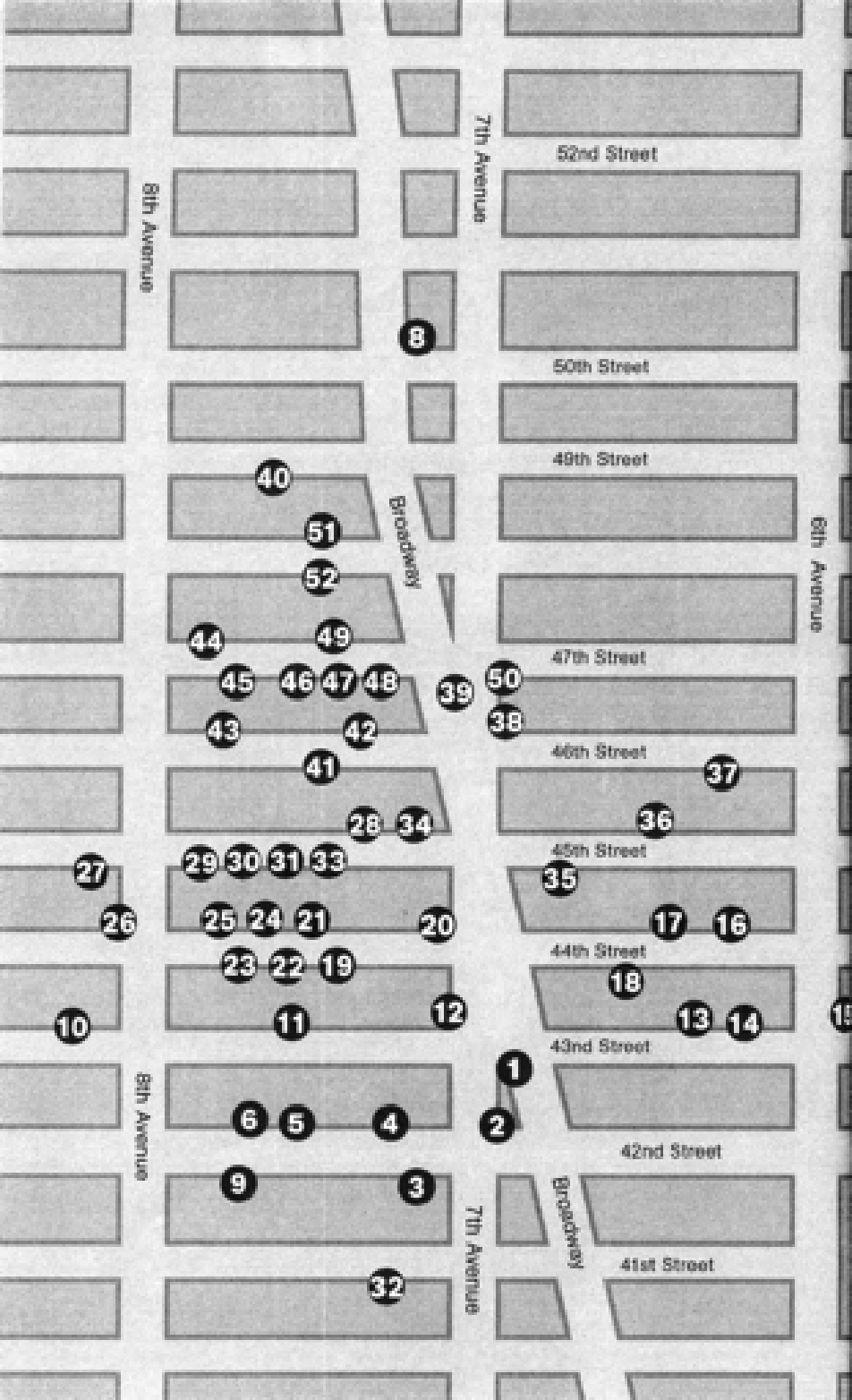
NEW YORK THEATER WALKS

Seven Historical Tours from Times Square to Greenwich Village and Beyond

Howard Kissel

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
BRENT C. BROLIN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7th Avenue
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WALK ONE: THE BROADWAY THEATER DISTRICT

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4 New Victory Theater
5 Hilton Theater
6 American Airlines Theater
7 Studio 54
8 Winter Garden Theater
9 AMC Empire 25
10 Second Stage Theater
11 The New York Times building
12 Hard Rock Café
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15 Hippodrome office building
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18 The Lambs Club
19 Helen Hayes Theater
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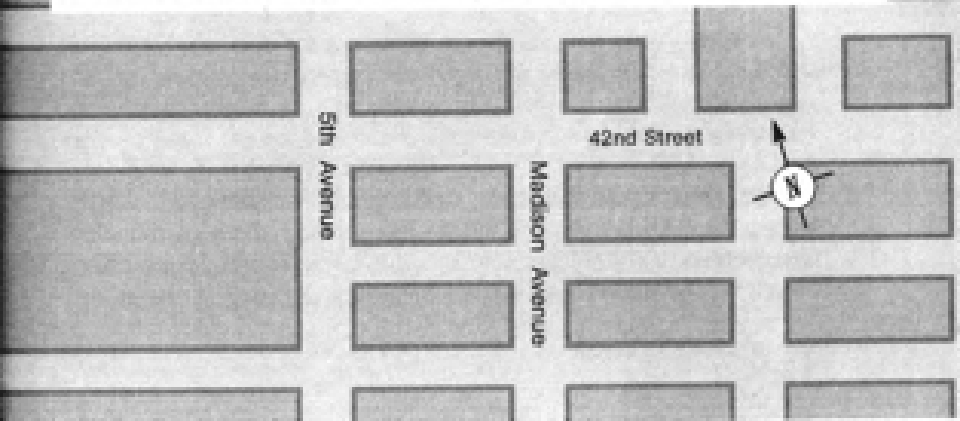
44 Biltmore Theater
45 Brooks Atkinson Theater
46 Edison Hotel
47 The Supper Club
48 Café Edison
49 Ethel Barrymore Theater
50 Palace Theater
51 Walter Kerr Theater
52 Longacre Theater



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Most of the walks we will take together will require the use of the imagination. This quality, which as a theater lover you presumably have in abundant supply, is important in New York because the city changes so rapidly. A 19th-century anecdote has it that a distinguished visitor was greeted downtown at City Hall and given a tour of the city on his way up to lunch. On his journey back down to City Hall he was shown all the changes that had taken place while he had eaten.

Even in the course of preparing this book, certain buildings that seem to have been in place forever have been destroyed. Only two days after finishing this chapter, I was startled to read that the Lambs Club, which had been the subject of negotiation between preservationists and developers, would finally be torn down. I have left the description in place in the—I'm afraid—naïve hope that yet another compromise may be effected.

While many of the walks in this book feature buildings that you will have to imagine, on this walk we will concentrate on what has been here for a long time.

It must be remembered, of course, that **Times Square** itself is only a little over a century old. Before the turn of the 20th century this area was known as Longacre Square, and, like the Long Acre district in London, it was home to stables, blacksmiths, and horse markets. It was, in effect, suburban, but two things were changing its status: the automobile and the subway, both of which brought this area of the city within the reach of people who lived further downtown and did not own horses or buggies.

