

The Indiana Theatre at 100

Treatment with Narration (rev. 2/11/2023)

Overview: The historic Indiana Theatre, also known as the Buskirk-Chumley is beloved by many. Built in 1922 by Harry P. Vonderschmitt, the theater started out showing silent movies and vaudeville acts. The legendary composer, Hoagy Carmichael and his band the Collegians played between shows. It has weathered fires, wars and a depression, insolvency, and changes in ownership. While many theaters were built in the early 20th century, few remain today. Most have been torn down or repurposed. But the Indiana Theatre's ornate façade still graces Kirkwood Avenue in downtown Bloomington. And it still hosts sellout shows and has become a favorite of touring performers. You can watch a film festival there, or a play or a comedy act, and sometimes even catch a vaudeville show. In this documentary, we look at the secret to its longevity and explore the fascinating story of the Indiana Theatre.

The Indiana Theatre at 100 -----

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.

[images of beautiful Victorian house]

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.

[Historic photos of Porticos Restaurant, then perspective showing the Victorian building is the Greene & Schultz Law Offices]

This building, constructed in 1926 as a Kresge five and dime store, still stands today. To survive nearly 100 years, it's adapted to changes in how people spend time and money.

[Photo of historic Kresge building dissolves to present day video of the TAP brew pub- and people drinking beer.]

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.

[Images of former Von Lee or Princess theatre, which are now restaurants.]

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 as 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.

[Early photos of the Indiana Theatre and downtown Bloomington and recent photos and video of how it appears today.]

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.

[Title: The Indiana Theatre at 100]

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 elaborate Harris-Grand. On December 11, 1922, Harry and Nova Vonderschmitt opened the Indiana Theatre. The first movie shown was The Storm, produced by Universal Pictures.

[Historic photos and period music. Interviews with Danielle McClelland and Sue Talbot describe opening and who Harry & Nova were.]

The Vonderschmitts built a stately house in the style of a French chateau, with architectural features reminiscent of a castle. These mirrored some of the details inside their theatre.

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.

[Greg Waller interview on the arrival of sound coinciding with the Great Depression. Touch on Vitaphone, by Warner, that used phonograph records and Movietone, used by Fox.]

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.

[B&W movie clip with firefighters]

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.

[Sue Talbot remembering fire. FYI There was a fire at the Princess Theatre in 1924 and at the Von Ritz in Bedford in 1930. Roy Hayes audio interview (12 minutes in) describes fires. Joseph Crouch interview- (beginning of side B) talks about it.]

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.

[Montage of movie ads for the Indiana Theatre]

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.

[Photos of telegrams sending congratulations]

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.

[Barbara Lee was the daughter of Thelma (Vonderschmitt) and Joseph Crouch.]

Scene 4 – A Segregated City (4 minutes)

In the 1940s, at the Indiana Theater, 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 on racism in Bloomington.]

Even though Bloomington was a forward-thinking university town, racism was widespread, systemic, and discrimination was accepted practice. Indiana University became an important factor in the slow process of integration. George Taliaferro- 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.

[Interviews with Sue Talbot and Michael Twyman address racism and tell story of how Herman B Wells assisted by the love of Black athletes and students, ended segregation in Bloomington theatres and restaurants. Consider using audio interview of Bob Cook]

Scene 5 – Love for Movies (3 minutes)

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

[People describing childhood memories of movies at the Indiana.]

Scene 6 – Troubling Times (1 minute)

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 addresses building of College Mall and impact on downtown theatres and restaurants.]

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

Scene 7- Kerasotes Years 1976-1995 (3 minutes)

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.

[David Gudaitis soundbite on upstairs theatre. Levi Thomas on people who used to work there.]

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 and Glenda Murray addressing expansion of College Mall and impact on downtown theatres, restaurants, and businesses. B-roll of mall construction, downtown, and the Indiana Theatre.]

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

Scene 8– Transfer to the BAAC (3 minutes)

In December of 1995, Kerasotes donated the Indiana theater to the 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 Bloomington Area Arts Council, which was housed in the Waldron Arts Center, another historic building just around the corner. The arts council had a tough decision- what to do with the theatre. Sell it or keep it to use as a performing arts venue. But this would require a major renovation.

[Frank Young and LuAnne Holladay on the BAAC getting the gift of the theatre and deciding to take it on. "And then the real work began."]

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 on preservation and tax credits worth up to \$600,00]

Scene 9 – Renovation Begins (3 minutes)

[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 (2 minutes)

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 (3 minutes)

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 (4 minutes)

Musicians, actors, and theatre goers love the Indiana Theatre. Its architecture, history, character, “just-right” 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? (2 minutes)

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

[Montage of people calling it various names (“I still call it the Indiana.” “To me it’s the Bus-Chum.” “It’s most definitely the Buskirk-Chumley Theatre”, “I think of it as Bloomington’s Community Theatre,” etc.)]

Scene 16 - Pandemic & Marquee Messages of Hope (3 minutes)

[Lily Bonwich and Jonah Crismore on starting their new jobs in a pandemic. Marquee with uplifting messages. Robert Meitus on start of Mandolin. Include Carrie Newcomer footage and credit, “Courtesy of Carrie Newcomer and Mandolin.”.]

Scene 17 – Out of the Dark (3 minutes)

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 the first significant show after opening their doors was the Lotus Festival.

[Interviews with Jonah Crismore and Tamara Lowenthal on reopening. B-roll of masked patrons and Busman’s Holiday / Ross Gay concert.]

Scene 18 – The Theatre Today (2 minutes)

Underneath the theatre’s shining marquee is an entrance that remains practically unchanged from how it 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 (2 minutes)

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

Scene 20 – Epilog & Credits (2 minutes)

The Bloomington Area Arts Council, which was gifted the theatre by Kerasotes was dissolved in 2009. 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.

[Credits]

Thank you, Ted Jones. You will forever light our hearts and our stages.

Produced and Written by
Jim Krause

Narrator
Brother William

Music by
Universal Production Music
Kevin MacDowell

Production Team

Rob Anderson
Kevin Atkins
Narmeen Ijaz
Hilary Fleck
Stas Menzelevskiy
Jason Pear
Khurram Sheikh
Grant Shorter
Gabrielle Steenberger
Kayan Taraporevala
Abi Yates

Additional Photography by

Jeremy Hogan / The Bloomingtonian
Michael LeFleur
Bloomington PRIDE
Steve Raymer
Dave Rust
Levi Thomas
Kagan Tuncay
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Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music
Indiana University Center for Documentary Research
Indiana University Libraries Moving Image Archive
Ted Jones
Sara Laughlin
Steve Logan
Tamara Loewenthal
James Madison
Christine Matheu
Danielle McClelland
Robert Meitus
Miah Michaelson
Monroe County History Center
Glenda Murray
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Frank Young

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