

# “New York Theatre!”

**Immediately, the flashing lights of Broadway spring to mind.**

**We forget that beyond Times Square, across the East River,**

**BROOKLYN** has been its own vibrant theatre scene.

**Theatre in Brooklyn began when the Dutch settled here in the 1660s.**

**Many of the nation’s greatest playwrights, producers and actors have been, and still are, proud Brooklynites—Arthur Miller, Lauren Bacall, Barbara Streisand, Mel Brooks.**

**The list goes on.**

The many theater landmarks that dotted Brooklyn were part of a storied past. Most of them, including gems like The Park, Montauk and Orpheum, exist only in the photos around you. Others conceal themselves as churches, stores, even a gymnasium. And a few, like the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Majestic, still entertain sell-out crowds.

While maintaining a distinct identity, the Brooklyn experience has always mirrored the nation’s. Before the

Revolution, colonists amused themselves in taverns, where they delighted in raucous melodrama. Realizing the stage’s power, the British banned theatrical productions during the Revolution.

Following Independence, and through the 1800’s, Brooklyn’s theatre scene blossomed. As America’s talent filled the downtown stages, ethnic theatres troupes reflected the tastes and cultures of arriving waves of immigrants. Productions with Polish and Russian names appeared next to the works of Moliere and Shakespeare in the lights of Brooklyn’s marquees.

By the turn of the 20th century, “theatre” in Brooklyn no longer meant just “drama.” Musicals, vaudeville, burlesque and nickelodeons gave audiences a varied menu of “high” and “low” culture. From tuxedoed crowds taking in Hamlet at the Majestic to beachcombers gawking at Coney Island’s freak shows, Brooklyn’s theaters left no one unsatisfied.

With the advent of movies, ornate palaces like the Fox, Albee, Kings, and

Paramount drew thousands to their elaborate interiors, often garishly covered with Egyptian and Arabian motifs. Coney Island became a world of bargain amusements, where a nickel could buy a look at a bearded lady, a thrilling ride, or a bet on a mechanical horse in the sprawl of Luna, Steeplechase, or Dreamland.

As everywhere else, Brooklyn’s theatre districts staggered under the blow of the Depression and the allure of television. By the mid-1950s, Brooklyn’s traditional entertainment industry found it hard to compete with sitcoms. By the end of the century, the grand dames of Brooklyn theatre, the Bijou, the Park, the Fox, succumbed to the wrecking ball. Brooklyn’s theatre world had gone underground.

Recently, however, Brooklyn theatre has seen a Renaissance. The Brooklyn Cultural District is expanding, and anyone attending BAM’s world-acclaimed productions needs no convincing that Brooklyn star power shines again at a megawatt glow.