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America's Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre

Andrew Davis

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America's Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre traces the history of America's oldest theater. The Philadelphia landmark has been at or near the center of theatrical activity since it opened, as a circus, on February 2, 1809. This book documents the players and productions that appeared at this venerable house and the challenges the Walnut has faced from economic crises, changing tastes, technological advances, and competition from new media.

The Walnut's history is a classic American success story. Built in the early years of the nineteenth century, the Walnut responded to the ever-changing tastes and desires of the theatergoing public. Originally operated as a stock company, the Walnut has offered up every conceivable form of entertainment—pageantry and spectacle, opera, melodrama, musical theater, and Shakespeare. It escaped the wrecking ball during the Depression by operating as a burlesque house, a combination film and vaudeville house, and a Yiddish theater, before becoming the Philadelphia headquarters for the Federal Theatre Project. Because Philadelphia is located so close to New York City, the Walnut has served as a tryout house for many Broadway-bound shows, including *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*. Today, the Walnut operates as a nonprofit performing arts center. It is one of the most successful producing theaters in the country, with more than 350,000 attending performances each year.

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