What drew these visitors northward? Times Square was developed primarily as a pleasure center. Although there were theaters and music halls throughout the city, certain areas of town grew in connection with specific industries, like the garment center just to the south. The industry that created the neighborhood we are about to walk through was entertainment. Journalism, then as now, is a branch of the entertainment industry, and it was the arrival of the offices of the *New York Times* that gave the neighborhood its name.

Let's begin our walk on the southeast corner of Seventh Avenue and 42nd Street, where there is an entrance to the subway appropriately decked out in neon. Originally the station underneath was a spur from Grand Central on the subway line that came up the East Side.

The *Times* opened its new building on December 31, 1904, with a display of fireworks, which inaugurated the idea that this was *the* place to celebrate New Year's Eve. We're standing on 42nd Street on the downtown side of the street, looking across at the

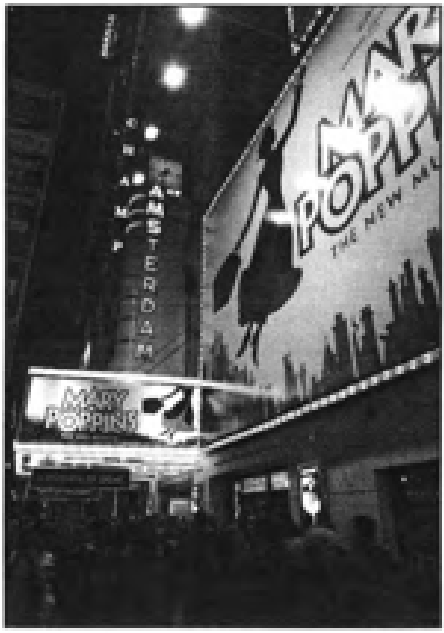
Times Square

triangular **Times building**. It echoes the Flatiron Building at 23rd Street, where Broadway intersects with Fifth Avenue. We can't really judge the architectural merits of the tower since its surface has been altered many times in the past 100 years.

Before beginning our walk, let's look back at the huge office building on the southeast corner of Broadway and 42nd Street. When it was built, in 1902, it was the Knickerbocker Hotel and was home to such distinguished tenants as Enrico Caruso, who worked a few blocks down Broadway when the Metropolitan Opera was there, as well as George M. Cohan, who performed in several of the theaters that were soon to be built to the north. The hotel served a very fashionable clientele, and the equally fashionable painter Maxfield Parrish was commissioned to do a painting of Old King Cole for its bar. The hotel was converted to an office building before World War II and the painting was moved uptown to the St. Regis Hotel, where it has long been the centerpiece of one of its restaurants.

Now let's walk west on 42nd Street. It is hard to imagine that this now resplendent block was, during the last few decades of the 20th century, a sewer. The movie theaters on both sides of the street showed only pornography. Many buildings had been condemned, but there were no plans to replace them. Various city commissions had proposed ways to overhaul the moribund block—the plans invariably featured a trolley car, as if the kind of conveyance featured on Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A., would transform the sordid surroundings into a congenial environment.

Disney would in fact play a role in the street's renaissance, but it was another very un-New York institution, the Gap, that sparked the transformation. The opening of a Gap store in Times Square signified to the 42nd Street Development Project that there was now a strong enough suburban middle-class tourist presence in the city to persuade investors to revitalize this seemingly hopeless street. In the mid-'90s, the Walt Disney Corporation invested $36 million (with comparable funding from New York City and State) to renovate one of the most beautiful buildings on the street, which we're approaching now—the **New Amsterdam Theater**, designed by the firm of Herts and Tallent, which opened in 1903.



New Amsterdam Theater

In a way it was a blessing that, like Sleeping Beauty, the New Amsterdam had been dormant for so long (it had been shut down as a movie theater in 1979). Had it been renovated earlier, it might have been modernized, but by the mid-'90s the value of New York's architectural heritage was recognized, and the firm of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, which specialized in historical renovation, was hired to restore the theater to its former glory. Disney was probably the ideal producer for this theater, for its décor reflects the same turn-of-the-century fairy-tale esthetic that underlies Disney's early animated features.

From its inception, the New Amsterdam was full of European touches, with a rich sense of fantasy in its art nouveau décor. Fittingly, the first production it held was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For the first nine years after its renovation, Disney's *The Lion King*, which opened in October 1997, was the attraction, and for the next umpteen it will be the stage version of Disney's *Mary Poppins*. The New Amsterdam is one of the only Broadway theaters that gives regular guided tours of its interior.

Across the street is the **New Victory Theater**. It was one of the first theaters to go up on this block, dating from 1902, when it

New Victory Theater

was built by Oscar Hammerstein. Hammerstein was also building much more lavish entertainment centers around the corner, like the Olympia, a huge building that combined theaters and restaurants at Broadway and 44th Street. By contrast, this theater, then named the Republic, was an intimate space for serious plays. Hammerstein called it "the perfect parlor theater." Its first production starred Lionel Barrymore.

Not all of its attractions were serious. In 1923 *Abie's Irish Rose* opened here and, to the dismay of critics and high-minded theatergoers, became one of Broadway's longest-running hits. (A mere two years later Lorenz Hart, in his lyrics for "Manhattan," wrote, "Our future babies / We'll take to *Abie's / Irish Rose.* / I hope they'll live to see it close." It seems worth noting that 80 years ago two years was considered a long run.) In 1932 the theater was bought by Billy Minsky and became the neighborhood's first burlesque house. Minsky created a tacky façade that was equally appropriate in the '70s, when it became the city's first XXX-rated porno theater.

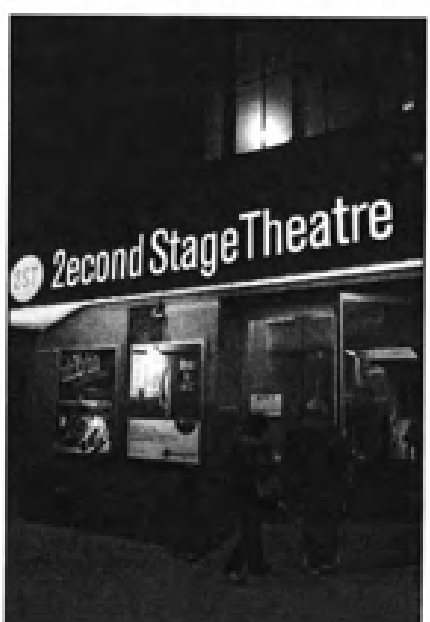
Interestingly, it was the first theater to be renovated as the new 42nd Street took shape. When it reopened in December 1995, the stunningly restored Venetian exterior with its period lamps and grand staircase almost seemed a mirage on a street that was then largely desolate. Renamed the New Victory Theater, it presents sophisticated children's theater and dance.

Next to the New Victory is the **Hilton**, another renovated theater, intended as a house for musicals, which respectfully incorpo-

rated elements of the interiors of two of the earliest theaters on 42nd Street: the Lyric, whose ornate façade we will see around the corner on 43rd Street, and the Apollo, which was the first Shubert Theater in New York. Both these theaters had long been movie houses—in the '50s and '60s, 42nd Street was a place where you could see second-run movies, at a lower cost than when they were new. By the '80s most of these cinemas were showing porno, though the Apollo held out for a long time as a place that showed "serious" films.

