

# A Tragedy Remembered

*The Iroquois Theatre fire alerted the country to the need for improved fire safety regulations in theaters. But for those who were there, it was a horror they could never forget. Here's one man's account of that fateful day in 1903.*

*"Instantly, I knew there was something deadly wrong. It could be nothing else but fire!"*

These are the words of Eddie Foy, an actor who was preparing to go on stage on December 30, 1903, at Chicago's Iroquois Theatre when flames swept through the building, killing 602 people and injuring 250 others in minutes. The blaze, which was probably started by an open arc spotlight touching a border drop, caused the greatest loss of life ever in a theater fire in the United States.

Most of those who died succumbed to smoke inhalation and burns. However, many others were trampled to death in the panic. Approximately 70 percent of the deaths occurred in the gallery; the remainder were in the balcony. Comparatively few people on the main floor lost their lives, thanks to numerous exits and the fact that the fire was drawn upward by the draft.

Although the building itself was of fire-resistive construction, it was woefully lacking in certain fire protection features. An asbestos curtain that was meant to protect the audience in the event of fire didn't function properly. Two automatic venti-

lators that had been installed near the stage weren't finished and were fastened shut. Exits weren't properly marked, and the gallery didn't have a main exit of its own. Fire protection appliances were lacking, and no fire alarm box had been installed. The attendants hadn't been drilled for emergencies. And there were no sprinklers over the stage.

Foy was appearing in "Mr. Blue Beard," playing the leading comedy character Sister Anne. The play included a flying ballet in which the lead dancer soared from the stage, out over the heads of the audience on a trolley wire—which was destined to play a tragic part in the fire.

The following is Eddie Foy's eyewitness account of the events that occurred that fateful day in Chicago.

## In a fool's paradise

The theater was one of the finest that had yet been built in this country—a palace of marble and plate glass, plush and mahogany and gilding. It had a magnificent promenade foyer, like an old-world palace hall, with a ceiling 60 feet from the floor and grand staircases ascending on either side. Backstage, it was far and away the most com-

ed out that we had mistakenly listed this fire as occurring in 1907 in our last issue.)



**Eddie Foy and a charred program found in the Iroquois Theatre after the blaze.**

## DID YOU KNOW?

A fire in the Grand Central terminal yard in New York City points to the dangers of transporting hazardous materials.

On March 28, a fire sweeps through the Hungarian town of Okorito, killing 320 people.

**1911**  
The Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in New York City kills 145. It is the worst peacetime industrial multiple-death fire in this century to date. (Thanks to the observant reader who point-

*There had been no great theater disaster in this country for many years, and all precautions against such a thing were greatly relaxed.*

modious I had ever seen . . .

We were told that the theater was the very last word in efficiency, convenience, and, most important of all, in safety. It is true that the building itself was probably as nearly fireproof as a building can be made; but because of certain omissions—some careless and made in the interest of economy—it was a fool's paradise. There had been no great theater disaster in this country for many years, and all precautions against such a thing were greatly relaxed.

#### **Gorgeous but dangerous**

We drew big crowds all through Christmas week. On Wednesday afternoon, December 30, at the bargain-price matinee, the house was packed, and many were standing. I tried to get passes for my wife and youngsters, but failed.

It was then that I decided that I should take only the eldest boy, Bryan, aged 6, to the show and stow him wherever I could.

I made one final effort to get a seat for him down in front, but found that there were none left, so I put him on a little stool in the first entrance at the right of the stage—a sort of alcove near the switchboard—and he liked that even better than being down in the seats.

It struck me as I looked out over the crowd during the first act that I had never before seen so many women and children in the audience. Even the gallery was full of mothers and children. There were several parties of girls in their teens.

Teachers and college and high school students on their vacations were there in great numbers.

The house seated a few more than 1,600. The managers declared afterward that they

sold only a few more than a hundred standing-room tickets, which would bring the total attendance to something over 1,700. The testimony of others indicated that there were many more standees than admitted by the management, and it was widely believed that there were at least 2,100 in the house—some reports claimed 2,300.



FIG. INTL.

