

Exterior of the Buskirk-Chumley Theater in September 2022. The Buskirk-Chumley Theater serves as the main performance stage for the annual Lotus Festival. Photo by Jim Krause.

Bloomington's Community Theater Turns 100

Strolling Through the History of the BCT

By Jim Krause

Editor's Note: This story includes spellings of theater with both "-er" and "-re" endings due to the name change from Indiana Theatre to the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. Any spellings with "-re" refer to the Indiana Theatre while "-er" endings refer to the Buskirk-Chumley Theater.

Author's Note: Bloomington's historic Indiana Theatre, aka the Buskirk-Chumley Theater is celebrating its 100th birthday. Opened in December 1922 by Harry and Nova Vonderschmitt, the Indiana Theatre started out showing silent movies and hosting vaudeville acts. 100 years later, its illuminated marquee and iconic "dog bone" neon Indiana sign still grace Kirkwood Avenue, and it has become an integral part of the downtown and our community. The BCT is celebrating with a Neon Jubilee birthday party on January 28. WTIU is airing an hour-long documentary on the theater in early February, which yours truly got to research and produce. What follows is a brief glimpse into its 100-year history.

Preamble

Like people, buildings have lifespans, and the odds of living past 100 are slim. Buildings are usually torn down or converted to serve different purposes than originally intended. For example, the historic Kresge building housing the Tap Brewery at Kirkwood and College Avenue started out in 1915 as a five and dime store. To survive more than 100 years, its caretakers adapted it to changes in how people spend time and money. Instead of clothing and housewares, they're selling food and drinks.

When the Indiana opened in 1922 in Bloomington, there were two other successful downtown theaters. The Harris-Grand (later becoming the Towne Cinema) and the Princess. The Ritz, later renamed the Von Lee, opened in 1928. Since then, the Harris-Grand/Towne Cinema was demolished, and the Princess and Von Lee converted into restaurants. Only the Indiana, now the Buskirk-Chumley Theater has stood the test of time. It was born a

theater and remains one—a very good one—to this day.

How it survived, or more accurately prospered, is a fascinating story. Over one hundred years it weathered fires and wars, a depression, changes in owners and identity, faced insolvency, and survived a pandemic. The saying, "it takes a village" applies to the BCT. Without help from dedicated individuals and our entire community, it would likely just be another ghostly façade, hinting at something from the past.

Birth of a Theater

Sometime around 1920, Harry and Nova Vonderschmitt moved to Bloomington. Born in Dubois County Indiana, Harry Vonderschmitt worked as a coal miner before becoming an entrepreneur, building and managing movie theaters 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 elaborate Harris-Grand. The two theaters were already in business—but the Vonderschmitts wanted to grow their amusement company. On December 11, 1922, Harry and Nova opened the Indiana Theatre. The first movie shown was *The Storm*, produced by Universal Pictures. They sold out with 1,300 people attending the opening show.

From Silent Movies to Talkies

The Indiana 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 theaters. 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 "Stardust," 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. Theaters replaced pianos and organs with expensive new hardware to enable audio playback, such as Vitaphone, which used discs that had to be synchronized with the film, and Movietone, which used optical sound on film technology. The transition to talking pictures was a financial struggle for theaters, as America was in the throes of the Great Depression. Many went out of business, such as the Ritz Theatre on Kirkwood Avenue, which closed shortly after opening in 1928.

While theaters struggled to adopt new sound reproduction capabilities, they also offered an escape from the 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 theaters. In November of 1933 the Indiana Theatre and much of the surrounding block was devastated by a fire. The fire was ruled as arson. The Harris-Grand was also almost destroyed by fire in 1942. Some blamed these on tactics by union agitators. 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 reopened.

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 Theatre, which was a grocery store at the time, and converted it back into a theater, renaming it the Von Lee—a tribute to their granddaughter, Barbara Lee, who was the daughter of Thelma Vonderschmitt and Joseph Crouch.

A Segregated City

In the 1940s, at the Indiana Theatre, Black moviegoers had to sit in the upstairs balcony. Theaters, restaurants, schools, parks, pools, dorms, and businesses were segregated. Most were off limits to Blacks. Even though Bloomington was a forward-thinking university town, racism was widespread, systemic, and discrimination was accepted practice.