The first show to open in the Hilton, which was originally called the Ford Center, was *Ragtime*, a musical version of E.L. Doctorow's novel with book by Terrence McNally and score by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty. It starred Marin Mazzie and Brian Stokes Mitchell. The musical, like the theater itself, was the brainchild of a Canadian entrepreneur named Garth Drabinsky, whose bookkeeping practices led to numerous indictments under New York state law that have kept him in Canada. Without his chutzpah, however, this handsomely proportioned theater might not exist.

The **American Airlines Theater** is an elegantly restored version of the Selwyn, named for the Selwyns, who were busy producers in the early part of the 20th century. It is one of several theaters belonging to the Roundabout Theater Company, which began its life in the late '60s in the basement of a supermarket on West 26th Street. Like many Off-Off-Broadway companies that were founded back then, it was devoted to revivals of classical plays. Over the years the Roundabout has occasionally presented new work, but it still focuses on revivals here and at **Studio 54** a dozen blocks uptown.

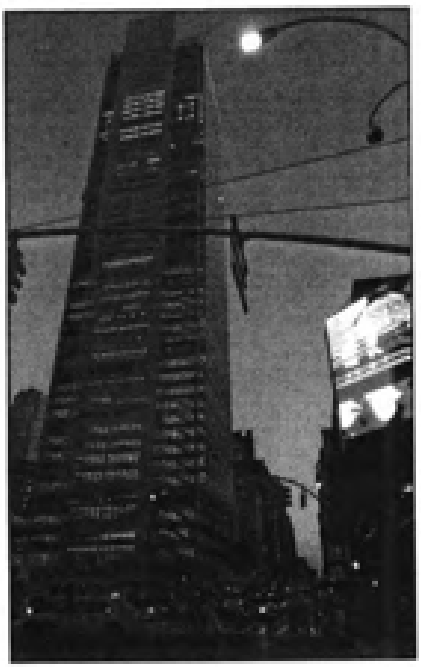


Second Stage Theater

Although many people in the theater resent the presence of corporate names on theaters (the venerable **Winter Garden** up at 50th Street was for a time the Cadillac Winter Garden), the willingness of huge corporations to lend their names to Broad-

way houses is perhaps the most amazing sign of the rebirth of the neighborhood. Until fairly recently no shareholder would have wanted his or her company associated with the theater district.

As we walk west on 42nd Street it seems worth noting the great effort made to retain the visual honky-tonk effect always associated with Times Square. Most of the buildings we're passing are new, but on the south side of the street close to Eighth Avenue is a huge, ornate movie complex called the **AMC Empire 25**. It is a measure of the care that went into planning the restoration of the block that the façade of the Empire, though hardly a design of architectural distinction, was transported about 100 feet west so that some of the original feeling of the street could be preserved. The Empire façade is a reminder of the grandeur that used to be associated with movie palaces.



The 2007 home of the *New York Times*

Let's turn right and walk up Eighth Avenue. On the northwest corner of 43rd Street is an Off-Broadway theater called **Second Stage,** which started in the '70s as a company devoted to reviving neglected contemporary plays rather than classics. It still does, though it also produces new work. Its original home was on the top floor of a seedy hotel just off Central Park West behind the Dakota. It then moved to another high floor in a building on upper Broadway, but its current home reflects the sophisticated attitude toward architecture of the new century. Second Stage hired the eminent Dutch architect Rem Koolhaus to create its new theater space inside the splendid art deco shell of a defunct bank.

As we walk east on 43rd Street we see what were the offices of the ***New York Times***, which moved here when it outgrew the triangular building around the corner. The newspaper is now headquartered in a huge skyscraper at Eighth Avenue and 41st Street.

As we make the first of our crossings of Broadway, it seems worth noting the variety and size of the signs that abound. The birth

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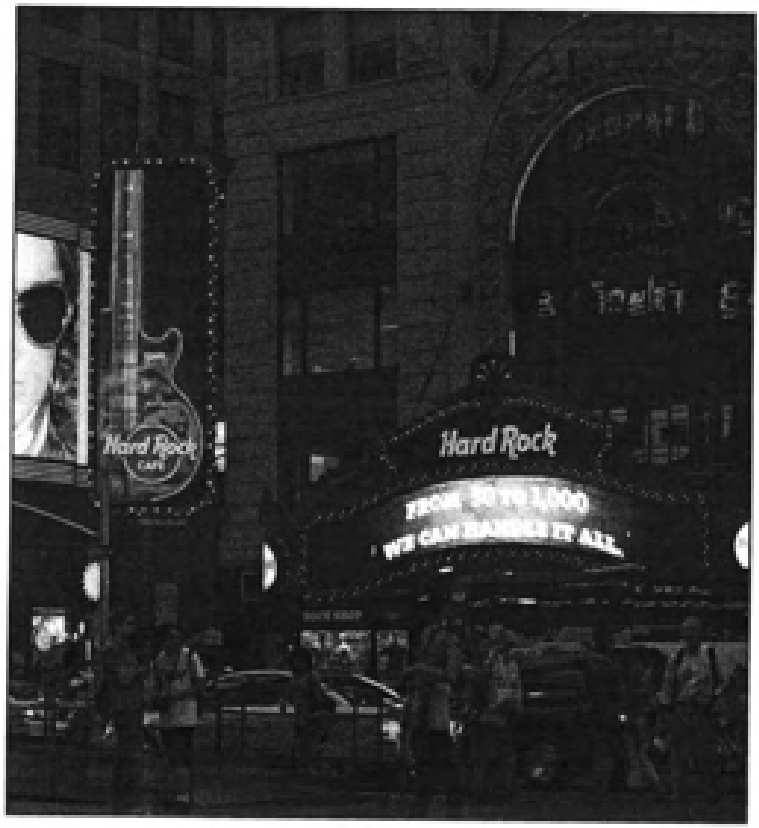


The Paramount building, whose marquee now advertises the Hard Rock Café

of Times Square coincided with the birth of electrical signage. In 1916 the city passed a zoning ordinance encouraging huge signs. When George Bernard Shaw was brought here he remarked, "It must be wonderful for people who can't read."

Standing on an island in the middle of traffic, let's look back at the distinctive marquee that was created for the Paramount Theater, which now advertises the **Hard Rock Café**. The Paramount was built in 1926, a year before the introduction of sound in motion pictures. Its opulence was such that—allegedly—people paid the admission fee simply to walk around its lavish interiors without necessarily bothering to watch the film. The interior of the theater itself was ten stories high. When Radio City Music Hall was built six years later, it was deliberately designed to eclipse the wonders of the Paramount and another showplace nearby, the Roxy, which was demolished in the '60s. It was a photograph of Gloria Swanson

standing in the ruins of the Roxy that inspired the Stephen Sondheim musical *Follies*.

Movie theaters in the '20s were competing with vaudeville. They didn't just give you a movie; there was also live entertainment. The Paramount, of course, is remembered as the place where the young Frank Sinatra rendered bobbie soxers hysterical during World War II. Because of the high cost of real estate in the inflationary '20s, the building was originally designed to have offices in addition to the theater. By the '50s the towering space that had been the Paramount was more valuable as offices than as an entertainment center.

Let's finish crossing the street. As we walk along 43rd Street, we see the newly sandblasted exterior of the **Woodstock Hotel**, which is typical of the apartment hotels that proliferated in this neighborhood in the last decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th. They were designed for people climbing the social ladder who could not yet afford to build mansions, let alone pay for the sizeable staff necessary to maintain them. They could stay in such hotels until they amassed enough capital to build their own homes further uptown. By the 1980s, when the neighborhood had reached its nadir, the Woodstock had become federally subsidized housing for the elderly and infirm.

