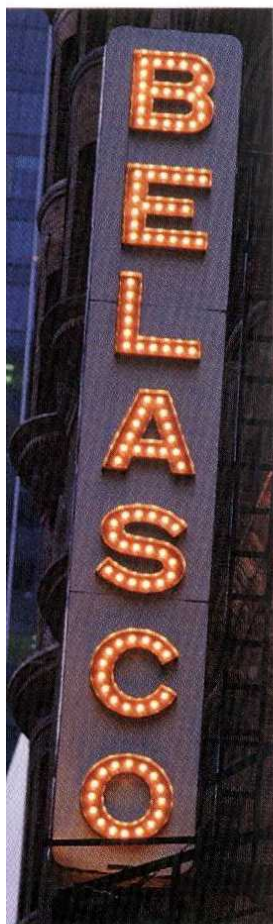


Along the Avenues

BEHIND BROADWAY'S BRIGHT LIGHTS A LEGACY ENDURES



New York's theaters—some of the city's great artistic treasures



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD BOWDITCH



BY ANTHONY W. ROBINS

On June 2, a Sunday night, millions of Americans will be tuning in to CBS to watch the curtain rise at the Majestic Theatre in New York City, marking the opening of the fiftieth annual Tony Awards—the glamorous ritual that every year at this time brings Broadway stars into living rooms across the country. Cosponsored by the American Theatre Wing and the League of American Theatres and Producers, the Tonys broadcast a remarkable spectacle to the nation: actors and actresses, choreographers and lyricists, directors and designers whose combined talents create that most wonderful, local, and evanescent of New York attractions,

the Broadway theater. Remarkable because—unlike the Oscars or the Emmys, which celebrate electronic creations reaching hundreds of millions of people across several continents—the Tonys celebrate lavish musicals and intimate dramas that, though they may travel, generally live and die in a few square blocks of Manhattan's West Forties. And remarkable because, unlike their counterparts, the Tonys celebrate an art that has an existence that is all too brief. Though a movie can be enjoyed again and again in precisely the same version, when the curtain comes down on a live performance it disappears into the evening sky, never to return. The production closes, the players move on, and theatergoers everywhere hoard their playbills and memories.

Yet visitors to Broadway can find a surprising legacy. The art and the drama of the stage survive in one of New York's great artistic treasures—the buildings, the great theaters themselves. Armed with knowledge, patience, and imagination, one can walk through the heart of Times Square, past the hustlers and the garish office buildings, and enjoy never-ending entertainment bequeathed them by the showmen and vaudevillians, serious theater troupes and amateur dabblers whose hopes and dreams and conquests are set in concrete, brick, and terra-cotta for all to see.

Consider David Belasco, one of Broadway's most flamboyantly fabled characters, who worked with but then helped break the back of the all-powerful turn-of-the-century Theatrical Syndicate, created revolutionary effects with the newfangled electric lighting, and wrote and first produced the plays that would become world-famous as Puccini operas—*Madame Butterfly* and *The Girl of the Golden West*. Belasco's stars are dead, his shows only a memory. But, walking from Broadway toward Sixth Avenue, turn down West Forty-fourth Street and you will find David Belasco present in the solid, red-brick, ninety-year-old theater named for him that he lovingly designed to be home and headquarters for his plays, his performers, and his technological experiments—and ultimately for himself, in a tower apartment added to the roof.

Belasco's own life was as melodramatic as his productions. Born in a San Francisco cellar in 1853 to immigrant Sephardic Jewish parents from England—his father, a would-be comic actor, lured by the California gold rush—Belasco was educated by Roman Catholic priests in Vancouver before heading to New York. Known as the Bishop of Broadway for the mock clerical collar he took to wearing, he acted, wrote plays, produced the plays of others, managed a stable of stars that included David Warfield and Blanche Bates, and pioneered the detailed, realistic staging of sentimental melodramas. So devoted was Belasco to verisimilitude that he was capable of sticking a pin into his leading lady's rear end to elicit an appropriately authentic scream. As *The New York Times* wrote in his obituary in 1931, Belasco was "not a great man in the theater—he was the theater" itself.

