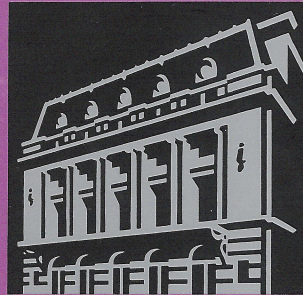


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Heppburn

**MERLE  
RESKIN  
THEATRE**



**DEPAUL UNIVERSITY**



**Formerly  
The Blackstone Theatre**





“Art is long and time is fleeting,” wrote Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in “A Psalm of Life.” Time indeed was running out for the Blackstone Theatre before DePaul University rescued it from the hands of would-be developers in 1988.

DePaul has long been committed to the arts, and when the university purchased this spectacular piece of history, it ensured the preservation of a Chicago treasure to be shared with future generations. The gracious support of Harold and Merle Reskin has been essential to DePaul in this effort.

The Reskin’s generosity to The Theatre School is accepted with our most sincere gratitude, and it is fitting when one considers Merle’s career singing on Broadway that the Blackstone Theatre be renamed the Merle Reskin Theatre in her honor.

The Blackstone Theatre will turn 82 on New Year’s Eve. With the continued support of people like the Reskins, who are dedicated to the arts, it will thrive long into the 21st century.

The Rev. John T. Richardson, C.M.  
*President, DePaul University*





*Merle and Harold Reskin.*



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## Merle Reskin

*Interview by Carolyn Kaplan*

There is a compelling openness about Merle Muskal Reskin—more than enough to conceal her shyness. She would much rather be talking about a myriad of other things than herself, but she must because her husband, Harold, has bestowed an enormous honor upon her: the gift of a theatre in her name. Merle's name will become a permanent fixture on the historic Blackstone Theatre when the new marquee lights up, officially changing the name to the Merle Reskin Theatre. What Merle is not shy about expressing is her happiness, awe and gratitude for what Harold has done for her, Chicago, DePaul University, and most importantly, the students of The Theatre School who are the real beneficiaries of this philanthropic tour de force.

This magnanimous gift came about through Harold's friendship with DePaul University president the Rev. John T. Richardson, C.M. "Fr. Richardson and Harold became friends when Harold attended DePaul's College of Law (Harold graduated in 1953) and they have remained very close friends. He came to Harold a couple of years ago and told him the Blackstone Theatre was available for sale and was in danger of being torn down. At the same time DePaul's Theatre School was in need of a professional performance space and training ground for aspiring theatre artists. Harold loved the idea of making a contribution in order to help DePaul save the Blackstone." He and Fr. Richardson decided to name the theatre for Merle.

Who better to name a theatre for than Merle Reskin, a former actress, a singer, and a patron of the arts? Equipped with an extraordinary voice, a streak of determination and hard work to buttress both, she accomplished a great deal in five professional years.



*Merle's high school graduation portrait, 1948.*

A very important aspect of Merle's life was her family. Hers was an artistic one, filled with warmth, intellect, laughter, and it was bursting with the sound of music. For Merle, an only child, music was as accessible, joyful, familiar and revered as a pair of skates might have been for the child down the block.

"My mother and father were nurturing and supportive. My aunt Ann also encouraged me, more than anybody. It was aunt Ann who said 'You can do it.' She taught me my first song: 'I'm a Roving Cowboy.'"

"By the time I was fifteen I was singing arias. I sang in all the grammar school productions and in high school, at the Latin School for Girls. After I graduated I went to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. I was also performing on television during the 1948-49 school year. Every





*A newspaper clipping of Merle Muskal from CBS-TV's "Studio One."*

Saturday I sang on the WPIX-TV Joe Bolton Open House, a variety show for young performers. Worthington Miner, the producer of 'Studio One' saw me in 'The Little Foxes' at the American Academy and put me on the show as soon as I graduated. I sang and acted in more than a dozen 'Studio One' productions. I did two years of summer stock at Chevy Chase Theatre in Wheeling, where Betsy Palmer was my roommate. I was up for a part in the movie 'Marty.' I didn't get it, but the item appeared in Kup's column and the William Morris Agency signed me because of it." Soon after, Merle became a member of the Screen Actors Guild, Actors' Equity and AFTRA. She also appeared on the Pulitzer Prize Playhouse in New York, "Hawkins Falls," a Chicago television production, and sang with Etta Moten (Bess in "Porgy and Bess") for two summers at the Chicago Fair. From 1952-54 Merle performed as Ensign Janet MacGregor in the Broadway production of "South Pacific." Merle also sang for charitable organizations. "I sang for W.A.I.F, an organization for orphans.



*Merle holding hands with Gene Saks on the set of "South Pacific."*



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founded by Jane Russell after World War II. I would sing Jewish songs for the elderly in Jewish homes during the holidays and sing Christmas songs at Children's Memorial Hospital and Cook County Hospital."