It made headlines in 1999 when a gigantic scaffold being used to construct the Condé-Nast building around the corner collapsed and fell on top of it, crushing a woman who lived on its top floor. A few years later the Woodstock was acquired by a developer and turned into condominiums.

As we approach Sixth Avenue we see the stately Georgian façade of the **Town Hall**, which was designed by the eminent firm of McKim, Mead & White. The money for the building was donated by a member of the Bliss family (who were also major contributors to the Metropolitan Opera) on behalf of the League for Political Education. The League had been founded in 1894 when an amendment to the New York State Constitution to permit women to vote was defeated.

Unlike most of the buildings in this neighborhood, which were geared for show business, this one was intended to raise the level of political discourse. By the time it was finished, in 1921, women's suffrage had been achieved. Nevertheless, its civic usefulness continues to this day. Its intimate interior is perfect for lectures and debates, and its excellent acoustics make it a great concert hall.

At the beginning of this walk I said we would not need to use our imaginations. Here we have a choice. As we turn the corner onto Sixth Avenue, we can look across at the office building called

the **Hippodrome** and imagine what it was like when it was a huge entertainment complex that housed a menagerie in its basement and a stage complete with a water tank for aquatic ballets. Or we can go across the street, pop our heads into the otherwise Spartan lobby, and see photographs of the lost splendors of this most ambitious of New York theaters.

As we turn west on 44th Street, we see the **Belasco**, built in 1907 and named for the innovative producer David Belasco. He was most famous for his daring stage effects and lighting, though he also created plays that have found enduring life in two operas by Giacomo Puccini: *Madame Butterfly* and *The Girl of the Golden West*. Belasco, who dressed in priestly garb, though hardly because he had a priestly outlook on life, had an apartment in his theater with a peephole that allowed him to keep an eye on what was going on onstage. The interior has a lot of lights behind stained glass, an innovation at the time since it obviated the need for chandeliers, which might restrict the audience's view. Supposedly Belasco's ghost still inhabits the theater.

Hudson Theater

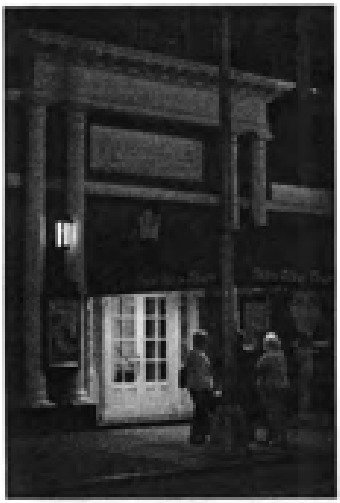
A little way down 44th Street is the 1903 **Hudson Theater**, which is now part of the Millennium Hotel. It has not been used much as a theater for many years, but is now mainly used for corporate events. This is a pity, because it means people seldom have the opportunity to see its beautiful Tiffany mosaic tiles. Just as the Republic (now the New Victory) opened with Lionel Barrymore, the Hudson's first production, *Cousin Kate*, starred his sister, Ethel.

Across the street is one of the most charming and intimate theaters in the neighborhood, on an upper story of the **Lambs Club**. The Lambs originated in London in the mid-19th century, as a theatrical and dining club named in honor of Charles and Mary Lamb. Its members were show people. The same was true of the American version, and the roster of former members, starting with, say, Fred Astaire, is extremely impressive. Like another fraternal showbiz organization, the Friars, which still pays mocking tribute to members in its Roasts, the Lambs had their Gambols. Their original function as a convivial club has been supplemented by philanthropic activities. The theater was even scheduled for demolition, but a last-

minute compromise was effected so the theater will remain within yet another office complex.

Let's cross Broadway again. Looking down toward the stretch of 44th Street closest to Eighth Avenue, we see one of the busiest corners in the neighborhood, a reminder of what a bustling area this was before the clusters of theaters and restaurants were broken up by huge high-rises. Each of these theaters is splendidly designed, and all have been beautifully restored.

As early as 1912, people were rebelling against the commercialism that characterized most of the theater. A result of this rebellion was the theater now called the **Helen Hayes**, which began its life as the Little Theater. It was indeed little, holding only 299 seats. And it was intended to provide a proper house for plays that required an intimate audience. It was renamed for the beloved actress in 1983, when the theater that had long borne her name was demolished to make room for the **Marriott Marquis Hotel**. Its current incarnation includes 597 seats.



Helen Hayes Theater

One of the most beloved theaters on Broadway, the **Shubert**, built in 1913, was named for the family that constructed many of the theaters in this neighbor-

Shubert Theater

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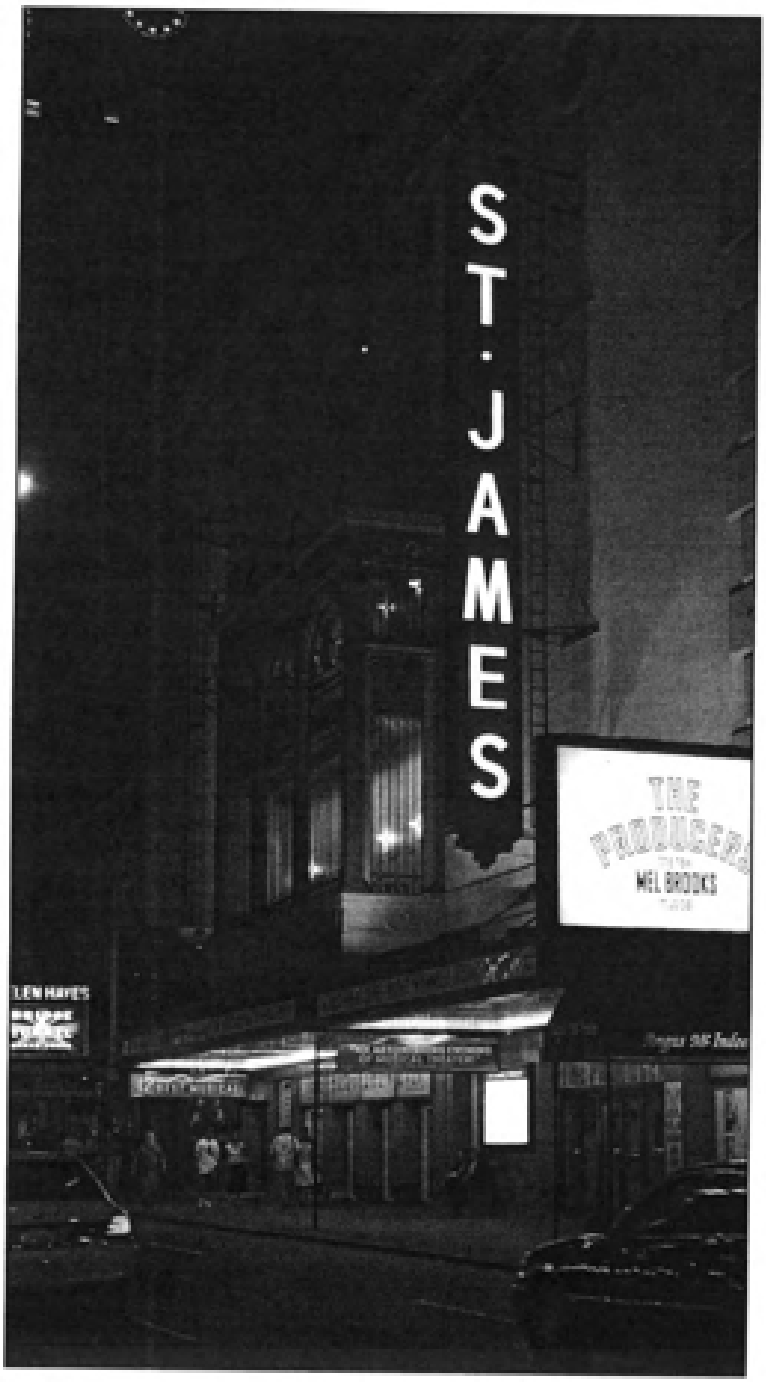


