



# Showtime in Cleveland: The Rise of a Regional Theater Center

*John Vacha*

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## Showtime in Cleveland: The Rise of a Regional Theater Center John Vacha

This work takes the reader from the city's first professional theatrical presentation in 1820, through the heyday of vaudeville, to the grand reopening of the newly renovated Allen Theatre in 1999 and the return of touring Broadway shows to Cleveland. In 1820 Cleveland was able to draw a visit from a troupe of professional actors. With no theater in which to perform, the troupe made do with Mowrey's Tavern on Public Square, where a standing-room-only audience saw *The Purse; or the Benevolent Tar*. It was five years before another professional company would visit. As the city grew, theater blossomed and vaudeville flourished. In the early 1920s, five magnificent theaters opened at Playhouse Square, the State and the Palace, for mixed programs of vaudeville and movies; the Hanna and Ohio, for legitimate Broadway-style theater, and the Allen, for movies. Cleveland was also in the vanguard of the "little theater" movement with the establishment of the Cleveland Play House and the interracial Karamu Theatre. After a period of decline in the 1960s and 1970s, live theater was reborn in Playhouse Square, which is now the second largest performing arts complex in the country, and a vigorous new alternative theater is flourishing "off-Euclid".

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