Merle made a television pilot called "Wonder Window" with Glen Tetley of the New York City Ballet and choreographer John Butler. As Miss Wonder, Merle was the star of the Mr. Rogers-like children's show. Though the series was never bought, it is a touching legacy for her children: daughter Leslie and her husband, Paul Neilan; son Jim and his wife Rhonda; and grandchildren Sean, Spencer and Eric.

Merle's priorities changed when she met Harold Reskin. "I met Harold on a blind date arranged by friends Sally and Miles Berger. Three months later we eloped, October 28, 1955." Although her professional career ended, she went on to work on charity boards and continued to make television commercials. For more than 30 years Merle has been the mid-west regional auditioner for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Harold, too, is quite generous and believes charity should come from the heart, and not to gain recognition. A real estate entrepreneur who developed and named the city of Glendale Heights, Harold Reskin is also an avid polo player and the founder and owner of the Glendale Polo Club. On weekends he works with handicapped children in the Easter Seals program, teaching them to ride horses. "Even if he doesn't feel well himself, he's there because he feels it's important for these kids to ride. Harold is a very private man, but he's one of the kindest people I've ever known."



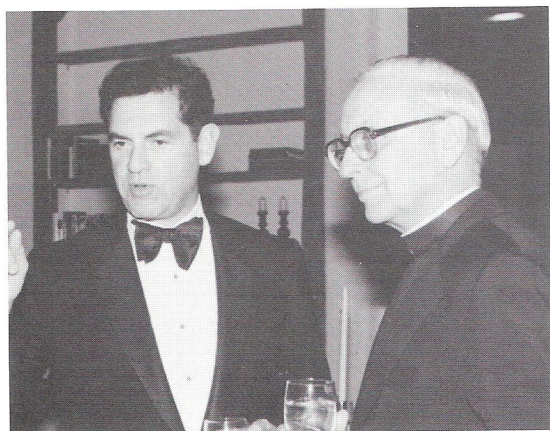
*Avid polo player Harold Reskin.*



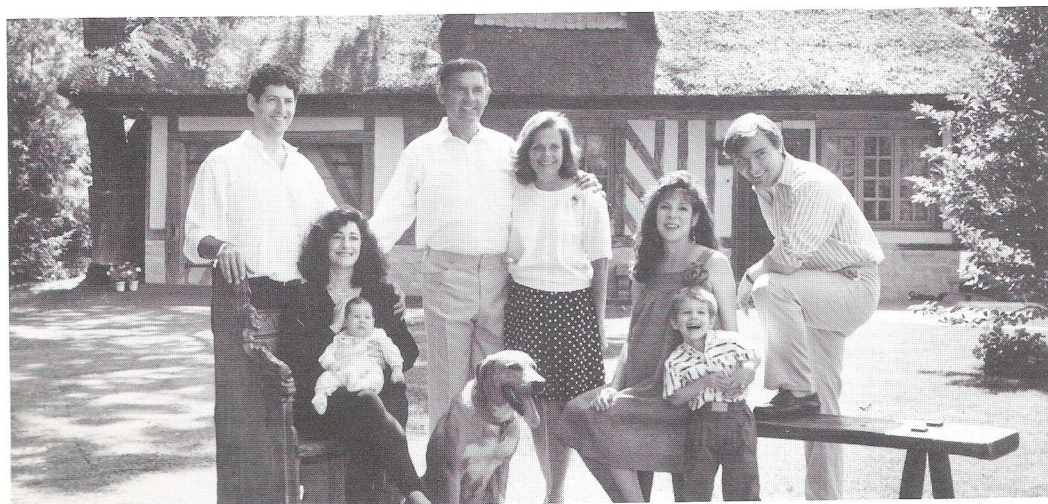
*Merle starred in the William Morris pilot "Wonder Window."*

Merle describes Harold as "quietly philanthropic." "Harold gave the money so that the theatre would continue to exist and The Theatre School students would have a place to perform. The International Theatre Festival, several of Chicago's dance companies and other arts organizations also use the theatre. The theatre has been saved and it is probably one of the most beautiful in the country and I will continue to be involved in fundraising for The Theatre School student scholarship fund. Harold and I believe the theatre dedication is symbolic of our ongoing zest for life."





