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*From Broadway to Cleveland:
A History of the Hanna Theatre*
JOHN VACHA

**FROM
BROADWAY
TO
CLEVELAND**

A HISTORY OF THE
HANNA THEATRE

JOHN VACHA

THE
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*To “Mr. First-Nighter”—Milton Krantz
(1912–2006)*

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PREFACE

HOUSE OF LEGENDS

Spelling *theater* with the final two letters reversed—theatre—has come to be regarded as not only outdated but decidedly pretentious. Current practice calls for the modern American spelling consistently except in reference to theatrical houses that (pretentiously or not) maintained the British spelling as part of their proper name. Such happens to be the case with the subject of this book; but if any Cleveland playhouse has earned the right to the archaic form free from any intimations of pretension, it is the Hanna Theatre.

The Hanna is the final successor in a regal lineage of three commercial, legitimate houses that have held sway over the local theater scene. First came the Academy of Music, midway in the nineteenth century, which housed John Ellsler's nationally known stock company. After a quarter century of dominance, it was usurped by the fabled Euclid Avenue Opera House, built by Ellsler but owned through most of its history by Mark Hanna. The reign of the Opera House fell just short of half a century before it was replaced by the Hanna Theatre, built by Mark's son, Dan R. Hanna. With a pedigree traceable back to John Ellsler, the Hanna has managed to sustain a career longer than

those of its two forebears combined, having kept its marquee lit, save for a single eight-year hiatus, for nearly ninety years.

It was more than longevity that gave the Hanna its preeminence; as with superior acting, it was also a matter of timing. In the year prior to its opening, Eugene O'Neill had midwived the birth of modern American drama with *Beyond the Horizon* and *The Emperor Jones*. O'Neill and his disciples, from Maxwell Anderson and Robert E. Sherwood to Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, would be well represented in Hanna playbills. A couple of decades after O'Neill came the golden age of the American musical. *Oklahoma!* galvanized the Hanna stage in 1943, to be followed by other shows of Rodgers and Hammerstein and their peers.

For seven decades this Broadway-style house was the primary venue in Cleveland for touring shows out of New York. Between the demise of the Ohio as a legitimate house in 1934 and the revival of Playhouse Square in the eighties, it was for all practical purposes the only such show in town. A large percentage of the classics of the American stage, spoken and musical, had their Cleveland premieres at the Hanna. For three generations of Clevelanders, "I saw it at the Hanna" was a bragging point that could only be trumped by "We saw it in New York." Occasionally the normal pattern was reversed, however, and Clevelanders might see a show trying out at the Hanna before it was seen on Broadway.

What really set the Hanna apart from any other Cleveland stage was the cavalcade of stars who appeared within its proscenium. Some of the legendary figures who applied their makeup and contended with their butterflies in the Hanna's dressing rooms included Ethel and John Barrymore, the Marx Brothers, Katharine Cornell, Katharine Hepburn, Helen Hayes, Eva Le Gallienne, Henry Fonda, the Lunts (Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne), and Konstantin Stanislavsky. In later years many more left their marks on the famed Hanna curtain; all left more vivid, and hardly less-permanent marks in the memories of local theatergoers.

In putting together the story of this historic house, I am deeply indebted to many people for their assistance. As with the other volumes in the Cleveland Theater Series, Evelyn Ward and the staff of the Literature Department of the Cleveland Public Library were un-

failingly helpful in making resources available. Ruth Flannery, John Hemsath, and Dave Louis of the Playhouse Square Foundation provided access to their holdings on the Hanna Theatre as well as to the house itself, front and back. For assistance in locating pictures of the theater, performances, and personalities, thanks are due to William Barrow and the Special Collections staff of the Cleveland State University Library. I made extensive use of an interview I had conducted with Milton Krantz for an article several years ago. Interview subjects for this volume included Jack Abbott, Anita Dloniak, John Hemsath, Marion Huntington, Jacqi Loewy, Bob Noll, Diana Price, Wayne Turney, Gina Vernaci, and the late Don Grogan.

