

# BACKSTORY



BY BEN HECHT AND CHARLES MACARTHUR

# The FRONT PAGE



Your behind-the-scenes look at TimeLine productions

YESTERDAY'S STORIES.  
TODAY'S TOPICS.

**TimeLine**  
Theatre Company

# a message

Dear Friends,

A few years ago I was browsing in a bookstore when a book caught my eye—*The Front Page: From Theater To Reality* by George W. Hilton. As a longtime fan of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's pressroom romp, I immediately picked it up and discovered a treasure trove of historical insight into the world of Chicago journalism and politics. I found things in Hecht and MacArthur's play I had never seen before—things that seemed to make this play even more ripe for TimeLine.

Hilton's painstakingly detailed dissection of *The Front Page* includes historical analysis and page-by-page annotations, along with photographs and insight into the real-life personalities that inspired each character in the play. Most important, the book includes the earliest surviving text of the play, from August 1928. It is this original version that provides a revealing window into Hecht and MacArthur's 1920s Chicago, warts and all. Plagued by censorship since the original 1928 production, the script has gone through numerous changes in vari-

**“Today, the form may be rapidly shifting away from newsprint, but the competition to publish the story first—even perhaps before the entire story has revealed itself or been fully investigated—continues to ring true.”**

ous stage and film incarnations (including the classic gender-bending film *His Girl Friday*), mostly sanitizing the play's language and softening its characters. The changes put a glossier finish on what was unquestionably a more rough-and-tumble world that Hecht and MacArthur aimed to celebrate and scorch. Though the overall story remained intact, celebration increasingly became the goal of each subsequent version. The cumulative effect of the changes, in Hilton's assessment, was “to weaken the play.”

In revised versions, the wiseacres of *The Front Page* pressroom evolved into more lovable loudmouths, charming in their foibles and more endearing for their audacity. But to look back at the original text, much of their language and actions were deplor-

able—misogynistic, racist, foul and corrupt. It is that original essence and text that TimeLine aims to bring to light, not to validate the characters' vernacular or boorishness but to present them honestly, as the flawed characters they were, as well as provide a snapshot of a particular time in our beloved city's blemished past.

To accentuate that reality, and to strive against the presentational quality often associated with this play, director Nick Bowling and his design team have put you—the audience—squarely in the middle of the action, sitting within the pressroom at Chicago's famed Criminal Courts Building. As we've featured later in this *Backstory*, the flexibility of TimeLine's theater is being employed yet again, as this show is staged with the audience



on all four sides of the playing area. So you will get to know, quite closely, the colorful personalities that populated Hecht and MacArthur's world.

Newspaper journeymen, Hecht and MacArthur worked this town in an era that may seem foreign to us now. Their play showcases eight actual daily newspapers in Chicago. Yes, eight—eight *print* editions! And, truth be told, there were other Chicago papers in the '20s that weren't included in the play. Today, the form may be rapidly shifting away from good old-fashioned newsprint, but the competition between news outlets to publish the story first—even perhaps before the entire story has revealed itself or been fully investigated—continues to ring true in our world of minute-by-minute online and cable-news reporting.

This point was never so clear to me than just a few weeks before we began rehearsals for *The Front Page*, watch-

ing the events unfold during the historic uprising in Egypt. The world was waiting for in-the-moment updates, and, in one critical instance, at least one of the media got ahead of itself. It was Thursday, Feb. 10, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was set to deliver what was being billed as a major speech. The widespread prediction was that he would finally cede power. Like countless others, I was hitting “refresh” on my computer in anticipation of historic news. And major media outlets were clearly at the ready, preparing headlines and “Breaking News” banners even before any news officially occurred. I was glued to a highly esteemed website midway through his speech when a breaking-news banner popped up: “Mubarak to step down.” I immediately clicked to another esteemed site to read its banner: “Mubarak refuses to step down.”

Site No. 2 had it right, and site No. 1 had jumped the gun, ultimately by a full day. (Mubarak did, of course, step down, but on Friday, Feb. 11.) But were the diligent, yet trigger-happy, journalists and editors at fault? They were giving

us what we yearned for, instant gratification and insight—news while it's happening in our media-frenzied world, even if at times the facts be damned.

Seeing that unfold a few weeks ago, I couldn't help but think about the shoot-from-the-hip reporters in *The Front Page*. They became folk heroes for the lengths they would go to for getting stories and their blatant disregard for political correctness and sometimes the truth. It was a different era, to be sure, but you may find yourself surprised by the resonances that Hecht and MacArthur's world have with modern media.

We are delighted to welcome you to their world—inside that world! Thank you for being here and for helping to make TimeLine's 14th season a stunning year of growth and a stimulating year of conversation. We look forward to having a vibrant discussion about *The Front Page* with you. I also hope you'll stick around and be a part of the exciting lineup we have put together for TimeLine's 15th anniversary season.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'PJ' with a flourish.