*Harold and Fr. Richardson.*



*The Reskin Family, summer of 1991: Jim with wife Rhonda and son Eric, Harold and Merle, Leslie and husband Paul Neilan with son Sean. Spencer was born a few months later.*



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*“Accept I pray you my gift that is brought to you because God has dealt  
graciously with me and because I have enough.”*

*—Genesis, Chapter 33, Verse 11*





*The DePaul Blackstone Theatre celebrated its 80th year in 1991.*



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## The Blackstone Theatre

### 1910-1992

The Blackstone Theatre became a leading center for drama soon after it opened on New Year's Eve, 1910. Playwright George Ade, who spoke at the gala premiere of his new play, "U.S. Minister Bedloe," predicted that the Blackstone would become the home of the best American plays. Ade's prediction was accurate enough. The Blackstone Theatre presented touring productions from New York City; generally plays that were hits or had won the coveted Pulitzer Prize, New York Drama Critics Circle Award, or Tony Award. Except for a brief period during the 1930s, when the Federal Theatre Project used the theater for original productions by local playwrights, the Blackstone played a minimal role in the creation of new works. But until quite recently, despite the impact of motion pictures, the Great Depression, and, later, television, the Blackstone survived as a home for touring productions while other theaters in Chicago began to show movies or disappeared from the scene.

The Blackstone Theatre on Hubbard Court (later renamed Seventh Street and then Balbo Drive) adjoined the Blackstone Hotel on Michigan Avenue, which had opened a year earlier. Both were built by Tracy C. Drake and John B. Drake and designed by Chicago architects Benjamin Howard Marshall and Charles Eli Fox.

The Blackstone Theatre was located on the southern edge of the theater district, but even there the potential audience was large because there were so many other theaters, restaurants, and cabarets scattered throughout the downtown area. And prospects for the Blackstone were favorable because theaters have always been more successful enterprises when they are located near large hotels filled with visitors looking for a way to spend the evening.

The Blackstone Hotel and Theatre were named after Timothy B. Blackstone, an early Chicago businessman who was one of the first directors of the Union Stock Yards and a partner of hotel mag-



*The Blackstone Theatre opened with a performance of George Ade's play "U.S. Minister Bedloe" on December 31, 1910. This was the cover of the program.*



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nate John Burroughs Drake, owner of the Tremont House and the Grand Pacific Hotel. Drake's sons, Tracy Drake and John Burroughs Drake, took over the management of the family estate after their father's death. They built the Blackstone Hotel and Theatre on a site previously occupied by Timothy Blackstone's home.

The Blackstone Theatre building is a six-story structure. Marshall & Fox adopted a French Renaissance style for both the theater and the hotel. Originally, a canopy of iron and glass jutted out from the gray sandstone of the theater's facade, but this was replaced by a later marquee. The lobby was finished in French walnut and gold, with a box office at the western end. The auditorium's indirect ceiling lighting was supplemented by lights (set in gold-colored sconces and muted by silk shades) along the side walls. A "blast system" of ventilation was supposed to change the air every three minutes. The carpets, upholstery, and wall hangings in the auditorium were ivory and green, designed to harmonize with the gold and green in the tapestry drop curtain at the front of the stage. The total cost of the theater was \$500,000.

Memories of a tragic fire at the Iroquois Theatre in 1903, which led to a loss of 571 lives, and resulted in a revision of the fire codes, prompted most theaters to reassure patrons that they would be safe. The Blackstone Theatre's program for opening night asserted that the theater was "equipped with every modern device for safety and comfort, and it is believed to be the safest and most substantial theatrical structure in existence." A later program stated that "this theatre, under normal conditions, with every seat occupied, can be emptied in less than three minutes."

The auditorium in the Blackstone Theatre contained 1,400 seats. During the renovations by DePaul University in 1988, some of the Blackstone's seats were removed to reinstate the orchestra pit and to create seating for handicapped persons, reducing the total to 1,325 seats. Percy Hammond's review of opening night in 1910 for the *Chicago Tribune* had praised the unusual comfort of the seats, which he wrote were "of a luxurious width and arrangement, calculated to provide an ease of body and mind not often encountered in a theater."

The Blackstone Theatre was then controlled by a trust. Initially it was leased and operated by Charles Frohman, Marc Klaw, and Abraham L. Erlanger, who soon formed the Blackstone Theatre Company with themselves serving as directors. This was just a small part of the Theatrical Syndicate that the three had organized in New York in 1896. The syndicate controlled principal theaters in cities all over the country. The rise of the Shubert Brothers helped break the syndicate's power; it dissolved in 1916.

More than 60 plays were presented at the Blackstone Theatre during its first decade. They included Shakespeare performed by the Stratford-Upon-Avon Players (the predecessor of the Royal Shakespeare Company) during their first American tour in 1913, and by Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson's Company from London the following year.

Frank R. Benson, who had directed festivals at Stratford-Upon-Avon since the 1880s, performed leading roles in 14 plays presented by the Players over a two-week period in Chicago.