While some credit longtime Indiana Theatre manager A. B. Clark for inviting George Taliaferro, (an IU student who became the first Black athlete drafted into the NFL), to sit anywhere he wanted, it was the help of Indiana University President, Herman B. Wells that kick-started the slow process of integration. When President Wells found out that restaurants, shops, and theaters were off limits to Black university students, he threatened a university-wide ban on the establishments. The threat of losing student clientele coupled with the persistence of Herman B Wells and respect for Black students, helped end segregation in Bloomington.¹

The Indiana Theatre, now the BCT, has stood the test of time. It has weathered fires and wars, a depression, changes in owners and identity, faced insolvency, and survived a pandemic.



The era of silent movies waned as “talkies” arrived. This photo of the Princess Theatre taken around 1930 advertised both Vitaphone and Movietone sound systems. Photo courtesy of the Monroe County History Center.

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

Nova died on July 23, 1974, leaving her estate to run the remaining theaters. In 1976 the Indiana Theatre and the Von Lee Theatre were sold to Kerasotes.

Kerasotes Years 1976-1995

Kerasotes, a large Illinois-based company, bought the Indiana Theatre and the Von Lee Theatre, and remodeled both. The Von Lee’s large single screen auditorium was split into three smaller rooms. At the Indiana, Kerasotes cordoned off the balcony section, creating a second, upstairs movie auditorium. On the eastside of town, Kerasotes bought the College Mall Cinema and built a Cineplex, which they later expanded from six screens up to eleven. People began favoring malls and so foot traffic and shopping downtown experienced a decline. In January 1995 Kerasotes closed the Indiana.

A Gift to the Bloomington Area Arts Council

In December of 1995, Kerasotes donated the Indiana Theatre to the BAAC (Bloomington Area Arts Council) to use as a performing arts venue. Along with their “gift” was a restriction that they couldn’t show movies. Frank Young was Director of the BAAC, housed in the Waldron Arts Center, another historic building just around the corner. The arts council had to decide what to do with the theater. Sell it, or keep it to use as a performing arts venue, which would require a major renovation. They had proven their prowess at remodeling the Waldron Arts Center, the former city building, but taking on the Indiana Theatre building was pushing the limits of their experience and financial resources.

The BAAC decided to keep the theater, began renovating it with volunteers, and set out on their largest fundraising campaign to



In November 1933, the Indiana Theatre and much of the surrounding block was devastated by a fire, which was ruled as arson by investigators. Photo courtesy of the Monroe County History Center.

date. In 1996 they hired Preservation Development Incorporated to carry out a feasibility study of the theater's architectural design and construction to see if it would qualify for historic tax credits, which could save hundreds of thousands of dollars. In the fall of 1997, they hired architects Christine Matheu and Steve Logan. Their goal was to make a functioning theater adhering to historic guidelines, but in a building that had already been remodeled without any attention to preservation standards. Ted Jones was the chief technical consultant, working with the architects to design the theater's infrastructure—the rigging, lights, and sound system. The entire lower floor had to be torn out and repoured to ensure proper sightlines. They addressed every detail from the sizes of the dressing rooms, matching the hand laid tile floor in the lobby, to determining the shape of the balcony and the height of its railing. 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 BAAC desperately needed more money.

A Donor Steps Forward and a Grand Reopening

The Indiana Theatre renovation project now threatened to bankrupt the BAAC, risking the historic Waldron Arts Center, which they'd used for collateral. With construction underway, the BAAC sent out a plea to the community for \$500,000 more in donations.

As many know, the Buskirk-Chumley families stepped forward with a donation. On September 25, 1998, the BAAC held a press conference announcing the new name, the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. Energized with the funding, construction of the theater concluded, and to the arts council's delight, the project met Historic Preservation Certification guidelines. The theater was now officially a National Historic Landmark.

In April 1999, the theater reopened, under a new name, the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. However, there was still about \$300,000 in construction debt and now there were employees and bills to pay. Without steady income and facing mounting bills, the theater closed, shortly after its grand opening. All theater and BAAC staff were laid off.

Reboot, and Enter BCT Mgt

To save both the troubled arts organization and the theater, Mayor John Fernandez assembled a task force headed by attorney Ted Najam. The task force's solution was unique. They created a private not-for-profit organization to operate the theater, BCT Management, while the building itself would be owned by the

City of Bloomington. This would insulate the city from managing art and performances while securing the building as a public amenity. Shortly after BCT Management was formed, they hired Danielle McClelland as director of the Buskirk-Chumley Theater.