A special thanks goes to Barbara Thatcher Williams for sharing her forty-year collection of Hanna programs and other memorabilia. As always, I am grateful for the commitment of the Kent State University Press to this Cleveland Theater Series and for the unfailing support and encouragement of my wife, Ruta. Finally, an “A-plus” goes to Victoria Fox Nash for wiring her old teacher into the computer age.

With no apologies for the archaic spelling, then, let the curtain rise on the history of the Hanna Theatre.



A BROADWAY-STYLE HOUSE

(1921)

Thermometers had fallen steadily through the early hours of Monday, March 28, 1921—from 44 degrees at midnight to 28 degrees by noon. They were expected to drop further to 20 degrees that night. In other words, it was springtime in Cleveland.

That wasn't enough to deter some 1,500 hardy theatergoers that evening from converging downtown on East 14th Street, half a block south of Euclid Avenue. A stream of limousines, taxis, and sedans slowly rounded the corner of Prospect Avenue to drop off fashionable first-nighters in front of a theater lobby on the east side of the street. The marquee advertised William Faversham in an adaptation of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, but that wasn't the main attraction. Atop the marquee appeared the name HANNA in large caps. The expectant crowd had braved the elements to witness the baptism of Cleveland's newest theater.

Beneath the marquee was a partly sheltered alcove with display windows on either side. Four sets of bronze and glass doors extended completely across the entrance to the theater. Entering quickly out of the chill, patrons found themselves in a small, nearly square lobby.

If they saw little of the lobby's decor through the crowd, there wasn't much to see anyway. It was a functional space measuring a little over twenty feet in each direction and lighted by a single chandelier in the middle of the ceiling. Since the rear wall slanted off to the left, that side was a few feet longer than the other. Two fluted pilasters divided the right wall into three equal panels; three pilasters partitioned the left-hand wall into four, with a pair of barred box-office windows in the next-to-last space. With little to detain the eye or invite dawdling, the lobby efficiently moved its guests through the rear doors leading into the theater.

Many Clevelanders, surrendering their tickets to the takers at those doors, might have been surprised to find themselves practically in the theater itself. Those who had already attended two theatrical debuts that year might understandably have expected a good deal more in the way of a grand lobby. Early in February, a pair of new theaters had opened their doors on Euclid Avenue, just around the corner from the Hanna. Actually, the State and the Ohio theaters occupied real estate in the middle of the block, well back from prestigious Euclid Avenue. Making a virtue of necessity, the builder connected the theaters to the streetfront with a series of majestic lobbies, each taking theatergoers back through antechambers of increasing magnitude, lined with Corinthian columns and culminating in marble staircases leading to the balcony levels. The lobby of the State, a huge movie and vaudeville house, was particularly awesome. Billed as the world's largest lobby, with colorful murals and a massive fireplace, it seemed an amalgamation of a first-class hotel lobby and a downtown banking room.

By way of contrast, once past the ticket taker at the Hanna, patrons found themselves in a shallow foyer, only a half-dozen determined steps from the rear of the orchestra section. No soaring columns or expansive murals here; only painted plaster walls with faux provincial moldings. Three chandeliers swung barely a good jump above the heads of the taller theatergoers in the crowd. A men's room opened off to the right, balanced on the other side by a coatroom behind a "dwarf door." Instead of the grand marble staircases of the State and Ohio, carpeted stairways on either side of the Hanna's foyer led between unadorned walls to the combined mezzanine and balcony level.

They were connected at the top by a long, narrow hallway winding along the rear of the mezzanine, with a restroom at either end but little more in the way of creature comforts. “There is nothing gaudy or spectacular about the house,” noted the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. “Some, indeed, may wonder at the simplicity evidenced in many of its details.” In the obvious understatement throughout the front of its house, the Hanna seemed to be saying, “The play’s the thing.”



