

The Indiana Theatre at 100

Narration (rev. 1/6/2023)

Scene 1 - Prologue (2 minutes)

Old buildings have stories to tell. Every coat of paint- or addition of a room represents a chapter in someone's life story.

Buildings are eventually torn down, remodeled, or converted into something entirely different.

Bloomington Indiana has seen buildings come and go. Those designed to last, have staying power.

This house was transformed into a restaurant, and then a law firm. And it's supposedly haunted- but that's another story.

This building, constructed in 1915 as a Kresge five and dime store, still stands today. To survive more than 100 years, it's adapted to changes in how people spend time and money.

Theatres by their basic nature must have broad appeal. They're designed to entertain an entire community and ideally, built to last a lifetime. But like old houses and department stores, most are torn down- or repurposed into something else.

The Indiana Theatre opened in 1922 in Bloomington, Indiana as a vaudeville and movie house. It's weathered fires and wars, a depression and faced insolvency- but 100 years later, now renamed the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, it's still vibrant as ever- and a prominent fixture on Kirkwood Avenue. True to its roots, it still hosts movies and performances. But it's also a place for much more- concerts, lectures, film and comedy festivals, debates, services, weddings, life celebrations, and sometimes even an occasional vaudeville show.

It's practically assured that anyone who lives in Bloomington has at some point gone to the Indiana Theatre for a show. It's also attracted countless visitors who have come to see their favorite act and tourists drawn in by its prominent downtown location, inviting marquee and enticing facade.

Within the walls of the Indiana Theatre, millions of people have experienced insights, emotional highs and lows, and shared laughter, joy, and tears.

Imagine the stories that a theatre might hold- especially one that's over one hundred years old.

Scene 2 – Birth of a Theater (3 minutes)

Sometime around 1920, Harry and Nova Vonderschmitt moved to Bloomington, Indiana- a small college town in the southern part of the state. Born in Dubois County Indiana, Harry Vonderschmitt worked once as a coal miner before becoming an entrepreneur- building and

managing movie theatres throughout Indiana. He wanted to build a movie palace in the heart of downtown Bloomington- just down the street from two other theaters- the Princess and the Harris-Grand. The two theatres were already in business- but the Vonderschmitts wanted to grow their amusement company. On December 11, 1922, Harry and Nova Vonderschmitt opened the Indiana Theatre. The first movie shown was *The Storm*, produced by Universal Pictures.

Scene 3- From Silent Movies to Talkies (4 minutes)

The Indiana Theater hosted movies and vaudeville acts. Since films were silent, organists or piano players provided the soundtrack and entertainment between shows. One such piano player was Lida Carmichael, who supplemented her income by playing at local theatres. She'd sometimes invite her son, Hoagy to join her. Hoagy Carmichael was studying law at IU, but a rising star in the world of jazz and popular music. Before going on to write hits such as *Heart and Soul*, *Georgia on My Mind*, and *Star Dust*, Hoagy and his band Carmichael's Collegians could sometimes be heard playing at the Indiana Theatre.

The era of silent movies began to wane as "talkies" arrived- movies with sound.

Theatres had to invest in new technology, to enable playback. The transition to talking pictures was a financial struggle for theatres, as America was in the throes of the Great Depression.

While theatres struggled amidst the depression to adopt new sound reproduction capabilities, they also offered an escape from the Great Depression.

Movies provided a peek into high society and could transport viewers into beautiful and exotic locations.

They offered a much-needed distraction from the struggles and hardships of the depression.

Adding to economic challenges, fires were a recurring problem for movie theatres.

In November of 1933 the Indiana Theater and much of the surrounding block was devastated by a fire. The fire was ruled as arson.

Incredibly, the Vonderschmitts were able to quickly rebuild and used the opportunity to make improvements. About 90 days later, on February 1st, 1934, the Indiana Theatre re-opened.

Moviegoing was a popular pastime and the Vonderschmitt's enterprise continued to grow. When celebrating their 22nd business anniversary, Harry and Nova Vonderschmitt received telegrams from companies and movie stars congratulating them on their success.