**Eddie Foy preparing for his role in "Mr. Blue Beard" at the Knickerbocker Theatre in 1902.**

And remember that back of the curtain, counting the members of the company, stagehands, and so on, there were fully 400 more.

Much of the scenery used was of a very flimsy character. Hanging suspended by a forest of ropes above the stage and so close together that they were well-nigh touching each other were no less than 280 drops, several of which were necessary to each set, all painted with oil colors, the great majority of them cut into delicate lacy, and some of them of sheer gauze.

There had been a fire among the fluffy properties used in the big fan scene during our engagement in Cleveland, but, by a piece of luck, it was quickly subdued, and I had been playing in theaters for so long without any trouble with fire that the incident didn't give me much of a scare.

It takes a disaster to make one cautious.

After our experience at the Iroquois, not 1 in 10 of us actors (and I dare say other people would have been equally heedless) could remember whether we had ever seen any fire extinguishers, fire hose, axes, or other apparatus back of the stage. Some testimony was given which seemed to indicate that precautions of this sort had been woefully inadequate.

The play went merrily through the first act. At the beginning of the second act, a double octette—eight men and eight women—had a very pretty number called "In the Pale Moonlight." The stage was flooded with bluish light while they sang and danced. It was then that the trouble began.

In spite of some slight conflict of opinion, there can be no doubt that one of the big lights high up at one side of the stage blew out its fuse. That was what had caused the Cleveland blaze, and it was well known to the electricians of the company that, in order to obtain the desired lighting effects, they were carrying too heavy a load of power on the wires. Anyhow, a bit of the gauzy drapery caught fire at the right of the stage, some 12 or 15 feet above the floor.

I was to come on in a few minutes for my turn with the comic elephant, and I was in my dressing room making up, as I wore a slightly different outfit in this scene. I heard a commotion outside, and my first idle thought was, "I wonder if they're fighting down there again"—for there had been a row a few days before among the supers and stagehands. But the noise swelled in volume, and suddenly I became frightened. I jerked my door open, and instantly I knew there was something deadly wrong. It could be nothing else but fire!

My first thought was for Bryan, and I ran downstairs and around into the wings. Probably not 40

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

### **1911**

New York City creates a Committee on Safety, which leads directly to the formation of NFPA's Safety to Life Committee.

### **1912**

There is a fire in the Equitable Building in New York City. ►



NFPA

seconds had elapsed since I heard the first commotion—but already the terror was beginning.

When the blaze was first discovered, two stagehands tried to extinguish it. One of them, it is said, strove to beat it out with a stick or a piece of canvas or something else, but it was too far above his head. Then he or the other man got one of those fire extinguishers consisting of a small tin tube of powder and tried to throw the stuff on the flame, but it was ridiculously inadequate. Meanwhile, in the audience, those far around on the opposite side, and especially those near the stage, could see the blaze and the men fighting it, and they began to get frightened.

The flame spread through those tinderlike fabrics with terrible rapidity. If the drop first ignited could have been instantly separated from the others, the calamity might have been averted, but that was impossible. Within a minute, the flame was beyond possibility of control by anything but a fire hose. Probably not even a big fire extinguisher could have stopped it by that time.

Why no attempt was made to use any such apparatus, or whether, indeed, it was in working order, I don't know. If the house force had ever had any fire drills, there was no evidence of it in their actions. The stage manager was absent at the moment, and several of the stagehands were in a saloon across the street. No one had even taken the trouble to see that a fire alarm box was located in or near the theater, and a stagehand ran all the way to South Water Street to turn in the alarm.

As I ran around back of the rear drop, I could hear the murmur of excitement growing in the audience. Somebody had of course yelled "fire"—there is almost always a fool of that species in an audience and sometimes several of them—and there are always hundreds of poorly balanced people who go crazy the moment they hear the word. I ran around into the wings, shouting for Bryan. The lower borders on that side were all aflame, and the blaze was leaping up into the flies. On the stage, those brave boys and girls, bless them, were still singing and doing their steps, though the girls' voices were beginning to falter a little.

### Foy's greatest role

I found my boy in his place, though getting much frightened. I seized him and started toward the rear. But all those women and children out in front haunted me—the hundreds of little ones who would be helpless, trodden underfoot in a panic. I must—I must do what I could to save them!

