

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 17, 1987; Designation List 196
LP-1343

IMPERIAL THEATER, first floor interior consisting of the auditorium, the stage, the staircases leading from the first floor to the balcony floor; the balcony floor interior consisting of the balcony, the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, doors, stair railings and attached decorative elements; 249 West 45th Street, Manhattan. Built 1923; architect, Herbert J. Krapp.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1017, Lot 10.

On June 14 and 15, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Imperial Theater, first floor interior consisting of the vestibule, the ticket lobby, the inner lobby, the auditorium, the stage, the staircases leading from the first floor to the balcony floor and all connecting entrance areas; the balcony floor interior consisting of the balcony, the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling, the upper part of the stage house; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall, ceiling, and floor surfaces, doors, stair railings and attached decorative elements; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 39). The hearing was continued to October 19, 1982. Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eighty-one witnesses spoke or had statements read into the record in favor of designation. Two witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The owner was among those speaking in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Imperial Theater Interior survives today as one of the historic theater interiors that symbolize American theater for both New York and the nation. Built shortly after the end of World War I, the Imperial was among the numerous theaters constructed by the Shubert Organization, to the designs of Herbert J. Krapp, that typified the development of the Times Square/Broadway theater district.

Founded by the three brothers Sam S., Lee and J.J. Shubert, the Shubert organization was the dominant shaper of New York's theater district. Beginning as producers, the brothers expanded into the building of theaters as well, and eventually helped cover the blocks east and west of Broadway in Midtown with playhouses.

Herbert J. Krapp, who designed almost all the Shuberts' post-World War I theaters, was the most prolific architect of the Broadway theater district. Having worked in the offices of Herts & Tallant, premier theater

designers of the pre-war period, Krapp went on to design theaters for the two major builders of the post-war era, the Shubert and Chanin organizations.

The Imperial represents a typical and important aspect of the nation's theatrical history. Beyond its historical importance, its interior is a fine example of the elegant Adamesque style in which Herbert Krapp worked.

For over half a century the Imperial Theater Interior has served as home to countless numbers of the plays through which the Broadway theater has come to personify American theater. As such, it continues to help define the Broadway theater district, the largest and most famous concentration of legitimate stage theaters in the world.

The Development of the Broadway Theater District

The area of midtown Manhattan known today as the Broadway theater district encompasses the largest concentration of legitimate playhouses in the world. The theaters located there, some dating from the turn of the century, are significant for their contributions to the history of the New York stage, for their influence upon American theater as a whole, and in many cases for their architectural design.

The development of the area around Times Square as New York's theater district at the end of the 19th century occurred as a result of two related factors: the northward movement of the population of Manhattan Island (abetted by the growth of several forms of mass transportation), and the expansion of New York's role in American theater. The northward movement of Manhattan's residential, commercial, and entertainment districts had been occurring at a steady rate throughout the 19th century. In the early 1800s, businesses, stores, hotels, and places of amusement had clustered together in the vicinity of lower Broadway. As New York's various businesses moved north, they began to isolate themselves in more or less separate areas: the financial institutions remained downtown; the major retail stores situated themselves on Broadway between 14th and 23rd Streets, eventually moving to Herald Square and Fifth Avenue after the turn of the century; the hotels, originally located near the stores and theaters, began to congregate around major transportation centers such as Grand Central Terminal or on the newly fashionable Fifth Avenue; while the mansions of the wealthy spread farther north on Fifth Avenue, as did such objects of their beneficence as the Metropolitan Museum of Art. ¹

The theater district, which had existed in the midst of stores, hotels, and other businesses along lower Broadway for most of the 19th century, spread northward in stages, stopping for a time at Union Square, then Madison Square, then Herald Square. By the last two decades of the 19th century, far-sighted theater managers had begun to extend the theater district even farther north along Broadway, until they had reached the area that was then known as Long Acre Square and is today called Times Square.

A district of farmlands and rural summer homes in the early 1800s, Long Acre Square had by the turn of the century evolved into a hub of mass

transportation. A horsecar line had run across 42nd Street as early as the 1860s, and in 1871, with the opening of Grand Central Depot and the completion of the Third and Sixth Avenue Elevated Railways, it was comparatively simple for both New Yorkers and out-of-towners to reach Long Acre Square. Transportation continued to play a large part in the development of the area; in 1904 New York's subway system was inaugurated, with a major station located at 42nd Street and Broadway. The area was then renamed Times Square in honor of the newly erected Times Building.² The evolution of the Times Square area as a center of Manhattan's various mass transit systems made it a natural choice for the location of legitimate playhouses, which needed to be easily accessible to their audiences.

The theater business that invaded Long Acre Square at the end of the 19th century consisted of far more than a few playhouses, for at that time New York was the starting-point for a vast, nationwide entertainment network known as "the road." This complex theater operation had its beginnings in the 1860s when the traditional method of running a theater, the stock system, was challenged by the growing popularity of touring "combination" shows. In contrast to the stock system, in which a theater manager engaged a company of actors for a season and presented them in a variety of plays, the combination system consisted of a company of actors appearing in a single show which toured from city to city, providing its own scenery, costumes, and sometimes musical accompaniment. Helped by the expansion of the nation's railroads after the Civil War, the combination system soon killed off the majority of stock companies.³ By 1904 there were some 420 combination companies touring through thousands of theaters in cities and towns across the country.⁴

Of crucial importance to the operation of the combination system was a single location where combination shows could be cast, rehearsed, tried out, and then booked for a cross-country tour. Since New York was already regarded as the most important theater city in America, it is not surprising that it became the headquarters for the combination system. In addition to the many theaters needed for an initial Broadway production for the combinations before they went on tour, New York's theater district encompassed rehearsal halls, the headquarters of scenery, costume, lighting, and makeup companies, offices of theatrical agents and producers, theatrical printers and newspapers, and other auxiliary enterprises. Close to the theater district were boarding houses catering to the hundreds of performers who came to New York in the hope of being hired for a touring show or a Broadway production.

As theaters were built farther uptown, the auxiliary enterprises also began to move north. By the turn of the century,

the section of Broadway between 37th Street and 42nd Street was known as the Rialto. Theater people gathered or promenaded there. Producers could sometimes cast a play by looking over the actors loitering on the Rialto; and out-of-town managers, gazing out of office windows, could book tours by seeing who was available.⁵

The theater district that began to move north to Long Acre Square in the 1890s was thus a vast array of business enterprises devoted to every facet of theatrical production.

The movement of the theater district north along Broadway had proceeded at a steady pace during the latter part of the 19th century. The Casino Theater was opened on the southeast corner of Broadway and 39th Street in 1882. A year later, it was joined by a most ambitious undertaking--the construction of the Metropolitan Opera House on Broadway between 39th and 40th Streets. In 1888, the Broadway Theater was erected on the southwest corner of Broadway and 41st Street. Five years later, the American Theater opened its doors at Eighth Avenue between 41st and 42nd Streets, as did Abbey's Theater at Broadway and 38th Street and the Empire Theater at Broadway and Fortieth Street.

It remained for Oscar Hammerstein I to make the move into Long Acre Square itself. At the close of the 19th century, Long Acre Square housed Manhattan's harness and carriage businesses, but was little used at night, when it seems to have become a "thieves' lair."⁶ In 1895 Hammerstein erected an enormous theater building on Broadway between 44th and 45th Streets. The original plan for the Olympia called for a "perfect palace of entertainment--which would have included three theaters, a bowling alley, a turkish bath, cafes and restaurants."⁷ Only part of this visionary plan ever became a reality. On November 25, 1895, Hammerstein opened the Lyric Theater section of the building, and a little over three weeks later he inaugurated the Music Hall section. Never a financial success, the Olympia closed its doors two years after it opened. Nevertheless, it earned Hammerstein the title of "Father of Times Square."

By the turn of the century Hammerstein had built two more theaters in the Long Acre Square area, and in the years 1901-1920 a total of forty-three additional theaters appeared in midtown Manhattan, most of them in the side streets east and west of Broadway. Much of this theater-building activity was inspired by the competition between two major forces in the industry, the Theatrical Syndicate and the Shubert Brothers, for control of the road. As each side in the rivalry drew its net more tightly around the playhouses it owned or controlled, the other side was forced to build new theaters to house its attractions. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of playhouses, both in New York and across the country. After World War I, as the road declined and New York's theatrical activity increased, the general economic prosperity made possible the construction of thirty additional playhouses in the Times Square area, expanding the boundaries of the theater district so that it stretched from just west of Eighth Avenue to Sixth Avenue, and from 39th Street to Columbus Circle.⁸

The stockmarket crash of 1929 and the resulting Depression caused a shrinkage in theater activity. Some playhouses were torn down, many were converted to motion picture houses, and later to radio and television studios. From the time of the Depression until the 1960s no new Broadway playhouses were constructed. Fortunately, the theaters that survive from the early part of the century represent a cross-section of types and styles, and share among them a good deal of New York's rich theatrical history.