# the playwrights

## A Partnership is Born

Legend has it the first collaboration between Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur was a piece of gallows humor—literally.

As Hecht writes in his biography of MacArthur, the day before a condemned man is scheduled to hang, they visit him. When they discover he has not planned his last words, MacArthur and Hecht pen a “spicy attack” on the city editors at their respective newspapers.

Unfortunately, the prisoner’s arms are bound when he steps onto the gallows. The convict manages to keep hold of the typewritten speech, but is unable to bring it up to read it. The collaboration between Hecht and MacArthur “died unheard on the gallows air.”

## The Jazz Age

In his biography of Hecht, William MacAdams observes: “A new generation, in revolt against nineteenth century values, was drinking, dancing, and making use of automobiles in ways engineers hadn’t planned: The Jazz Age had begun.”

Hecht married, divorced, carried on affairs, and married again, all the while

churning out newspaper columns, short stories, novels, poetry and plays as if his life depended on it. MacArthur, who also married more than once, was known for his humor, his valor as a soldier and his love of a good brawl.

Their writing was not generated through a process of calm reflection and careful construction. The belief that the right novel, play or film could make one instantly wealthy lent a sense of oil wildcatting to the whole enterprise. Hecht and MacArthur lived hard, wrote fast and carried themselves with an air of braggadocio that wouldn’t have been out of place in a con artist—or a newspaperman.

## Ben Hecht

In 1894, Ben Hecht was born into a garment industry family in New York City. The family eventually settled in Racine, Wis. Hecht came to Chicago in 1910, determined to be a writer. A family friend arranged an interview with the publisher of the *Chicago Journal*. In short order, Hecht was put to work as a “picture chaser.”

The job of a picture chaser was to acquire photos of newsworthy people, often the recent victims of crimes.



Ben Hecht in 1918, from the Chicago Daily News negatives collection. (Chicago History Museum)

Hecht claims to have once stolen an oil painting because it was the only likeness he could find. For another story, he plugged the chimney of a bereaved mother’s home. When she ran outside to escape the smoke, he slipped inside to steal a picture of her recently deceased daughter.

Hecht’s success led his supervisor to send him out to look for news stories. MacAdams writes, Hecht knew nothing about “the ways and means of getting a story. ... he was unsure how to ascertain the facts. Undaunted, he simply made them up.”

With photographer Gene Cour, Hecht manufactured a number of stories, including the story of a Chicago earthquake accompanied by a photo of a “fissure” dug by Cour and Hecht. Their fact-free reporting came to an end when they were caught using a well-known prostitute to pose for a



Charles MacArthur photographed at the height of The Front Page success. (photo by Nickolas Murray)

front-page story about a Bulgarian princess. Hecht was nearly fired.

Sherman Duffy, a sports editor at the *Journal*, took the somewhat chastened Hecht under his wing and taught him the ropes of actual newspaper reportage. By 1914, Hecht had become a top reporter at the *Journal*.

Having conquered the newspaper business, he set his sights on literature.

Hecht’s first foray into theater was in 1913 with collaborator Kenneth Sawyer Goodman, son of a lumber millionaire. They produced a series of plays at Jane Addams’ Hull House. This was Hecht’s first writing outside of the newspaper, a pursuit that would take him to New York and, ultimately, Hollywood.

## Charles MacArthur

Charles MacArthur was born in 1895 in Scranton, Pa. Unwilling to follow his father’s evangelist call-

ing, a teen-aged MacArthur moved to the Chicago area. His first newspaper job was at *The Oak Leaves*, an Oak Park paper owned by his siblings. In 1914 he joined the City News Bureau of Chicago, a news-service cooperative where cub reporters cut their teeth.

Described by historian Wayne Klatt as “restless, romantic [and a] prank-puller,” MacArthur became “everything his father detested: someone who craved excitement, neon lights, women, and liquor.”

Searching for that excitement, MacArthur joined the U.S. Army and served as a doughboy in World War I. His artillery service produced his only book, *A Bug’s Eye View of the War*, about which Hecht wrote: “[It is] the only witty story of battle and death I have read. ... The pursuit of laughter continues amid exploding shells as if they were the décor of some carnival.”

After the war, MacArthur was hired by the *Chicago Herald-Examiner*. He met Hecht in this period, socializing with him at the Corona Café, a reporter hang-out. As MacArthur’s fortunes as a writer improved, he would move to New York

## TIMELINE: Sources of the story

*The Front Page* was written in the summer of 1927, but years of important moments are referenced in the play. Not to mention the life *The Front Page* has had since its world-premiere production in 1928. Following are some key dates in the play’s legacy.

