

Living Over the Store: Shubert Penthouses by Brooks McNamara

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(This article is adapted from a talk given by Brooks McNamara to the Friends of the American Theatre Wing)

At the turn of the century, penthouses began to appear on the roofs of Broadway theatres. Some were strictly office space, like the rooms that are still in use at the top of the Shubert Organization's Longacre Theatre on 48th Street. These penthouse apartments seem never to have been widespread on Broadway, and at the present time, with so many old theatres gone, it is hard to say how many theatres actually possessed them. Probably not very many. But three of these rare penthouses still exist over Shubert theatres. Two are to be found above the Lyceum and the Belasco. Another is on top of the Shubert Theatre. A fourth penthouse is at the top of the Sardi Building, a Shubert-owned office building on 44th Street.

Daniel Frohman's small penthouse, now the reading room of the Shubert Archive, was restrained and dignified, though perhaps somewhat overdecorated for modern taste (Figures 1a-b). Frohman's Lyceum, the last repertory house built on Broadway, was opened in 1903. His apartment and, on the floor above it, his rehearsal hall, both run the entire width of the building, above the lobby and part of the auditorium, with the studio opening out onto a balcony overlooking 45th Street. After Frohman's death, the "studio," as he called it, was used as office space by George S. Kaufman and Max Gordon, and in later years by T. Edward Hambleton, who turned both floors into offices for his Phoenix Theatre.

Hambleton divided the studio into half a dozen small rooms. The partitions were taken down, however, when the Shubert Archive moved into the space, and it was found that much of the original woodwork remained intact underneath. The most famous amenity in the studio was the concealed "door in the wall," located in the wainscoting in Frohman's dining room (Fig. 2). "In one corner of my studio," he wrote in his autobiography, "there is a little door which when opened gives one a view of the stage. Many a night I have sat with the author of a play, viewing it from a hidden position and discussing the points that needed strengthening." The door still exists today, and it is still possible to watch a play at the Lyceum from Dan Frohman's old studio.

David Belasco, the so-called "Bishop of Broadway," was a uniquely colorful director, producer and theatre owner. During his years in New York he had two penthouse apartments. The first was in a 42nd Street theatre, now known as the Victory, which he purchased in 1902. Although the penthouse still exists, no traces of Belasco's occupancy remain. However, an early illustration (Fig.3) suggests the wildly eclectic nature of the place, which matched in every way the flamboyance of its owner. More is known about the producer's second penthouse, built in 1909 above the present-day Belasco Theatre, and probably



Fig. 1a-b. An undated photo of the main room of Daniel Frohman's penthouse located atop the Lyceum Theatre, now home of the Shubert Archive; Daniel Frohman's penthouse as it looks today. The main room serves as the Shubert Archive's Reading Room.



Fig. 2. Daniel Frohman (third from left) dines in his penthouse, n.d.

influenced somewhat by Frohman's 1903 penthouse over the Lyceum.

The main entrance to Belasco's second penthouse was by an inconspicuous elevator off the alley next to the theatre. It was the only thing that was inconspicuous about the penthouse. Guests first entered a small foyer with a fountain, then progressed through another small room to a two-story stair hall with a huge fireplace and, beneath the staircase, a medieval confessional booth. From there it was possible to mount the stairs to a dining room and bedroom, or one could cross under the staircase into a grand salon outfitted with pseudo-Gothic woodwork. Belasco's study (Fig. 4) opened off the main salon. A small door led out of the study onto an office floor and ultimately to one of two staircases, the first leading to the theatre lobby and the second to another theatre alley.