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Evolution of Theater Design

The frenzy of theater construction that occurred in New York during the first thirty years of this century brought with it an evolution in architecture and decoration.⁹ At the close of the 19th century American theaters were still being built in the style of traditional European opera houses, with high proscenium arches, narrow auditoriums, two or three balconies built in a horseshoe configuration, and dozens of boxes, some set into the front of the first balcony. Although contemporary notices of the theaters attributed specific (though often vague) styles or periods to them, their interiors were more often than not a melange of styles and colors.

With the increase of theater construction after the turn of the century came a new attitude toward theater architecture and decoration as firms such as Herts and Tallant, Thomas W. Lamb, and others, began to plan the playhouse's exterior and interior as a single, integrated design. The Art Nouveau style New Amsterdam Theater, which opened in 1903, signalled this new seriousness in theater design.

Perhaps influenced by such European experiments as Wagner's Festival Theater at Bayreuth, American theater architects after the turn of the century began to structure their playhouses along different lines. Proscenium openings were made lower and wider, auditoriums were made shallower, seating was planned in a fan shape, and the number of balconies was usually reduced to one. Boxes were cut back to a minimum. The theaters that were built just before and after World War I for the most part shared this new configuration.

Because many of New York's extant playhouses were built during the period in which New York was serving as the starting-point for nationwide tours, they represent a style of theater architecture that is characteristic not only of New York but also of other cities across the United States, for a show which was originally produced in a New York theater would require similar conditions in the theaters in which it toured, and theater owners often hired the same architects to design and build theaters in several cities. Thus, New York's theaters set the standard for theater construction across the United States, as an inspection of designs for theaters in various cities will show.¹⁰

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The Broadway Theater in American Theatrical History

The playhouses still standing in the Broadway theater district share among them over eighty years of American theatrical history. In the early years of the century, when American theater was still heavily influenced by Europe, the theaters played host to such great international stars as Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and to adaptations of such European successes as The Merry Widow and Floradora.

It was in the Broadway theaters that the beginnings of a distinctly American drama could be seen in the Western melodramas of David Belasco, the social comedies of Clyde Fitch and Langdon Mitchell, and the problem plays of Edward Sheldon and Eugene Walter. With the rise of the "little

theater" movement in the second decade of the century, it seemed that theatrical leadership had passed from Broadway to such experimental "art" theaters as the Provincetown Playhouse and the Neighborhood Playhouse. Before long, however, the innovations of the little theaters infused Broadway with new life. Beginning with the production of Eugene O'Neill's first full-length play, Beyond the Horizon, on Broadway in 1920, the playhouses of Broadway presented the work of a new generation of playwrights, including, in addition to O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Philip Barry, S.N. Behrman, Rachel Crothers, Sidney Howard, George S. Kaufman, George Kelly and Elmer Rice.

The Depression of the 1930s brought with it a new concern with political and social issues, and the dramas presented in the Broadway playhouses reflected that concern. Commercial producers gave us plays by Lillian Hellman, Robert E. Sherwood, and Thornton Wilder, while the Group Theater and other new organizations introduced such writers as Clifford Odets and Sidney Kingsley. The Broadway theaters continued to house challenging plays during the 1940s and 1950s, when new talents such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and William Inge first began writing for the theater.

Meanwhile, musical comedy had blossomed from the adaptations and imitations of European operetta popular at the turn of the century to a uniquely American art form. By the 1940s and 1950s the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and many others, were being exported from the stages of Broadway to theaters around the world.

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of ferment and change, both in and out of the theater. As in the 1920s, the impetus for theatrical experimentation came from outside of Broadway, and as in the 1920s, the experimentation helped to revitalize the Broadway theater. Today, the playhouses of Broadway are showcases for the best plays of the Off- and Off-Off Broadway theaters, as well as for exciting productions from theatrical workshops, regional theaters, and outstanding foreign companies.

Having moved gradually northward all during the 19th century, New York's theater district finally came to rest at Times Square, where it has remained for almost ninety years. The economic Depression of the 1930s discouraged speculative ventures such as the construction of new theaters, while after prosperity returned in the wake of World War II, the cost of renting land and constructing a theater was prohibitively high. The northward movement of the theater district may also have been discouraged for a number of years by the existence of the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railway, which crossed from Sixth to Ninth Avenues at 53rd Street, thereby providing a natural northern boundary for the theater district.¹¹

The interior of the Imperial Theater, as one of the Broadway theater interiors surviving today in the theater district, contributes to the totality of the district's history by virtue of its participation in that history.

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Notes

1. The discussion of the northward movement of Manhattan's business and theaters is based on Mary Henderson, The City and the Theatre (Clifton, N.J.: James T. White and Co., 1973), pp. 130-131, 168-170.
2. W.G. Rogers and Mildred Weston, Carnival Crossroads: the Story of Times Square (New York: Doubleday, 1960), pp. 39-78; Howard B. Furer, New York: A Chronological and Documentary History 1524-1970 (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1974), p. 34 ff.; The New York Subway (New York: Interborough Rapid Transit Co., 1904; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, n.d.).
3. Alfred L. Bernheim, The Business of the Theatre (New York: Actors Equity Association, 1932; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), p. 26.
4. Jack Poggi, Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 6.
5. Brooks Atkinson, Broadway, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 11.
6. Philip Paneth, Times Square, Crossroads of the World (New York: Living Books, 1965), p. 20.
7. Henderson, p. 263.
8. Henderson, p. 195-196.
9. The discussion of the developments in American theater architecture is based upon: Ned A. Bowman, "American Theatre Architecture: the Concrete Mirror Held Up to Yankee Nature," The American Theatre: The Sum of its Parts (New York: French, 1972), pp. 199-233; Burr C. Cook, "Twenty Years of Theatre Building," Theatre, 36 (August 1922), 98-99; Arthur S. Meloy, Theatres and Picture Houses (New York: Architects' Supply and Publishing Co., 1916), p. 29.
10. See, for example, the discussion of various theaters in Randolph Williams Sexton and Ben Franklin Betts, eds., American Theaters of Today, 2 vols. (New York: Architectural Book Pubs., 1927, 1930; reprint ed., New York: Vestal, 1977).
11. Stanley Buder, "Forty-Second Street at the Crossroads: A History of Broadway to Eighth Avenue," West 42nd Street: "The Bright Light Zone" (New York: Graduate School and University Center, CUNY, 1978), p. 62.

The Shuberts

Sam S. Shubert (d.1905), Lee Shubert (c.1873-1953), and Jacob J. Shubert (c.1877-1963) formed perhaps the most powerful family Broadway has ever seen. Children of an immigrant peddler from Czarist Lithuania,¹ the Shuberts rose to become the dominant force in legitimate theater in

America. By 1924 they were producing 25 percent of all the plays in America,² and controlled 75 percent of the theater tickets sold in this country.

The Shuberts' career in the theater actually began in front of a theater: Lee Shubert sold newspapers outside Wieting's Opera House in Syracuse. Soon his brother Sam began to help him. The manager of Wieting's then made Lee his personal errand boy. Sam Shubert was the first in the family actually to work in a theater: soon after his brother's promotion to errand boy he was given a small role in a Belasco production at Wieting's. Belasco was to remain Sam Shubert's idol throughout his career.³

Sam Shubert was the driving force behind the family's rise in the theater industry. From a first job as program boy at the Bastable Theater in Syracuse, he moved to Syracuse's Grand Opera House as assistant treasurer (ticket seller) and then treasurer. At eighteen he returned to Wieting's Opera House as treasurer.⁴ In 1894 he assembled enough money to buy the road rights of Charles Hoyt's A Texas Steer, and took the play on a tour of inexpensive houses. The tour was a success and the next season he repeated it with Hoyt's A Stranger in New York.⁵ In 1897 the Shuberts used the money of local backers to build their own theater in Syracuse, the Baker, with Jacob Shubert serving as manager.