- **February 1894** Ben Hecht is born in New York City. In a later account of his birth, Hecht will write he was born in a toilet. In truth, it is a cousin who was born prematurely in a toilet. Hecht simply steals the story.
- **November 1895** Charles MacArthur is born in Scranton, Pa.
- **1903** Walter Howey, then a cub reporter for the City Press Association, files a story on the tragic Iroquois Theater fire. Howey eventually will become managing editor of the *Chicago Herald-Examiner*. He is the prototype for Walter Burns in *The Front Page*.
- **1910** Hecht graduates from high school and moves to Chicago. He is hired by the *Chicago Journal* and begins a newspaper career.
- **1913** MacArthur begins work on *The Oak Leaves*, an Oak Park paper.
- **1914** Hecht leaves the *Journal* and joins the staff of the *Chicago Daily News*, where he writes his famous “1001 Afternoons in Chicago” column.
- **1914** MacArthur begins as a reporter on the *Herald-Examiner*. (Some accounts, though,

City. In New York, he was in frequent attendance at the Algonquin Hotel, becoming a founding member of the famed Algonquin Round Table.

### **The Front Page and beyond**

In the summer of 1927, the two Chicago reporters would re-establish their collaboration in New York. Drawing on their raucous newspaper days, they created *The Front Page*. The play opened on Broadway

in 1928 and ran for 278 performances.

That theater success led to Hecht's work on 1932's *Scarface*, a movie that defined the gangster film genre. The Hecht-MacArthur collaboration also would lead to critically recognized films such as *The Scoundrel* (1936 Academy Award for Best Writing), and to films starring such greats as Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. (*Angels Over Broadway*, 1940), Cary Grant (*Gunga Din*, 1939)

and *Rosalind Russell (His Girl Friday*, 1940).

The influence of those early days in Chicago stayed with them: It is apparent in the verve and fire with which they continued to write. Charles MacArthur died in 1956, Hecht in 1964.

Helen Hayes, MacArthur's second wife, spoke of Hecht and MacArthur's newspaper days in a 1980 talk at Chicago's Newberry Library. Chicago, she said, is "where they fell in love with life."

## An Evolution

# the news



A paper delivery to the Chicago Daily News; mass production of paper made the modern newspaper possible. (Chicago History Museum)

Historian George H. Douglas dates the golden age of the newspaper from the 1830s, in which printing and paper advancements made the affordable "penny paper" possible, to the 1930s, with the rise of radio news. He argues a newspaper spoke to a real, nearby community. By contrast, television and radio are remote, standardized and lacking in individuality.

Douglas published *The Golden Age of the Newspaper* in 1999, just ahead of the rising tide of blogs and the increased polarization of cable news. The news today again speaks to different communities, virtual though some may be. Despite advances in technology and the practice of journalism, it seems there are some aspects of the news that never will change.

Prior to the 1830s, Douglas writes, newspapers were nothing like our modern papers. They were commercial journals, offering "static commercial announcements." Most early papers were "unabashed political organs, devoted to scathing and vitriolic attacks on political opponents. ... The concept of unbiased news or objective reporting was unknown."

As technological advances improved the speed and quantity in which newspapers could be printed, they became more affordable. The penny paper—which actually sold for a few cents—became available, and street sales of newspapers began. Appealing to a wide audience, the early papers began including human-interest stories and courtroom material.

The Civil War would make its mark on the newspaper industry, painfully demonstrating the need for timely news. According to historian Frank Luther Mott, the post-Civil War years saw a "growth of independence from party bonds [and] the growth of feature material in place of long political disquisitions." By this time, newspapers were no longer directly engaged in political disputes. Instead of appealing to consumers with partisan brawling, they began

have him starting after his service in World War I.) He later switches to Colonel Robert McCormick's *Chicago Tribune* and later still to the *American* in New York City.

- **1916** MacArthur serves as a cavalry trooper with the Mexican border patrol in search of Pancho Villa. After that failed mission, he joins the U.S. Army's 149th Field Artillery, part of the Rainbow Division. He serves in France as an artillery man.
- **1918** Hecht returns from a newspaper assignment in post-war Berlin.
- **1921** Convicted murderer Tommy O'Connor escapes from the Cook County Jail. The gallows is stored for use after he is recaptured. He is never found. In 1977, when it is fairly certain he will not be seen again, the gallows are sold to Ripley's Believe It Or Not Museum. O'Connor's escape inspired the character of Earl Williams in *The Front Page*.
- **1924** MacArthur relocates to New York City. Hecht moves there in 1925.
- **1925** Cook County Sheriff Peter Hoffman serves time—during his term as sheriff—for contempt of court in connection with a scheme offering special privileges to jail inmates. Hoffman is the prototype for Sheriff Hartman in *The Front Page*.
- **1927** Hecht writes the screenplay for the gangster movie *Underworld* and wins an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. This launches a film career that includes *Scarface* (1932), *Gunga Din* (1939) and *Monkey Business* (1952).