Walk into the Belasco today, and you will enter the same enchanted world over which audiences exclaimed almost a century ago. The auditorium is as dramatically lighted as one of Belasco's

stage sets—light from Tiffany chandeliers, light within stained-glass capitals atop classical columns, light from leaded glass fixtures set in the dark, paneled wood ceiling reminiscent of a private men's club. There you can marvel at the enormous murals by Everett Shinn, one of New York's famed Ashcan school artists, showing allegories of such theatrical verities as *Intrigue*, *Motherly Devotion*, and *The Hero*. You have entered, in short, the luxurious "living room" into which Belasco invited his audiences. You can imagine the great man pacing the aisles just before curtain time in the years preceding the outbreak of World War I.

At the opposite end of the theatrical spectrum from Belasco—and on the other side of Broadway—stands the Harvard-trained aristocrat from New England Winthrop Ames. Ames came to New York during the first decade of the century to run the New Theatre, an enormous barn more like an opera house than a theater, on Central Park West at Sixty-second Street. He was imported by the city's social set, who hoped to bring fine drama to an industry they considered too vulgar for words. Despite Ames's best efforts, the New Theatre turned out to be an expensive white elephant. Convinced that its monstrous size was the problem, Ames moved on to build its exact opposite in order to feature dramas of the chic new Little Theater movement. After traveling through Europe to seek out models, in 1912 he built his own Little Theatre (today the Helen Hayes), financed with his inheritance from the Ames Shovel & Tool Company, on Forty-fourth Street west of Broadway. A small house seating just 299—as compared with the Broadway standard of 800 to 1,600 seats—the Little Theatre was conceived as an intimate space for intimate drama and played to an elite audience that could afford what was then considered the extravagantly high ticket price of \$2.50. But then Ames wasn't interested in playing to the bulk of theatergoers, whom he once described as a great, new, eager, childlike, tasteless, honest, crude general public.

Like Belasco, Ames considered his playhouse his home and its auditorium his drawing room. His architects, Ingalls & Hoffman, designed what looks like a restrained red-brick eighteenth-century country home, complete with white wooden windows flanked by shutters. "This is the house of Mr. Winthrop Ames,"

wrote one reviewer. "The patrons are his guests for the nonce, in an old colonial house behind a garden wall." His audience walked through an elegant Adamesque lobby into a small auditorium whose walls were lined with tapestries. The theater's reputation was such that George Bernard Shaw could rehearse his play *The Philanderer* in England and then send it to New York to be produced by Ames. The Little, alas, proved no more successful financially than the oversized New Theatre, and in 1917 Ames gave in to economics, doubling the theater's size by adding a small balcony. Even so, this theater remains the Great White Way's most intimate.

The Belasco and the Little are just two of some forty similar structures surviving from the first three decades of the twentieth century, when Times Square became the latest in a series of Broadway theater districts. The first such building was probably the Park, built in 1798 just off Broadway near City Hall Park, back when New York City encompassed little more than the tip of Manhattan. Over the next century, as the city grew, the legitimate theater district migrated northward up the island, staying always on or near Broadway but moving from City Hall to Union Square, Madison Square, and Herald Square. Then, in 1895, Oscar Hammerstein I forged across Forty-second Street to build the now-vanished Olympia complex of theaters and roof gardens on Broadway between Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth streets—a project that, though it failed a year or so later, earned him the title "Father of Times Square."

In Hammerstein's day, the decidedly unsquare intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue was still known as Longacre Square—functioning as the city's harness and carriage business district and taking its name from a similar part of London. The Winter Garden—longtime home of *Cats*—was converted from an old stable; critics attending past productions there have occasionally suggested they could detect a whiff of the building's former occupants. Longacre became Times Square in 1904 in honor of the newly erected Times Tower. In the decades following Hammerstein's lead, producers and speculators constructed approximately eighty theaters in the surrounding blocks before the Great Depression ended the enormous orgy of development. The majority of those buildings put up before World War I, and several put up afterward, were for impresarios such as Belasco and Ames.