Mr. F. R. Benson



Blackstone Theatre

November 10-15

First American Tour of

The  
**Stratford-upon-Avon Players**

including

**Mr. F. R. Benson**

in

**Plays of William Shakespeare**

Direction of Charles F. Cowie

Hint.—The present tour has been arranged by courtesy of the Board of Governors of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre Stratford-upon-Avon, England. This is the only authorized theatre among nations speaking the English tongue.  
To see Mr. Benson and The Stratford-upon-Avon Players in their world masterpieces for the first time is an unending experience. Their intimacy with the scenes and surroundings of Shakespeare's birthplace, as well as with the men and women of his plays, seems to vivify their acting so that the spectator sits in wonder at the sweep and power of the story and the vitality of the characters. They bring the conviction home that Shakespeare is still "our greatest living dramatist."

**PLAYS TO BE PRESENTED**

Monday, "The Merry Wives of Windsor"	Tuesday, "Henry the Fifth"
Wednesday Matinee, "Romeo and Juliet"	Wednesday Evening, "Hamlet"
Thursday, "The Taming of the Shrew"	Friday, "King John"
Saturday Matinee, "Much Ado About Nothing"	Saturday Evening, "Othello"

*Frank R. Benson played the leading roles in the two-week presentation of Shakespeare plays by the Stafford-upon-Avon Players in 1913.*

Benson was highly regarded in England, especially as a director and teacher, but *Chicago Daily News* critic Amy Leslie took a dim view of his acting abilities. Reviewing the company's "mighty scraps with Shakespeare," Leslie wrote that "everything physical creaks and everything spiritual fumes and everything emotional sags in these unhappy exhibitions."

Leslie was much more enthusiastic about the Forbes-Robertson Company's productions of Shakespeare in 1914, reporting that the opening performance of "Hamlet" was "symmetrical, perfectly balanced and exquisitely harmonious throughout."

Two plays by George Bernard Shaw were produced at the Blackstone during its first decade. Granville Barker's Company from London presented "Fanny's First Play" in 1914. Mrs. Patrick Campbell, then nearly 50, portrayed the young Eliza Doolittle in the London premiere of "Pygmalion" that same year and in the American tour the following year. Amy Leslie praised Campbell as "superbly equipped" and pronounced "Pygmalion" a "finely balanced, splendidly built play," although she thought there was only "tolerable support" from the rest of the English company, which included Philip Merivale as Henry Higgins in his American debut. Drama focusing on social problems came to the Blackstone Theatre in a 1913 production of "Damaged Goods," an adaptation of a French play about the terrors of syphilis written by Eugene Brieux. Richard Bennett played the role of a profligate man who contracted the disease and then married a young woman without informing her of his condition. Presented under the auspices of the American Federation for Sex Hygiene and the American Vigilance Association, the play attracted an opening-night audience filled with welfare and settlement-house workers. The program informed patrons that the play contained no disgusting or scandalous scenes and could be viewed by everyone "unless we must



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believe that folly and ignorance are necessary conditions of female virtue.”

Many well-known actors and actresses appeared in the varied repertoire at the Blackstone Theatre. James H. Hackett portrayed a wealthy corporation lawyer who fell in love with a stenographer in “The Grain of Dust” (1911), by Louis Evans Shipman. Blanche Bates portrayed a heroine who shot her drunken brute of a husband in “The Witness for the Defense,” by A.E.W. Mason. And Ethel Barrymore appeared in “Tante” (1914), a comedy by Charles Haddon Chambers based on a novel by Anne Douglas Sedgwick, and in “The Shadow” (1915), by Dario Niccodemi and Michael Morton.

George Arliss gave “a remarkable characterization” of the British prime minister in “Disraeli” (1914), by Louis N. Parker. Minnie Maddern Fiske, after the dissolution of the Theatrical Syndicate, appeared as an elocution teacher who answered a matrimonial advertisement among the Pennsylvania Dutch in “Erstwhile Susan” (1917) and as George Sand in “Madame Sand” (1918). And Maude Adams appeared in her last major role in 1918 as a starving waif who took care of some war orphans in James M. Barrie’s “A Kiss for Cinderella.” On that occasion Amy Leslie reported that the audience called Adams back repeatedly for curtain calls in “a kind of hysterical ovation.”

During the 1920s the Blackstone Theatre presented nearly 60 plays. They included George Bernard Shaw’s “Saint Joan” and “Major Barbara;” Eugene O’Neill’s “Strange Interlude” and “Marco Millions;” Sean O’Casey’s “The Plough and the Stars” and “Juno and the Paycock;” Sir Arthur Wing Pinero’s “The Second Mrs. Tanqueray” and “Trelawny of the Wells;” Richard Sheridan’s “The Rivals;” Ben Jonson’s “Volpone;” and Oliver Goldsmith’s “She Stoops to Conquer;” together with offerings like Lynn Starling’s “Meet the Wife;” Frank Craven’s “Coal Oil Jenny;” and George M. Cohan’s “The Baby Cyclone.”

