

THEATRE BIRTH & FLAMES - ACT 3

Henry Van Liew: founder of The People's Theater

Azlene: Van Liew's foster 'daughter'

James: Henry's stage builder/assistant

Sallie St. Claire: the best variety entertainer

Schuyler Colfax: Visiting Indiana representative
Newspaper 1

HERALD

Welcome back to Theatre Birth and Flames. The People's Theatre, the first real theater in town - and our The Third episode. Van Liew and the Company made it through two years, changing casts, different directions. Now 1859, a terrified economy and upcoming war. Remember, that Civil War thing? The country is pulling itself apart at the seams.

In St. Paul, Van Liew and The People's Theater are holding together with nerve and unpaid invoices. But the season, against all reason, is the best one yet.

NEWSPAPER 1

The Pioneer Press acknowledges, finally, that the People's Theatre brought "the finest season of drama this city has witnessed."

HERALD

But temporary excitement can't paint over a mess. The fearless - or at least pretending to be fearless - Henry Van Liew? Well, dealing with dollar reality.

VAN LIEW

(to self) Maybe all the world is not a 'stage'. Maybe it's battle.

Azlene, Sallie, James! We must convene!

AZLENE

We're coming! What's going on?

VAN LIEW

I..we... can't keep going. The People's Theater is taking a break.

HERALD

What?!

SALLIE

What does that mean?

JAMES

But you still need a stagehand, right?

VAN LIEW

You've seen our ghosted house - People can't afford tickets. *(pause)* So we must stop too. For now.

AZLENE

What does 'for now' mean?

VAN LIEW

Until my investor comes through for the real theatre. The building. He's close..

JAMES

He's been close for eight months - a year. We- I - need steady income.

SALLIE

I got an offer. Clarksville. Yes, a VARIETY show. *(beat)* I wasn't going to take it - but Henry, I have to be somewhere that pays.

VAN LIEW

Sallie, we will do benefits. For the Republicans. They're still invested in our space and I with them.

SFX: a ping

SALLIE

Henry, I don't serve-I perform. I will miss you. All of you. You got me to do Hamlet.

VAN LIEW

(pause, then)

Go. To where you are honored.

SFX: footsteps, a door.

JAMES

Boss, if you need me - for an event. You know where I am. I'll help - if I can.

SFX: Another door.

AZLENE

I'm not going anywhere. For now.

SFX: music stops.

VAN LIEW

Azlene, yes the People's Theater will be quiet. But trust me. The investor will come through and next year...it will all new. New building, new people, birth again. We are entertainment, truth and beauty. I will do it again.

AZLENE

What? Oh, Yeah.

VAN LIEW

I will try - but sometimes....I fail.

AZLENE

I know.

SFX: steps, and another door closing.

SFX: A noisy theater.. Live reactions

HERALD

When you reach the bottom, sometime that's not far enough. September 28th, 1859, after weeks of no theatre, Van Liew hosts a Republican rally in support of Alexander Ramsey's bid for governor.

VAN LIEW

So dramatic! Galusha Grow of Pennsylvania spoke for one full hour. Now, Schuyler Colfax of Indiana— Ten minutes of brilliance already.

SCHUYLER COLFAX:

...Under God, man can have - and of right - *no owner* save himself. The word "slavery" - from constant use - fails to express the full weight of what it means. One human being, owned by another. One human being's children - owned. WE WILL NOT let our opponents bring this state into this state of reprehension that takes away the basic rights of humans..

VOICE IN CROWD

Smoke! I see smoke under the stage.

COLFAX

-- Under God -- um, civilization needs - does not need

VAN LIEW

I see it! A flame! Everyone out - Now! NOW!

AZLENE

The wind has set fire to the canvas!

COLFAX

We've been attacked!

VAN LIEW

Everyone run.. run.. the election will survive... but run.HELP!

SFX: Running, shouting, fire and
screams and then...

SILENCE. A coin dropping - into nothing.

NEWSPAPER1

Headline. The People's Theater - totally gone. Fifteen minutes and nothing left. No lives lost.

HERALD

It was never determined for sure whether it was the opposition...but most agreed it was planned. Ramsey did win eventually, but Van Liew's vision? Burned away.

VAN LIEW

May I say something? It was worth it. For the election. For the theatre. The speeches, the arguments, plays we couldn't afford... The funder that never came through. Azlene did duets with me after the fire - but then her life went elsewhere. As all daughters lives should.

(pause)

I loaded what was left on a barge going down the Mississippi.

(SFX: Diesel/Horn blasts)

(*Laugh*) But the barge sank. Yes. (*pause*) I lost more than everything twice. But I continued to do theatre until I died. With other people willing to believe a wooden shack with a canvas roof could hold some truth.

(quiet)

Henry Van Liew. The People's Theater. Look me up.

HERALD

The beginnings of St. Paul theater, a dedicated group of regional actors doing classical works (and some other stuff)... The Guthrie wasn't the first. But just two blocks away, The first was here - and it burned, and it mattered, and no courthouse built on top of it can change that.

(beat)

End of Story.

(beat)

For now.