

## The Wisconsin Union Theater: A Short History



The opening of the Wisconsin Union Theater in 1939 marked the realization of a dream and the solution to a long-felt need for a theater at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Statewide radio broadcasted the October 8th inaugural ceremonies, and the next three days saw four splendid performances of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, starring the leading couple of the American Theater, Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontanne.



The idea for a theater wing in the Memorial Union was conceived in the 1920's by University President Van Hise and members of the Memorial Union Building Committee. These pioneers imagined a theater with ancillary workshops as an integral part of the Memorial Union, drawing the arts into the daily life of the campus.

It was the vision, dedication and persistence of one man, Porter Butts, with his organizational and fundraising talents, which made the theater a reality without the use of any taxpayers' dollars during the financially troubled times of the Great Depression.



As the Theater grew over the years, countless artists have echoed Alfred Lunt's opening night comment that "the acoustics are simply marvelous." The broad aisles and wide outer lobby corridors serve as an effective social center, and the complementary art galleries host changing exhibits. For more than 60 years the Wisconsin Union Theater has been a cultural center for the entire state of Wisconsin, featuring local, national, and international acts.



Union Theater audiences have seen and heard some of the most famous actors, dancers and musicians of the century in many thousands of performances; popular artists have entertained; renowned leaders, philosophers and scientists have challenged the mind. Fritz Kreisler, Ella Fitzgerald, Indian Prime Minister Nehru, Frank Lloyd Wright, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Frost, Itzhak Perlman, John F. Kennedy, Yo-Yo Ma, T.S. Eliot, Jesse Jackson, Arthur Rubinstein, Jascha Heifetz, Louis Armstrong, Martha Graham, Dave Brubeck, the Lunts—the theater's autograph book is a "Who's Who" of twentieth century arts and ideas. Over the years, eminent personalities have communicated from the stage with over ten million people, and their influence has rippled throughout the world.



Smoothness of operation and quality of programming, key elements in the theater's success over the years, have rested in the capable hands of many administrators, publicists and technicians, including Fan Taylor, Fred Buerki, Bill Dawson, Ralph Sandler and Michael Goldberg, to name just a few. Equally important have been the generations of students who today, as in the past, enjoy the opportunity to work with Union Theater staff on artist





booking, contracts, box office and front-of-the-house management, backstage and technical crews, business operations, and publicity. They continue to serve as door people, as interns in the Union Theater office, and as members of Wisconsin Union Directorate, enabling them to learn leadership and management skills while enjoying the opportunity to meet world-famous personalities.



In the 21st Century, the Union Theater continues to flourish with ideas and programs, energy and vision. That vision becomes a reality hundreds of times each year, when the Theater is reserved for use or its doors open to a lively and inquiring audience. The Union Theater remains warm, vivacious and inviting, while the magic of great performances and the ferment of ideas continue to fill it.

**Captions (top to bottom):** Alfred Lundt, Lynne Fontanne, inside the Wisconsin Union Theater, Eroica Trio ("the most sought after trio in the world"), Baaba Maal (Senegalese singer), Emerson String Quartet ("America's greatest quartet" - *Time Magazine*), Nrityagram Indian Dance ensemble (classical Indian dance forms with contemporary objects), Red Stick Ramblers (Cajun, western swing, blues and old-school jazz).

For more information on the Wisconsin Union Theatre: <http://www.uniontheater.wisc.edu/>

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