

# Outdoor Theatres<sup>\*</sup>

*By Jens Jensen*



THE play of the American is born in the out-of-doors. The life of the early Pioneer, was closely woven into the forest and the field. Wild beauty—the romance of the stream and forest was his play-field. Primitive man, and himself, the actors or spectators as it happened to be. Here is a richness of material, of romance and nobility, of color and beauty, equal if not surpassing that of any other country.

The early settlers were idealists, they were not on conquest bound. They wanted to build their homes where they would be free to cultivate their ideals, and live their own lives as they saw fit. They brought with them a great deal of that which was the best of their race. The Indian was no less of an idealist. He had a civilization of his own, rich in sacrifice, and chivalry, full of poetry, and romance, with a mythological back ground. That this simple life of early American occupation has exerted its influence upon its descendants, in cultivating a love for the out-of-doors can not be doubted. That out of the simple play of the Pioneers should spring a desire for greater efforts in that direction can be expected, and it must be conceded that out of

<sup>\*</sup> This and the next article show interesting if somewhat violent contrasts in their conception of the out-door theatre. Mr. Jensen, who has designed, among many other beautiful things an outdoor theatre for Columbus Park, Chicago, is insistent upon the theory of American theatrical art being rooted in our primitive origin. From this follows an outdoor theatre fitted to such a conception rather than to older ideas based on the Greeks. The writer of the next article, however, describes an equally beautiful, but classic Greek theatre, the design for which he drew for Briarcliff in Westchester. In the December, 1917, issue of the JOURNAL, Mr. Caparn reviewed Professor Waugh's book on Outdoor Theatres to which readers are referred. Both sides of the question are there dealt with at more length than is possible here.—ED.



this rich and romantic life of the Pioneer, the American drama will be born.

The desire for plays in the open is a growing thing, and the native play will come as soon as we have found ourselves. So far we have been contented with borrowed productions especially written for the indoor stage. The drama out of doors must be woven into its environment. The drama fitted to it, not the environment fitted to the drama. This gives us a richness and beauty of a higher intellectual expression than can ever be accomplished on the indoor stage where cheap artificial setting always must have a lowering influence on art values.

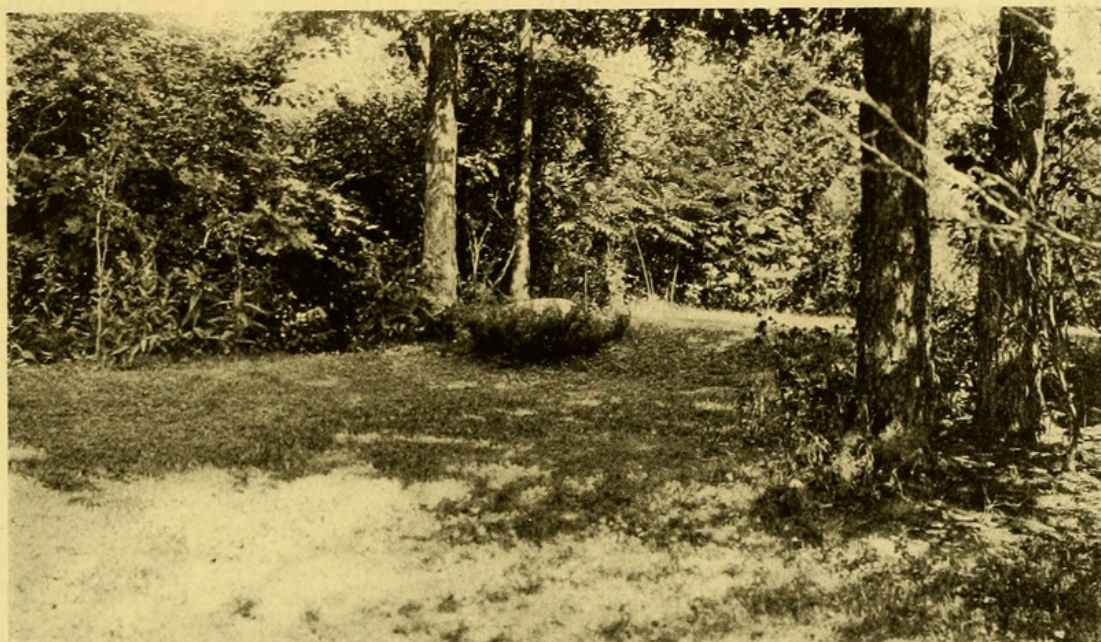
It is in the out-of-doors (where thoughts are pure, life simple and actions noble) that the drama must be reborn. The setting is sublime; noble trees form the proscenium; the mystery of the forest the back ground; the meadow the stage, and the auditorium. Blossoming things, all growing living things form the decorations. Into all this the drama has been woven. There are no artificial decorations, no artificial illuminations. These belong to the indoor stage with its ever changing decorations. It must not be a Greek theatre, for that belongs to the past, to the museum and library. Its expressions are not of our life, for it has no teaching to give to our youth. It is not of our day, it is looking backward, not forward. The drama belongs to the present, and the future. It is one of the great forebearers of culture, and should deal with what is best, purest, and noblest, in the lives of all peoples of the race. The drama should be the disseminator and builder of all that is best in our lives.

