

= Merle Reskin Theatre =

The Merle Reskin Theatre is a performing arts venue located in the Loop community area of Chicago , Illinois . Originally named the Blackstone Theatre , it was founded in 1910 . The Merle Reskin Theatre is now part of DePaul University , although it is still used for events not affiliated with the university . It serves as the home of the Chicago Playworks for Families and Young Audiences series produced by The Theatre School .

The building was designed by Marshall and Fox and developed by Tracy C. Drake and John Drake of Drake Hotel fame on the former site of Timothy Blackstone 's mansion . The theatre has a rich history of live performances that have traditionally been touring productions of hit and prize @-@ winning shows .

= = Building = =

The architects who designed the new theatre in 1910 were Benjamin Marshall and Charles Fox of the firm Marshall and Fox , who also designed the adjacent Blackstone Hotel in 1909 . As with the hotel , the theatre took its name from Timothy Blackstone , whose mansion had previously occupied the site . The original address was on Hubbard Court , which was later renamed Seventh Street , and renamed once again to East Balbo Drive , the current name . The building is six stories tall and built in a French Renaissance style . Constructed only seven years after the Iroquois Theater Fire , the theater was required to be fireproof and the management claimed the auditorium could be cleared in three minutes . Seating capacity was 1 @, @ 400 people until 1988 , when renovations to reinstate the orchestra pit and to create seating for handicapped persons reduced the seat count to 1 @, @ 325 .

The developers of both the Blackstone Hotel and Blackstone Theatre were Tracy C. Drake and John Drake , better known as developers and proprietors of the Drake Hotel . Their father , John Drake ( 1826 @-@ 1895 ) had been a business partner of Blackstone 's . The building of the Blackstone Theatre directly resulted in the shuttering of an older , nearby theatre , the Olympia .

= = Blackstone Theatre Company = =

In an era when most entertainment was performed live on stage , the opening of a new theatre was considered so newsworthy that major newspapers reported on it . The proposed opening of the Blackstone was even noted by the New York Times , which wrote in mid @-@ July 1909 that " ... The new Blackstone Theatre , soon to be erected on Hubbard Place in Chicago ... [ will ] have a large seating capacity , and is to be equipped with every modern theatrical device . The stage is to be patterned on that of the New Amsterdam Theatre in this city [ New York ] ... " The Chicago Tribune also announced the up @-@ coming event , and in a front page story , the newspaper elaborated on what the Times had reported . The new theatre would feature the productions of Charles Frohman , who would operate the theatre jointly with impresarios Klaw & Erlanger ; the three had incorporated under the name " Blackstone Theatre Company " ( which was part of their larger Theatrical Syndicate , formed in 1896 ) . The July 1909 Tribune article also pointed out that this new theatre would be an ornate " movie palace " , able to seat about 1 @, @ 200 people and costing in excess of half a million dollars to build . The Blackstone Theatre officially opened on December 31 , 1910 , with the premiere of a Chicago playwright George Ade 's newest play " U.S. Minister Bedloe . " It was a comedy that starred William H. Crane , and the critics were impressed by the play and by the beauty of the venue .

The Blackstone was managed by Harry J. Powers , a Chicago businessman with extensive experience in the theatre : he had worked his way up from his early days as an usher to ultimately become one of Mr. Erlanger 's most trusted associated ; Powers remained as the Blackstone 's manager throughout its first two decades . The Blackstone 's first productions featured some of that era 's best known performers and playwrights ? for example , after " U.S. Minister Bedloe " came a David Belasco production , " The Return of Peter Grimm " , starring David Warfield . Many of the

productions had already been well received in New York before coming to the Blackstone , such as another play that featured comic actor William H. Crane , " The Senator Keeps House . " But while some of these productions were the equal of the version that played in New York , Tribune theatre critic Hammond observed on several occasions that the Chicago companies lacked the biggest stars . Despite this , the touring companies that performed at the Blackstone tended to do a good job and Hammond praised them for their " effective " productions . This trend of presenting touring company versions would continue in later years , when most of the performances at the Blackstone were plays which had already won the Pulitzer Prize or the Tony Award , and were presented by touring companies from New York .