One of the things that set the Hanna apart from the beginning was its crowded foyer, seen during an intermission, and lobby. In this respect the theater on East 14th Street was closer in spirit to a Broadway house than to its comparatively luxurious Playhouse Square neighbors on Euclid Avenue. *Cleveland Press* Collection.

In time the Hanna's relative lack of ostentation gave it the distinction of being a "Broadway-style" house. Most of the legitimate houses raised in New York's crowded theater district during this period could spare little space for superfluous amenities. They were located not on the Great White Way of Broadway itself but on the narrow, numbered side streets of the West Forties branching off of Times Square. The Hanna emulated them in this respect too, with its location on East 14th, just off Cleveland's own great white way of Euclid Avenue.

The theater itself was part of a larger complex reared by Cleveland industrialist and publisher Daniel Rhodes Hanna as a memorial to his father, the late U.S. Senator Mark A. Hanna. First came a sixteen-story office tower, the Hanna Building, on the slightly acute angle of Euclid and East 14th Street. Designed by New York architect Charles A. Platt, it wore a classical facade of Indiana limestone reputedly inspired by the Pitti Palace in Florence. Behind the main building, a matching eight-story annex was added at the obtuse angle of East 14th and Prospect and linked to its larger partner by a seven-story bridge over Brownell Court. Ensnared within this annex was the new theater, which was referred to during the construction phase as the Shubert, after the New York producing organization that had undertaken to manage it as a roadhouse. Before the opening, however, perhaps recalling that his father had once been the owner of the prestigious Euclid Avenue Opera House, Dan Hanna had raised the family name above the marquee.

If the front of the house was somewhat spare in compass and decor, the Hanna's auditorium made handsome amends. It was designed by Platt, but the decorations were largely the work of Faustino Sampietro. Described as "Pompeian" in motif, they featured walls of straw-colored travertine offset by green and gold carpets and dark green seats with leather bottoms and rep fabric backs. There were 827 seats on the orchestra level, arranged in twenty-four rows spaced not twenty-six inches, as specified by the building codes, but thirty-one inches apart at the insistence of Dan Hanna. Even that proved too constrictive for the six-foot-four owner, who tried out a seat he wanted in the fifth row and ordered, "Give me more room." Consequently, there were thirty-five inches between the fourth and fifth rows, a little-known fact of which one knowledgeable *Plain Dealer* critic later took advantage in choosing his own regular seat.

Opening off the orchestra on stage right was a lounge in the European fashion, with frescoed walls, a fireplace, parquet floors, and Louis XVI gilt furniture. Women, it was pointedly observed, were encouraged as much as men to light up a “festive cigarette” here. The refreshment bar was necessarily dry, however, no doubt patiently awaiting the abandonment of the nation’s recently inaugurated experiment with Prohibition. Next to the lounge entrance, a passage led to the ladies’ “retiring room” at the rear of the orchestra. On either side of the orchestra was a single box, seating twelve apiece, situated just below the mezzanine level. Both the mezzanine and the balcony were contained in the Hanna’s sole upper deck, which could seat a total of 570 patrons. There were four rows in the mezzanine, divided by a crossover aisle from the ten rows in the upper balcony. Added to the orchestra and boxes, the balcony level brought the Hanna’s overall capacity to 1,421. From the upper balcony to the front of the orchestra, the price scale for that night ascended from one dollar to three.