Their success upstate convinced the Shuberts that they were ready to enter the theater world in New York City. In 1900 Sam and Lee Shubert obtained the lease of New York City's Herald Square Theater at Broadway and 35th Street (demolished 1915), while Jacob managed their upstate business. The Herald Square Theater at that time was unpopular with theatergoers, but the Shuberts changed that with a successful production of Arizona by Augustus John. They proceeded to engage the well-known actor Richard Mansfield, and he appeared at the Herald Square in 1901 in a popular production of Monsieur Beaucaire.⁶ The success of these productions encouraged the Shuberts to expand their activities in New York City. In 1901 Sam Shubert leased the Casino Theater on 39th Street; he secured the American rights to the London hit A Chinese Honeymoon and in 1902 it opened at the Casino to rave revues. The show ran for more than a year, and three companies presented it on the road.⁷

The Shuberts followed the success of A Chinese Honeymoon with further expansion in New York City. In 1902 they acquired the lease of the old Theater Comique on 29th Street and Broadway, remodeled the interior and reopened it as the Princess. As an opening attraction they brought Weedon Grossmith and his English company to America in their popular production of The Night of the Party. The following year, 1903, the Shuberts leased the New Waldorf Theater in London and the Madison Square Theater in New York City. They also sold a property on 42nd Street to the composer Reginald DeKoven, who built the Lyric Theater there as a home for the American School of Opera and leased it back to the Shuberts.⁸ The Shuberts then signed a ten-year agreement with Richard Mansfield to open each season at the Lyric, to be followed by DeKoven's productions with the American School of Opera.

By this time the Shuberts were outgrowing the financial means of their upstate backers. Lee Shubert found two new financial backers, Samuel

Untermeyer and Andrew Freedman. Untermeyer was a New York attorney with connections to many New York bankers and investors. Freedman was the owner of the New York Giants baseball team, had extensive New York real estate holdings as well as associations with the Morgan Bank, and was among the small group building New York's first subway. With the political influence and capital made available to the Shuberts by Untermeyer and Freedman, they were able to expand their theater holdings in cities across the country, including Chicago, Boston, New Haven, St. Louis, and Philadelphia.

By 1905 the Shuberts controlled thirteen theaters. They had also found two additional backers who enabled the growing Shubert empire to expand still further, George B. Cox of Ohio and Joseph L. Rhinock of Kentucky. Cox was the immensely wealthy political boss of Cincinnati and Rhinock was a member of Congress who had extensive race track and real estate holdings. In May of that year, however, Sam Shubert was killed in a train wreck. He had been the driving force behind the Shubert empire, and many in the theater industry thought the Shuberts' dramatic rise would now end. Lee Shubert, however, took over his brother's role and within six months of the latter's death had quadrupled the Shubert chain and planned five memorial theaters to Sam.⁹

The Shuberts' success in acquiring and building theaters across the country and in booking and producing shows brought them into conflict with the central booking agency controlled by Marc Klaw and A.L. Erlanger. In 1905 Klaw and Erlanger's Syndicate managed most of the roughly one thousand lucrative theaters of the approximately 3000 theaters in the country.¹⁰ Every touring company had to pass through the Syndicate's stage doors. The Shuberts began to fight in earnest with Klaw and Erlanger in 1904 when they learned that their musical The Girl From Dixie wouldn't be able to get a road booking unless the brothers stopped renting their own theaters. Following his brother's death, Lee Shubert announced to the press that Harrison Fiske, David Belasco and the Shuberts were joining forces and were inviting "other independent producers" to join them in an "open door" independent circuit. The need for such a circuit was emphasized in November 1905 when Mme. Sarah Bernhardt arrived in New York for a Shubert tour. Klaw and Erlanger denied her the use of any of their theaters thinking that this action would force the Shuberts to accept their terms. The idea backfired and created enormous public support for the Shuberts as Mme. Bernhardt played in tents and town halls across the country. The struggle for control of theatrical bookings between the Shuberts and Klaw and Erlanger continued through the 1910s. By 1920, after countless lawsuits, the Shuberts gained supremacy.

In the five years following Sam Shubert's death the family continued to expand their holdings in New York City. In 1908 they hired Ben Marshall of Marshall & Fox, Chicago, to design a playhouse on West 39th Street. In what was to become a common Shubert practice, they named the theater after one of their stars, calling it Maxine Elliott's Theater (demolished). This was the first theater that the Shuberts built themselves, neither remodeling nor leasing an existing theater. In 1909 they were involved, along with a number of other investors, in the building of the New (later Century) Theater on Central Park West at 62nd Street (demolished). At the same time they were building a second theater of their own in New York on West 41st Street, the Comedy Theater, designed by architect D.G. Malcolm (demolished). In 1910 the Shuberts hired architect Albert Swasey to design

a small playhouse on West 39th Street, named Alla Nazimova's 39th Street Theater (demolished).

During the 'teens the Shuberts continued to expand their control of New York's theaters. Lee Shubert became the business director of the Century Theater on Central Park West. There he met Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt who owned the American Horse Exchange on Broadway at West 50th Street. The Shuberts acquired the Exchange from Vanderbilt and hired Swasey to remodel it as a theater. It opened in 1911 as the Winter Garden Theater with Jacob Shubert as manager. The Shuberts also bought the Astor Theater on Broadway and 45th Street (demolished) as well as an interest in three Manhattan theaters owned by the Selwyn brothers, and continued to build their own New York theaters. In 1913 they opened two theaters designed by Henry B. Herts, the Sam S. Shubert Memorial Theater on West 44th Street and the connecting Booth Theater (with Winthrop Ames as a partner) on West 45th Street. The Shubert Theater building also became home to the family's corporate offices.

Over the following decade the Shuberts proceeded to cover the Times Square area with Shubert theaters, all designed by architect Herbert J. Krapp, formerly of the Herts & Tallant office. In 1917 three new Shubert houses opened: the Morosco on West 45th Street (demolished), named for West Coast producer Oliver Morosco; and a second adjoining pair, the Broadhurst on West 44th and the Plymouth on West 45th, just east of the Shubert-Booth pair. The Broadhurst was initially managed by playwright George Broadhurst and the Shuberts, while the Plymouth was built in partnership with producer Arthur Hopkins. In 1918 the Shuberts built the Central Theater on Broadway and 47th Street (it survives today as the Forum 47th Street movie theater).

In the 1920s the Shuberts continued their fast-paced expansion both in New York and in other cities across the country. In 1920 they acquired complete ownership of the Century Theater on Central Park West.¹¹ That same year, they announced plans for six new theaters on West 48th and 49th Streets, all to be designed by Herbert J. Krapp. Of the four of these theaters eventually built, three opened in 1921: the Ritz on West 48th Street, and the Ambassador and the Forty-Ninth Street (demolished) on West 49th. The Edwin Forrest (today called the Eugene O'Neill) on West 49th Street opened in 1925.

While the Shuberts were building and acquiring theaters for use as legitimate houses they were also involved in other aspects of the entertainment business, many of them in competition with the legitimate stage. Lee Shubert at one time owned one-third of Samuel Goldwyn's motion picture company, and later sat on the boards of both Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and United Artists.¹¹

The Shuberts also became involved in vaudeville. In 1910 in Syracuse the Shuberts had reached an agreement with B.F. Keith, who virtually controlled vaudeville in the East. They agreed to stay out of vaudeville for ten years in return for a share in Keith's Syracuse profits.¹² With the agreement's expiration in 1920, Lee Shubert announced plans to produce vaudeville shows, making inevitable a battle with Keith's United Booking Office (UBO) and its monopoly of the eastern vaudeville circuit. The booking battle with Keith caused intense competition for stars and control

of theaters. Eventually, however, it became clear that vaudeville was no competition for the growing popularity of motion pictures, and the Shuberts abandoned the enterprise.

In 1924 the Shuberts issued four million dollars worth of Shubert theater stock. The prospectus detailed the assets owned by the Shuberts, not the least of which was their control or ownership of 86 "first class" theaters in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston and 27 other major cities. The 30 theaters they owned or controlled in New York City represented half of the seating capacity on Broadway. The Shuberts owned seven of Chicago's fifteen theaters, and they booked three of the others. They went on to announce in their prospectus that the producers who booked through their organization included the Theater Guild, Winthrop Ames, Brady, Comstock, Gest, Hopkins, Sam Harris, William Morris and 40 others. Finally the Shuberts noted that 20 percent of the total time on their circuit was devoted to their own productions.¹³ The stock sold out.

In addition to the four theaters on 48th and 49th Streets announced in 1920, the Shuberts built Krapp-designed theaters throughout the Times Square area. In 1921 Jolson's 59th Street Theater opened (demolished). The Shuberts named it for Al Jolson who opened it but never appeared in it again. In 1923 they opened the Imperial Theater on West 45th Street and in 1928 the Ethel Barrymore on West 47th Street. In addition to building their own theaters, the Shuberts owned or leased at various times many other New York theaters including the Belasco, the Billy Rose (now the Nederlander), the Cort, the Forty-Fourth Street, the Harris, the Golden, the Royale and the St. James.

