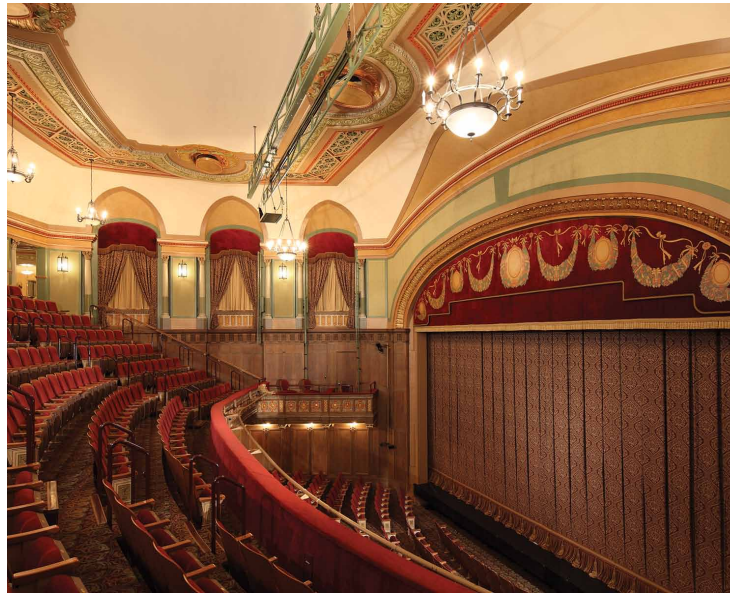
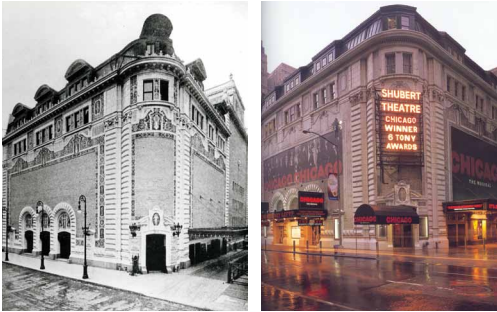
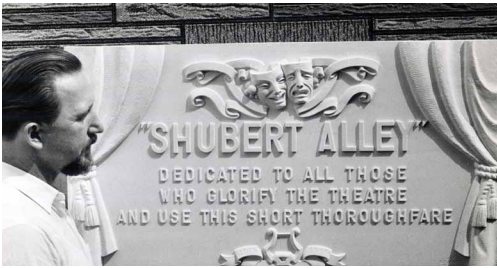


BACKSTORY

STARS IN THE ALLEY

By Jim Lochner

THE HEART OF BROADWAY CELEBRATES A CENTURY OF THEATRICAL DESIGN.



Clockwise from top left: Sculptor Mihaly DeKatay displays his Shubert Alley plaque; the Jacobean interior of the Booth Theatre*; the lights go out on *A Chorus Line* after a record-breaking 15 years; the razzle-dazzle revival of *Chicago* starts its long run at the Shubert in 2000*; the Shubert Theatre exterior circa its opening in 1913. *Photo by Whitney Cox, courtesy The Shubert Archive. All other photos courtesy The Shubert Archive.

A few steps west of Times Square's clogged pedestrian walkways and naked cowboys sits the physical and symbolic heart of Broadway—a 300-foot thoroughfare known as Shubert Alley. At the entrances on 44th and 45th streets stand two venerable theaters celebrating their centenaries this fall—the Shubert and the Booth.

Originally named for Sam J. Shubert, the head of the powerful producing family who died in 1905, and actor Edwin Booth (brother of the infamous John Wilkes Booth), architect Henry Beaumont Herts (1871-1933) built the two theaters in 1913 as a single structure on one lot. Only a two-foot brick wall separates the stage areas in the middle of the block. Herts was well known for incorporating the elaborate and ornamental Beaux-Arts style in earlier venues such as the Lyceum and New Amsterdam Theatres, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. But his designs for the Shubert and the Booth reflect the changing tastes in turn-of-the-century architecture—still elaborate, but marked by a more restrained classicism.

The two theaters share an architecturally unified exterior, described by the *New York Tribune* as “Venetian Renaissance, with certain modern adaptations,” incorporating arcades and rusticated piers, and a combination of brick and terra-cotta. Herts also etched polychromatic sgraffito frescoes into wet plaster to cleverly conform to a statute in the city's building code forbidding any part of the edifice to project beyond the building line. Today, these theaters represent the last known surviving examples in New York of this once-popular decorating technique. While the exteriors exhibit a rare, unified whole, the interiors create distinctly different atmospheres.

The inside of the Booth was inspired by Tudor sources and features regal Jacobean wood paneling to enhance the acoustics of the intimate space. Stars such as Anne Bancroft, Henry Fonda, and Paul Newman once gazed out on the rich, deep reds of the house, and classic plays such as *You Can't Take It with You* and *That Championship Season*, and chamber musicals like

Sunday in the Park with George and *Next to Normal* have premiered here. In 1915, in an odd bit of theatrical synchronicity, the Booth even hosted a revival of *Our American Cousin*, infamous as the play Abraham Lincoln attended the night he was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth.

Though the Shubert's flamboyant interior design provided the perfect dramatic frame for larger-than-life stars such as Katharine Hepburn, Mae West, Rex Harrison, Vivien Leigh, and Ingrid Bergman, it more properly reflects the theater's original intent to serve as a home for extravagant musical productions. O.H. Bauer decorated the space with high-relief ornamental plaster panels of classical figures and simulated drapery, while artist J. Mortimer Lichtenauer accentuated the intricate plasterwork with a grand cycle of theatrically themed paintings inspired by Renaissance sources. The first Tony Award winner for Best Musical—Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*—opened on this stage, as did future Tony-winning tenants *A Little Night Music*, *Crazy for You*, *Spamalot*, and *Memphis*. Barbra Streisand made her Broadway debut here in 1962 in *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* and the Tony- and Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Chorus Line* became “one singular sensation” for a record-breaking 15 years (6,137 performances).

This fall, the “rotten children” of *Matilda* will continue to rebel at the Shubert, while the Booth is set to host a new revival of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. But to quote that cinematic salute to backstage bitchery, *All About Eve*: “Nothing is forever in the Theatre. Whatever it is, it's here, it flares up, burns hot, and then it's gone.” With a century's worth of theatrical performances fading into memory, the Shubert and the Booth's landmark status thankfully allows them to continue as enduring symbols of early 20th-century theatrical architecture and design. And with this city's penchant for new construction, that's as close to a guarantee of “forever” as we're likely to get.

For tickets, visit us.matildathemusical.com and theglassmenageriebroadway.com.