St. James Theater

hood as well as a chain of theaters across the country. The Shuberts were born in Syracuse, New York, but arrived in New York before World War I, when this neighborhood was a boom town. (*The Boys from Syracuse*, the title of the Richard Rodgers–Lorenz Hart adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*, was an affectionate tribute to the brothers Lee and J. J. Shubert.) This theater was named for their older brother Sam, who founded the business and was killed at the age of 29 in a train crash.

The Shuberts still maintain their offices above the theater. During the dark days of the Depression they were generous to producers who wanted to rent their theaters, not out of innate altruism but simply as a way of keeping the neighborhood—and their business—alive. The Shubert's longest running tenant was *A Chorus Line*, which occupied the house for 15 years.

One of the things that turned **Sardi's**, an unassuming mom-and-pop Italian restaurant, into one of the city's most long-lasting and popular landmarks was its proximity to the Shuberts' offices, the nerve center of Broadway. Another thing, of course, was the tastiness of its signature dishes. Caricatures of its celebrity clientele have hung on its walls for many decades. Vincent Sardi first opened his restaurant down the block, where the St. James theater now stands, in 1921, but it has been here since 1927.

The **Broadhurst**, next door to the Shubert, was named for a British playwright who arrived here in the late 19th century and

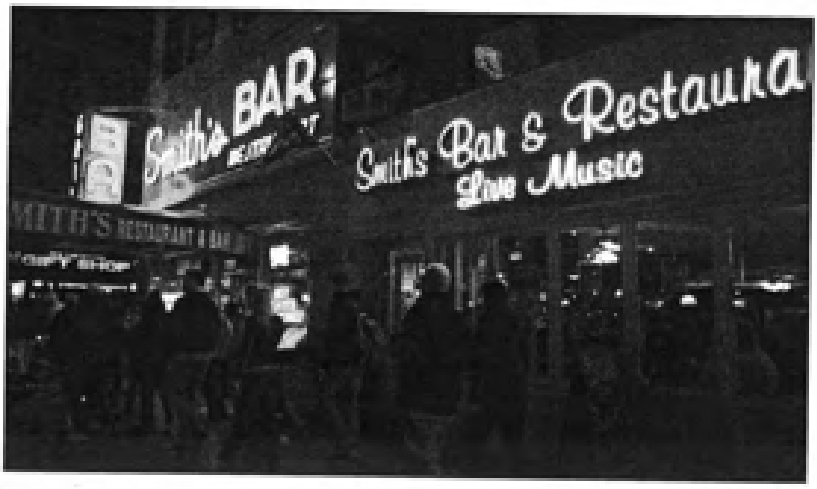
Broadhurst Theater

had an active career not just writing plays but managing theaters all across the country. He opened the theater in 1917 with the New York premiere of *Misalliance*, a play by his fellow countryman George Bernard Shaw. The proportions of the Broadhurst make it an excellent theater for serious drama.

By contrast, the **Majestic** next door, whose interior certainly lives up to its name, is a perfect house for musicals. Ever since 1988 it has been the home of Andrew Lloyd-Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera*, and there is a good chance, even if you buy this book secondhand decades from now, that will still be the case.

Across the street is another house that also mostly plays host to musicals, the **St. James**. Its distinctive exterior, featuring what looks like an elaborate birdcage, was inspired by the architecture of Georgian London. At one point, in the mid-'40s, the St. James and the Majestic, both finished in 1927, had Rodgers and Hammerstein's first two masterpieces running simultaneously—*Oklahoma!* at the St. James and *Carousel* at the Majestic. One of its long-running recent tenants was a theatrical adaptation of *The Who's Tommy*.

As we again approach Eighth Avenue, let's glance across the street at **Smith's Bar**, a dimly lit place that serves basic food and alcohol at very reasonable prices. Its frowzy ambience is a reminder that the theater once shared this neighborhood with the world of boxing. Madison Square Garden was up the street at 49th, and the intervening blocks were filled with similar bars, as well as pool halls and training gyms. The neighborhood was also dominated by steak joints that catered to the Garden's patrons, unlike the more culinarily adventurous establishments that now feed theatergoers.



Smith's Bar

Before turning east on 45th Street, let's look across Eighth Avenue and notice the witty façade of the **Al Hirschfeld Theater**, named for the beloved artist whose uniquely vivid and enduring caricatures of Broadway shows began running in New York newspapers in 1926, when he was 23. The theater was dedicated in June 2003 on what would have been Hirschfeld's 100th birthday. Although in ostensible good health, he died quietly about six months before his birthday.

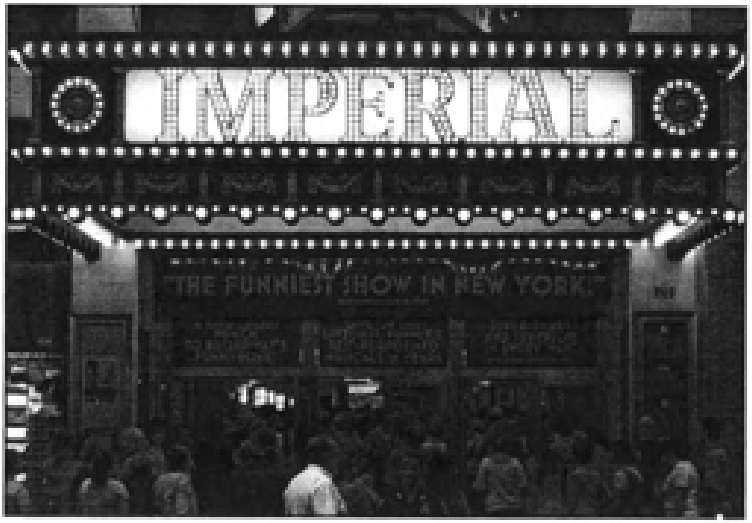
Al Hirschfeld Theater

The theater itself, which has a Moorish aspect both outside and in, opened in 1924. It was named for the man who built it, Martin Beck, who also built the Palace. When Rocco Landesman, the head of Jujamcyn Theaters, which owns it, decided it should be renamed the Hirschfeld, his hardest task, he said, was informing Beck's heirs of his decision. Their response was entirely gracious.

Inside the theater is a gallery of original Hirschfelds illustrating plays and musicals that appeared in this theater, including the original 1946 production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* and the 1977 production of *Dracula* that starred Frank Langella.