Each impresario had a particular place in the world of Broadway, and each imprinted his own character on the theater built around his personal ambition. On Forty-fifth Street west of Eighth Avenue stands the Martin Beck Theatre, testament to the life and times of Martin Beck, vaudeville king. A teenage actor who emigrated from Czechoslovakia, Beck found his way to San Francisco, where he took a job in vaudeville with the Orpheum theater chain, married the boss's daughter, and rose to be president. After moving to New York, in 1913 Beck built the Palace, the legendary center of vaudeville, and, ten years later, the Martin Beck (still the only Broadway theater west of Eighth), which he spent the rest of his life running. Beck, always a vaudevillian at heart, considered the signing of Sarah Bernhardt to play two-a-day at the Palace his greatest triumph.

To design his new theater, Beck brought in the Orpheum's chief architect from San Francisco, G. Albert Lansburgh, a specialist in the grand movie palaces of the twenties. Lansburgh designed the Beck as a Moorish-style fantasy: outside, a triple arcade and a staircase to nowhere; inside, a cornucopia of exotica such as twisting columns, wrought-iron lanterns, tapestries, elaborate plasterwork, and an enormous painted wooden dome.

This kind of exotic architectural excess has always been anathema to the serious drama types. In 1919 a high-minded group of amateurs with roots in Greenwich Village's Washington Square Players, among them actress Helen Westley, director Philip Moeller, scenic designer Lee Simonson, playwright Lawrence Langner, and—most usefully—banker Maurice Wertheim, founded the Theater Guild as a subscription playhouse. They began by leasing a commercial theater but disliked the idea of compromising their standards and sharing profits with such an abysmally lowbrow institution. So the guild formed a building committee; acquired such socially prominent backers as Mrs. August Belmont, Otto Kahn, Walter Lippmann, and Louis Untermeyer; hired theater architect C. Howard Crane; and in 1925 opened its own home on West Fifty-second Street.

The Guild, said *The Times* in April, 1925, was "regarded in many quarters as the finest theater in New York." More than just a performance space, it included classrooms, studios, a library, and the latest in stage technology, a cyclorama—

a large swath of painted linen with backlighting used to represent day or evening sky. Crane's model was an appropriately serious source, a fifteenth-century Florentine palazzo. One critic gushed that the Guild's stuccoed walls, tiled roof, and small arched loggia awakened vistas of Florence; Crane might indeed have intended a reference to the famous medieval craft guilds of that city. On opening night, Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* vied for the public's attention with Crane's dazzling architecture. Now known as the Virginia, the Guild is just another Broadway theater—but its restored façade still recalls the glory days of old.

Who else built Broadway theaters? The dreamers have ranged from H. H. Frazee (owner of the Boston Red Sox, who built the Longacre Theatre in 1912 and, to keep it solvent, sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees) to Irving Berlin, who built the Music Box Theatre to house his *Music Box Revues* and kept a half-interest in the place until his death in 1989. But the greatest number of theaters in Times Square were put up by the organization that defines Broadway to this day: the Shuberts.

Brothers Sam, Lee, and J. J. Shubert started out doing odd jobs around theaters in Syracuse, New York, and eventually established the nation's biggest chain of stage theaters. After Sam's untimely death in a train wreck in 1905, Lee and J. J. erected a number of Sam S. Shubert Memorial theaters around the country, including their headquarters on West Forty-fourth Street, which opened in 1913.