Plays at the Blackstone usually ran for two to four weeks. Productions with long runs included Willard Mack’s “The Dove,” a melodrama based on a story by Gerald Beaumont presented by David Belasco (21 weeks); Kenyon Nicholson’s “The Barker” (22 weeks); and George M. Cohan’s “Elmer the Great,” based on Ring Lardner’s “You Know Me, Al” stories (14 weeks). The Blackstone continued to bring well-known stars to Chicago during the 1920s. Helen Hayes appeared in Edward Childs Carpenter’s “Bab” (1921) and in Israel Zangwill’s “We Moderns” (1923). Ruth Gordon and Cornelia Otis Skinner starred in “Bristol Glass” (1923), a comedy by Booth Tarkington and Harry Leon Wilson. Ethel Barrymore played Laura in Pinero’s “The Second Mrs. Tanqueray” (1925). Spencer Tracy appeared in George M. Cohan’s “The Baby Cyclone” (1928).

In the late 1920s the Theatre Guild selected the Blackstone Theatre as a home for its touring productions. Founded in 1919 in New York, the Guild decided in 1928 to enlarge its playing company and present subscription series in Chicago and five other cities. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne starred in the first production sent to Chicago, a revival of Shaw’s “Arms and the Man.” This was followed by Eugene O’Neill’s “Marco Millions,” and Ben Jonson’s “Volpone” adapted by Stefan Zweig. Dorothy and DuBose Heyward’s “Porgy,” with an all-black cast, was scheduled for two weeks, but was held over for seven. This was the play on



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which George Gershwin based his musical.

By the 1929-30 season, the Theatre Guild's subscription list at the Blackstone had grown to nearly 15,000, and Eugene O'Neill's "Strange Interlude," starring Judith Anderson and Tom Powers, achieved a 17-week run. Subsequently, attendance declined. O'Neill's "Mourning Becomes Electra" at the Blackstone in 1932 was considered "an event of the first magnitude," but it was the only Theatre Guild production to appear in Chicago that season.

During the early 1930s theaters that presented live drama were reeling as a result of both the introduction of talkies in 1928 and the stock market crash of 1929. *Chicago Tribune* critic Charles Collins, summarizing "The Season in Chicago" for 1931-32 for Burns Mantle's annual *The Best Plays*, lamented that the Chicago stage was struggling "like a wounded stag with the remorseless hounds of the economic depression in close, menacing pursuit." The total number of live productions in Chicago dropped to 84 in 1930-31 and 50 in 1932-33. Only seven theaters still tried to offer live productions on a more or less regular basis. When the total number of productions dropped to 21 in 1935-36, Charles Collins feared that the legitimate stage in Chicago might soon "become totally extinct."

The Blackstone Theatre suffered with the rest, although there were bright moments. When Walter Hampden brought his revival of "Cyrano de Bergerac" on a cross-country tour to the Blackstone for one week in 1932, the theater was sold out for every performance, and box-office receipts for the week were the second highest in the Blackstone's history. Nevertheless, the number of productions at the Blackstone declined and the number of dark nights increased. At the end of 1930 Mitchell Erlanger and Harry Powers terminated their lease. Tracy and John Drake, the owners of the Blackstone Theatre building, took over the management of the theater for a year. But they had borrowed to finance the purchase of the land under the hotel and theater in 1927, and they were unable to meet the mortgage payments to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, which foreclosed in 1932.

A new organization called Playgoer's, Inc., with Seymour Blair as chairman, leased the theater in 1934 for a subscription series of five productions. Playgoer's hoped to become "a permanent organization for the professional production of plays, with the avowed purpose of restoring the confidence of the Chicago theatre-going public by taking it out of the hands of the second-string road companies with cast-off productions which have been its fate for the last few years." The organization disappeared by the next season. After a week of performances by the Abbey Theatre Players from Dublin in 1935, no more professional touring productions appeared at the Blackstone until 1941.

However, the Blackstone was by no means empty in the interim. The Federal Theatre Project, established by the Works Progress Administration in 1935, leased the Blackstone and the Great Northern theaters for its rehearsals and performances in Chicago. From 1936 until Congress abolished the program in 1939, the Federal Theatre Project staged more than 20 productions at the Blackstone Theatre.

The first two of these productions were older works: "A Texas Steer," a farce by Charles H.