Turning east, we see a stretch as dense as 44th Street in terms of the number of theaters. The uptown side of the street used to be equally dense with restaurants, including one of the last remaining places that had begun as a speakeasy, but in the prosperity of the first years of the 21st century they were all demolished to make way for yet another high-rise apartment building.

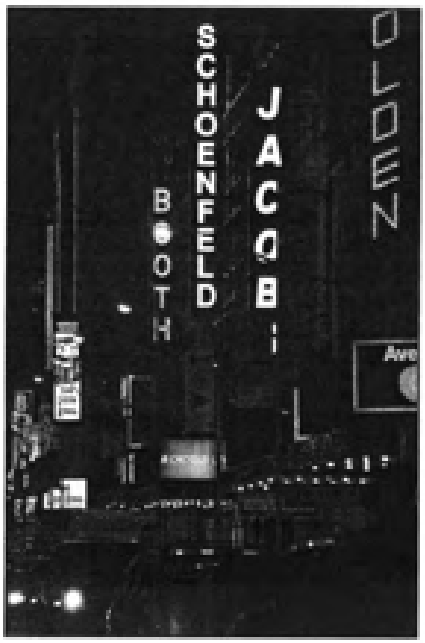
With the exception of the **Imperial**, a grand place for musicals, all of the theaters on this stretch are fairly intimate, making them perfect settings for plays and comedies. The first of them, named for the producer **John Golden**, has often been used for small-cast shows, like *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May*, which introduced those Second City talents to New York in 1960, or *Beyond the Fringe*, which introduced the Brits Alan Bennett, Peter



Imperial Theater

Cook, Jonathan Miller, and Dudley Moore to America a few years later. It has also housed intimate musicals like *Avenue Q*.

In the summer of 2005, two of the handful of theaters not named for anyone, which for decades had been known as the Royale and the Plymouth, were renamed for **Bernard B. Jacobs** and **Gerald Schoenfeld**, who since the early '70s had run the Shubert Organization. Not everyone in the theater community was enthusiastic about naming theaters for hard-nosed businessmen rather than actresses or playwrights, but it was noted that the **Nederlander**, on 41st Street, where *Rent* opened in 1996, has long been named for the founder of the dynasty. It was also pointed out that the Shuberts (as Bernie and Gerry were commonly known, as if Shubert were an honorific title) had been instrumental in restoring the neighborhood. When they took over



West 45th Street

the Shubert empire in the early '70s, the most sensible step might have been to turn the theaters into parking lots, but Jacobs and Schoenfeld restored all the theaters sumptuously, setting an example for other theater owners.

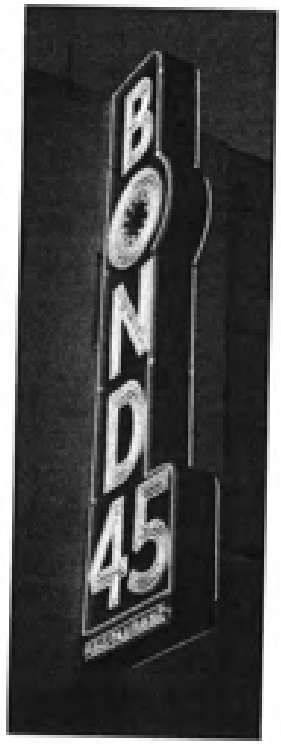
The **Booth**, of course, is named for an eminent theatrical family (one member of whom unfortunately is better known for an incident in American history than for his theatrical accomplishments.) It too has often hosted one-person shows, like those of Lily Tomlin and Barry Humphries, better known as Dame Edna Everage. It was also the original home of Stephen Sondheim's Pulitzer Prize-winning musical *Sunday in the Park with George*, starring Mandy Patinkin and Bernadette Peters.

Music Box Theater

If any theater can be called beloved, it is the **Music Box**, which was built in 1921 by the producer Sam Harris and the composer Irving Berlin. Originally, it was designed to house revues by Berlin. Harris wanted the theater to be named Irving Berlin's Music Box Theater, but Berlin refused. After Berlin died in 1990, the Shuberts, who co-own the theater, proposed that Berlin's name finally be placed on the marquee, but out of respect for their father's wishes his daughters refused. In its time, the Music Box, which cost $1 million to build, was considered expensive. Nowadays you'd need more than that to produce a single Broadway play. In its intimacy and charm, there is no better-designed theater on Broadway.

Apart from many of Berlin's own shows, the Music Box was home to the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize, the Gershwins' *Of Thee I Sing*. In 1989 *A Few Good Men*, by a young playwright named Aaron Sorkin, opened here. A year into its successful run, a young actor named Bradley Whitford took over the lead. A few years afterward, playwright and actor teamed together in *The West Wing*.

Let's walk east across Broadway. As of this writing there is a restaurant called **Bond 45** on the downtown side of the street—its electric sign mimics the sign of a men's clothing store that stood on Broadway and 44th Street for many decades. In those days Broadway signage also included a waterfall and a Camel sign that blew puffs of smoke over the street.



Bond 45 restaurant

The **Lyceum**, in the middle of the block, has one of Broadway's most imposing facades, with its grand Roman columns. Its hardwood interior is equally impressive. It opened in 1903, the same year as another masterpiece by the architectural firm of Herts and Tallent, the New Amsterdam. When it opened, it was noted for its inclusion of shops for building sets inside the theater, like the Metropolitan Opera House.

Theaters east of Broadway are often dark, partly because of an old-fashioned way of thinking: if your play was in one of the clusters of theaters on either 44th or 45th Streets you might profit from "walk-in business." The customer wants to buy tickets for X, but they're sold out. Rather than just go home and get to bed early, the customer will rush across the street and buy tickets for Y. This paradigm for ticket-buying has not been valid for decades, especially since the institution of the TKTS booth in Duffy Square, where last minute theatergoers can get half-price tickets for that day's performances. Nevertheless, the notion that the theaters on this side of Broadway will not get "walk-in business" means they are the last to be rented to producers.

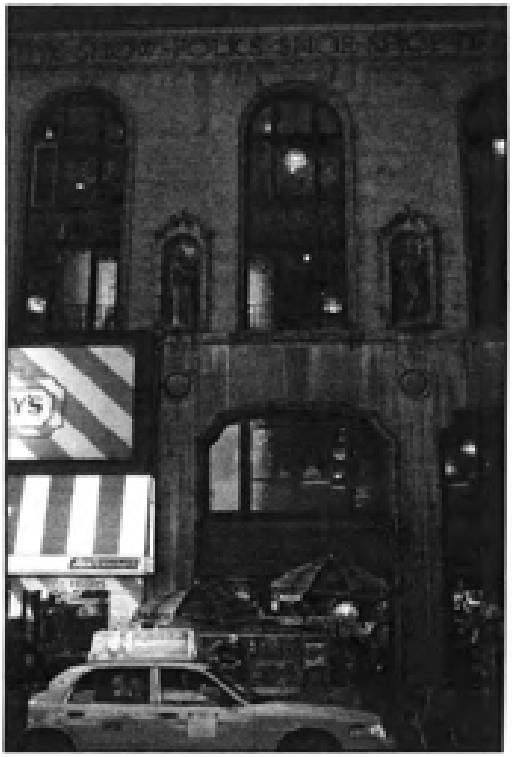

Lyceum Theater

The Lyceum's location may explain why in the early '70s it was home to the APA-Phoenix Theater, which presented classic plays directed by Ellis Rabb, and why, in the late '90s, Tony Randall used it for his Na-

tional Actors Theater. Subscription series do not depend on "walk-in business."