## Special Events and Resources

# the conversation

TimeLine looks forward to engaging our audience in conversations inspired by our productions. We hope you will participate in the array of additional resources and online communities available:

### SUNDAY SCHOLARS

After the show on **Sunday, May 1** is Sunday Scholars, a one-hour panel discussion featuring experts talking about the play's themes and issues. **Admission is free.** Visit [timelinetheatre.com](http://timelinetheatre.com) for panelists and more.

### COMPANY MEMBER DISCUSSION

Our Company Members shape the artistic vision and choose programming for TimeLine. On **Sunday, May 22**, join them for a free post-show discussion.

### POST-SHOW DISCUSSIONS

On **Thursdays, April 21, 28, and May 5, 12, 19; Sundays, April 24 and May 8 and 15; and Wednesday, May 25**, moderated by a TimeLine Company member and featuring cast and production staff.

### DRAMATURGY

A **study guide** is available at [timelinetheatre.com](http://timelinetheatre.com).

### BLOG AND MORE!

Find behind-the-scenes insight and conversation on our blog, **Behind the 'Line**, via [timelinetheatre.com](http://timelinetheatre.com).



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to embrace the sensational interests of urban readers.

As papers evolved into large corporate enterprises in the late 1800s, some observers felt it was the end of personal journalism, in which the personality of the leading editor was the paper's defining trait. A new type of newspaper began to emerge, offering a more, moderate, serious presentation of the news.

This overall trend toward serious news did not equal an aversion to the sensational, though. The circulation wars in the 1890s between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer marked the beginning of yellow journalism and muckraking. In yellow journalism, sensational headlines and lurid stories were the norm. Rick Musser, a journalism professor at University of Kansas, defines muckraking as the practice of exposing "corruption in government, unfair treatment of factory workers, and the privileges of the upper class." This taste for the lurid would continue to define papers well into the 1920s.

Under pressure from the founding of journalism schools, shifts in cultural

## “Modern media’s obsession with sex and crime has nothing on [the Jazz Age’s] scandalous content.” – Rick Musser

norms, advertisers' need to offend no one and the corporate desire to reach an ever wider readership, the rollicking sensational press began to give way to the tempered independent mainstream press we see today. While political leaders seek the endorsement of major papers and editorial pages clearly show ideological leanings, newspapers attempt to maintain some sense of objectivity in their reporting of the news.

One might argue that a tactic to increase market share of news organizations (particularly television) has resulted in a backsliding toward increasingly partisan positions. Yet the mainstream media polarization is fairly even-tempered when compared to the political papers of the 1830s. To find that level of personal attack masquerading as news now,

*The next evolution of the news: Online sources like these publish faster than ever before.*



however, one simply has to enter the unregulated world of the blogosphere.

In that virtual world we are witnessing the same pattern once seen in the newspaper industry: free-for-all early days, followed by the influx of advertising money, then a call for standards from within and outside the field. The blog already has taken much of this journey, evolving into online extensions of recognized journals as well as becoming news outlets in their own right. Blogs, though, seem on the verge of being displaced by the current emphasis on shorter-form social media, where everyone can be a reporter in 140 characters or less.

Whatever the next evolution, the one constant has been the hunger for information and the power afforded those who can most efficiently disseminate that information. It seems likely there will always be a band of individuals who will go to extremes to get the story first—whether it is completely true or not—much like the reporters in *The Front Page*.



*A reporter interviews a woman who has been charged with assault. (Chicago History Museum)*

## You can make a living, but can you survive the job?

Even as *The Front Page* was achieving commercial and critical success, the type of freewheeling reporter it portrays already was fading from existence. “Schools of journalism and the advertising business have nearly extirpated the species,” Hecht and MacArthur lamented in a print edition of the play.

Before the journalism schools, a reporter learned by doing. For the reporter of the 1910s and '20s, the learning curve was steep—they either figured out how to cultivate contacts or they failed to get a story. As Wayne Klatt explains in his book *Chicago Journalism*, “A reporter obtained stories by making regular checks on police stations, slapping the backs of policemen

who did not mind it, asking about their families, telling jokes, staying out of their way, going for coffee, giving officers a few news tips, and keeping after any unsolved crimes day after day.” If you returned to your editor without a story that a competitor then printed, you were fired.

Successful reporters of the period had four core traits: They were inventive, competitive, controlled their emotions and possessed a strong sense of humor.