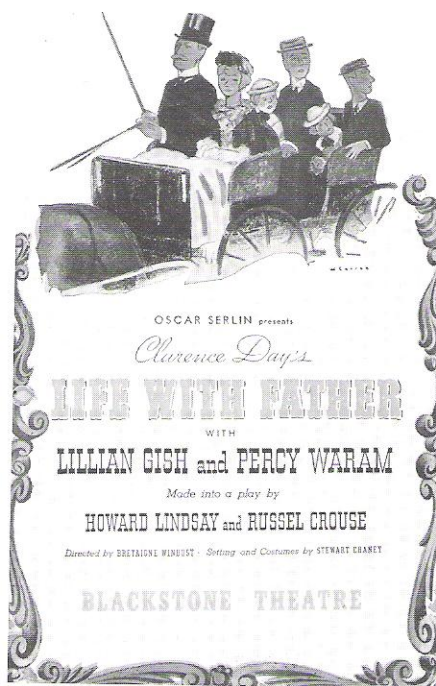


Hoyt written in 1890 featuring a Texas rancher who bought his seat in Congress; and a revival of a melodrama by William Gillette called "Secret Service," written in 1896. Several productions during the first season had substantial runs, especially "Broken Dishes," a comedy by Martin Flavin about a family's rebellion against a domineering mother, which ran from mid-June to mid-October. But Hallie Flanagan, national director of the Federal Theatre Project, dismissed the plays as "nothing but new heights of old hokum." Charles Collins declined to discuss the Federal Theatre in his summary of "The Season in Chicago" for *The Best Plays*, except to say that "their performances thus far have been mediocre."

Hallie Flanagan reported later that two attempts at experimental plays early in the first season had to be abandoned because of censorship. Rehearsals of Meyer Levin's "Model Tenement," concerning housing problems that culminated in a rent strike, were halted after higher administrators in the W.P.A.'s Chicago office heard rumors that Mayor Edward J. Kelly, who had recently banned a dramatization of Erskine Caldwell's "Tobacco Road," was upset; and the state administrator of the W.P.A. closed Paul Green's "Hymn to the Rising Sun," which dealt with the brutality of chain gangs, on opening night while the audience was already waiting in the lobby.

The situation changed after Flanagan sent George Kondolf, a young New York producer, to become the Federal Theatre's director for Chicago. Kondolf's goal was to produce new plays that originated in Chicago. His first production was a dramatization of Sinclair Lewis's "It Can't Happen Here," which started a 16-week run in October 1936. The world premiere of Howard Koch's "The Lonely Man," a drama about Abraham Lincoln's reincarnation as a liberal professor and union lawyer at a small college in Kentucky, ran for 12 weeks in 1937, and was praised by *Chicago Daily News* critic Lloyd Lewis as "the most ambitious and literate of the W.P.A. dramas."

Another notable production at the Blackstone, "Spirochete," was written by Arnold Sundgaard, a young dramatist on the Chicago project. Using the "Living Newspaper" format introduced by the Federal Theatre, the play dramatized the dangers of syphilis, a subject explored two decades earlier in "Damaged Goods." Sundgaard's play was highly praised by the medical profession and the press. Even



*"Life With Father" ran at the Blackstone for 66 weeks in 1940-41 to highly enthusiastic reviews.*



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the *Chicago Tribune*, which was generally hostile toward the Federal Theatre and other New Deal programs, considered "Spirochete" a "valuable contribution."

The Federal Theatre Project in Chicago ended with Shakespearean Repertory on July 1, 1939. By that time *Chicago Tribune* drama critic Cecil Smith could report in his summary of *The Best Plays for 1939-40* that "for the first time in a decade it is possible to submit a reasonably bright and cheery account of theatre in Chicago." The next year he reported that the record-breaking run of "Life With Father" was "the brightest single achievement of the season."

Oscar Serlin rented the Blackstone and refurbished it for his immensely popular presentation of Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse's "Life With Father." Starring Percy Waram and Lillian Gish, the Chicago production opened in February 1940, and eventually ran for 66 weeks, establishing a record as the longest-running production in the city's history. But this record was soon broken by another production at the Blackstone. "Good Night Ladies!," a farce by Cyrus Wood starring Buddy Ebsen as a shy professor who inadvertently enters a Turkish bath on Ladies Night, opened in 1942 and was held over for 100 weeks.

The 52-week seasons achieved by the Blackstone Theatre in the early 1940s reflected the return of some degree of prosperity for the remaining live theaters in Chicago. The total playing time for all theaters in Chicago reached 180 weeks in 1939-40, an increase of 39 percent over the previous season. This rose to 235 weeks in 1942-43 and 329 weeks in 1945-46. Playbills indicate that the Slavin Amusement Company operated the Blackstone Theatre from early 1942 to mid-1945, followed by the Blackstone Theatre Company, which in 1948 was succeeded by the "Messrs. Shubert." In 1946 the *Chicago Sun* reported that the Blackstone Theatre Corporation had bid \$40,000 at a tax foreclosure sale to buy back the Blackstone Theatre, but had lost out to "unidentified Eastern interests" who bid \$50,000. The Eastern interests were the Shubert Brothers (reconstituted in 1973 as the Shubert Organization).

The period of prosperity for live theater in the early 1940s did not last long. Attendance figures for live theater and motion pictures shot up during World War II. After the war ended and more consumer goods became available again, people spent more of their disposable income on houses, automobiles, and major appliances.

