

= Jessie Bonstelle =

Laura Justine " Jessie " Bonstelle ( c . 1870 ? October 14 , 1932 ) was an American theater director , actress , and drama company manager . Encouraged by her mother , she sang and performed in the theater from a young age ; she went on to become a famous leading lady and made several performances on Broadway . Later she became a director , managing many stock companies , directing Broadway productions and training many young performers who went on to be famous actors . In 1925 she founded her own theater in Detroit . Reorganized in 1928 as the Detroit Civic Theatre , it was one of America 's first civic theaters , and her methods influenced community theater projects elsewhere . She has been described as " one of the pioneering women stage directors in the early twentieth century " .

= = Early life = =

Bonstelle was born to Helen and Joseph Bonesteel on her father 's farm near the town of Greece , New York , the youngest of their eight children . Her exact date of birth is unknown , and she kept it a secret , but it was sometime in November 1869 ? 1871 . Originally named Bonesteel , later in life she changed it to Bonstelle after , according to legend , seeing it misspelled like that on a theater marquee .

Bonstelle 's mother , who herself had wanted to be an actress , home @-@ schooled her in reading , writing , singing , dancing , and even in reciting Shakespeare . Jessie 's first public performance was singing temperance songs in church at the age of two years . Helen gave her daughter a passion for acting by often taking her to theaters in nearby Rochester . Around the age of ten Jessie auditioned for critic Thomas Keane , and with his encouragement she left on tour with a production of Bertha , the Beautiful Sewing Machine Girl , a melodrama . After returning home from California she briefly studied at Nazareth Academy , a convent school in Rochester . In 1886 she returned to the stage , working for local opera house owner Edward D. Stair and touring in his productions .

= = Career = =

After the death of her parents in 1890 , Bonstelle went to New York City , and in 1891 she joined the company of Fanny Janauschek , with whom she toured for a season . In 1892 she worked as an understudy and chorus member in Augustin Daly 's company , but the season left her exhausted . However , in 1893 she married the actor Alexander Hamilton Stuart , who was twenty years older than her and Janauschek 's leading man . Happily married , together they worked in Philadelphia 's Forepaugh Stock Company for two years , before moving to Rochester , where Bonstelle played various roles and became an established leading lady . She was the leading lady of Philadelphia 's Standard Stock Company during the 1898 ? 99 season . Stuart died in 1911 ; Bonstelle would never remarry .

Bonstelle performed in three productions on Broadway , including Elizabeth Jordan 's The Lady from Oklahoma , which Bonstelle herself produced in 1913 . Her acting received mixed or poor reception from New York Times critics , and according to some she " lacked creative depth " .

In 1899 , while playing with the Biancke Sisters , Bonstelle produced Heimat by Hermann Sudermann . This was its first performance in the United States , and only the second in English . Later she received a letter from Sudermann in which he thanked her for performing his work . Her career as a manager and director began around 1900 when Jacob J. Shubert offered her the management of a stock company in Rochester . This company , the Lyceum stock company , based at Rochester 's Lyceum Theater , included some prominent actors and future stars , such as Orrin Johnson , Margaret Wycherly and Charles Hutchison .

She spent the next five years managing , directing and acting there , but also appeared from time to time in Philadelphia and toured at least once in Canada . Moreover , she occasionally directed for the Shuberts in New York , and was associated with Frederick Freeman Proctor 's 125th Street Theater in Harlem . Bonstelle said that her dedication was partly inspired by the death of

Janaushek in 1904 , realizing that what she did for the theater was lasting . From 1906 she managed stock companies at the Star Theater in Buffalo , and from 1910 also at Detroit 's Garrick Theater , moving weekly between the two cities . She usually put on plays which had recently been successful on Broadway , but not those which she saw as immoral . The most popular production she directed was an adaptation of Louisa May Alcott 's Little Women by Marian de Forest . Bonstelle researched the play herself , traveling to Boston to view personal papers provided by Alcott 's family and talking to her friends . The production toured nationally in 1911 , with four companies performing in different places at the same time , and had a " successful and lengthy run " on Broadway in 1912 . It was also performed in London after World War I. From 1912 to 1917 she was a director at the Northampton Municipal Theater in Massachusetts .

Bonstelle sold her stake in the Garrick Theater in 1924 . She and her company founded the Bonstelle Playhouse in Detroit , which opened on January 1 , 1925 . Backed by a syndicate led by a patron of hers , she bought a former synagogue on Woodward Avenue , Temple Beth El , for \$ 500 @, @ 000 and commissioned C. Howard Crane to renovate it . At first she carried on producing mostly Broadway @-@ style plays . However , the company did perform classics , including modern @-@ dress productions of Romeo and Juliet in 1926 and Hamlet in 1927 , among the first to put on such performances . In February 1928 Bonstelle began a campaign to gain community support for the theater . A fund of over \$ 200 @, @ 000 was raised by donations from the public and Bonstelle made an agreement with local authorities to make the playhouse the city 's unofficial premier theater . Later that year the group became known as the Detroit Civic Theater . In her plan for the theater she emphasized the importance of providing the public with the best drama , including both classics and modern works , and improving young people 's knowledge of dramatic literature . Funded by public subscription , it had ticket prices as low as \$ 1 @. @ 50 . Performances included works by Shakespeare , Henrik Ibsen and Richard Brinsley Sheridan . The theater also played a religious role . Bonstelle used it in an effort to improve understanding and co @-@ operation between the church and the theater , holding multi @-@ denominational religious services there during Lent , and she stated that her plays , while avoiding being preachy , were intended to have a positive moral influence on the audience . Local clergy publicly praised her work with the theater .

In June 1932 Bonstelle went to Hollywood ; possible reasons include a desire to direct films , to found an acting school , or to explore the possibility of a new stock company . She returned to Detroit after falling ill and learning she had cancer . There she began a campaign to keep open the Civic Theatre , which was adversely affected by the Great Depression , but became seriously ill . Aided by her secretary , she continued to campaign for and run the theater until her death on October 14 , 1932 , when she suffered a heart attack at the home of relatives in Detroit . On October 16 her body lay in state at the theater and the New York Times reported that twenty @-@ five thousand people went to see her bier . A memorial service was held there which thousands attended and at which mayor Frank Murphy spoke . She was buried in Rochester next to her husband .

= = Character = =

Bonstelle was a perfectionist who was passionate about her work . She ran grueling rehearsals and kept control over the direction , even on productions she was not directing . However , she was willing to help actors if they were struggling , and was respected for her passion and drive .

= = Reception and legacy = =

Bonstelle had a wide reputation ; according to Brooks Atkinson her " industry in the theater [ was ] famous throughout Eastern America " . However , Broadway critics did not rate her directing highly . In Detroit , though , drama critics praised her greatly , and few of her 165 plays were poorly reviewed ; however most of these critics were in fact either friends of Bonstelle or employees of Stair .

Bonstelle 's Playhouse was one of America 's first civic theaters and , uniquely in the 1920s , a

profitable one . Though it closed in 1933 , a year after her death , due to the rise of the movie industry and the Depression , Wayne State University bought the premises in 1956 for the use of its theater department , and in 1963 renamed it the Bonstelle Theatre in her memory . Bonstelle 's approach gained nationwide attention and she was interviewed by authorities from other cities which wanted information about her plan . Her theater influenced the future Federal Theater Project .

She was well known for spotting talent in young actors and was skilled at developing that talent . She trained many actors and actresses who later became well known , including Katharine Cornell and William Powell .