Newspaper lore is filled with tales of daring inventiveness. During the Leopold & Loeb trial in 1924, reporter George Wright scooped everyone by acquiring secret grand-jury testimony. Somehow Wright learned there was a five-foot space above ceilings in the courtroom. He smuggled a plank into the building and used

■ **1927** William H. Thompson is re-elected mayor of Chicago. Thompson is known for his corrupt administration and his slogan “Keep King George out of Chicago,” which is intended to win the support of Chicago's Irish residents. Thompson is the inspiration for the character of The Mayor in *The Front Page*.

■ **1927** Hecht and MacArthur write *The Front Page* over the summer. In Hecht's biography of MacArthur, he describes their collaboration: “I sat with a pencil, paper and a lap board. Charlie walked, lay on a couch, looked out of a window, drew mustaches on magazine cover girls and prowled around in some fourth dimension. Out of him, during these activities, came popping dialog and plot turns.”

■ **1928** *The Front Page* opens on Broadway, directed by George S. Kaufman. It runs for 278 performances.

■ **1928** MacArthur marries actress Helen Hayes.

■ **1931** The first film version of *The Front Page* is created. It stars Adolphe Menjou, Pat O'Brien and Edward Everett Horton.

■ **1940** *His Girl Friday*, directed by Howard Hawks and starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell, is released. This version of *The Front Page* re-imagines Hildy Johnson as a female reporter.

■ **1945** A television version of the play is created, starring Vinton Hayworth and Matt Crowley.

■ **1946** The play is revived on Broadway. There will be two other Broadway revivals, in 1969-'70 and 1986-'87. The

it to creep to an area above the witness stand. Getting caught and violating the defendant's rights weren't the only dangers of this kind of reporting. A reporter using a similar tactic elsewhere was found dead in the closet where he had been hiding: It is surmised he came into contact with an exposed wire and was electrocuted.

The quest for a scoop and the threat of being fired made reporting fiercely competitive. Historian and newspaperman William T. Moore observes, "It has been remarked that the *Tribune* conducts itself as though it had won and not coined the slogan on its masthead, World's Greatest Newspaper. ... This lordly air has been a hotfoot stimulating the opposition to trickery, mischief and herculean feats above and beyond the expected coverage of the news."

Legend has it that while covering the Iroquois Theater fire in 1903, Walter Howey (the inspiration for the character Walter Burns in *The Front Page*) secured exclusive use of a telephone line by bribing a bookie in a nearby saloon and then instructed a crew of men from the City Press As-



Reporter Jake Lingle was thought of as a press martyr until it was revealed he had connections to the mob underworld.

sociation of Chicago to stick pins in the shielded wires of nearby public phones, rendering them inoperable. "In modern eyes, newspaper tactics in the early years of the twentieth century entailed unconscionable acts," Klatt writes. "But reporters viewed them as a part of a game as they competed with their friends and rivals, just as the papers were competing with one another."

In order to be that competitive, a reporter had to maintain a certain emotional distance. In *Chicago Journalism*, reporter Robert J. Casey describes a good crime reporter as one who has the ability to "distance himself from a situation and think of human misery as a commodity." Klatt writes: "Reporters developed the twin defenses of cynicism, to prevent honest feelings from affecting their work,

and sentimentality, to keep them from losing their interest in human nature."

Reporters also used humor as a defense. "Sensing a certain phoniness in news writing and editing to keep ordinary information entertaining day after day," Klatt writes, "reporters became a playful lot." He summarizes the work of historian Norman Howard Sims, who wrote humor "kept reporters from being vulnerable as they moved among the corrupt, the cheated, and the dead."

Some critics have said *The Front Page* misrepresents the newspaper business. Hecht, though, claimed they had to delete some of the truly wild events to make it believable.

Because Hecht and MacArthur were newspapermen, it is possible to see the mad-cap comedy of the play as more than simple entertainment. The comedy springs from the intense pressures faced by newspapermen using any means necessary to get a story. Even if not a completely realistic portrayal of the newspaper business, *The Front Page* brings the audience closer to experiencing the spirit of a reporter's life in the 1920s.

One of the things TimeLine audiences often comment on is their appreciation for how our theater is continually re-invented. Our flexible seating system allows us to reconfigure where the playing area is and re-imagine the physical relationship between actor and audience. That flexibility is being showcased again for *The Front Page*, as the audience completely surrounds the playing space.

We asked some of the *The Front Page* production team to discuss their approach to the design of the show. We also talked with other TimeLine artists about the joys and challenges of this 100-year-old facility TimeLine has called home since 1999.

### How does the configuration of the audience impact a play?

Nick Bowling, TimeLine Associate Artistic Director and *The Front Page* director: Configuring the space is one of the most important elements in creating the world of the play. It can determine the intimacy level of the production, the perspective and the role of the audience members and help evoke a specific setting. In 1994, I directed my first professional Chicago production

in this very space—it was the European Repertory Company's theater at the time—and I fell in love with it. For that play, Eugène Ionesco's *The Killing Game*, we used the "alley" setup, with the audience seated on both sides. Since then, I have staged five TimeLine plays that way (including *The Children's Hour*, *The Farnsworth Invention* and *The History Boys*), leading some actors and designers to dub that configuration the "Bowling Alley."