The jumble of little businesses and restaurants that characterized these streets was replaced in the latter decades of the 20th century by the corporate skyscrapers that have made Sixth Avenue the chilling thoroughfare it is, its sidewalks supercrowded during the workday and virtually empty at night. Let's turn back west on 46th Street. The brown stone building on the downtown side of the street, designed in the Romanesque style and finished in 1894, may look familiar—it was the setting for the TV show *Fame*, based on the experiences of kids at the High School of Performing Arts. Among its many famous graduates are Diahann Carroll, Liza Minnelli, and Al Pacino. Along with the High School of Music and Art, Performing Arts was transferred to the Fiorello LaGuardia High School behind Lincoln Center, and this handsome building was reborn as the **Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis High School for International Careers**.

On the northeast corner of 46th Street and Broadway is a reminder of how show business transformed even the most basic commerce. This corner of the **Actors' Equity** building, the headquarters of the actors' union, used to be a branch of the I. Miller shoe store chain. Between the two World Wars a lot of imagination was given to designing shoe stores—though generally the ones on Fifth Avenue. Nowadays shoe stores reflect a more utilitarian mindset. Not many, for example, have stone facades, nor do they have the sort of grand statuary this one does. Look up to the second story and you'll see sculptures of some of its famous clients in their most famous roles: Ethel Barrymore as Ophelia, Marilyn Miller in the title



The Actors' Equity building

role of Jerome Kern's musical *Sunny*, Mary Pickford as Little Lord Fauntleroy, and—what will come as a surprise to those who forget that grand opera was once part of popular culture—the great soprano Rosa Ponselle in the title role of Bellini's *Norma*. The statues are the work of A. Stirling Calder, who is not as well known as his son, Alexander Calder.

St. Malachy's Church

Let's cross onto the island in the middle of the intersection. Technically this triangle is called **Father Duffy Square**, for the man whose statue stands in the middle of the island. Father Duffy was a courageous chaplain during World War I who had earlier served as the pastor of **St. Malachy's Church** around the corner west of Broadway on 49th Street, long known as the Actor's Chapel. But first we encounter the statue of a man who was one of the most famous and beloved performers of the first half of the 20th century: George M. Cohan. In his capacity as an actor he had appeared in the original cast of Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical *Ah, Wilderness*. But he was better known as the composer of such songs as "Over There" and "Give My Regards to Broadway."

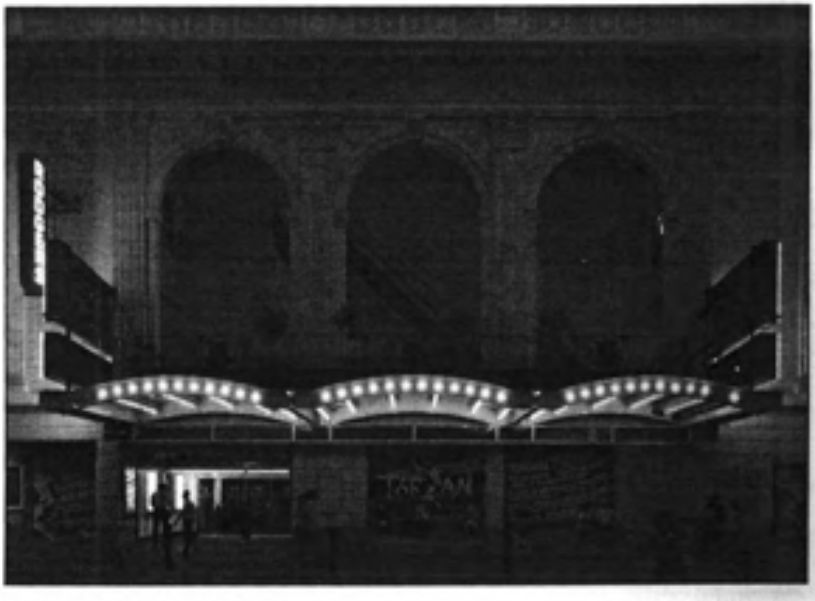
Since 1973 this island has been best known as the home of the TKTS booth, a project of the Theater Development Fund. It sells half-price and discounted tickets to shows both on and off Broadway a few hours before curtain time. In 1973, not only was this neighborhood itself on the skids, but nearly two-thirds of Broadway theaters were dark. The TKTS booth was intended to stimulate spur-of-the-moment theatergoing.

In those days, when the top price was rarely more than $10, the difference between a half-price theater ticket at $5 and a first-run movie ticket at $2 made the idea of live theater more attractive. The booth became especially popular with out-of-towners, to the extent that a survey of tourists staying in Times Square hotels in

the late '90s revealed that they didn't know every theater had its own box office—they thought the way you bought a ticket to a Broadway show was by lining up in Duffy Square.

Let's continue along 46th Street. Two illustrious names face us, **Richard Rodgers** on the left and **Lunt-Fontanne** on the right. Let's start with the Lunt-Fontanne. It was built in 1910 as the Globe by the distinguished producer Charles Dillingham, who unfortunately sustained huge losses in the 1929 stock market crash. He realized that the most profitable way to use the space was to turn it into a movie theater, which it remained until 1958, when it was beautifully renovated and restored to legitimacy with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne appearing in one of their greatest triumphs, the Swiss playwright Friedrich Duerrenmatt's *The Visit*, directed by Peter Brook.

The Lunts were not just Broadway stars; they were national stars. Throughout their career they toured their shows across the country, performing in theaters of all sizes, sometimes even in high school gymnasiums. Because they were totally dedicated to the craft of acting, they were celebrities without even realizing it. A pair of seats in their theater was dedicated to them. Once, being ushered to their seats for an opening, they heard applause. "There must be someone famous here tonight," Lunt said to his wife. It apparently didn't occur to him that the applause was for them.



Richard Rodgers Theater

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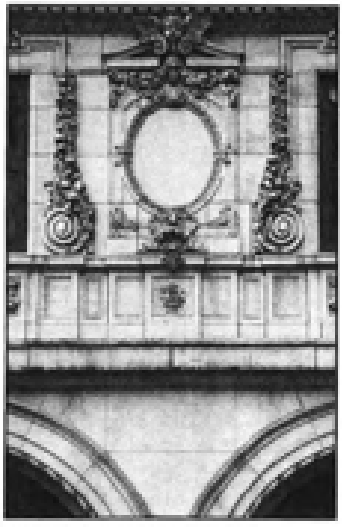
One of the great titans of New York real estate for much of the 20th century was the Chanin family, best known for an odd, metallic skyscraper across from the Chrysler Building on 42nd Street. In the '20s they built several Broadway theaters, including, in 1924, one that for many years was known by the highly unimaginative name of the 46th Street Theater. In 1990 the producer Alexander H. Cohen, who had produced Richard Rodgers's last musical, *I Remember Mama*, proposed to the Nederlander Organization that this theater, which they owned, be renamed in Rodgers's honor. It might more fairly have been named the Frank Loesser Theater, since Loesser had two huge hits here, *Guys and Dolls* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. But there are many legendary names that have not received their due—Cole Porter, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Jerome Kern, to name just a few.