They may not have had their own lounge, but denizens of the mezzanine and balcony enjoyed one advantage over those in the orchestra: a close-up view of Sampietro’s *pièce de résistance*, the Hanna’s magnificent coffered ceiling. It was composed of rows of alternating circular and octagonal medallions, separated by gilded borders and interstices. Against a deep greenish-blue background, each medallion contained a gilded figure: “Dragons and flying cupids, Psyche, Pegasus, merhorses—all enter into the scheme,” said the *Plain Dealer*; “classic figures such as might have graced the buildings of the ancient city of Pompeii before it fell victim to Vesuvius.” Four large chandeliers containing electric bulbs arranged in concentric circles lighted the ceiling as well as the auditorium below. Above the proscenium Sampietro spread a series of Hellenic landscapes. Further out, on the front of the sounding-board arch and visible only from the balcony, were graven the names of the giants of dramatic literature: IBSEN · AESCHYLUS · VICTOR HUGO · SHERIDAN · SHAKSPERE [*sic*] · EURIPIDES · MOLIÈRE · CALDERÓN · GOLDONI · GOETHE. (Shakespeare would be well represented in years to come on the stage below; Euripedes, Molière, Sheridan, and Ibsen would have their moments; as for the rest, getting their names on the ceiling would have to suffice.)

Once they managed to bring their eyes back to ground level, a gala first-night audience, comprising “the best in cultural, social and

financial life of the city” in the words of one critic, expressed satisfaction with the surroundings. Visiting dignitaries were generous with their compliments. “It’s the most beautiful and perfectly constructed dramatic theater in America and that means the finest in the world,” said Lee Shubert, half of the leasing firm of Lee and J. J. Shubert Enterprises. “I have no hesitancy in saying that while there may be many theaters that are larger, there is no more perfect theater in the world for the uses to which the Hanna will be put—that is, to cater to Cleveland audiences with high grade theatrical entertainment,” continued the man who would be doing the catering. “Here are elegance, dignity and beauty mixed with intimacy,” observed Julie Opp from one of the side boxes, a vantage point she rated for being the wife of the night’s star, William Faversham. “Don’t you wish,” she asked Lee Shubert, “that you could put this theater on four wheels and push it down Broadway?”

What the audience couldn’t see, the back of the house, was nevertheless described as exemplary of the best in the modern theater in its equipage. Behind its thirty-six-foot proscenium, the Hanna offered a stage forty feet in width by forty in depth. A modern switchboard controlled the five border lights across the stage, and an illuminated signboard facilitated the manipulation of the counterweights that shifted the scenery. Between the outer curtain and one of asbestos was a “water curtain” that could shut off the stage from the rest of the house with a fireproof wall.

Beyond the wings on stage right were the dressing rooms. There were suites for the star and costar at stage level, two generous rooms on the level above, separated by the staircase, and five rooms apiece on the third and fourth levels. “Each dressing room has outside air and light, hot and cold running water,” boasted the Hanna’s opening-night Souvenir Program. “The stars’ apartment includes a reception room, tub and shower bath.” In the basement were three more dressing rooms for the chorus, plus rooms for properties, electricians, and musicians. One feature noted by many out front was the Hanna’s orchestra pit. Though a comparatively shallow eighteen inches in depth, it was an innovation apparently lacking in some older houses. “If that also sinks the director at a musical show it has my applause!” rejoiced George Davis in the *Cleveland Press*.

Precisely at 8:15 Max Faetkenheuer, veteran maestro of many a Cleveland theater orchestra, stepped into the pit to get the evening underway. First came “The Star Spangled Banner,” a custom still in force from the fairly recent days of the First World War. Then, to the sprightly cadences of the march from Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*, the Hanna’s green and gold damask curtain rose for the first time on Act I of *The Prince and the Pauper*.

This particular adaptation of Mark Twain’s tale of mistaken identity in Tudor England was prepared by Amélie Rives. Like an earlier dramatization by Abby Sage Richardson, it called for look-alikes Prince Edward Tudor and pauper Tom Canty to be played by the same actor—or in this case, an actress in tights. Ruth Findlay assumed the dual title role at the Hanna, with Faversham taking the part of Miles Hendon, the soldier of fortune who befriends the rightful prince and helps restore him to his throne. It was a nonmusical version, with Faetkenheuer’s men confined to mood or entr’acte pieces such as Edward German’s *Nell Gwyn* dances. Some critics have regarded the single casting of the title role as a fatal weakness, since it precluded the possibility of any scenes between the two characters. Archie Bell of the *Cleveland News* wasn’t of their number, praising Findlay as “a youthful Maude Adams. . . . It is a big order, this dual role, and she characterizes both individuals in a distinct and natural manner that is delightful.” Faversham was praised for feeding Findlay dramatically and keeping the limelight on the “boy.”

