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The Merle Reskin Theatre

A Ninety-Eight Year Old Teaching Young Artists in the South Loop

For the past ninety-eight years, a French-renaissance style theatre has sat just off of Michigan Ave in the South Loop. The theatre has changed addresses, owners, names, audiences, managers, and seen the city of Chicago change around it, but continues to offer performances to more than 50,000 audience members per season. Many famous performers have graced the stage of the Blackstone Theatre, including Henry Fonda, Uta Hagen, Katherine Hepburn, Ethel Barrymore, Dustin Hoffman, James Earl Jones, Vivien Leigh, Geraldine Page, Melvyn Douglas, and Studs Terkel, to name a few. For many members of Chicago's community, it will always be a shining landmark of the history of Chicago theatre – and today the Merle Reskin Theatre serves as the “legendary training ground” for the students of the Theatre School at DePaul University.

Located on the southern edge of the theatre district, 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 Hotel and Theatre were named after Timothy B. Blackstone, an early Chicago businessman and a partner of hotel magnate John Burroughs Drake. 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 mansion.

The Blackstone Theatre building is a six-story structure. Marshall & Fox adopted a French Renaissance style for both the theatre and the hotel. The interior finish of the lobby of the theatre was designed by Plamondon & Tetze to give the appearance of a European Opera House, with a finish of French walnut and gold. 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 theatre." The total cost of the theatre was \$500,000.

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When the Blackstone Theatre opened its doors, on New Year's Eve of 1910, it quickly became a leading center for the arts. During the first decade of its opening, more than 60 plays were produced including Shakespeare pieces performed by the Stratford-Upon-Avon Players (the predecessor of the Royal Shakespeare Company), and other international productions. The theatre also housed vaudeville acts and hit productions from New York.

As the decades went on, the list of stars and hits grew. Some of the highlights included Ethel Barrymore as Laura in Pinero's "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray"(1925), Walter Hampden's revival of "Cyrano de Bergerac" (1932), and a one hundred week-long run, in 1922, of "Good Night Ladies!," a farce by Byrus Wood starring Budde Ebsen as a shy professor who inadvertently enters a Turkish bath on Ladies Night. During the 1930's, the Blackstone Theatre was home to the Federal Theatre Project, established by the Works Progress Administration in 1935, for rehearsals and performances in Chicago. From 1936 until Congress abolished the program in 1939, the Federal Theatre Project staged more than twenty productions at the Blackstone Theatre.

The 1960's and 70's brought a plethora of other well received productions and stars to the Blackstone, including Myrna Loy in Neil Simon's "Barefoot In The Park" (1935), Katherine Hepburn in "A Matter of Gravity" (1977), and Henry Fonda in "First Monday in October" (1979). By the 1980's, the League of Chicago Theatres reported record highs for the quantity of productions being produced in Chicago, as well as the number of theatre attendees. Unfortunately, times were not as prosperous for the Blackstone, and the number of nights that the theatre was dark increased until finally it closed its doors for an entire year in 1987.

By the time that Lily Tomlin was to open an eight week run of her one woman show "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life," the Shubert Organization (who had acquired the theatre in 1946) decided to dispose of the Blackstone Theatre. Already seventy-two years of history and well received productions had graced the stage of the Blackstone, and suddenly the theatre was in danger of demolition, and in need of a care-taker.

A few years earlier, the trustees of the Art Institute voted to phase out the Goodman School of Drama, and stopped accepting new admissions. At that point, the Goodman School of Drama had already produced generations of actors and artists with national recognition. The program was in its final days when DePaul University agreed to give the school a new home. On July 1, 1978, the Goodman School of Drama became the ninth college of DePaul University. One observer wrote: "The future has gone from 'curtains' to more curtain calls. For that, applause." At DePaul, the Goodman School of Drama (renamed The Theatre School at DePaul University in 1985) expanded its degree programs, faculty, administration and student body and moved into the former St. Vincent's Elementary School on North Kenmore Avenue as its primary classroom and office building. But after moving from the Goodman Theatre, The Theatre School needed a new theatre facility to call its own.

So the story goes: a rescued conservatory training program finds its soul mate in a French-renaissance Theatre that is in need of revitalization and fresh life. The marriage of one of the country's oldest theatre schools to one of Chicago's oldest remaining theatres devoted to live performance was a momentous occasion. On May 26, 1988, Rev. John T. Richardson of DePaul University announced the purchase of the Blackstone Theatre from the Shubert Organization and by the fall of 1988 The Theatre School had invested \$1,000,000 in seven months of extensive renovations to the Blackstone Theatre. The theatre re-opened in February 1989.

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 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."

In 1992, due to a magnanimous gift from Mr. and Mrs. Harold Reskin, the Blackstone Theatre enjoyed yet another rebirth as the Merle Reskin Theatre. Offering productions at the Merle Reskin Theatre all season long, the Theatre School at DePaul University has continued the Goodman School of Drama's commitment to offering highly imaginative children's productions, in the Chicago Playworks for Families and Young Audiences Series. The Showcase Series of Contemporary Plays and Classics productions are also presented at the Merle Reskin Theatre, and both Series are open to the public.

Recent alumni who have graced the stage of the Reskin Theatre include Jillian Anderson (*The X-Files*), Zach Helm (*Stranger Than Fiction*), Judy Greer (*Arrested Development*) and Monique Coleman (*Disney's High School Musical*). The Reskin has also served as a perfect laboratory for the training of hundred of designers, technicians, arts administrators, playwrights, and actors that have entered the industry as alumni of the Theatre School and continued their careers on a local and worldwide scale.

The Merle Reskin Theatre has been a landmark in Chicago's South Loop, as well as a strong foundation for hundreds of artists. If the walls of the ninety-eight year old theatre could talk, the conversation would most likely lean towards storytelling – both the personal stories of the professionals who have dedicated eras of their lives to producing the hundreds of productions that have been housed in the theatre, as well as the stories that those productions have aimed to tell. The Theatre School is proud to invite the next generation of theatrical professionals in all disciplines to learn their craft in a truly historical and sacred spot of Chicago theatre.

The Theatre School at DePaul University's Upcoming shows at the Merle Reskin Theatre include:

Chicago Playworks for Families and Young Audiences presents:

THE GIVER, by Lois Lowry, adapted for the stage by Eric Coble, directed by Ernie Nolan
April 1 - May 24, 2008 (For ages 9 and up)

Tickets are \$8. Group rates are available. Seniors (over 60), DePaul employees and alumni and college students may receive a discount (with ID). The Merle Reskin Theatre is accessible via CTA busses (3-King Drive, 29-State Street, 146-Michigan/Museums and others), and CTA El stops (Red, Blue, Brown, Green, Orange, Purple and Pink).

The Showcase Series: Contemporary Plays & Classics presents:

THE HEIDI CHRONICLES, by Wendy Wasserstein, directed by Jane Drake Brody
April 18 - 27, 2008 (previews 4/16 & 4/17)

KOSI DASA, written and directed by Shepsu Aakhu
May 16 - 25, 2008 (previews 5/14 & 5/15)

Tickets are \$15. Group rates are available. Seniors (over 60), DePaul employees and alumni, and college students receive a discount (with ID). Previews are FREE for any college student (with ID). DePaul's Merle Reskin Theatre is accessible via CTA busses (3-King Drive, 29-State Street, 146-Michigan/Museums and others), and CTA El stops (Red, Blue, Brown, Green, Orange, Purple and Pink).

Visit <http://theatreschool.depaul.edu> for information about our entire season, special events, or to buy tickets.