Lee and J. J. built the Shubert jointly with the Booth; one a spacious home for large-scale musicals, the other a small setting for more serious fare. Back to back, they share a long façade on what became known as Shubert Alley, a block-through drive behind the old Astor Hotel. The Shuberts' architect, Henry Herts, worked in a style described as Venetian Renaissance, with heavy, rusticated terra-cotta pilasters suggestive of Italian palaces; triple-arched entrances with paintings above; and bands of low-relief decorative panels. The row of windows at the top of the building illuminates the offices where the future of Broadway is planned by the modern-day Shubert Organization. Inside, the auditorium is rich in ornamental plaster friezes and figures as well as a series of painted mythological scenes. One of Broadway's most successful musical houses, the Shu-

bert has showcased Rodgers and Hart productions as well as Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*, Paul Robeson in *Othello*, and the long-running hit *A Chorus Line*.

Within a few years the Shuberts inaugurated a second pair of theaters, the Broadhurst and the Plymouth, next door to but smaller and cheaper than the first two. By now the brothers had changed the face of theater construction and management: Their second effort was not one of impresarios but rather a business venture, to be leased out to other producers. All through the 1920s the Shuberts built theater after theater on the blocks off Broadway. So successful were they that for a few years mid-decade they attracted the rivalry of one of New York's foremost real-estate families, the Chanins. It was the Chanins who filled out the rest of the Shubert Alley block with three theaters in a modern Spanish design—today's Majestic, Royale, and Golden—plus a large hotel, now the Milford Plaza, at the end of the block on Eighth Avenue. This row of seven theaters, along with the Little and St. James across Forty-fourth Street and the Music Box and the Imperial across Forty-fifth, make up the city's single greatest concentration of stage theaters—and give us some sense of the excitement, glamour, and general pizzazz that flowed through block after block in Broadway's heyday.

After the Depression and World War II, these buildings fell on hard times with the rise of television. Half were demolished and others went in and out of theatrical use. But the fantasy and the wonder of the Broadway theaters somehow managed to survive, and today, happily, a major revival is underway.

The old Ed Sullivan Theater, on Broadway between Fifty-third and Fifty-fourth—grand, Gothic-vaulted, and opulent—was built in the twenties by producer Arthur Hammerstein as a memorial to his father, Oscar Hammerstein I. Its television history is perhaps better known than its theater days: Here, of course, was where Ed Sullivan introduced to the nation both Elvis Presley and the Beatles. Restored by CBS, the space has returned to major television use as the set for the *Late Show with David Letterman*.

But possibly the most extraordinary work of all is taking place as part of the long-awaited transformation of what was once one of New York's most notoriously sordid blocks, Forty-second Street be-

tween Broadway and Eighth Avenue. The New Amsterdam Theatre, an exquisite Art Nouveau gem that opened in 1903 and once housed *The Ziegfeld's Follies*, languished for the last fifteen years but is now undergoing a multimillion-dollar rehabilitation—unthinkable only a few short years ago—to become a live theater for Disney. And across the street, a similarly once unimaginable restoration has created a new children's theater out of the oldest surviving Broadway playhouse of them all.

Originally opened in 1900 as the Republic, the sole survivor of the Times Square ventures of Oscar Hammerstein I, and rebuilt two years later for David Belasco (shortly before he built his own

theater), it reopened in December, 1995, as the New Victory, with a grand revue including Sesame Street muppets cavorting before the footlights on stage and Patrick Stewart reciting excerpts from Dickens's *Christmas Carol* to an audience that included Hammerstein's descendants and a passel of the politicians and sundry others whose support made it all possible. This last of New York's nineteenth-century-style theaters had decayed into the most repulsive of pornographic venues, making its rescue for children all the more amazing. The formerly ruined façade is now one of Broadway's finest, and the brilliantly restored interior shows off the wonderful century-old dome on whose rim

perch eight pairs of gilded plaster putti.