In 1948 the Vonderschmitts purchased the former Ritz theater, which was now a grocery store- and converted it back into a theater- renaming it the Von Lee- a tribute to their granddaughter, Barbara Lee.

Scene 4 – A Segregated City (4 minutes)

In the 1940s, at the Indiana Theatre, Blacks had to sit in the upstairs balcony. Theatres, restaurants, schools, parks, pools, dorms, government buildings, businesses and barbershops all were segregated. Most were off limits to Blacks, who were only welcome in their own or assigned schools, restaurants, and clubs.

[James Madison interview]

Even though Bloomington was a forward-thinking university town, racism was widespread. It was systemic, and discrimination was accepted practice. Indiana University became an important factor in the slow process of integration. George Taliaferro- at that time an IU student and the 1st Black athlete drafted into the NFL. - had a lasting impact on the Indiana Theatre. But it was with the help and encouragement of Herman B Wells, that segregation in Bloomington came to an end.

[Sue Talbot interview on Wells and ending segregation at the Indiana Theatre]

Scene 5 – Love for Movies

Harry Vonderschmitt died in February 1955, leaving his wife, Nova to run the theater. But business was good- people loved going to the movies.

[Various interviews on people's first experiences at the theatre.]

Scene 6 – Troubling Times

In 1965 the College Mall opened on the eastside of Bloomington. With it came the *College Mall Cinema*, a two-screen movie theatre run by General Cinema. Downtown businesses, including the Indiana Theatre faced fierce competition. This was a troubling time for the Vonderschmitt theatres across Indiana. Many were sold or shut down.

[Glenda Murray interview on downtown demise.]

Nova died on July 23, 1974. In 1976 the theater was sold to Kerasotes.

Scene 7- Kerasotes Years 1976-1995

Kerasotes, a large Illinois-based company, bought the Indiana Theatre along with the Von Lee, just down the street. They remodeled both. At the Indiana Theatre, Kerasotes cordoned off the balcony section, creating a second, upstairs movie auditorium.

[People describing memories of the Indiana Theatre in the Kerasotes years.]

On the eastside of town, Kerasotes bought the College Mall Cinema and had built a Cineplex, which they expanded from six screens up to eleven. People began favoring malls and foot traffic and shopping downtown experienced a decline.

[Sue Talbot on impact on downtown.]

In January 1995, after nearly twenty years of showing movies, Kerasotes closed the Indiana.

Scene 8– Transfer to the BAAC (3 minutes)

[Danielle McClelland on Kerasotes giving the theatre to the BAAC. Frank Young on the BAAC getting the theatre. LuAnne Holladay and John Fernandez comments.]

The Bloomington Area Arts Council began renovating the theatre with volunteers and began their largest fundraising campaign to date. In 1996 they hired Preservation Development Incorporated to carry out a feasibility study of the theatre’s architectural design and construction to see if it would qualify for historic tax credits- which could save hundreds of thousands of dollars.

[Duncan Campbell interview.]

Scene 9 – Renovation Begins

[Frank Young on hiring architects, Steve Logan, and Christine Matheu. Steve Logan, Christine Matheu, and Ted Jones interviews.]

As work continued, costs kept climbing, exceeding the budget by one million dollars. The fundraising campaign so far had raised 3.5 million dollars, but costs were running far above estimates. The Bloomington Area Arts Council desperately needed more money.

[Frank Young, Steve Logan, and Christine Matheu on running out of money.]

Scene 10 – A Donor Steps Forward and a Grand Re-opening

[Norris Chumley and Sally Gaskill interviews]

On September 25, 1998, the arts council held a press conference announcing the new name: the Buskirk-Chumley theater. Energized with the funding, construction of the theatre concluded- and to the arts council’s delight, the project met Historic Preservation Certification guidelines. The theatre was now officially a National Historic Landmark.

Scene 11 – Open and Close

A small staff had been brought on board. EJ Ernsberger was hired to serve as technical director- and started working in the newly renovated space. He had to get the theatre ready for opening day.