While the Shubert Organization continues to function today (the sole survivor among the early 20th century theater entrepreneurs), its contribution to the stock of Broadway theaters ended with the Depression. That contribution, however, was of enormous importance for the creation of the Broadway theater district, and the surviving Shubert-built theaters today bear witness to the productivity of one of the most active and influential families in American theater history.

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Notes

1. Jerry Stagg, The Brothers Shubert, (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 3.
2. Stagg, p. 217.
3. Stagg, p. 12.
4. Ibid.
5. Sam S. Shubert, obituary, New York Dramatic Mirror, May 20, 1905, p. 13.
6. Reviewed in The Theatre, January, 1902.
7. Sam S. Shubert obit., p. 13.

8. Stagg, p. 208.
9. Stagg, p. 75.
10. Stagg, p. 98.
11. Stagg, p. 165.
12. Stagg, p. 164.
13. Stagg, p. 230.

Herbert J. Krapp

The character of today's Broadway theater district owes more to architect Herbert J. Krapp (1883-1973) than to any other architect. He designed sixteen of the extant Broadway theaters (almost half the total),¹ fourteen of which are in active theatrical use, as well as five that have been demolished.² Despite his enormous output, however, little is known today of his life and work.

Herbert Krapp's career coincided with the rise of the Shubert organization as the major force in the New York theater. Upon his graduation from Cooper Union, Krapp joined the office of noted theater architects Henry Herts and Hugh Tallant, who had designed some of the handsomest early twentieth-century theaters in New York, including the Lyceum (1903), New Amsterdam (1902-03), Helen Hayes (1911, demolished), and Longacre (1912-13). According to Krapp's daughter, the partners were becoming increasingly debilitated by morphine addiction, and gradually entrusted Krapp with responsibility for design and office operations.³ Be that as it may, when the Shuberts next decided to build new theaters, in 1916, they turned to Krapp for designs, and proceeded to commission from him a dozen theaters in Times Square in as many years (1916-1928). Throughout his professional career Krapp remained the preferred Shubert architect. He designed their theaters in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and elsewhere, supervised Shubert theater alterations nationwide, and was even the architect for their private residences.⁴

Besides his twelve Shubert theaters, Krapp designed nine other Times Square houses. Six, built between 1924 and 1927, were for the Chanin Construction Company. Only three, the Alvin, the Hammerstein (now the Ed Sullivan), and the Waldorf (demolished) were designed for independent interests. A brilliant acoustician and gifted architect of great invention, Krapp was responsible for scores of theaters throughout New York City and State (including three movie houses in Queens: the Sunnyside in Woodside and the Jackson and the Boulevard in Jackson Heights) and others stretching from Palm Beach to Detroit. His office records document alterations to literally hundreds of theaters across the country.

Krapp's Broadway theaters closely reflect the interest and needs of a new breed of theatrical entrepreneur, the large-scale speculative owner/builder. Prior to the rise of the Shuberts as major theater owners,

most theaters had been erected for independent impresarios, including Oscar Hammerstein who built the first Times Square theater and whose Victory Theater (1899) still stands on 42nd Street, Daniel Frohman who built the Lyceum (1903), Charles Dillingham who built the Lunt-Fontanne (1910), and David Belasco and John Cort who built the theaters that bear their names (1907 and 1912). At the turn of the century, Klaw and Erlanger's Theatrical Syndicate dominated most of the Times Square theaters, but did not sponsor a unified building campaign as the Shuberts eventually did. Since the Shuberts were building theaters largely as financial ventures, most of their buildings tended to be simpler than those designed for the impresarios who were attempting to draw attention both to their theaters and to themselves. The theaters that Krapp designed for the Shuberts are relatively restrained on both the exterior and interior, but they reflect Krapp's mastery of theater layout, as well as the general stylistic trends established by the earlier and more elaborate theater designs in the Times Square theater district.

Krapp's earliest theaters, the Plymouth (1916-17) and Broadhurst (1917), were built as a pair located immediately to the west of Henry Herts's earlier Shubert pair, the Shubert and Booth. The designs of the Plymouth and Broadhurst echo those of the earlier theaters. Like the Shubert and Booth, Krapp's houses have rounded corners that face towards Broadway (the direction from which most audience members arrived). Each corner is accented by an entrance with a broken pedimented enframing and by an oval cartouche. These forms imitate, in a simplified manner, the ornamental forms on Herts's buildings. In addition, Krapp's theaters are faced with bricks separated by wide, deeply inset mortar joints in a manner favored by Herts. The Plymouth and Broadhurst facades are simpler than their neighbors, but they were clearly designed to complement Herts's theaters and create a unified group of Shubert houses.

The Plymouth and Broadhurst are not adorned with a great deal of applied stone or terra cotta. This lack of architectural ornament is typical of Krapp's designs for the Shuberts;⁵ the facades of these theaters are generally enlivened by diaper-patterned brick and occasionally by the use of ornamental iron balconies. The use of diaper-patterned brick can be seen on the Plymouth and the Broadhurst, but it is most evident on the Morosco (1917, demolished), Ritz (1921), Ambassador (1921), and the 46th-Street facade of the Imperial (1923). Krapp's use of diaperwork might have been inspired by Herts & Tallant's use of an ornate diaper pattern of terra cotta on their Helen Hayes Theater (1911).

After building a large number of new theaters between 1916 and 1923 the Shuberts undertook very little construction in the Times Square area from 1924 through 1927. During these years the Chanin Construction Company emerged as the major theater builder in the area. The Chanins also turned to Krapp for their theater designs. Major New York City builders, the Chanins considered theaters to be sound financial investments from which they could not fail to profit. The six theaters that Krapp designed for the Chanins are more ornate than those he designed for the Shuberts. One reason may be that the Chanins, new to the theater world, decided that their theaters should project an elegant image; another, that as a building company, they were more concerned than the Shuberts about the exterior appearance of their buildings. Still another factor may have the greater availability of money in the middle of the 1920s as compared to the years

during and immediately following World War I when most of the Shubert theaters were erected.

Krapp's first two theaters for the Chanins, the Forty-Sixth Street (1924) and the Biltmore (1925), are neo-Renaissance style structures with extensive terra-cotta detail that includes rusticated bases, monumental Corinthian pilasters, and ornate cornices and balustrades. Krapp's next commission, the Brooks Atkinson (1926), has a facade with the Mediterranean flavor that came to be favored by the Chanins. Referred to at the time as "modern Spanish" in style⁶, the Brooks Atkinson is a brick building articulated by three Palladian openings supported by twisted columns. Roundel panels and a Spanish-tiled parapet are additional Spanish forms on the facade. Krapp's largest commission from the Chanins was a trio of theaters, the Golden, Royale, and Majestic, all built between 1926 and 1927 in conjunction with the Lincoln Hotel (now the Milford Plaza Hotel). Like the Brooks Atkinson, these three theaters were described as being "modern Spanish in character."⁷ All three were constructed of yellow brick and adorned with areas of decorative terra-cotta pilasters, twisted columns, arches, parapets, and columned loggias.⁸

Following his work for the Chanins, Krapp designed three independent houses, all of which were stylistically unusual. The Waldorf (1926, demolished) which stood on West 50th Street was an ornate French neo-Classical-style structure; the Alvin (1927, now the Neil Simon) an impressive neo-Federal style red brick building; and the Hammerstein (now the Ed Sullivan) a neo-Gothic theater housed in a tall office building. The latter two were commissioned by theatrical impresarios, hence their more elaborate design as compared to Krapp's work for the Shubert and Chanin theater chains.

In 1928 the Shuberts commissioned their final theater from Krapp. The Ethel Barrymore is among Krapp's finest and most unusual designs. The theater is a monumentally scaled structure combining an extremely ornate rusticated Beaux-Arts-style base with a superstructure boldly modeled after the windowed facade of a Roman bath.⁹

Like the exteriors of his buildings, Krapp's interiors are stylistically varied, reflecting the design eclecticism of the first decades of the twentieth century. On many occasions the style of the interior has little to do with that of the exterior. Most of the theater interiors designed for the Shuberts have Adamesque style ornament, a style deriving from the neo-Classical designs originated by the eighteenth-century English architect Robert Adam. Krapp's Adamesque interiors display the refined, elegant forms common to the style, and such features as delicate garlands, rosettes, and foliate bands. The "Spanish" theaters that Krapp designed for the Chanins have interior details such as twisted columns, arcades, and escutcheons that match the style of the exteriors. All of Krapp's interiors were designed to create a relaxing and comfortable environment for the theatergoer. The decor of the auditoriums is simple yet elegant, and generally complemented by similarly designed lobbies and lounges.