A classic example of the "Bowling Alley": TimeLine's 2009 production of *The History Boys* placed audience on both sides of the playing area and scenery in the lobby!



second revival would feature John Lithgow as Walter Burns, Richard Thomas as Hildy Johnson and Julie Hegerty as Peggy.

- **1956** Charles MacArthur dies.
- **1964** Ben Hecht dies.
- **1974** Another film version of *The Front Page* is released; directed by Billy Wilder, it stars Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau and Susan Sarandon.
- **1981** The Goodman Theatre produces the play. In his review, Richard Christiansen, theater critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, notes Tennessee Williams called *The Front Page* the play that "uncorseted American theater." Christiansen writes: "Even after 53 years, the play's truths and humor still hold up."
- **1982** *Windy City*, a musical based on *The Front Page*, opens in London and runs for 250 performances.
- **1984** *Windy City* is staged at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire; it is remounted there in the 1990s.
- **1988** The movie *Switching Channels*, which moves the story to television news, is released. The film stars Kathleen Turner, Burt Reynolds and Christopher Reeve.
- **1996** The Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., stages a benefit performance featuring members of Congress and the Clinton Administration, including Labor Secretary Robert Reich as Earl Williams and Republican Dick Armey, the House Majority Leader, as Sheriff Hartman. Hildy Johnson and Walter Burns were played by professional actors Casey Biggs and Stacey Keach.
- **2011** TimeLine opens the latest revival of *The Front Page*.

Each configuration has its strengths and challenges. The more sides the audience sees from, the more geometry and sightlines come into play. In-the-round an audience member is getting one of four possible perspectives. Of course, it's our job to make the experience equal for all audience members, but I still often tell people they should come back and watch the play from another side—it will change in some small, interesting ways.

### **What appealed to you about staging *The Front Page* in-the-round?**

*Nick: The Front Page* is historically a proscenium play. There are a lot of characters and it is easier to keep track when they are all on one plane. Also, there are a few important plot points that some would say require a proscenium. But the proscenium is also limiting in how far we can get inside a play. We really wanted the audience to see this world up close, to be inside it and almost be able to smell it. We wanted to focus on and share all of the details—which is such a TimeLine trait—and we knew we could do that better in-the-round, where you

will be sitting inches away from many of the actors.

*Collette Pollard, Scenic Designer:* Nick and I agreed that the play read dark, quick and intense, although funny for sure. This text didn't call for a need to flatten out the space, but to actually make it more dimensional, allowing us to hear the text by placing the action in the middle of the room.

### **How does staging in-the-round impact your work as a lighting designer?**

*Heather Gilbert:* I am newly in love with shows in-the-round. I love, love, love the intimacy of that relationship of actor to audience. It can be really tricky to do these shows well, however. In a classic proscenium setup you can hide the tricks; you have a place to put light that the audience won't see.

The entire design team is excited to use actual prop table lamps and overhead lights that people could have in their homes. It's super exciting for us.

### **As an actor, how does it affect you having the audience all around?**

*Mechelle Moe (Mollie Malloy):* For me, as Mollie, the staging helps immensely.

Walking into that room is akin to walking into the middle of a viper's nest or shark tank. Then to have the audience hovering just beyond intensifies the whole situation. It certainly keeps you on your toes. There is no room for slacking. You have to be specific, as someone is literally only a few inches away, watching your every move.

*Terry Hamilton (Walter Burns):* I love working in-the-round. It allows the actor to move in a much more realistic manner. No matter where you stand, turn or move, the audience always can see you and "read" the character's body language. The challenge is to be able to convey emotions with your whole body, because at any given moment your back is going to be toward someone, and they have to know what's going on in the head and body of the character at all times.

### **What are the challenges of this 100-year-old space?**

*Terry:* One of the biggest challenges is what we call doing a "cross-around." Meaning, if an actor exits the set using one of the exits that go directly backstage and you have a

quick entrance from the other side of the house (the lobby), you have to hurry down some very old, very creaky, very noisy steps, then run around in the basement of the building, run up the steps leading into the lobby and then try to make a quick entrance through the aisles of the theater onto the stage. It can be quite challenging. God forbid you have a costume change at the same time!

*John Culbert, The Farnsworth Invention scenic designer:* There is no significant offstage space. Thus there is little space to move things when they are not onstage (scenery, props and even actors). The entire world must be carved out of the one space. It is self-contained. Out of challenges rises creativity!