David Belasco might not recognize today's Times Square—the glitz of the new buildings, the hype, the hustle and bustle—but then again he might. Back for a visit, taking in the Tonys, he would certainly find the theater alive and well, and he might be pleasantly surprised to discover magical evenings being created in playhouses not so greatly changed from his own day. ♦

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WHEN THE FOOD'S THE THING

Le Bernardin

155 West 51st Street
Tel. (212) 489-1515

Quite simply one of the finest restaurants in Manhattan, in or out of the theater district, Le Bernardin opens its doors early enough for those play-bound. Superlative fish dishes such as pepper-crusted seared yellowfin tuna, black bass *seviche*, and crispy Chinese-spiced red snapper provide enough entertainment to whet the appetite for the real show to come. But don't run so late that you risk skipping the *mille-feuille* of chocolate. Expensive.

Cité

120 West 51st Street
Tel. (212) 956-7100

With its sharply angled, golden rooms, Cité looks like the heart of a giant quartz crystal enhanced with such Art Deco touches as curlicued grillwork from the old Au Bon Marché store in Paris. Wise in the ways of pretheater service, the deft wait staff ensures that you can feast on such French classics as onion soup, *filet au poivre*, and chocolate mousse in about an hour. The impressive wine list is five times the length of the menu. For post-theater dining, try the more casual Grill Room, just off the main space. Expensive.

44

Royalton Hotel
44 West 44th Street
Tel. (212) 944-8844

The Philippe Starck-designed futuristic lobby of the Royalton provides a dramatic setting for New York's major players and Hollywood stars in the stylish restaurant

called 44. So, settle into the cushy banquette and take in the scene. The eclectic, creative menu is appropriately chic, but the food is happily more down-to-earth (swordfish "minute steak" and a ragout of chicken, white beans, and chanterelles were among recent offerings) than the surroundings. Moderate.

Frico Bar

402 West 43rd Street
Tel. (212) 564-7272

With a flair for good food, a relaxed atmosphere, friendly service, and affordable prices, Frico Bar has already become a neighborhood favorite. This Italian bar-restaurant fits the bill for all appetites—from a steak to clam pizza, Caesar salad, and *frico* (crisp grilled Montasio cheese—the house specialty as well as that of the Italian region of Friuli). Stop by after the show for a glass of red wine and a prosciutto sandwich at the bar. Moderate.

Jezebel

630 Ninth Avenue
Tel. (212) 582-1045

Southern allure and the best soul food south of 125th Street are found at Jezebel. Favorites include crispy chicken livers, shrimp Creole, a superior bread pudding, and strawberry shortcake made with warm, fresh biscuits. The spacious dining room welcomes with multihued shawls draped from the ceiling, vintage posters, antique crystal chandeliers, eccentric lamps dressed with beaded shades, and potted palms. Perfect for an *après*-theater nightcap later in the evening, when the joint starts jumping. Moderate.

Orso

322 West 46th Street
Tel. (212) 489-7212

At Orso dramatic photos of writers hang alongside snaps of the owner's friends, and beneath them directors and actors twirl forkfuls of *linguine* at tables beside convivial playgoers. After crackly garlic "pizza bread," you might try lamb with white beans or zesty *tagliarini* with tomatoes, olives, capers, and anchovies (pastas are the real stars). And, like a casual American cousin, **Joe Allen** (next door, same owner) serves up well-made bar food. Both moderate.

Tapika

238 West 56th Street
Tel. (212) 397-3737

The décor may be Old Wild West by way of Sunset Boulevard, and the huge light fixtures may hover overhead like props from *The X-Files*, but David Walzog's food is straight out of Texas—the new Texas, that is. Chilies are everywhere: rubbed on grilled salmon and steak, baked in polenta-like "corn fries," and stirred into salad dressing. Moderate.

'21' Club

21 West 52nd Street
Tel. (212) 582-7200

Possibly the best pretheater dinner deal in town. Choose from chef Michael Lomonaco's herb-roasted chicken with hash browns, grilled salmon with vegetable couscous, and peppercorn steak with chili rings. If it's the '21' classics you're interested in, start with Caesar salad and end with *crème brûlée*. Moderate. —Eds.