Although Krapp lived to the age of 86, he apparently designed no theaters during the last forty years of his life. Because of the theater

glut caused by financial problems during the Depression, theaters ceased being a lucrative architectural specialty. Krapp survived as a building assessor for the City of New York, and turned increasingly to industrial design. A twentieth-century Renaissance man, he supplemented his architectural practice with the patterning of silver- and flatware and especially with his design of mechanical couplings.¹⁰ The theaters he designed in the early decades of this century, however, remain a lasting legacy, and many of his buildings, such as the Majestic, Imperial, Plymouth, and 46th Street Theaters, are counted among the most successful and sought-after on Broadway.

(ASD)

Notes

1. Krapp's sixteen theaters are the Alvin (now the Neil Simon), Ambassador, Brooks Atkinson, Ethel Barrymore, Biltmore, Broadhurst, 46th Street, Golden, Imperial, Majestic, Eugene O'Neil, Plymouth, Ritz, Royale, and Ed Sullivan (originally Hammerstein). The Central (1567 Broadway at 47th Street) is now a movie house and all but its cornice is covered with billboards.
2. The five theaters designed by Krapp that have been demolished are the Bijou (209 West 45th Street), Century (932 Seventh Avenue between 58th and 59th Streets), 49th Street (235 West 49th Street), Morosco (217 West 45th Street), and Waldorf (116 West 50th Street).
3. Interview with Mrs. Peggy Elson, Herbert Krapp's daughter, by Janet Adams, November 16, 1984.
4. Herbert Krapp papers, currently in the possession of Mrs. Peggy Elson, New York City.
5. The 49th Street Theater (1921) was an exception. This building had a terra-cotta facade articulated by fluted pilasters.
6. Brooks Atkinson Theater, Souvenir Program of the dedication (as Mansfield Theater), February 15, 1926, n.p. Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center branch, New York Public Library.
7. Royale Theater, Souvenir Program of the dedication, January 11, 1927, n.p. Billy Rose Theater Collection.
8. The use of restricted areas of very ornate detail set against an otherwise unornamented facade is reminiscent of Spanish Baroque or Churrigueresque architecture.
9. This theater is often overlooked because the present rectilinear marquee cuts the facade in half, hiding the ornate base and destroying the subtle juxtaposition between the top and bottom sections of the building.
10. Herbert Krapp papers, and interview with Mrs. Peggy Elson.

The Imperial Theater

When the Shuberts commissioned Herbert J. Krapp to build the Imperial Theater, their fiftieth in the New York area,¹ it was anticipated that it would become the premier showcase for their musicals and revues.² Already financially extended by their construction of the Ritz and Ambassador theaters during the preceding year, they financed the Imperial in partnership with the 45th Street Leasing Co., Inc., and with L. & A. Pincus. The latter firm owned the irregular plot between Broadway and Eighth Avenue on which the theater was built. With its bulk on West 46th Street, the T-shaped site extended its narrow stem to frontage on West 45th Street.

The Shuberts built the Imperial in the "Shubert Alley" cluster of theaters on 44th and 45th Streets between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. Its narrow entrance on West 45th Street was squeezed in between the Music Box on the east and the Klaw Theater (demolished) on the west;

the carriage entrance and exit is placed on 46th Street, an arrangement which relieves the traffic congestion on 45th Street.³

Like those of many of the Shubert theaters built in the years immediately following the end of World War I, including the Ambassador and the Ritz, the Imperial's facades were given very modest architectural treatments.

The Imperial's interior, in contrast to its plain exterior, was adorned with the elegant Adamesque plasterwork detailing that Herbert Krapp used to such fine effect in most of his Broadway theater designs.

The Adamesque style takes its name from the brothers Robert and James Adam, 18th century British architects. Robert Adam (1728-1792), following English tradition, went to Italy to study the monuments of classical antiquity, but unlike his predecessors was attracted not to the great public monuments but rather to ancient domestic buildings. He took inspiration from these works to develop a highly ornamental and refined style of low-relief plasterwork with which he adorned a succession of English town and country houses.⁴

Adam's works were equally notable for their plans: the rooms in his houses were often circular, or oval, or rectangular with curved ends. A typical Adam room might be a long rectangular hall with a curved apse at one end, with walls articulated by shallow ornamental pilasters and bands of swags, and a ceiling covered with delicate plaster fan-light shaped tracery and murals of rustic scenes.⁵

Robert Adam became quite influential in his time, and his work was widely imitated, making the "Adamesque" something of a generic 18th century style. When English architecture crossed the Atlantic with the colonists in the 18th century, versions of the Adamesque became the style of Federal America. An early 20th-century revival of interest in the Georgian and Federal periods in this country brought with it a revival of the Adamesque for interior decor.

Several early Broadway theaters were designed in the neo-Georgian or neo-Federal styles (e.g. the Little Theater, 1912, and the Henry Miller Theater, 1917-18), and their red-brick Georgian exteriors were complemented by Adamesque plasterwork ornament in their interiors. In the 1920s, the style became very popular, and was used freely, particularly by theater architects such as Herbert Krapp and Thomas Lamb, in theaters whose exteriors had nothing to do with the neo-Georgian.

The auditorium of Krapp's Imperial Theater is a handsome adaptation of the Adamesque to the needs of a theater. Like Adam's rooms, the auditorium is a rectangle, wider than it is deep, with differently shaped ends, in this case with a flat proscenium arch at one end. The walls are lined with shallow pilasters, while the technique of highly ornamental, low relief plasterwork has been used to produce handsome triple boxes, as well as elaborately worked panels on the walls and coved ceiling and ornament including floral and geometric motifs, Adamesque friezes, and fairy figures holding tragic and comic masks.

By early December 1923, work was continuing around the clock on the new Imperial Theater.⁶ It opened according to schedule on Christmas Eve, Mary Hay having christened its marquee with champagne a few days earlier.⁷ While Miss Hay received praise for her leading role in Mary Jane McKane, Oscar Hammerstein II's latest musical, the critics reserved their raves for the new theater:

The very latest thing in playhouses, inserted between the Music Box and Klaw theaters on West Forty-fifth Street, is done in Empire style, as befits a reigning success. It is one of the most tasteful of the latter day theaters of the Shuberts, and achieves the feat of concentrating 1,650 into an orchestra and single balcony without the faintest suggestion of crowding....⁸

Upon its completion in 1923, the theater was leased by the Shuberts for \$2,500 per month; they purchased it outright four years later.⁹

In 1925 the Shuberts planned the expansion of the Imperial into a multiple use property with a million dollar proposal for a fifteen-story apartment hotel, to be designed by Herbert Krapp.¹⁰ The plan was later abandoned, and in subsequent years the Imperial fell victim, after a valiant struggle, to the Depression, as most of Broadway's other theaters had long since done. It went into receivership in 1934; the Shuberts, however, were able to convince their creditors to let them retain management of the house. Eventually, when their finances improved, they regained ownership of the theater.

Under the Shuberts, the Imperial established itself as a Broadway legend; its name became, and remains, synonymous with long-running musicals. In the words of theater historian, Dr. Mary C. Henderson, "the Imperial can boast of more thrilling moments in American musical theatre than any other on Broadway." It "has earned its majestic position as the crown jewel of New York's theatre District."¹¹

(JA)

Notes

1. "The Imperial Dedicated," New York Times, December 22, 1923, p. 8.
2. "Imperial Theatre, New York City," Architecture and Building, 56 (March, 1924), 20; Mary C. Henderson, "Broadway's Luckiest House: The Imperial Theatre," New York Times, June 6, 1982, advertising supplement, p. 4.
3. "Imperial Theatre, New York City," p. 20.
4. This brief account of the work of Robert Adam is based on Margaret Whinney, "The Adam Style," in Home House: No. 20 Portman Square, (Feltham, Middlesex: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd, 1969), pp. 15-17.
5. See for instance the Back Parlour of Home House, 20 Portman Square, London, designed by Robert Adam and built c.1775.
6. "The Imperial Its Name," New York Times, December 5, 1923, p. 23.
7. "The Imperial Dedicated," p. 8.
8. New York Herald, December 25, 1923; cited by George Freedley, "Broadway Playhouse," bound typescript of the "Stage Today," 1941-43, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library, p. 123.
9. Henderson, p. 4.
10. New York Buildings Department, New Building application 160-1925.
11. Henderson, pp. 4, 12.

The Imperial as a Playhouse¹

The Imperial opened on Christmas Eve, 1923, with the musical Mary Jane McKane, a "featherlight concoction" with "catchy tunes,"² which achieved a respectable 151 performance run. The following season brought the Imperial's first big hit, Oscar Hammerstein and Rudolf Friml's operetta Rose-Marie, whose stars Mary Ellis and Dennis King sang their "Indian Love Call" through 581 performances. Oh, Kay! of 1926 was a "breezy"³ tale of bootlegging on Long Island set to music by George and Ira Gershwin. Its score included "Do, Do, Do," "Clap Yo' Hands," and "Someone to Watch Over Me," the last memorably rendered by Gertrude Lawrence. Oscar Hammerstein and Sigmund Romberg's long running New Moon of 1928 (518 performances), added "Lover Come Back to Me" to the canon of popular song.

