

After several decades of impressive growth in local neighborhood theater, the business of commercial theater production in Chicago is still minuscule. The large downtown theaters are still near totally dependent on New York producers for product. Most of these theaters are owned or controlled by New York corporations. The last time a downtown theater was owned or controlled by a Chicago-based commercial theater producer, the Chicago Cubs were routinely playing in and winning the World Series. Chicago theater has gained national admiration for its quality, variety and sophistication. Yet Chicago is still viewed as a place to start and learn only. Anyone aspiring to a career in major theater must still move to New York. A century ago, theater in Chicago was very different. Chicago playwrights had the stature to premiere their plays in a Loop theater and if a success, then a Chicago road company would be sent to New York. New York has always sent road companies across the country but a century ago, New York's shadow didn't cover Chicago. The theater community prospered here and augmented the development of other arts especially in the literary and music communities.

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While the bizarre, the misshapen and the obese were common attractions at the Kohl, Middleton museums, there were many more conventional acts presented and some eventually became legendary American entertainers. One such performer was the great illusionist Harry Houdini. The first illusion Harry perpetrated was his own biography. He claimed to have been born in Appleton, Wisconsin when, in fact, he had been born in Budapest, Hungary as Ehrich Weisz. The family did move to Appleton for a brief time when Harry's father, a rabbi, was offered a job but he wasn't congruent with the congregation and Ehrich ended up a street kid in Milwaukee selling newspapers and shining shoes. Because Houdini's biography seems to be tainted with some of Harry's own advertising hyperbole, it has been difficult for biographers to cull the myth from the reality. He did start his career as a magician in New York first with a friend and then with one of his brothers but it went poorly so he returned to his native Midwest early in the 1890's where he found some employment in the dime museums including the Kohl, Middleton circuit.

Houdini was not a headliner at Kohl's like the rooster orchestra or the Stout Sisters on Stilts; his name didn't yet have the celebrity to attract an audience. So, as with the other performers at Kohl, Middleton, Houdini had to perform his magic acts as many as 20 times a day to earn \$12 a week. In addition to his stage performances, Houdini served as a lure trying to entice passersby to chance a dime using the "rope-

tie” challenge, a technique he had first learned in New York at the Huber dime museum from another illusionist. Harry would stand on the Clark Street sidewalk outside of Kohl’s with his hands tied and then make a challenge to curious onlookers. If they put a dime on the Kohl box-office countertop and he couldn’t get untied within a minute, then they could take their dime back and still enter the museum and see the show for free otherwise the dime goes into the cashbox and they can still go in or not but the dime is Kohl’s. No one got their dime back and a free show. Harry was so proficient at escaping the knotted rope that people thought it was a trick rope. It wasn’t; so Houdini switched to handcuffs and went intentionally slow so that people would think it was a greater struggle than it actually was.

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The Great Northern Theater with a large stage had once been a popular house for operettas, the Shuberts’ *Student Prince* played there for over a year, and might have served as an alternative to the Civic Opera House but the Great Northern was standing unused under a death sentence. The theater had been built with the Great Northern Hotel in the gilded age of the Chicago Colombia Exposition. The hotel was a premier destination for wealthier travelers to Chicago and the theater shared the hotel’s ostentation and elegance. But when the Dearborn Street subway line was built in 1940 the Hotel’s foundation was in the way so it was demolished leaving the theater isolated and in a precarious location directly across the street from the Federal Court House. In the post-war era, the only entity growing faster than the American nation was the American government that served the nation and in Chicago, the Federal Government needed room to expand. The Great Northern Theater and the site of the demolished Hotel were purchased to make way for a new Government office tower. No one in Chicago seemed to notice the irony that it was the Justice Department that forced a private company to divest its theaters in a manner to preserve the theaters while the Government wanted to demolish a theater so the Justice Department would have new offices and the Government new courts. No one noticed and no one protested.

The Haymarket Theater on Madison and Halsted



The flagship of the Westside Theater District. It had been managed by Will J. Davis and Charles Kohl. The area was demolished for an Interstate Highway.

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Chicago at the dawn of the 20th century, one generation removed from being a pile of smoldering rubble, had become the second largest theater and entertainment center in the nation. Then as now, most major stage shows presented in Chicago originated from somewhere else but independent local theater managers from James McVicker and Richard Hooley to Charles Kohl and Harry Hamlin also produced original shows of their own. As a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* estimated in 1909, as many as twenty percent of the theatrical companies touring across America had originated in Chicago. Chicago was the entertainment capital of the Midwest and

headquarters to the largest Vaudeville circuits west of New York. The Loop offered a greater diversity of entertainment in the 1920's than did even New York City which was oriented towards classical theater, standard Vaudeville variety, comic operas and musical revues. Chicago a smaller city than New York had less total quantity of live entertainment to offer but in a greater variety. In the South Loop at the Eighth Street Theater, the radio *Barn Dance Show* attracted millions of people from the heart of the country to see the show that they loved to hear and in the North Loop, Jazz was becoming so popular that Balaban and Katz built the Oriental Theater specifically to suit the needs of the Paul Ash Jazz Band. The Big Band era was Chicago's entertainment alternative to Broadway. There were several Chicago venues presenting bands often with a radio simulcast that made the Loop better known across the country than their East Coast counterparts. And of course, there was grand opera at the Auditorium Theater and comic operas sent from New York playing throughout the Loop. From Country music to Grand Opera, from Jazz to dance bands, Chicago as an entertainment Mecca was second to none in the first three decades of the 20th century for the diversity of entertainment genres routinely offered in the Loop venues.

By the end of the 20th century, Chicago's Loop entertainment district was at times completely void of any type of entertainment, even second run movies or tired Broadway road companies. When the office workers left their downtown office towers, the Loop looked as if an evacuation had been ordered to escape a pandemic. Socioeconomic trends that disfavored the old Northern rustbelt cities and new entertainment technologies - film, radio and television - were proffered as cause for the decline. But all of America's older cities including New York had experienced a diminution of their theater and live entertainment industries. Yet nowhere was the diminution greater than Chicago; no city lost a greater percentage of its theaters than did Chicago and of the old cities, Chicago was among the last to make a significant effort to restore its theater heritage

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