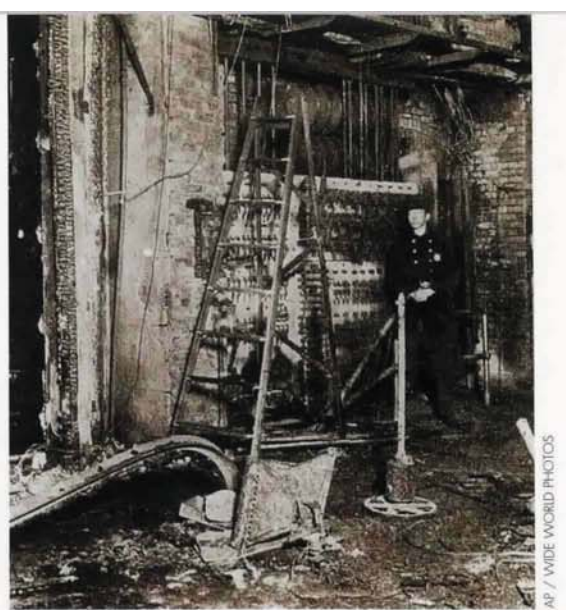
I tossed Bryan into the arms of a stagehand, crying, "Take my boy out!" I paused a moment to

watch him running toward the rear doors, then I turned and ran out on the stage, right through the ranks of the octette, still tremblingly doing their part, though the scenery was blazing over them. But as I reached the footlights, one of the girls fainted and one of the men picked her up and carried her off.

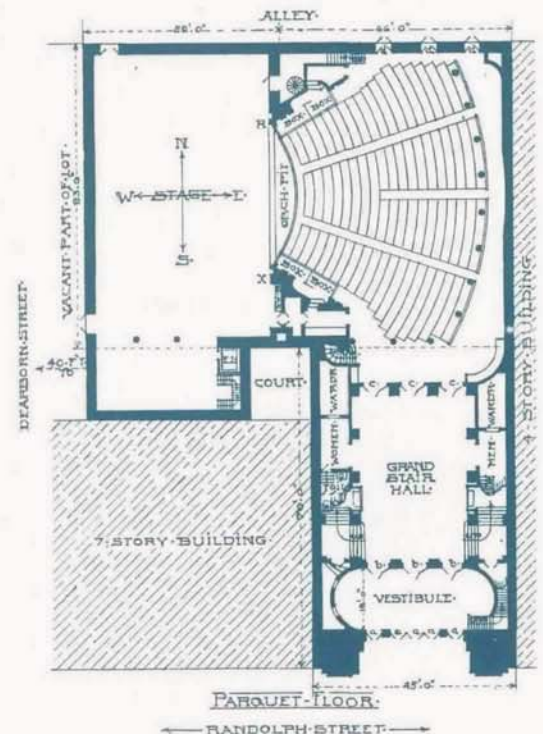
I was a grotesque figure to come before an audience at so serious an occasion; tights and comic shoes, a short smock—a sort of abbreviated Mother Hubbard—and a wig with a ridiculous little pigtail curving upward from the back of my head.

The crowd was beginning to surge toward the doors and already showing signs of a stampede—those on the lower floor were not so badly frightened as those in the more dangerous balcony and gallery. Up there, they were falling into panic.

Oh, if only I possessed an overmastering personality and eloquence that could quiet them! If only I could do 50 things at once—why didn't the asbestos curtain come down? I began shouting at the top of my voice, "Don't get excited. There's no danger. Take it easy"—and to Dillea, the orchestra leader, "Play! Start an overture—anything! But play!" . . . Some of his musicians were fleeing, but a few, and especially a fat German violinist, stuck nobly . . . "Take your time, folks. (Wonder if that man got out with Bryan?) No danger!"—and sideways into the wings, "The asbestos curtain! For God's sake, don't anybody know how to lower this



AP / WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



**Top: Damage to the area where the fire started.**

**Bottom: The floor plan of the theater showing streets and exits.**

## DID YOU KNOW?

The British ocean liner Titanic hits an iceberg and sinks in the North Atlantic, killing 1,503 people.