The Depression was greeted at the Imperial by Jack Donahue and Lily Damita singing and dancing in Sons O' Guns which played 297 times. A period of short runs followed in 1930 and 1931, but by November 1931, the

theater's luck returned with Ed Wynn's The Laugh Parade (243 performances). The merriment continued in 1932 with Flying Colors which introduced the songs "Louisiana Hayride" and "Shine On Your Shoes." In October 1935 Jubilee opened at the Imperial. This fantasy of royalty on holiday by Moss Hart had an exceptional score by Cole Porter that included "Begin the Beguine" and "Just One of Those Things." Forced to close after 169 performances so that star Mary Boland could honor a Hollywood contract, it found a worthy successor in Rodgers & Hart's On Your Toes. This musical mating of ballet and tap starring Ray Bolger and Tamara Geva featured George Balanchine's great choreography for "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue." Cole Porter's tunes were heard again at the Imperial in 1938 when Leave it to Me catapulted Mary Martin to stardom with her performance of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy."

The 1940s were gravy years at the Imperial with one block-buster musical succeeding another. The trend began in 1940 with Irving Berlin's Louisiana Purchase (444 performances), continued with Cole Porter's Let's Face It (547 performances) and Kurt Weill and Ogden Nash's One Touch of Venus (567 performances) and culminated in 1946-49 with Irving Berlin's Annie Get Your Gun. Ethel Merman's 1,147 performances in the last gave rise to the rumor that she had assumed "permanent residence at the Imperial."⁴ The rumor was almost realized in 1950 when she again appeared there before 644 audiences in Call Me Madam.

During the 1950s the Imperial's tradition of great musical entertainment continued. Harry Belafonte and Hermione Gingold made their New York debuts in John Murray Anderson's Almanac. Hildegard Neff starred in Silk Stockings, a musical adaptation of Ninotchka, which was to be Cole Porter's last show. Frank Loesser's The Most Happy Fella had audiences whistling "Standing on the Corner" and Lena Horne was a sultry show-stopper in Jamaica.

Ethel Merman began a third decade at the Imperial when her smash Gypsy moved there from the Broadway Theater in November 1960. Anna Maria Alberghetti made a charming Lili in Carnival during 1961-1962, and Lionel Bart's Oliver considered itself at home at the Imperial in 1963-64. In September 1964, Zero Mostel opened as Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof, giving a performance of such "brilliance...as will probably not be repeated during this century."⁵

In 1972, the Imperial had its greatest success to date with the Stephen Schwartz musical Pippin which was notable both for Bob Fosse's inventive choreography and Ben Vereen's extraordinary dancing. Liv Ullmann's Anna Christie took the Imperial into the realm of drama in 1977 and Neil Simon provided the theater with back to back hits, Chapter Two and They're Playing Our Song.

In the 1980s the Imperial's tradition of inovative musicals was carried on by Dreamgirls which ran for over 1500 performances. Currently the theater is home to Drood, a Tony-Award winning musical.

(GH)

Notes

1. This production history of the Imperial Theater, condensed from the fuller version in the Appendix, is based on listings compiled by Actors Equity and submitted as testimony at the Landmarks Preservation Commission's public hearings of June and October, 1982. Their submission has been checked by Landmarks Commission staff against George Freedley, "Broadway Playhouses," bound typescript of the "Stage Today," 1941-43, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library; The Best Plays of...[annual] (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1899-present); Theatre World [annual] Daniel Blum, editor (New York: Theatre World, 1946-present), The Biographical Encyclopedia & Who's Who of the American Theater, Walter Rigdon, editor (New York: James H. Heinman, Inc., 1966); Edwin Bronner, The Encyclopedia of American Theater, 1900-1975 (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., Inc., 1980); Gerald Bordman, Oxford Companion to American Theatre (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Louis Botto, At This Theatre: An Informal History of New York's Legitimate Theater (New York: Dodd Mead & Co., 1984).
2. Mary C. Henderson, "Broadway's Luckiest House," New York Times, June 6, 1982, special advertising supplement, p. 4.
3. Freedley, p. 213.
4. Henderson, p. 11.
5. Ibid.

Description¹

Auditorium:

1) Configuration: The configuration of the auditorium consists of a space wider than it is deep, a single balcony with a crossover aisle, a proscenium flanked by boxes, a sounding board, an orchestra pit in front of the stage, an orchestra promenade, a ceiling, a stage opening behind the proscenium arch, and the sloping floor extending towards the proscenium arch.

Orchestra: The walls curve in towards the proscenium.

Proscenium: The proscenium is flat-arched.

Sounding board: A curved sounding board rises above and in front of the proscenium.

Balcony: There is a single balcony with a crossover aisle.

Boxes: At each side of the proscenium are three curved boxes which flare out at their bases and step up to meet the balcony front.

Staircases: Staircases at the rear corners of the auditorium lead up to the balcony level.

Ceiling: The ceiling is a shallow curve above a cove.

Floor: The floor is raked.

Stage: The stage extends behind the proscenium arch and forms a stage picture (visible from the audience) framed by the proscenium arch.²

Orchestra Pit: The orchestra pit is placed in front of and below the level of the stage.

Orchestra Promenade: A promenade is located at the rear of the orchestra.

2) Ornament:

The decorative ornament is plasterwork in relief, which is integrated into the surfaces which define the configuration of the auditorium. Decorative ornament includes, but is not limited to, the following:

Proscenium arch: The proscenium arch is framed by a wide plasterwork band with floral motifs and flanked by flat pilasters with stylized capitals supporting an Adamesque frieze and modillioned cornice spanning the proscenium arch.

Sounding board: The sounding board has a center latticework panel and is framed by a foliate band.

Orchestra: A frieze with Adamesque ornament surmounts the exit doors on the north, side wall. The side walls are paneled above a wainscoting. Two columns with stylized Tuscan capitals at the rear of the orchestra level help support the balcony.

Orchestra promenade: The ceiling above the promenade is divided into paneled sections by wide bands with Adamesque ornament.

Boxes: The three boxes at either side of the proscenium are framed by flat pilasters with stylized capitals. At orchestra level is a rectangular opening beneath each box flanked by panels. (The original orchestra level boxes have been removed; see below under alterations.) Each box front is outlined by moldings at the base and top. The box openings are framed by a plasterwork band with geometric and foliate motifs; two eight-sided columns flank the center opening. The wall section above each set of boxes contains plasterwork panels with Adamesque ornament and winged figures holding tragic and comic masks. The entire box section is surmounted by a frieze and cornice which are a continuation of that above the proscenium.

Balcony: At balcony level the side walls are divided into segmental-arched panels by stylized flat pilasters. Smaller panels with dancing figures in bas relief are placed in the large wall panels. Exit doors are surmounted by friezes with Adamesque ornament. A frieze with intertwined foliation surmounts the side walls.

The balcony front is unornamented (and now mostly covered by a modern light box, see below under "alterations").

The underside of the balcony is ornately paneled with Adamesque ornament.

Ceiling: The coved ceiling is divided into sections by ribs spanning the space. The front face of the rib by the sounding board has Adamesque ornament in bas relief plaster and large round medallion panels with bas-relief sculpture. Other sections of the ceiling are outlined by ornamental bands, and the ribs also have ornamental bands. The modern chandeliers (see below under "fixtures") are suspended from plasterwork centerpieces in the ceiling sections.

3) Attached fixtures:

Light fixtures: Existing non-original light fixtures are stylistic compatible with the Adamesque interior design.

4) Known alterations:

The original orchestra level boxes have been removed.

The balcony front is now mostly covered by a modern light box.

Air conditioning grilles and vents have been inserted into the wall and ceiling. Modern down lights have also been installed in the ceiling. A modern technical booth has been installed at the rear of the balcony. The current contrasting color scheme highlights the architectural detail.

(MP)

Notes

1. This description identifies spaces and elements in the spaces that are included in this designation. Specific elements are listed, and architecturally significant features are underlined as explained in the "Guidelines for Treatment of Theater Interiors" as adopted by the Landmarks Preservation Commission on December 10, 1985.
2. For the purposes of this description, the stage shall include the enclosing walls and roof of the stage house and a floor area behind the proscenium arch, but not any fixture or feature of or within that space.

