The first season of St. Louis "municipal" opera, as it is called, in 1919, lasted six weeks, and faced a deficit, but the next season was financially successful, and the institution has gained in popularity and influence ever since.

Only light operas have been given in this place until this year. The board of guarantors and business men who sponsor the operative activities, as also their artistic advisers, believed that the great public of St. Louis could only be interested in musical shows of "light" or superficial nature, and could not be interested in anything approaching the quality of real opera. They had operated comfortably and with very fair returns on this principle for years. (The season of 1923, in fact, netted a surplus of \$50,000.) Then they received a shock of the kind that practical men understand, for Mr. Golterman gave last year eight performances of "Carmen"—performances, according to report, of high artistic excellence and completeness—and reaped greater gate receipts than the municipal opera has shown in any week of its existence. As a result of this the municipal opera has incorporated "Martha" and "Cavalleria Rusticana" in its program of the season—not, to be sure, a wildly revolutionary step, but a straw that gives an interesting indication of the winds' direction. Incidentally, "Cavalleria Rusticana" and a single act of "The Stolen Requiem," libretto by Richard L. Stokes, music by Isaac van Grove, will open Mr. Golterman's three weeks' season at the Municipal Theatre, following a season of light opera. The remainder of the Golterman repertory will consist of "Carmen" and "Aida" for the last two weeks. The Golterman performances may also have hinted at a heightening of artistic standards at the Municipal Theatre. These standards, to be plain, could be improved. Nothing is more desirable for the Summer than a good season of good light opera. The beginning made here is extremely promising, not only because of what has been done, and the public patronage secured, but also even more for what can be done in the future in this medium, and also because of higher demands likely to be made eventually by the public. An evening performance of that somewhat antiquated but in places amusing operetta of the halcyon days of Lulu Glaser, "Dolly Vardon," is a case in point. The stage setting was fully adequate to the needs of the occasion and very beautiful, with its background of trees and the two giant elms that stand on each side of the scene. The chorus, which numbers ninety-six, consisting of trained amateurs with a salting of professionals, was fairly efficient for the second night of an edition to the repertory, though the tone is not very round or

opulent. The orchestra of about fifty from the St. Louis Symphony was as good an orchestra for an open-air performance as need be, though it should be larger. There is an excellent conductor, Charles Frevin, admirable in his grasp, authority and musicianship. The soloists were mediocre and much worse. Better things could be done, with such resources. With an eager public and a profitable one; with a really superb theatre; with ample financial resources, a bigger orchestra, better artists, a more finished ensemble, could certainly be had for money. It should be added that in the opinion of many habitués of this theatre the opera and the performances here discussed were held to be considerably poorer than earlier performances of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Ruddigore" and De Koven's "Rob Roy." Whether this is so or not, it did seem that the artistic direction of this theatre owed more to its patronage. This is likely to come, if only because certain patrons seated near, and audible, implied a public desire for something better. And the public wins.

We come again to the origins and purposes of the new Garden Theatre. In due course, at the Municipal Theatre, the Fashion Show met with a man mentioned as a genius with lighting, Joseph Solari. He made of this spectacle such effects of color and light as had not been conceived before. His art impressed Flint Garrison, one of the wealthy men of the city and one of those most interested in the Fashion Show, to such an extent that Mr. Garrison conceived of a new theatre, more modest in proportions and possibly of more complete lighting facilities than the older and larger theatre, "for Mr. Solari to play with." Hence the Garden Theatre, which promises to reflect additional reputation upon the city to which it owes its existence, which is planned to be self-supporting if possible, but, first instead of last, to serve art—a theatre that owes its beginnings to the advertising activities of business men.

This theatre is not municipal in any of its features. It is organized through a real estate company that has been formed and an operating company that rents the theatre from the real estate organization, the whole representing a capitalization of \$160,000, and the arrangement so contrived that the artistic control of the theatre rests in the hands of Mr. Garrison and Mr. Solari. The new theatre is not on a hill, but is built up of concrete. The hill which is before the Municipal Theatre is behind this one, and forms a kind of a natural back drop. This accords entirely with Mr. Solari's modern technique of outdoor scenography, in which buildings and properties are on the natural scale with the trees and surrounding objects; with three dimensional properties; with simplicity for the keynote of the representation, and "atmosphere" secured entirely by means of lighting. The electrical current at Mr. Solari's disposal will be half again as powerful as that used by University City near by, and he has his station during the performance, with his keyboards at hand, in a place that corresponds to the prompter's box, though far enough from the stage for the electrical director to be cognizant every second of the effect of his directions and manipulations.

In these open-air theatres St. Louis has been a pioneer among American cities and a leader in a movement which is spreading rapidly through the Middle West. On the two coasts, for various reasons, orchestral music flourishes. New York has the Stadium concerts in the Summer time. Boston has its fully patronized "Pop" season. There is the Summer season of thirty-two symphonic programs, and probably the first performance in America of Strauss's "Joseph's Legend," in Los Angeles. In the Middle West it is Summer opera that appeals most to the public. In St. Louis this entertainment outrivals the movies during the hot weather, which, even in hot weather, says something. It may be remarked parenthetically that orchestrally the situation in St. Louis is not at present at all favorable to the Winter symphonic performances, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra facing a very serious problem on the 1st of next January of the renewal of guarantees for large deficits. But the Summer opera and theatre enterprises are not only flourishing hereabout, they are a very popular expression and fertile in possibilities for the future.