During the first decade of operation , the Blackstone Theatre featured a number of unique productions . Among them were the performances of the Stratford @-@ upon @-@ Avon Players . Under the direction of F.R. Benson , they offered fourteen of Shakespeare 's plays in two weeks during early November 1913 . Also noteworthy was a presentation of George Bernard Shaw 's " Pygmalion " in 1914 ; performances by the Boston Opera Company , featuring Mlle. Anna Pavlova in 1916 and Louis N. Parker 's " Disraeli . " And during periods of time when there was no play being performed , the Blackstone opened its doors to events sponsored by civic and fraternal organizations such as the Elks or Chicago 's University Club . When Big Sisters was still a new organization , it held one of its first benefits at the Blackstone . The Blackstone was also the home to a large women 's suffrage rally and conference in 1916 ; in attendance were 1 @,@ 200 suffragists from all over the United States . And keeping up with the times , some of the performances from the stage of the Blackstone were heard on Chicago @-@ area radio station WTAS , thanks to station owner Charles Erbstein , who thought it was a good idea to use the theatre for live broadcasts , and began doing so in early 1925 .

Because the Blackstone Theatre was a touring theatre , many actors appeared there who would not have otherwise had that opportunity if the venue had specialized in new productions . Some of the actors who graced the stage of the Blackstone include William Gillette , Ethel Barrymore , John Barrymore , Helen Hayes , Ruth Gordon , Katharine Cornell , Cornelia Otis Skinner , and Spencer Tracy . During the 1920s the Blackstone presented 60 plays by playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw , Eugene O 'Neill , Seán O 'Casey , Sir Arthur Wing Pinero , Richard Sheridan , Ben Jonson , Oliver Goldsmith , Frank Craven , Ring Lardner , and George M. Cohan .

= = Post Blackstone Theatre Company = =

= = = Lease = = =

At the end of 1930 , it was announced that the Blackstone Theatre Company was terminating its lease . Mr. Erlanger had died in March , the country was in the midst of the Depression , and newspaper reports remarked on how many businesses were suffering . Building owners John and Tracy Drake managed the theatre for a year before foreclosure loomed in 1932 . In 1934 , they leased the theatre to Playgoer 's Incorporated , although this group only lasted a year .

The Blackstone was saved in the 1930s by the Federal Theatre Project , which leased the theatre in 1936 and continued to use it for rehearsals and productions until the program was abolished by Congress in 1939 . During this period , the Blackstone played host to original plays .

In 1940 , the theater was rented by Oscar Sertin , who staged " Life with Father " starring Lillian Gish , which opened in February and ran for more than a year . The following year , Buddy Ebsen starred in " Good Night Ladies ! " , which ran for 100 weeks . From 1942 through 1945 , the theatre was run by Slavin Amusement Company .

= = = Shubert Brothers = = =

In 1945 , a reconstituted Blackstone Theatre Company managed the hall until 1948 when the Shubert Brothers bought the theatre . With the rise of other forms of entertainment , such as

television , attendance at live theaters declined and the Shubert Organization scaled back the Blackstone 's season from 28 weeks to as few as 14 weeks each year .

1959 saw the premiere of Lorraine Hansberry 's " A Raisin in the Sun . " Although the play was successful , after four weeks it left Chicago for New York . Around the same time , a renaissance in Chicago theatre was taking place on the city 's north side .

The Blackstone was dark from 1986 until August 1988 , when it reopened to Lily Tomlin 's one woman show " The Search For Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe . " At this time , the Shubert Organization decided it was time to divest itself of all Chicago theatres except for the Shubert Theatre on Monroe Street .

= = = The Theatre School = = =

The Goodman School of Drama , renamed The Theatre School in 1985 , was founded in 1925 . It joined DePaul University in 1978 . Alumni include Gillian Anderson , John C. Reilly , Scott Ellis , Joe Mantegna , Theoni V. Aldredge , Karl Malden , Michael Rooker , Elizabeth Perkins , Judy Greer and Eugene Lee .

When the Shubert Organization decided to divest the majority of its Chicago theatres , the Blackstone Theatre building was offered to DePaul University . Although DePaul 's Theatre School began officially performing in the Blackstone on March 21 , 1989 , with a production of The Misanthrope by Molière , it had an earlier production of " The Phantom Tollbooth " . The Theatre School 's main performance space is the Merle Reskin Theatre . Each year The Theatre School presents the Chicago Playworks series as well as The Theatre School Showcase , which both run throughout the academic year at the Merle Reskin Theatre . Chicago Playworks presents works intended for families and young audiences , while the Showcase series offers contemporary plays and classics .

In 1992 , Harold and Merle Reskin made a sizable donation to the Theatre School and on November 20 , the theatre was renamed the Merle Reskin Theatre . Merle Reskin ( née Muskal ) had spent five years as a professional actress , portraying Ensign Janet MacGregor in " South Pacific " on Broadway and appearing with Etta Moten . She gave up her career upon marrying Reskin in 1955 ; however , she spent thirty years as the Midwest Regional Auditioner for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts . In addition to The Theatre School , the building is also used by other arts organizations .