Conclusion

The Imperial Theater Interior survives today as one of the historic theater interiors that symbolize American theater for both New York and the nation. One of the group of theaters constructed for the Shubert Organization during the early decades of this century, it helped shape the character of the Broadway theater district. Designed for the Shuberts by Herbert J. Krapp, the most prolific architect of the Broadway theater district, the Imperial represents a typical and important aspect of the nation's theatrical history. Its interior is a handsome example of the elegant Adamesque style with which Herbert Krapp adorned the Broadway theaters he designed.

For over half a century the Imperial Theater has served as home to countless numbers of the plays, including unusual numbers of the most successful American musical comedies, through which the Broadway theater has come to personify American theater. As such, it continues to help define the Broadway theater district, the largest and most famous concentration of legitimate stage theaters in the world.

The preparation of this report has involved the work of a number of consultants supervised and edited by Anthony W. Robins (AR), Deputy Director of Research. Individual authors are noted by initials at the ends of their sections. The consultants were Margaret Knapp (MMK), Andrew S. Dolkart (ASD) and Eugenie Hoffmeyer (EH). Janet Adams (JA) of the Research Department contributed several sections. Gale Harris (GH) of the Research Department verified the citations and sources, wrote the production history, and provided editorial assistance. Marjorie Pearson (MP), Director of Research, wrote the description. Research Department staff who contributed to the report include Marion Cleaver, Virginia Kurshan, Susan Strauss, and Jay Shockley.

The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission gratefully acknowledges the assistance rendered by many concerned citizens in studying the Broadway theaters. Special thanks are due the New York City Planning Commission; Community Planning Board 5, Manhattan; the New York Landmarks Conservancy; the Actors Equity Committee to Save the Theaters; and the individual theater owners.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Imperial Theater, first floor interior consisting of the auditorium, the stage, the staircases leading from the first floor to the balcony floor; the balcony floor interior consisting of the balcony, the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, doors, stair railings and attached decorative elements; has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, New York State, and the nation, and the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Imperial Theater Interior survives today as one of the historic theater interiors that symbolize American theater for both New York and the nation; that, built in 1923, it was among the group of theaters constructed for the Shubert Organization during the early decades of this century which helped shape the character of the Broadway theater district; that it was designed for the Shuberts by Herbert J. Krapp, the most prolific architect of the Broadway theater district; that as a Shubert theater designed by Herbert Krapp it represents a typical and important aspect of the nation's theatrical history; that its interior is an excellent example of the elegant Adamesque style with which Herbert Krapp adorned the Broadway theaters he designed; that its significant architectural features include floral plasterwork bands, flat pilasters with stylized capitals, and Adamesque friezes including figures holding tragic and comic theatrical masks at the boxes; that for over half a century the Imperial Theater has served as home to countless numbers of the plays, including unusually large numbers of the most successful American musical comedies, through which the Broadway theater has come to personify American theater; that it has an established reputation as a long-run house where many of America's most successful musical comedies have been staged; and that as such it continues to help define the Broadway theater district, the largest and most famous concentration of legitimate stage theaters in the world.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Imperial Theater, first floor interior consisting of the auditorium, the stage, the staircases leading from the first floor to the balcony floor; the balcony floor interior consisting of the balcony, the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, doors, stair railings and attached decorative elements; 249 West 45th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1017, Lot 10, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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APPENDIX

The following production history of the Imperial Theater is based on listings compiled by Actors Equity and submitted as testimony at the Landmarks Preservation Commission's public hearings of June and October, 1982. Their submission has been checked by Gale Harris and Susan Strauss of the Research Department staff against George Freedley, "Broadway Playhouses," bound typescript of the "Stage Today," 1941-43, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library; The Best Plays of...[annual] (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1899-present); Theatre World [annual] Daniel Blum, editor (New York: Theatre World, 1946-present), The Biographical Encyclopedia & Who's Who of the American Theater, Walter Rigdon, editor (New York: James H. Heinman, Inc., 1966); Play Statistics File, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library; Programmes, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library.

1923

MARY JANE McKANE 12/25/23 (151 perfs.) by William Cary Duncan and Oscar Hammerstein II, music by Herbert Stothart and Vincent Youmans; with Stanley Ridges and Mary Hay.

1924

ROSE-MARIE 9/2/24 (581 perfs.) by Otto Harbach and Oscar Hammerstein II, music by Rudolf Friml and Herbert Stothart; with Arthur Deagon, Edward Ciannelli and Mary Ellis.

1926

SWEETHEART TIME 1/19/26 (145 perfs.) by Harry B. Smith, lyrics by Bellard MacDonald and Irving Caesar; with Eddie Buzzell, Marion Saki and Fred Leslie.

THE MERRY WORLD 6/8/26 (87 perfs.) music by Maurice Rubens, Jr., Fred Coots, Herman Hupfeld and Sam Timber, lyrics by Clifford Grey.

DEEP RIVER 10/4/26 (32 perfs.) by Lawrence Stallings; with Roberto Ardelli, Lettice Howell and Luis Abern.

OH, KAY! 11/8/26 (257 perfs.) by Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse; music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin; with Victor Moore, Gertrude Lawrence, the Fairbanks Twins and Betty Compton.

1927

DESERT SONG 11/7/27 (465 total perfs.) by Otto Harbach, Oscar Hammerstein II and Frank Mandel; with Vivienne Segal and Robert Halliday. (First opened at the Casino Theater 11/30/26.)

1928

SUNNY DAYS 2/8/28 (101 perfs.) by Clifford Grey & William Cary Duncan, adapted from a play by Hennequin & Verber, music by Jean Schwartz; with Frank McIntyre, Jeannette MacDonald and Audrey Maple.

THE NEW MOON 9/19/28 (519 perfs.) by Oscar Hammerstein II, Frank Mandel and Laurence Schwab, music by Sigmund Romberg; with Robert Halliday and Evelyn Herbert.

1929

SONS O' GUNS 11/26/29 (297 perfs.) by Fred Thompson and Jack Donahue, music and lyrics by Arthur Swanstrom, Benny Davis and J. Fred Coots; with Jack Donahue, Lily Damita and William Frawley.

1930

PRINCESS CHARMING 10/13/30 (56 perfs.) by Jack Donahue from the original of Martos, Wimperls & Wylie; music by Albert Sirmay and Arthur Schwartz; with Evelyn Herbert, George Crossmith and Ernest McChisney.

BABES IN TOYLAND 12/20/30 (29 perfs.) by Glen MacDonough, music by Victor Herbert.

1931

THE GANG'S ALL HERE 2/18/31 (23 perfs.) by Russel Crouse, Oscar Hammerstein II and Morrie Ryskind; with Zelma O'Neal, Jack McCauley and Tom Howard.

THE LAUGH PARADE 11/2/31 (243 perfs.) by Ed Wynn and Ed Preble; with Ed Wynn, Jeanne Aubert, Jack Powell and Eunice Healey.

1932

FLYING COLORS 9/15/32 (181 perfs.) book and lyrics by Howard Dietz, music by Arthur Schwartz; with Clifton Webb, Patsy Kelly, Buddy Ebsen and Imogene Coca.

1933

OF THEE I SING 5/15/33 (32 perfs.) by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind; lyrics by Ira Gershwin, music by George Gershwin; with Victor Moore and Betty Allen (Return engagement.)

LET 'EM EAT CAKE 10/21/33 (89 perfs.) by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind; with Victor Moore, William Gaxton and Lois Moran.

1934

ALL THE KING'S HORSES 2/19/34 (120 total perfs.) book and lyrics by Frederick Herendeen, music by Edward A. Horan; with Guy Robertson, Nancy McCord, Harry Tighe, and Betty Starbuck. (First opened at the Shubert Theater, 1/30/34.)

SALUTA 8/28/34 (40 perfs.) by Will Morrissey; with Milton Berle.

SAY WHEN 11/8/34 (76 perfs.) by Jack McGowan; with Bob Hope, Cora Witherspoon, Taylor Holmes, Harry Richman and Charles Collins.

1935

NOWHERE BOUND 1/22/35 (15 perfs.) by Leo Birinski.

PANIC 3/14/35 (3 perfs.) by Archibald MacLeish; with Orson Welles, Richard Whorf, Rose McClendon, Russell Collins, Joanna Roos, Walter Coy, Wesley Addy, Zita Johnson and Abner Biberman.

JUBILEE 10/12/35 (169 perfs.) by Moss Hart, music and lyrics by Cole Porter; with Melville Cooper, Mary Boland, Charles Walters and Montgomery Clift.

1936

ON YOUR TOES 4/11/36 (318 perfs.) by George Abbott, music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Lorenz Hart; with Ray Bolger, Monty Woolley and Tamara Geva.