[EJ Ernsberger, Danielle McClelland, Miah Michaelson, and John Fernandez interviews.]

Without steady income and facing financial hardships, the theatre had to close, shortly after their grand opening. All theatre and arts council staff were laid off.

Scene 12 -Reboot and enter BCT Mgt

To save the troubled arts organization and the theatre, Mayor John Fernandez put together a task force- the Bloomington Area Arts Council Study Commission.

[Sally Gaskill, Mark Hood, Sara Laughlin, John Fernandez interviews on starting BCT Mgt]

Scene 13 - The 2nd Reopening & Enter Equity

[Sally Gaskill on reopening the theatre in 2001.]

Shortly after BCT Management was formed, they hired Danielle McClelland as the executive director of the Buskirk-Chumley Theater.

[Danielle McClelland, Michael Twyman, and Tamara Loewenthal interviews on equity.]

While it might have not been their intention, the Buskirk-Chumley Theatre and its illuminated marquee became a beacon and sounding board for equity and a platform for discussion of LGBTQ rights.

[Danielle McClelland on starting PRIDE Film Festival.]

The Lotus Education and Arts Foundation began using the theatre as the main performance venue for their annual world music festival.

[Tamara Loewenthal on Lotus using the theatre.]

Scene 14 – We Love the Theatre

Musicians, actors, and theatre goers love the Indiana Theatre. Its architecture, history, character, size, and location are just a few things that bring people back again and again. It's a favorite stop for touring performers and the place many choose for honoring special life occasions.

[Bela Fleck, Lucinda Williams, and Carrie Newcomer on why they love playing at the BCT. EJ Ernsberger and Tamara Loewenthal on what's great about it.]

Scene 15 - What's in a Name?

Constructed as the Indiana Theatre and renamed as the Buskirk-Chumley, the theatre sometimes faces a bit of an identity crisis.

Scene 16 - Pandemic & Marquee Messages of Hope

After nearly twenty years running the theatre, Danielle McClelland decided it was time to move on. Jonah Crismore was brought in as the new director. But the timing couldn't have been worse, as the COVID-19 pandemic had just started sweeping across the globe. Everyone was deeply affected, and countless businesses shut their doors, many for good. Among the businesses most deeply affected were restaurants and theatres. While the theatre was closed during the onslaught of the pandemic, its marquee became a beacon of hope.

[Lily Bonwich, Jonah Crismore, David DeSante and Robert Meitus on starting Mandolin at the BCT.]

Scene 17 – Out of the Dark

Many theatres didn't survive the pandemic, but the Indiana did. In fall of 2021, the Buskirk-Chumley Theatre cautiously reopened their doors. With the pandemic still afoot, they had to follow strict safety protocols, but the Indiana was back in business. ~~It was fitting that one of the first shows after their reopening was the Lotus Festival.~~

Scene 18 – The Theatre Today

Underneath the theatre's shining marquee is an entrance that remains practically unchanged from how it first appeared back in 1922. But advances in building, lighting, sound, and stage technology have opened the doors to numerous improvements and upgrades.

The theatre is a time machine, transporting people back to 1922 so they can experience a show in a historic theatre- but now with incredible lighting, pristine sound- and even craft beer.

It carries people away from their worries and everyday lives to a place where they can experience emotional highs and lows, and shared community experiences.

Scene 19 – It's a wrap

[People talking about the importance of the building and what it means to the community.]

Scene 20 – Epilog & Credits

The Bloomington Area Arts Council, which was gifted the theatre by Kerasotes was dissolved in 2009- their membership suspended by the Indiana Arts Commission. Of the five movie theatres that once operated in downtown Bloomington, only three remain standing today- but two of them, the Von Lee and Princess are no longer theatres, and have been converted into restaurants. Only one, the Buskirk-Chumley Theatre, known fondly as the Indiana, is still going strong. It's easy

to find in downtown Bloomington, Indiana. Just look for the shining marquee just off the courthouse square.