The drama out-of-doors may be as varied in its interpretation as the character of the place in which it is enacted. The mountain or hill may have its trolls, and the meadows their fairies; each may express itself, and the life of its people. The first rays of the rising sun may be woven into the play, and open the performance against a setting, illuminated by the birth of the day. Sunset will have equal importance to the play out-of-doors. What can surpass the opening act lit up



by the last rays of the setting sun with the heavens all afire, and the last act in the dark mystery of the night brightened by the flickering light of a hidden pyre? Or the play might be dedicated to a moonlight setting on snow clad fields, and starry nights. These are compositions of the master mind.

Every part of the country will give what is within it, and thereby make each section rich in what it has to give, and make life richer for it. Community centers, and gardens, parks and reservations may vie with each other in encouraging the drama out-of-doors, and developing local talent. Thus it will



PLAYERS GREEN IN THE AUTHOR'S GARDEN

do its part in the final work of building a great race. Gardens, large or small may have their players green for minor dramatic productions. Children may have performances all of their own making. Drama and music may compete with each other for a place in this sanctuary of the out-of-doors.

The players green may become the shrine of the gardens, a poetic expression in growing things. Cedars and Aspen, Western Crabapples and Sugar Maple, Elms and Hawthornes, Birch and Juneberry, each group forms a composition with a spiritual beauty all its own. For minor notes in the composition or for color in spring or fall, Sumach, Flowering Dog-



wood, Sunset Dogwood, Native Roses, Junipers, Asters, Goldenrod, Daisies, Violets, and carpets of early spring flowers, may add a poetic loveliness if properly used or a frivolous charm if over done. Each composition with its own particular type of beauty may influence the character of the play at certain seasons of the year when through the colors of flowers or foliage, the poetic values of the picture are at their highest. Imagine for instance, the pink blossom of the Crab-apple in May against a back ground of the pink and silver buds of Oak and a canopy of the deep blue sky above, decorated with fleecy floating clouds or, the stage all afire in its Fall coloring at sunset time. One of the greatest delights of the players green is its ever changing beauty; it never repeats itself, and therefore never becomes monotonous or tiring. Water may add to the composition of the players green, and make possible a greater variety of plays.

Let us consider the plan of the players green. Paths should lead in from all directions permitting freedom of access and retreat, and opposite paths should enter near the front so as to permit pageants to pass across the green. For the footlights are in two sunken fire pits, partly hidden by boulders and out of these pits the flames burst forth as if coming through the crust of Mother Earth. The charm and weirdness of these fires on a dark night cannot be described. They offer light and shadows full of romance and mystery such as no other light can produce. Their influence on the play enacted is wonderful. What a contrast with the artificial product of our hidden stage! I remember a few years ago, seeing "As you like it" performed in a fairly good natural setting. Strings of electric lights such as commonly used in our cities, and the search light, played in competition with the silvery moon that with all its poetic power was trying to flood the stage with its beautiful rays. What a travesty on intellectual life.