Entering the twilight of a long and distinguished career, William Faversham remained a Cleveland favorite. At the end of the second of four acts, the audience persisted in its applause until the star favored them with an unscheduled curtain speech—the evening’s only nod to the significance of the occasion. “Cleveland is a city that loves the theater, one that has done much for the actor and the institution in all departments,” noted Faversham in rising to the occasion. “Now tonight we are celebrating another event in the theatrical life of Cleveland, and Cleveland is to be congratulated upon the acquisition of this beautiful playhouse.” His words were recorded by Archie Bell, who couldn’t resist adding his own impression that in twenty years of “viewing the theaters of all countries,” he had never seen one “so perfectly adapted to the drama” as the Hanna. “Many others are



Chosen to launch Cleveland's newest theater on March 28, 1921, was veteran actor William Faversham, who had appeared as Algernon in the American premiere of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "Cleveland is to be congratulated upon the acquisition of this beautiful playhouse," he remarked in a gracious curtain speech between the acts of *The Prince and the Pauper*. On this one night, at least, the play was upstaged by the theater itself. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 20, 1921.

larger, more ornate in decoration, many state subventioned houses represent more vast expenditure of money; but for the presentation of plays and the comfort and luxury afforded patrons, none equals it, so far as my observations go."

Cleveland in 1921 was on the threshold of one of the most expansive decades of its history. With a population of more than three-quarters of a million, it was billing itself as the nation's "Fifth City." Though it had surrendered leadership in the growing automobile industry to Detroit, it was still a leader in the manufacture of auto parts and a major player in steel, paints, electrical equipment, and Great Lakes shipping. Having amassed significant fortunes in business and industry, it was now reinvesting that wealth in projects of civic and cultural improvement. The last half of the previous decade had seen the opening of the Cleveland Museum of Art and the debut of the Cleveland Orchestra. The first years of the twenties would see the completion of a new Public Auditorium, one of the country's largest, and a new main building for the Cleveland Public Library to house what would become one of the nation's largest collections of books.

Theaters too were seen as a sign of cultural maturity. With the opening of the Hanna, noted the *Cleveland Press*, “That will make four theaters here presenting high-price stage shows of standard quality—a jump from two in January to four in April.” Besides the new Ohio and Hanna, the *Press* included the Euclid Avenue Opera House and the Shubert-Colonial in this select circle of legitimate downtown houses. Both of the older theaters were located in the former center of the business district, west of East 9th Street. The center of the business district as well as the theater district was shifting decidedly eastward, however. A few days after the Hanna’s debut, a new movie theater, the Allen, opened alongside the Ohio and the State on upper Euclid Avenue. The area was referred to in the *Press* as “Cleveland’s new theatrical Main Street, which some call Play House Square. (It’s not a square, but the name’s not bad.)” Indeed, compressed to Playhouse Square, it was good enough to stick for close to a century.

Despite the two new legitimate houses, vaudeville was still the dominant format in live theater, both in Cleveland and elsewhere. Cleveland’s largest theater, the Hippodrome on lower Euclid, was now a vaudeville house under the management of the B. F. Keith chain. Vaudeville also reigned downtown at the Star, the Priscilla, the Empire, and between movie showings at the new Loew’s State. The Shubert organization was also putting together a vaudeville circuit of some forty cities, including Cleveland. If he couldn’t get the Hippodrome, Lee Shubert said he wanted to build another new Cleveland theater. “The circuit will be instituted in September,” he told the *Plain Dealer* the week of the Hanna’s opening. “If we could complete a new theater by October, we would delay until that time.” As it turned out, it was Keith’s partner, Edward Albee, who gave Cleveland a new vaudeville house the following year. It was the magnificent Palace at Euclid Avenue and East 17th, the final jewel in the crown of Playhouse Square.