The penthouse was lavishly, even bizarrely decorated—supposedly by Belasco's stage carpenters and scene painters, who, it was said, were expected to work on their employer's apartment when not needed on a show. One of Belasco's biographers, Craig Timberlake, recalled that the director "established his studio in a suite of half a dozen rooms, which were soon overflowing with the bric-a-brac and objets d'art of a hundred auctions. In this confusing and cluttered labyrinth could be found anything from fireplace tiles, stolen by slaves from the Alhambra, to a lock of Napoleon's hair." The penthouse is no longer in use, and most of its elaborate architectural detail was removed to Sardi's Restaurant a number of years ago to create the famous Belasco Room. The rest—including stained glass windows, paneling, tiles, and lighting fixtures—has been moved into the Shubert Archive.

Equally imposing, if somewhat more restrained, were the penthouse apartments of those powerful producers and theatre owners, Lee and J.J. Shubert. Over the years the Shubert brothers seem to have owned several penthouses. J.J., for example, once had a suite, now destroyed in a building at 47th and Broadway, atop what was once the Central Theatre. But the penthouses most often associated with the brothers faced each other across 44th Street. Lee's studio covered a floor on top of the Shubert Theatre, built in 1913, with an entrance on Shubert Alley. Like Belasco's penthouse, the apartment seems to have been an afterthought, since the plans for the Shubert suggest that the two top floors were originally intended as artists' studios. But Lee Shubert shortly changed his mind and built a large and commodious penthouse on the next to top floor of the theatre. It serves today as the executive offices of the Shubert Organization.

Like the Belasco and Frohman studios, Lee's penthouse was a composite of private quarters, public space, and offices. His own office was a tiny round room at the Shubert Alley-44th Street corner, which his friend Ruth Gordon recalled, was painted "really pink, like a wild rose." The only known photographs of the penthouse as it was during Lee's years show a few rooms packed up for the movers—probably after Lee's death—and do not really suggest the grandeur of the place. There are, for example, only a few photographs of Lee's dining room, once a grand two-story affair, complete with minstrels' gallery, walls painted with heraldic designs (Fig. 5), and a functioning fountain. A few other photographs also survive, including one of the large reception room (Fig. 6) outside Lee's office in which he held auditions,



Fig. 3. Belasco's first studio, c.1902.

Fig. 4. Belasco at work in his second studio, n.d.

Fig. 5. A detail of the minstrel's gallery over the dining room, c. 1954.

Fig. 6. The office area, c. 1954.

and another showing Lee's library (Fig. 7), which looks much the same today.

Originally, it is said, Lee and J.J. shared the penthouse quarters over the Shubert—or at least the office portions of it. When the Shuberts' Sardi Building was built in 1927, however, J.J. moved across 44th Street. As J.J.'s son John told it, this was fine with Lee, "who wanted plenty of distance between his brother and himself." J.J.'s office was moved to the sixth floor of the Sardi Building. His penthouse was built at the very top of the structure, and, like Daniel Frohman's apartment, featured a balcony off the main room with a spectacular view of the theatre district.

J.J.'s penthouse was smaller than Lee's, but actually more elaborate in many of its details. There were countless bookcases for his extensive library, and a lavishly decorated main room, complete with an overmantel portrait of his son John (Fig. 8), which now hangs in the Shubert Archive. A very elaborate and extremely heavy bronze door in the Renaissance style (Fig. 9)—probably a souvenir from one of J.J.'s frequent European tours—had to be hauled up to the penthouse with a crane set up in the middle of 44th Street. J.J. Shubert's elegant old apartment is now the home of the Dramatists Guild.

From the turn of the century to the late twenties, penthouses like these four survivors represented the quintessence of Broadway glamor. But the Depression ended the building of such apartments because it ended theatre building in the Times Square area for more than thirty years. A small handful of similar penthouses was built later on, notably "Roxy" Rothafel's famous apartment over Radio City Music Hall. But living over the store --at least in the grand style of the theatre moguls of three-quarters of a century ago—is a long-vanished Broadway institution.



Fig. 7. The library, c. 1954.

Fig. 8. John Shubert's portrait hangs over the fireplace of his father's apartment, c.1965.

Fig. 9. The bronze Renaissance-style door to J.J. Shubert's apartment, c. 1965.