One of the vine covered boulders mentioned before may serve as a council rock, from which local poets or sages will give their messages to their people, or from which singers may send forth their thrills or philosophers preach the gospel of the out-of-

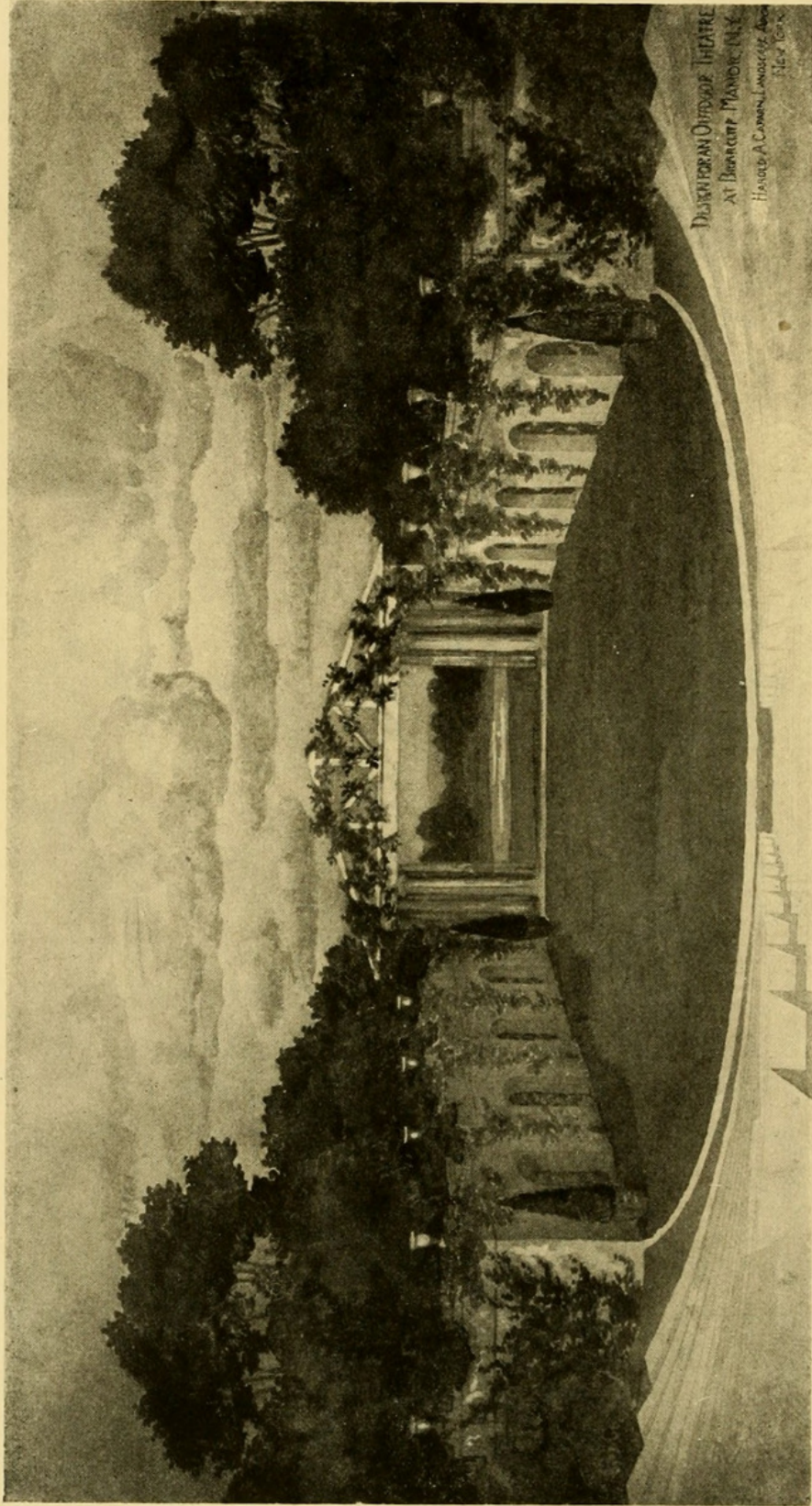


doors. The boulder is first of all, the herald of pre-historic things.

The whole composition of the players green is a symphony of great beauty, its merits are beyond man's conception. Its beauty plays with the soul. It is into this realm of beauty and romance that the American drama in the out-of-doors must weave itself into a fabric whose cultural value will illuminate the world.

*Chicago.*





OUTDOOR THEATRE AS SEEN FROM AUDITORIUM



Jensen, Jens. 1918. "Outdoor Theatres." *Journal of the International Garden Club* 2(2), 247–252.

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