*Heather:* Oh!!! The electrical power! Such a lovely, old building, so little power. But

*This Happy Breed, presented in 2004, was the last play performed in-the-round at TimeLine.*



you just have to be smarter than math to make it work.

### **What do you love about this space?**

*William Brown, To Master the Art director and co-playwright:* I think the space has proven to be amazingly versatile. It houses so many extraordinary theatrical memories.

I loved how Nick recently used essentially the same setup for *In Darfur* that we had for *To Master The Art* and yet created a desperate sparseness a million miles from our Paris-in-the-'50s set. That's using stagecraft to magically, miraculously even, change the room.

*Collette:* Its ability to be modular is my favorite quality. TimeLine continually supports its designers' vision for the space. This support is an undertaking, since it takes just as much, if not more, effort to design and execute the audience experience as it does the set.

*Lou Contey, Associate Artist and Frost/Nixon director:* Truly, most theater spaces do not afford any flexibility. The TimeLine space allows us to think thoughtfully, artistically, creatively about how to best present the

stories we tell in the most imaginative way.

*Mechelle:* TimeLine feels like home. I love all the nooks and crannies. Mainly I love the space because it has heart and history. It's a living, breathing space—exactly what actors need to do their work.

*Terry:* The intimacy, hands down. The communication between the audience and the actors is immediate. Both parties get an experience that's very hard to feel in larger spaces.

*Heather:* The HEIGHT!!! Most theaters in Chicago are so short, and that is a huge challenge for a lighting designer. TimeLine has such beautiful height.

*John:* Character, it has character! And character is the main event in theater. There is an inherent quality of story when one enters the space. Its long history of serving various purposes is evident. It has seemingly unexplained oddities and thus suggests and supports humanity. It has its own story to tell, setting up anticipation in the audience even before the curtain rises.

*This is an edited version of a longer article. Read it all on our blog Behind the 'Line.*

# backstage



TimeLine Board member and long-time supporter Peter Kuntz with his wife Lori Kleinerman.

In its 14-year history TimeLine Theatre has grown tremendously. Over that time many people have worked tirelessly to make the company what it is today, but few can say they have been a part of the journey for more than a decade. So we are pleased to recognize Peter Kuntz, a 11-year supporter, Board member and advocate.

Peter first came to TimeLine in 1999 when he attended the production of *Gaslight* by Patrick Hamilton. “That’s when I first experienced the always-clever, sometimes illusion-based use of TimeLine’s space, which they were achieving even back in the days when the set budget was considerably smaller. I had been introduced to the company just weeks before by a co-worker who moonlighted as a dramaturg for TimeLine. She picked up on my deep interest in theater, and

thought I’d be just right for their expanding board.”

During his tenure, Peter has seen more than 40 TimeLine productions. His favorite? “I will always have a sentimental attachment to the 2002-03 season, which began with a captivating production of Clifford Odets’ *Awake and Sing!*, continued with John Logan’s menacing *Hauptman*, and ended with the riveting world premiere of *Hannah and Martin*. To my mind, it was the year that TimeLine truly ‘arrived’ in some way. Yes, there were awards and big audiences, but it was something more—a feeling that the company at last knew what it was about and where it was going.”

For several seasons Peter also has served as the moderator of TimeLine’s Sunday Scholars Series, working with the Company and staff

to identify and lead in a panel discussion experts on the themes and issues raised in the plays.

Beyond the stage, Peter notes that “what so impresses me about TimeLine is the remarkably professional and thoughtful way it is managed as a business enterprise, not just an artistic project. As an organization, TimeLine represents the ‘complete package,’ balancing artistic ambition and purpose with the zeal of a small, neighborhood-based business enterprise. It has been a joy to watch it grow in measured, thoughtful and—that word—strategic fashion over the years.”

While Peter has served on TimeLine’s board, the organization has flourished from no subscribers and an operating budget of \$50,000 to 2,300 subscribers and a budget approaching \$1 million,

TimeLine’s 1999 production of *Gaslight* was the first play produced in the company’s current home and TimeLine’s third production ever. Featuring walls created by wires and a “floating” floor, it proved the first of numerous innovative designs within the space.



TimeLine’s award-winning 2002 production of *Awake and Sing!*.

and has received awards for strategic planning and managerial excellence.

“Without getting cute,” Peter remarks, “I have to point out how much is actually the *same* as it was back then, despite the intervening expansion and accolades. Same sense of adventure, same respect for both artists and audiences, same understanding that success is never guaranteed, same humility when things exceed expectations, same focus on even the tiniest of details and same passion for telling stories that matter.”

What does Peter see in the future? “I believe TimeLine has the potential to be a permanent and highly regarded fixture of the American theater scene, following in the footsteps of a handful of other Chicago-based theater companies. I expect TimeLine will have its New York ‘moment’ someday, but

the reality is that serving as a leading Chicago theater company is to be already at the forefront of the art form in this country. I also foresee that playwrights from all over will itch to have TimeLine perform (or remount) their plays in Chicago in what amounts to their definitive productions. Call it the TimeLine Treatment.”