The most damaging impact on national attendance at both live theater and movies resulted from the rise of television: the number of sets in American households soared from 14,000 in 1947 to 32,000,000 in 1954. People stayed home to watch their favorite programs and went out for the evening much less frequently. As a result, attendance at theaters declined during the 1950s and 1960s. Total playing time for all theaters in Chicago dropped back to 265 weeks in 1947-48 and 152 weeks in 1950-51. Seasons at the Blackstone dwindled to 28 weeks in 1948-49 and 19 weeks in 1949-50. During the 1950s, the Blackstone's seasons ranged from 14 to 33 weeks. By 1961 *The Best Plays* no longer bothered to include Chicago.



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There were still some successful productions at the Blackstone Theatre. Deborah Kerr appeared in 1955 in Elia Kazan's production of Robert Anderson's "Tea and Sympathy," and *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Herman Kogan wrote that the ovation was the kind that audiences "reserve for a really rare performance that shines in every facet like a gem." Helen Hayes and Mary Martin starred in Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth" in 1955. Unfortunately, *Chicago Tribune* critic Claudia Cassidy reported, it opened on a "scalding August night" and "wilting wags maintained that the air conditioning consisted of J. J. Shubert blowing on two ice cubes." Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's "Inherit the Wind" ran for 17 weeks later during that season.

Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" premiered at the Blackstone in 1959 and was there for four weeks before it went on to a New York theater, even though the Blackstone had to turn away "a small fortune at the anguished box office." When Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne came to the Blackstone for their farewell appearance in 1960, Cassidy reported that "no shoehorn could have squeezed more customers into the Blackstone for the painfully short three weeks allotted "The Visit," by Swiss playwright Friedrich Duerrenmatt.

In 1968, Jory Graham praised the Blackstone Theatre in *Chicago: An Extraordinary Guide* as "the handsomest of the Loop theatres, the most intimate, the most like a fine old New York house. Its sight lines are good, and you'll be able to see and hear well from almost any seat in the house."



*Elia Kazan's production of "Tea and Sympathy" at the Blackstone in 1955 featured Alan Baxter and Deborah Kerr.*

By that time, a renaissance was taking place in Chicago theater. In 1959 Second City began honing the improvisational skills of successive members of its ensemble in satirical reviews. The success of innovative new productions at Hull House Theatre directed by Robert Sickinger beginning in 1963, wrote *Chicago Tribune* critic Richard Christiansen, "proved that there was an audience in Chicago eager to see the kind of drama that was being produced Off Broadway in New York." In 1969 the Body Politic and Organic Theatre opened, and Goodman Theatre became a professional organization. By the 1980s Chicago was recog-



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nized as “the hottest theater town in America.”

The exciting developments in Chicago’s resident theater companies were accompanied by continued stagnation and decline in the downtown theaters, which relied on touring productions from New York. After *The Best Plays* restored a brief section on Chicago in 1963 in “The Season Around the United States,” critic Glenna Syse wrote that “Chicago is scorned as a pre-Broadway stop for tryouts. Most of the shows arrive here long after the fact, tired out, with cheap casts and absentee direction.”

Although seasons at the Blackstone now included more dark nights than evenings with



*The Blackstone Theatre in 1965.*

performances, many good plays were offered there from 1965 to 1985. Myrna Loy appeared in Neil Simon’s “Barefoot in the Park” in 1965; Dan Dailey and Richard Benjamin toured in Simon’s “The Odd Couple” in 1966; Katharine Hepburn starred in Enid Bagnold’s “A Matter of Gravity” in 1977; and Henry Fonda appeared with Eva Marie Saint in Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee’s “First Monday in October” in 1979. In 1982 Second City Productions presented the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival’s mammoth production of “The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby,” adapted by David Edgar from Charles Dickens’ novel.

For the 1986-87 season, the League of Chicago Theatres reported that its 125 members had presented 12,500 performances of 950 productions; and that attendance at professional





*Geraldine Page, Sidney Blackmer and Rip Torn performed in Tennessee Williams' "Sweet Bird of Youth."*

Goodman School of Drama in 1925. After The Art Institute of Chicago decided to discontinue the Goodman School in 1978, it was taken over by DePaul. In 1985 it was renamed The Theatre School. The marriage of one of the country's oldest theater schools to one of Chicago's oldest remaining theaters devoted to live performance was a momentous occasion.

Alumni of The Theatre School and Goodman School of Drama who have graced the stage of the Blackstone include Geraldine Page (GSD '45) in "Separate Tables" in 1958, "Sweet Bird of Youth" in 1960 and "Clothes for a Summer Hotel" in 1980. Theoni V. Aldredge (GSD) designed the costumes for "Close for a Summer Hotel" as well as for "Cactus Flower" and "You Know I Can't Hear When the Water's Running," both in 1968. Concetta Tomei (GSD '75) appeared in the "The Elephant Man" in 1980 and Elizabeth Perkins (THE '81) starred in Neil Simon's "Brighton Beach Memoirs" in 1984. Joe Mantegna (GSD '69) appeared in "Hair" in 1969 and co-starred with Peter Falk in "Glengarry Glen Ross" in 1986. Current faculty member Nan Cibula-Jenkins designed the costumes for that production.