## 1913

The Binghamton Clothing Factory fire, which kills 35, results in a new standard for building exits. ▶



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*It struck me as I looked out over the crowd during the first act that I had never before seen so many women and children in the audience.*

**Eddie Foy and the College Girls in "The Orchid."**



CULVER PICTURES, INC.

curtain? Go slow, people! You'll get out!"

I stood perfectly still, and when addressing the audience, spoke slowly, knowing that these signs of self-possession have a calming effect on a crowd. Those on the lower floor heard me and seemed to be reassured a little, but up above, and especially in the gallery, I could see them surging, fighting, milling about in the flickering light, a horde of maniacs.

Down came the curtain slowly, two-thirds of the way—and stopped, one end higher than the other, caught on the wire on which the girl made her flight over the audience, and which had just been raised into position for her coming feat! Instead of being fastened in a rigid frame sliding in grooves at the side, the curtain hung loose, and the strong draft, coming through the back doors by which the troupe were fleeing, bellied the slack of the curtain in a wide arc out into the auditorium, letting the draft and flame through its sides. "Lower it! Cut the wire!" I yelled. "Don't be frightened, folks; go slow! (Oh, God, maybe that man didn't take Bryan out!) No danger! Play, Dillea!"

Below me, Dillea was still swinging his baton, and that brave, fat little German was still fiddling alone and furiously, but no one could hear him now, for the roar of the flames was added to the roar of the mob . . .

Then came a cyclonic blast of fire from the stage out into the auditorium—possibly a great mass of scenery suddenly ignited and was fanned by a stronger gust, though some insist that the gas tanks exploded—a flash and a roar as when a

heap of loose powder is fired all at once. A huge billow of flame leaped out past me and over me and seemed to reach even to the balconies. Many of the spectators described it as an "explosion" or a "great ball of fire." A shower of blazing fragments fell over me and set my wig smoldering. A fringe on the edge of the curtain just above my head was burning, and as I glanced up, the

curtain itself was disintegrating. It was thin and not wire-reinforced: another cheat!

Now the last of the musicians fled. I could do nothing more—might as well go too. But by this time, the inferno behind me was so terrible that I wondered whether I could escape that way; per-

haps it were better through the auditorium. I hesitated momentarily, but Bryan had gone out by the rear—if he had gone out at all—and I was irresistibly drawn to follow, that I might learn his fate more quickly.

### **He stuck to the last**

I think I was the last man on the stage; I fairly had to grope my way through flame and smoke to reach the Dearborn Street stage door, which was still jammed with our people getting out. Some of those dressing under the stage had to break down doors or escape through coal chutes. The actors and stage employees nearly all escaped—saved by the failure of the asbestos curtain to come down, which let the bulk of the flame roll out into the auditorium and brought death to many in the audience.

The flying ballet went out as I did, rescued through the heroism of the elevator boy, who ran his car up through tips of flame to the scorching flies where they stood awaiting their turn, and brought them down. But one of them, Nellie Read, the premiere, was so badly burned that she died in a hospital a day or two later.

As I left the stage, the last of the ropes holding up the drops burned through, and with them the whole loft collapsed with a terrifying crash, bringing down tons of burning material—and at that, all the lights in the house went out and another great balloon of flame leaped out into the auditorium, licking even the ceiling and killing scores who had not yet succeeded in escaping from the gallery.

The horror in the auditorium was beyond all description. There were 30 exits, but few of them were marked by lights; some even had heavy portieres over the doors, and some of the doors were locked or fastened with levers which no one knew how to work.

When one balcony exit was opened, those who surged out on the platform found that they could not descend the steps because flames were leaping from the exit below them. Some painters in a building across a narrow court threw a ladder over to the platform. A man started crawling over it. One end of it slipped off the landing, and he fell, crushed, on the stones below. The painters then succeeded in bridging the gap with a plank, and just 12 people crossed that narrow footpath to safety.

### **Eight minutes of horror**

The twelfth was pursued by a tongue of flame which dashed against the wall of the opposite building—and no more escaped. The iron platform was crowded with women and children. Some

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

### **1913**

The first *efficient* single-driving and pumping engine is developed.