Outside TimeLine, Peter serves the arts community as Executive Director of the Arts & Business Council of Chicago. He describes the impact of his TimeLine Board service on his work there as profound. “I think of my years serving TimeLine as a sort of graduate school in which I learned about the nuts and bolts of establishing and nurturing an arts organization. I’ve learned from some of the best in town, it turns out. As I listen to the Council’s arts organization clients describe their administrative and governance issues, I can’t help but recall similar challenges and situations from TimeLine’s past. More than once I’ve asked myself: ‘what did TimeLine do?’ Far more often than not, TimeLine seems to have gotten things right.”

## BACKSTORY: THE CREDITS

*Dramaturgy @ Historical Research* by Aaron Carter

*Written by* Aaron Carter, PJ Powers, Lydia Swift and Lara Goetsch

*Edited by* Karen A. Callaway & Lara Goetsch

*Photography by* Lara Goetsch

*Graphic Design by* Lara Goetsch

*The Front Page Photo by* Ryan Robinson

*Backstory is published four times each season.*

*Pictured on front cover (from left): Actors John Gray and Malcolm Callan; costume designer Lindsey Pate; actors PJ Powers and Terry Hamilton; assistant director Bridget Dehl and director Nick Bowling; and actor Mechelle Moe.*

*Pictured on back cover (from left): Actor Bill McGough, actors Loren Lazerine, Angela Bullard, PJ Powers and Larry Baldacci; set model by scenic designer Collette Pollard; actors Mark Richard and Loren Lazerine; and actor Alex Goodrich.*

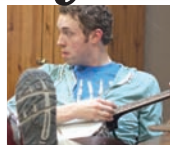
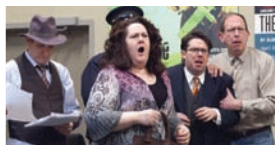
### Our Mission:

TimeLine Theatre presents stories **inspired by history** that connect with today’s social and political issues.

Our collaborative artistic team produces provocative theatre that engages, educates, entertains and enlightens.



# the play



April 16 - June 12, 2011

previews 4/12 - 4/15

by **BEN HECHT & CHARLES MACARTHUR**  
directed by **NICK BOWLING**

In this landmark comedy set inside the crowded pressroom at Chicago's Criminal Courts building during the 1920s, a group of reporters covers a controversial execution and exposes the rampant corruption, scandal and hi-jinx associated with Windy City politics and journalism. In reviving this quintessential Chicago classic, TimeLine highlights a wealth of local history embedded in the semi-autobiographical script and brings to life the tough, gritty heart of its tale of rough-and-tumble reporters and politicians jockeying for control of a story and the city.

**Cast**

- Bill McGough \*\*
- Rob Riley \*\*
- Larry Baldacci
- Don Blair
- Angela Bullard
- Malcolm Callan
- Rob Fagin
- Alex Goodrich
- John Gray
- Terry Hamilton

- Michael Kingston
- Laurie Larson
- Loren Lazerine
- Mike McNamara
- Mechelle Moe
- Bridgette Pechman
- Clarno
- PJ Powers
- Mark Richard

*\*\*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers.*

**Production Team**

- Collette Pollard, U.S.A.: *Scenic Designer*
  - Lindsey Pate: *Costume Designer*
  - Heather Gilbert, U.S.A.: *Lighting Designer*
  - Andrew Hansen: *Sound Designer*
  - Julia Eberhardt: *Properties Designer*
  - Aaron Carter, *Dramaturg*
  - Ana Espinosa: *Stage Manager*
  - John Kearns: *Production Manager*
- Those designers and scenic artists identified by U.S.A. are members of United Scenic Artists, IATSE Local 829, AFL-CIO*

**APRIL 2011**

SU	M	T	W	TH	F	SA
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

**MAY 2011**

SU	M	T	W	TH	F	SA
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

**JUNE 2011**

SU	M	T	W	TH	F	SA
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12						

- Regular Performance**
- Preview Performance**
- Opening Night *Sold Out***
- Post-Show Discussion** with cast & production crew *Free*
- Sunday Scholars** a one-hour post-show panel discussion with experts on the themes and issues of the play *Free*
- Company Member Discussion** a conversation with TimeLine's Company members *Free*

**SHOW TIMES**

- PREVIEWS 8 PM
- OPENING NIGHT 7 PM
- WEDNESDAYS & THURSDAYS 7:30 PM  
*(Except 8:30 pm on 4/21)*
- FRIDAYS 8 PM
- SATURDAYS 4 PM & 8:30 PM
- SUNDAYS 2 PM