By the fall of 1988 The Theatre School had invested \$1,000,000 in renovations to the Blackstone Theatre and began its production schedule of more than 200 performances annu-

theaters had reached 2,730,000. Meanwhile, the Blackstone Theatre was dark throughout 1987. It had last been used in 1986 when the National Theatre of Great Britain performed there as part of the first International Theatre Festival. The next booking was scheduled for August 1988, when Lily Tomlin was to open an eight-week engagement in "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe."

By that time the Shubert Organization had decided to dispose of the Blackstone Theatre, as it had already done with all its other Chicago theaters except the Shubert. Chairman Gerald Schoenfeld offered the building to DePaul University because it is "an organization that is vigorously involved in the theatre arts in Chicago."

DePaul University's Theatre School was founded as the





*In March of 1989, Molière's "The Misanthrope" directed by David William marked "the opening of the Blackstone Theatre for the second time."*

ally. The theatre is not only a highly visible performance site but also an ideal laboratory for training in scene, costume and lighting design, theatre technology and production and theatre management.

In March of 1989, Molière's "The Misanthrope" directed by David William marked "the opening of the Blackstone Theatre for the second time." Of the event, Richard Christiansen of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote: "Having physically saved and improved the Blackstone...DePaul also has made sure that the theatre's artistic content is at a high level for the reopening."

Members of the theater community in Chicago are delighted that this use by DePaul enables Chicago to save an important theater. Since DePaul's purchase of the Blackstone Theatre, it has generously shared the theatre with many prominent Chicago performing arts organizations, as well as companies from around the world. The following list includes those





*The Theatre School Playworks, founded as the Goodman Children's Theatre, brought productions for young audiences to the Blackstone. "The Unwicked Witch" was presented during the 1991 Halloween season.*

Theatre School, DePaul University, Award for Excellence in the Arts, an honor to be presented at the benefit each year to artists who have made a significant contribution to the arts throughout their career. Past recipients include Don Ameche, Kevin Anderson, Dixie Carter, Fred Ebb, Hal Holbrook, Linda Hunt, Anne Jackson, James Earl Jones, John Kander, Harvey Korman, Martin Landau, Patti LuPone, Karl Malden, Joe Mantegna, Marlee Matlin, Mercedes McCambridge, Lloyd Richards, Elizabeth Perkins, Steve Smith, Daniel J. Travanti, Eli Wallach and George Wendt, many of whom have their own special memories of the Blackstone Theatre.

In 1991, the DePaul Blackstone Theatre celebrated its 80th birthday. Rev. John T. Richardson C.M., president of DePaul University, said, "It gives me great pleasure to say that during its 80th anniversary year, the Blackstone Theatre is alive and well and busier than ever!" Later that year Fr. Richardson was presented a Joseph Jefferson Award for his outstanding leadership and efforts in the rescue, nurturing and refurbishing of both The Theatre School and the Blackstone Theatre. Chicago's first lady Maggie Daley presented the award saying, "As if they were two abandoned or orphaned children, the Goodman School in 1978 and the Blackstone Theatre in 1988 were adopted and given homes by DePaul University. As if they were long-lost siblings meant for each other, the now-66-year-old theatre school and the 80-year-old theatre have since been able to enjoy prolonged and productive lives."

who have utilized the Blackstone Theatre in the past four years: American Institute of Architects, American Players Theatre, Ballet Chicago, Boitsov Ballet, Chamber Music Chicago, Chicago Chamber Orchestra, Chicago Public Schools, City Musik, Encyclopedia Britannica, International Theatre Festival (Renaissance Theatre Company, Le Cirque Imaginaire, Katona Jozsef Theatre, Theatre an der Ruhr, State Theatre of Lithuania, English Shakespeare Company, Gate Theatre, Circus Oz), Joel Hall Dancers, The Joseph Jefferson Awards Committee, Lyric Opera of Chicago, McDonald's Corporation, Old Town School of Folk Music, 20th Century Fox and WBEZ Radio.

The Theatre School Awards Gala was established in 1989 to raise support for the purchase and operation of DePaul's Blackstone Theatre as well as scholarship support for students of the The Theatre School. Dean John Ransford Watts established The



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Now in 1992, due to the magnanimous gift from Mr. and Mrs. Harold Reskin, the Blackstone Theatre enjoys yet another rebirth as the MERLE RESKIN THEATRE.



*Merle Reskin.*