HAMLET 11/10/36 (39 perfs.) by William Shakespeare; with Leslie Howard, Wesley Addy and Alexander Scourby.

1937

FREDERIKA 2/4/37 (94 perfs.) by Franz Lehár; with Dennis King, Helen Gleason and Ernest Truex.

ORCHIDS PREFERRED 5/11/37 (7 perf.) by Fred Herendeen; with Eddie Foy, Jr., Benay Venuta and Ethel Barrymore Colt.

BETWEEN THE DEVIL 12/22/37 (93 perfs.) by Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz; with Jack Buchanan.

1938

YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU 9/5/38 (837 total perfs.) by Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman; with Josephine Hull and Aldrich Bowker. (First opened at the Booth Theater 12/4/36.)

LEAVE IT TO ME 11/9/38 (291 perfs.) by Bella and Samuel Spewack, music and lyrics by Cole Porter; with William Gaxton, Sophie Tucker, Victor Moore, Mary Martin, Gene Kelly and George Tobias.

1939

LEAVE IT TO ME 9/4/39 (16 perfs.) Return engagement.

TOO MANY GIRLS 10/18/39 (249 perfs.) by George Marion, Jr., lyrics by Lorenz Hart, music by Richard Rodgers; with Desi Arnaz, Eddie Bracken, Van Johnson and Richard Kollmar.

1940

LOUISIANA PURCHASE 5/28/40 (444 perfs.) by Morrie Ryskind, music and lyrics by Irving Berlin; with Victor Moore, Vera Zorina and William Gaxton.

1941

LET'S FACE IT 10/29/41 (547 perfs.) by Herbert and Dorothy Fields; with Eve Arden, Vivian Vance, Nanette Fabray and Danny Kaye.

1942

LET'S FACE IT 8/17/42 run resumed after a month's vacation with Carol Goodner substituting for Eve Arden.

1943

ROSALINDA 5/23/43 (520 total perfs.) adapted by Gottfried Reinhardt and John Meham, Jr. from DIE FLEDERMAUS by Johann Strauss, music by Strauss, lyrics by Paul Kerby; with Dorothy Sarnoff and Ralph Horbest. (First opened at the Forty-Fourth St. Theater 10/28/42; returned there 10/3/43.)

ONE TOUCH OF VENUS 10/7/43 (567 perfs.) by S.J. Perelman and Ogden Nash, lyrics by Ogden Nash, music by Kurt Weill; with Mary Martin, John Boles, Henry Clark and Kenny Baker.

1944

SONG OF NORWAY 8/21/44 (860 perfs.) operetta by Milton Lazarus based on the life and works of Edvard Grieg; with Sig Arno and Irra Petina.

1946

ANNIE GET YOUR GUN 5/16/46 (1,147 perfs.) by Herbert and Dorothy Fields, music and lyrics by Irving Berlin; with Ray Middleton and Ethel Merman.

1949

MISS LIBERTY 7/25/49 (308 perfs.) by Robert E. Sherwood, music and lyrics by Irving Berlin; with Eddie Albert, Herbert Berghof and Maria Karnilova.

1950

PETER PAN 4/24/50 (321 perfs.) by J.M. Barrie with new music by Leonard Bernstein; with Boris Karloff, Jean Arthur and Nehemiah Persoff.

CALL ME MADAM 10/12/50 (644 perfs.) by Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse, music and lyrics by Irving Berlin; with Ethel Merman, Russell Nype, Paul Lukas and Lilia Skala.

1952

WISH YOU WERE HERE 6/25/52 (598 perfs.) by Arthur Kober and Joshua Logan, music and lyrics by Harold Rome; with Jack Cassidy, Larry Blyden, Frank Aletter, Florence Henderson, Reid Shelton, Tom Tryon, and Phyllis Newman.

1953

JOHN MURRAY ANDERSON'S ALMANAC 12/10/53 (227 perfs.) by John Murray Anderson; with Polly Bergen, Kay Medford and Billy De Wolfe.

1955

SILK STOCKINGS 2/24/55 (478 perfs.) by George S. Kaufman, Leueen McGrath and Abe Burrows, music and lyrics by Cole Porter; with David Opatoshu, Don Ameche, Julie Newmar, George Tobias, Hildegard Neff and Gretchen Wyler.

1956

THE MOST HAPPY FELLA 5/3/56 (676 perfs.) by Frank Loesser, based on a play by Sidney Howard, music and lyrics by Frank Loesser; with Robert Weede, Susan Johnson, Jo Sullivan, Art Lunde and Zina Bethune.

1957

JAMAICA 10/31/57 (555 perfs.) by E.Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, music by Harold Alren, lyrics by E.Y. Harburg; with Ricardo Montalban, Lena Horne, Ossie Davis and Alvin Ailey.

1959

DESTROY RIDES AGAIN 4/23/59 (472 perfs.) by Leonard Gershe, music and lyrics by Harold Rome; with Ray Mason, Dolores Gray, Andy Griffith and Rosetta LeNoire.

1960

GYPSY 11/2/60 (702 total perfs.) by Arthur Laurents, suggested by the memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee, music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim; with Ethel Merman, Sandra Church, and Jack Klugman. (First opened at the Broadway Theater 5/21/59.)

1961

CARNIVAL! 4/13/61 (719 perfs.) by Michael Stewart, music and lyrics by Bob Merrill; with Will Lee, Anita Gillette, Kaye Ballard, Anna Maria Alberghetti and Jerry Orbach.

1963

OLIVER 1/6/63 (774 perfs.) by Lionel Bart; with Bruce Prochnik, Clive Revill, Georgia Brown, Alice Playten and Danny Sewell.

1964

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF 9/22/64 (3,242 total perfs.) by Joseph Stein; with Zero Mostel, Maria Karnilova, Julia Migenes, Beatrice Arthur, Austin Pendleton, Bert Convy and Leonard Frey. (Moved to the Majestic Theater 2/27/67).

1967

CABARET 4/7/67 (1,163 total perfs.) by Joe Masteroff, lyrics by Fred Ebb, music by John Kander; with Joel Grey, Jill Hayworth, Bert Convey, Lottie Lenya and Jack Gilford. (Originally opened at the Broadhurst Theater 11/20/66, later moved to the Broadway 10/7/68.)

1968

ZORBA 11/17/68 (306 perfs.) by Joseph Stein; with Maria Karnilova, Nat Horne and Herschel Bernardi.

1969

A PATRIOT FOR ME 10/5/69 (49 perfs.) by John Osborne; with Maximillian Schell, Staats Cotsworth, Dennis King and Salome Jens.

1970

MINNIE'S BOYS 3/26/70 (76 perfs.) by Arthur Marx and Robert Fisher; with Shelly Winters.

TWO BY TWO 11/10/70 (352 perfs.) by Peter Stone, music by Richard Rodgers; with Danny Kaye.

1971

ON THE TOWN 10/31/71 (73 perfs.) book and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, music by Leonard Bernstein; with Phyllis Newman, Bernadette Peters and Jess Richards.

1972

LOST IN THE STARS 4/18/72 (39 perfs.) by Maxwell Anderson; with Brock Peters, Rosetta Le Noire, Jack Gwillim and Giancarlo Esposito.

PIPPIN 10/23/72 (1,944 total perfs.) by Roger O. Hirson, music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz, choreography by Bob Fosse; with Ben Vereen, John Rubinstein, Irene Ryan, Leland Palmer and Jill Clayburgh. (Moved to the Minskoff Theater 3/15/77.)

1977

MARK TWAIN TONIGHT! 3/15/77 (12 perfs.) with Hal Holbrook.

ANNA CHRISTIE 4/14/77 (124 perfs.) by Eugene O'Neill; with Liv Ullmann, Mary McCarthy, John Lithgow and Robert Donley.

COMEDY WITH MUSIC 10/3/77 (66 perfs.) by Victor Borge; with Victor Borge and Marylyn Mulrey.

CHAPTER TWO 12/4/77 (857 perfs.) by Neil Simon; with Judd Hirsch, Cliff Gorman, Anita Gillette and Ann Wedgeworth.

1979

THEY'RE PLAYING OUR SONG 2/11/79 (1,082 perfs.) by Neil Simon, music by Marvin Hamlisch, lyrics by Carol Bayer Sager; with Robert Klein and Lucie Arnaz.

1981

DREAMGIRLS 12/20/81 (1,522 perfs.) by Tom Eyen, music by Henry Krieger;
with Jennifer Holliday, Sheryl Lee Ralph, Loretta Devine, Deborah
Burrell and Cleavant Derricks.



Imperial Theater Interior
249 West 45th Street
Manhattan

Built: 1923
Architect: Herbert J. Krapp



Imperial Theater Interior



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