Rebirth and a 2nd Reopening

The hiring of Danielle McClelland and reopening of the theater as a public-operated venue marked a new beginning. One of the first shows scheduled was the Vagina Monologues, followed shortly thereafter by the PRIDE Film Festival. The Buskirk-Chumley Theater and its illuminated marquee became both a beacon and a sounding board for equity and a platform for discussion of LGBTQ+ rights. As a public-owned venue, the BCT hosts a wide range of community uses. It has served as the location for marriages, life celebrations, concerts, film and comedy festivals, the annual Trashion Refashion Runway Show, IU Soul Review, Ted Talks, and the Mayor's State of the City address. The Lotus Education and Arts Foundation began using the theater as the main performance venue for their annual world music festival. In just a brief period, the Buskirk-Chumley Theater became an integral part of the community and a key tourist attraction, bringing in audiences and performers from all over the world.

What's in a Name?

Constructed as the Indiana Theatre and renamed the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, the building sometimes faces a bit of an identity crisis. BCT conveniently stands for both Buskirk-Chumley Theater and Bloomington's Community Theater. Just the spelling of the word "theatre" has flip-flopped. Long-time residents call it the Indiana Theatre, as do the BCT Management incorporation documents. Recent residents usually call it by its official name—the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. Before leaving town, former Executive Director Danielle McClelland made a passionate plea, "Whatever you do, don't call it the Bus-Chum."

The Pandemic and Marquee Messages of Hope

After nearly twenty years running the theater, Danielle McClelland decided it was time to move on. Jonah Crismore and Lily Bonwich were brought in as new staff, 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. Of the businesses most deeply affected were restaurants, bars, and theaters.



Kardemimmit performing at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater in September 2022 for the 29th Annual Lotus Festival. Photo by Jim Krause.

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The theater was closed during the onslaught of the pandemic, but its marquee became a beacon of hope. BCT staff created a virtual fundraiser, placing uplifting messages on the theater marquee. There were announcements of births, marriages, and graduations. One message making national headlines was from Mister Rogers, “When I was a boy, and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”

What can one do with an empty theater and performers with no stage? Attorney Robert Meitus helped create Mandolin, a ticketed live streaming concert platform. In the summer of 2020, they held their first show, featuring Robert Meitus’s wife, Carrie Newcomer. People watched from home as Newcomer performed to an empty auditorium. But they were able to see a favorite performer in a familiar space. Thus began a new way of putting on concerts and seeing shows.

Out of the Dark

Many theaters didn’t survive the pandemic, but the Indiana did. In fall of 2021, the Buskirk-Chumley Theater cautiously reopened their doors. With the pandemic still afoot, they had to follow strict safety protocols, but the Indiana was back in action. It was fitting that the first big show after reopening was the Lotus Festival, which has traditionally used the theater as its main performance venue.

The Theater Today

Underneath the theater’s shining marquee is an entrance that remains practically unchanged from how it first appeared. It’s a time machine, transporting people back to 1922 so they can experience a show in a historic theater, but with a digital projector, state of the art sound and lighting, and craft beer. Today, the theater is far more than a historic icon. It’s the main performing arts venue in downtown Bloomington and to some, represents the heart and soul of our community.

The Buskirk-Chumley Theater exists thanks to the efforts of countless individuals, donors, and because of the city’s support. The journey to convert a once private theater into a public amenity was circuitous and might’ve contained some missteps. But if it hadn’t been for the vision of the BAAC and their goal to save an old building, we wouldn’t have the Buskirk-Chumley Theater or be celebrating its centennial.

Epilogue

The Bloomington Area Arts Council was dissolved in 2009. Their membership was suspended by the Indiana Arts Council. Kerasotes sold most of their assets to AMC Entertainment. Of the five movie theaters that once operated in downtown Bloomington, only one, the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, known fondly by some as the Indiana, is still going strong. It’s easy to find in downtown Bloomington. Just look for the shining marquee just off the courthouse square.

Endnote

1 Knight, Dawn, *Taliaferro: Breaking Barriers from the NFL Draft to the Ivory Tower and Wells*, Herman B. *Being Lucky: Reminiscences & Reflections*

Jim Krause is a photographer, documentary producer, musician, and an instructor for the Media School at Indiana University where he teaches video production, animation, and TV studio production.


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