Schloss, Simeon Archibald [1]

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See also: Opera Houses [2].

10 Oct. 1865–22 Dec. 1913

Simeon Archibald Schloss, predominant figure in theatrical management in North Carolina in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was born in Lynchburg, Va., one of four children of Marx (1817–94) and Mary Burrows Schloss (1835–1903). His father, who had emigrated from Bavaria about 1840, was a hotelkeeper by trade (he managed hotels in Raleigh [3], Salisbury [4], and Wilmington [5], among others) and served in the Quartermaster Corps of the Confederate army. The other Schloss children were Nathan (1855–1914), Jeanette (1858–1929), and Joseph (1869–1921).

S. A. Schloss began his career as a clerk in his father's hotel in Wilmington. By 1888 he was an auctioneer and commission merchant, and later that year he opened a crockery and glassware business in partnership with his brother-in-law, Aaron A. Nathan, who later figured in the development of Wrightsville Beach [6]. Schloss was also employed by J. M. Cronly as assistant manager of the Wilmington Opera House (better known as Thalian Hall [7]). In 1895, after a stint as a cornetist with Barlow, Dolson, and Powers' Minstrels, a national touring company, Schloss signed a lease with the city of Wilmington and became manager of the Opera House in his own right.

In the 1890s the process of booking acts for local theaters was a haphazard affair. During the summer, theater managers from all over the country would converge on New York's Union Square, then the center for theater business, and attempt to line up their seasons by contacting agents for individual attractions, often accosting them on the street. Once the agent and the manager came to terms, there was nothing to prevent an agent from reneging on an agreement to play a particular theater if a better offer came along from another manager. But there was also nothing to prevent a manager from double-booking two attractions for the same play date to prevent having a hole in his schedule if one company did not show up. Once a production company was out on the road, the results of these slipshod arrangements could be disastrous, particularly if a producer decided to cut his losses and fold the company before it returned to New York. (The practice of leaving actors stranded on the road became one of the major reasons for the founding of Actors' Equity Association [8].)

It was ostensibly to correct these abuses, but mainly to ensure profitability for all concerned, that in 1896 five theater owners and booking agents formed a trust, the Theatrical Syndicate, that came to be known by the names of its two most prominent members, Marc Klaw and Abraham L. Erlanger. The Syndicate began by controlling a significant number of theaters throughout the country and within a very short time controlled nearly all the major theaters on major transportation routes. The effects of the Syndicate are still being debated: on the one hand, formation of the Syndicate standardized financing, touring, contracts, and promotion; on the other, independent theaters could not get the best attractions (which usually belonged to the Syndicate) and independent attractions could not get booked into the best theaters (which were usually controlled by the Syndicate).

S. A. Schloss became the Syndicate's main representative in North Carolina. Operating from his home base in Wilmington, and with the clout of the Syndicate behind him, he developed a chain of theaters that brought theatrical attractions of every type to nearly every part of the state. In 1898 he leased the Academy of Music in Raleigh [9], and in 1901 he secured the lease for the Grand Opera House in Greensboro [10], located in the new City Hall. In 1902 he was outbid for the lease on the Wilmington Opera House by James H. and Robert H. Cowan (who also held the lease on New Bern [11]'s Masonic Opera House) but regained it by merging his growing operations with theirs in 1905. Other theaters followed: Charlotte's Academy of Music [12] in 1903; the Elks' Auditorium inWinston-Salem [13] in 1905; Asheville [14]'s Grand Opera House by 1906; the Monroe Opera House by 1907; the Tarboro Opera House, the Messenger Opera House in Goldsboro [15], and Wilson [16]'s Lyceum Theater by 1909; and the Asheville Auditorium in 1910. At its greatest extent, the Schloss Theaters Circuit controlled fourteen theaters in North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee; at the time of his death, it controlled theaters in Asheville, Charlotte, Concord [17], Goldsboro, Raleigh, Wilmington, and Winston-Salem; also in Danville, Va., and Chester, S.C.

With the booking arrangements for these theaters all handled by Schloss and his local managers (his nephew Marx S. Nathan in Charlotte and Greensboro, the Cowan Brothers in Wilmington, J. S. Upchurch in Raleigh, among others), theater programming became more consistent. Audiences in Tarboro [18] or Monroe [19] could see the same attractions for the same prices as the audiences in Raleigh or Charlotte, because major attractions would be more likely to play a smaller venue if they were also booked into the larger towns. This did not mean that they consistently got the best: though major stars of the day like Richard Mansfield, Otis Skinner, De Wolf Hopper, and others long forgotten did play North Carolina towns during the era of the opera house, most of the programming that Schloss and his fellow managers brought in was typical of that found in other theaters across the country. ("Opera house," of course, was a euphemism: despite the

popularity of individual attractions, there was still a general antitheatrical prejudice. The term *opera house* gave a patina of respectability to attending entertainments that might have been suspect. Very little grand opera made its way into any but the halls in the largest towns.)

The fare was a steady diet of melodrama, light comedies, and minstrel shows, occasionally spiced by something more substantial like Shakespeare or concerts by soloists and groups ranging from the New York Philharmonic to John Philip Sousa's band. Most people did not mind how bland most of it was; the goal was entertainment, not an aesthetic or moral uplift. One of the last mentions of Schloss in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* was a note from the paper's Greensboro correspondent on 20 Mar. 1912: "The theatregoers of the city of Greensboro certainly cannot complain of the class of attractions here this season; Mr. Schloss appears to know just what the people want."

In addition to his theatrical activities, Schloss owned and operated a music store as well as the bill-posting company that was a forerunner of the modern outdoor advertising industry. The company was operated by his son as Outdoor Advertising of Charlotte. Schloss's widow ran his theater enterprises after his death but finally sold them to S. A. Lynch of Asheville in 1915. By then the great days of touring theater were over, and movies had become the country's chief form of popular entertainment.

Schloss married Miriam (Mamie) Bear (20 Aug. 1872–23 Oct. 1927) of Wilmington on 23 Feb. 1897. They had four children: Florette (b. 1898), S. A., Jr. (1899–1900), a second S. A., Jr., known as "Happy" (1902–69), and Mary (b. 1904).

Schloss died in Wilmington after suffering a stroke. Perhaps in an oblique comment on the breadth of his interests, his death certificate lists his occupation as "Capitalist." He was buried with his wife, two sons, parents, and many other family members in Wilmington's Oakdale Cemetery [20].

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