Paramount Hotel

As we proceed to Eighth Avenue we pass the art deco façade of the **Paramount Hotel**, whose interior underwent a major modernist renovation in the '80s. Its inviting exterior makes a strong contrast to the Marriott Marquis back down the street. Designed in the '70s, when the neighborhood was still very "iffy," the Marquis was built as a fortress to protect its guests from the outside world—even its lobby is on the eighth floor.

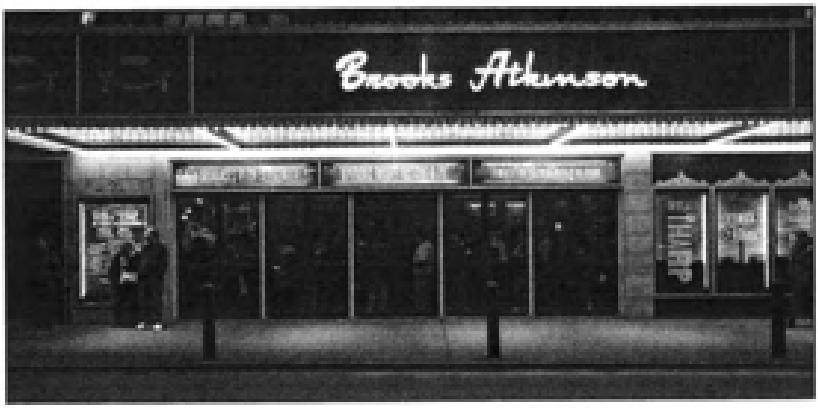
Let's walk briskly up Eighth Avenue to 47th Street. Depending on when you read this, you may still be able to look across Eighth to see the hodgepodge of buildings that once constituted this neighborhood, most of which have been replaced by high-rises. As we turn onto 47th Street we see the elegant façade of the **Biltmore**, which was restored in 2003. Its interior is also a gem, an extremely intimate space. It is best known as the home of the musical that caused a sensation in the '60s, *Hair*.

From the late '80s until its acquisition by the Manhattan Theater Club and subsequent restoration, the Biltmore was dark, its interior was vandalized, and it was often reported on the verge of demolition. Its salvation was contingent on a complicated plan that involved building a high-rise around it—this was a case where farsighted planning benefited the theater. The shortsighted position

Biltmore Theater

would have been simply to destroy the theater, which was extremely costly to restore—but enlightened city policy, affording developers tax breaks for preserving the city's history, enabled both economic growth and the retention of an extremely valuable theater.

Across the street from the Biltmore is one of only two Broadway theaters named for critics. The **Brooks Atkinson** honors one of the few *New York Times* critics who might be described as beloved. Atkinson became the critic of the *Times* in 1930 and, except for a hiatus during World War II, when he asked to be assigned to cover the war (and, among other things, reviewed a production of *Hamlet* in China), he remained in that post until 1960.



Brooks Atkinson Theater

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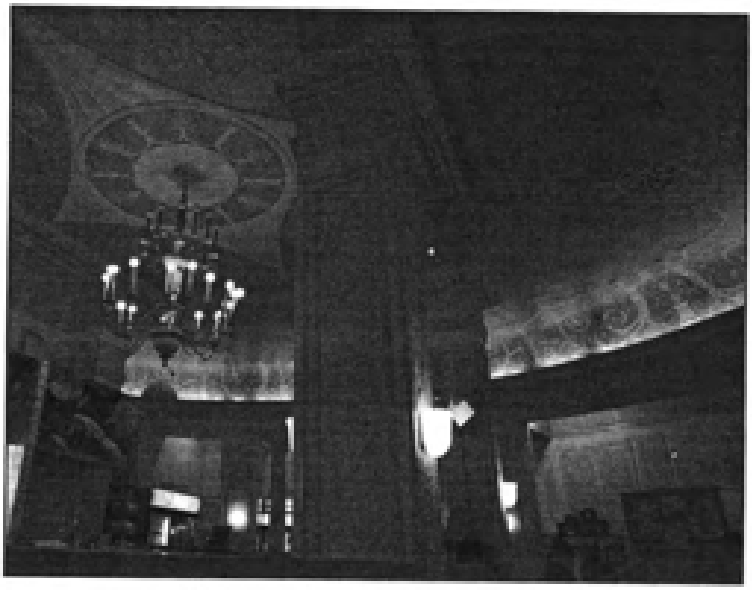

Ceiling, Café Edison

Ethel Barrymore Theater

A few doors east is the **Edison Hotel**, whose lobby boasts charming art deco murals. It houses a nightclub called **The Supper Club** in a space that was once a theater. Its best known tenant was *Oh, Calcutta!*, which caused a sensation when it opened downtown in 1969 but had lost its shock value when it moved here, providing frissons largely for foreign tourists.

In the '80s its coffee shop, **Café Edison**, was nicknamed the Polish Tea Room. Even the reference that is being parodied now seems a little obscure—the Russian Tea Room, on 57th Street, famously advertised as "slightly to the left of Carnegie Hall," was in its later years a celebrity hangout with an emphasis on Hollywood. When it opened in the '20s, it had indeed been a tearoom whose clientele consisted of White Russians, refugees from the Bolshevik Revolution, many of them involved in the arts. Its décor consisted of antiques from the czarist era.

The Polish Tea Room has no such amenities. It was operated by an elderly couple who were survivors of the Holocaust. In 2001 Neil Simon wrote a play about them titled *45 Seconds from Broadway*. The Polish Tea Room's clientele consisted of people who worked nearby—theater people of the nuts-and-bolts variety, producers, managers, and of course actors.

Across the street is an unusually graceful theater, the **Ethel Barrymore**, which gives the theatergoer a strong sense of proximity to the stage. Unlike the many Broadway theaters that were renamed for stars after they had been standing a long time, this one was named for Barrymore when it was built, in 1928. It has housed many important plays, notably the original 1947 production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which catapulted Marlon Brando to stardom, and a revival in 1992 with Alec Baldwin and Jessica Lange.

This time we won't cross Broadway. We'll just look at the **Palace**, which was the destination of vaudeville stars for decades. Many of the office buildings in this neighborhood a century ago were booking offices for theaters across the country. One of the virtues of vaudeville in the eyes of the producers was that the performers provided their own costumes and scenery—all you had to supply was the stage. The Palace has been a Broadway theater for many years—one of its attractions in the late '60s was appropriately a musical about its neighbor George M. Cohan, called *George M.*, with Joel Grey in the title role. The Palace is fondly remembered as a place where Judy Garland gave concerts over the years, including a famous one in 1969 shortly before she died.

Walking up to 48th Street we see the other Broadway theater named for a critic, the **Walter Kerr**. Its renovation was another

brainchild of Rocco Landesman. Before its renaming, this theater was called the Ritz, and its interior was fairly mundane. Landesman discovered that the original, more elaborate interior decoration was never completed because funds ran out when the Great Depression took hold. In honor of Kerr, Landesman resurrected the original '20s design, which gave the interior a fairy-tale glow.

Proceeding down 48th Street, we approach the **Longacre**, another nicely proportioned theater suitable for non-musical plays. Here we will call an arbitrary halt to our journey. As we move uptown, more and more of the theaters are surrounded by hotels and high-rises only recently constructed. Besides, this theater serves as a useful bookend, a reminder that the area through which we have walked, a neighborhood with exciting connotations all over the world, was once known largely for its horse trading.

Walter Kerr Theater