Few would have guessed it at the time, but vaudeville was actually entering the final act of its career. Two new forms of mass entertainment, radio and the movies, would nail down most of vaudeville’s coffin by the end of the decade. As the Hanna and Ohio were going up, the *Plain Dealer* counted more than twenty theaters in the process of construction throughout the city, the majority of them intended for the cinema. Especially after the introduction of talkies in 1927,

even flagship vaudeville houses such as the Hipp and the Palace would be converted into movie theaters. Some of the older or smaller ones would simply be razed in the name of progress.

Among the theaters that failed to make the cut was the once-proud Euclid Avenue Opera House. Its fate was predetermined by the shift of theatrical activity from East 4th to East 14th Street and the Hanna family's investment in the newer district. Mark Hanna's old theater carried on for another year, largely on movies and vaudeville, with an occasional flashback to the glory days occasioned by visits of such luminaries as Ethel Barrymore and Otis Skinner. The final curtain descended on April 2, 1922, a year after the opening of the Hanna. After a farewell gala including scenes from *The Bohemian Girl* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Euclid Avenue Opera House made way for a commercial development.

Meanwhile, the Hanna finished what remained of its foreshortened inaugural season in Playhouse Square. Following a week's run for *The Prince and the Pauper*, the new theater hosted a typical product of the Shubert musical factory: *The Passing Show of 1919*. It was the Shubert brothers' version of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, a mélange of comedy sketches and musical numbers barely held together by a central theme and dominated overall by the inevitable female chorus line. This particular edition had visited Cleveland's Shubert-Colonial earlier, and the *Plain Dealer* concluded that "the opening last evening lacked the pep and vigor which characterized the first appearance here."

Somewhat more substantial fare came the next week with the fantasy *Smilin' Through*. As described by Archie Bell in the *Cleveland News*, playwright Allan Langdon Martin had "cleverly adapted motion picture technique to the speaking theater" by inserting a "flashback" scene between the two framing acts. Like Ruth Findlay in *The Prince and the Pauper*, actress Jane Cowl was called upon to portray two different characters—one in the outer scenes and another in the flashback. "She paints the two as distinct and unlike as the lines will permit, for there is a similarity in their lives and conditions," noted Bell. If so, the star had only herself to blame, for it appears that she was actually a coauthor of those lines, working with a collaborator under a nom de plume. Even so, the vehicle was a great success, and Jane Cowl became the first in a long line of leading ladies who would



Seen a few weeks after the opening of the Hanna Theatre in 1921 is the Hanna Building Annex at East 14th Street and Prospect Avenue. Obscured partly by a utility pole at left is the theater's original marquee, apparently similar in style to the metal and glass marquee that was preserved at the nearby Allen Theatre. Featured at the Hanna that week was Guy Bates Post in *The Masquerader*. Cleveland Public Library.

hold center stage at the Hanna in years to come. Among her half a dozen or so visits was one as an especially memorable Juliet.

After *Smilin' Through*, it was two more weeks of Shubert musical fluff. First came *Jim Jam Jems* starring Joe E. Brown and featuring a chorus line of fifteen that, in the words of the *Press*, "combines looks with singing ability." One of the numbers that tested their ability was "Show Me the Town." *Pitter Patter* was the title of the next musical, derived no doubt from its special scenic effect of a rainstorm. Ernest Truex played a downwardly mobile young man who goes from soda jerk to demolition man in a copper mine. "The music is not particularly tuneful, nor the chorus particularly expert," judged the *Press*.

Dual roles were quite the vogue at the Hanna that first season, for then Guy Bates Post came in to play a journalist and a member of Parliament in *The Masquerader*. It was a popular English melodrama in which the MP meets his double in a London fog and persuades him to take his place, evidently to cover his morphine habit. Complications ensue when the journalist not only fills the parliamentary