The *Building Exits Code*, later known as the *Life Safety Code*, is published.

### **1914**

Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, precipitates World War I.

The Panama Canal opens.

died right there; others crawled over the railing and fell to the pavement. The iron railings were actually torn off some of the platforms.

But it was inside the house that the greatest loss of life occurred, especially on the stairways leading down from the second balcony. The struggle there must have been one of the most hideous things in the history of the human race.

The stairways were one long mass of bodies, and wherever turns or landings caused a worse jam, they were piled 7 or 8 feet deep. Firemen and police confronted a sickening task in disentangling them. An occasional body still breathing faintly was drawn from the heaps, but most of these were terribly injured. The heel prints on the dead faces mutely testified to the cruel fact that human animals stricken by terror are as mad and ruthless as stampeding cattle. Many bodies had the clothes torn from them, and some had the flesh trodden from their bones.

Never elsewhere did a great fire disaster occur so quickly. It is said that from the start of the fire until all the audience had either escaped or been killed or were lying maimed in the halls and alleys, the time was just 8 minutes. In that 8 minutes, more than 500 lives went out.

The fire department arrived quickly after the alarm and extinguished the fire in the auditorium so promptly that no more than the plush upholstery was burned off the seats, the wooden parts remaining intact. But when a fire chief thrust his head through a side exit and shouted, "Is anybody alive in here?" not a sound was heard in reply. The few not dead were insensible or dying.

Within 10 minutes from the beginning of the fire, bodies were being laid in rows on the sidewalks, and all the ambulances and dead wagons in the city could not keep up with the ghastly harvest. Within 24 hours, Chicago knew that at least 587 were dead, and fully as many more injured. Subsequent deaths among the injured brought the list up to 602.

As I rushed out of the theater, I could think of nothing but my boy. I became more and more frightened; as I neared the street, I was certain he hadn't got out. But when I reached the sidewalk and looked around wildly, there he was with his faithful friend, just outside the door. I seized him in my arms and turned toward the hotel. At that moment, I longed only to see my family all together and to thank God that we were all still alive.

It was a thinly clad mob which poured out of the stage doors into the snow. The temperature was around zero, and an icy gale was howling through the streets. Many of the actors and actresses had had no opportunity to get street



UPI / BETTMANN

**Damage to the balcony.**

clothes or wraps, and some of the chorus girls who were dressing at the time of the fire were almost nude. Kindly people furnished wraps for these whenever they could and took them into business houses nearby for refuge.

My own outfit of tights and thin smock felt like nothing at all, and my teeth were chattering so from the cold and the horror of what I had been through that I could not speak.

A well-dressed man, a stranger to me, stopped me and said, "My friend, you'd better borrow my coat," throwing off his heavy overcoat as he said so and helping me to put it on. He then picked up Bryan and walked with me across the street; and there, at the corner of a drugstore, hurrying toward the theater, I saw my wife with the two youngest children.

She gave a scream at sight of me, and crying, "Oh, thank God! Thank God!" she threw herself into my arms—then seized Bryan and kissed him, then me again, transferring quantities of grease paint from my face to her own and then to her son's. She had had a vague premonition of disaster from the time that Bryan and I left the hotel that afternoon . . .

We turned back toward the hotel, thankful yet oppressed by the horror of the calamity which we knew must have occurred. I returned the overcoat to my good Samaritan friend, but was so agitated that I forgot to ask his name or even thank him adequately, I fear.

I had no sleep at all that night. Newspaper reporters were begging me for interviews, friends were calling me by telephone and wiring me . . . I was too excited to sleep, anyhow, even if I had had opportunity. My nerves did not subside to normal pitch for weeks afterward.

*A huge billow of flame leaped out past me and over me and seemed to reach even to the balconies.*

## DID YOU KNOW?

The military tank is invented.

**1915**  
Building Officials and Code Administrators International (BOCA) is formed.

The New York City Fire Department organizes its first rescue company following a major subway fire.

The British ship Lusitania is torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine off Ireland, killing 1,198 people.