

Successful and Strange

'Mr. Broadway' peeks behind the curtain of the Shuberts, who grew up in Syracuse

By Charles Isherwood
New York Times News Service

The subtitle of "Mr. Broadway," a posthumously published memoir by Gerald Schoenfeld, the longtime chairman of the theatrical powerhouse Shubert Organization, promises us "The Inside Story of the Shuberts, the Shows, and the Stars." That's a pretty accurate description of this straightforward book written by a major player in the theater world for almost half a century, who died in 2008.

It could also serve as a warning to any civilians who might happen upon it, although with the decline of bricks-and-mortar bookstores, it's getting harder and harder to happen upon books these days. If you have no idea who "the Shuberts" were or are — the Shubert Organization is the largest theater owner on Broadway, with 17 houses there, as well as a leading producing entity — Schoenfeld's reminiscences are not likely to enthrall. This intermittently engrossing but patchy book is strictly for readers with an unquenchable thirst for show-business lore.

Certainly Schoenfeld, a courtly, avuncular presence on the theater scene but a pugnacious negotiator when it came time to sign contracts, had dealings over the years with most of the on-stage and backstage luminaries in the business. But while the memoir includes not one but two celebrity forewords — by Alec Baldwin and Hugh Jackman, who notes cheerfully, "I can't wait to read this book" — its tales of Schoenfeld's encounters with boldface names are often less entertaining than his recollections of his tumultuous early years as a lawyer with the organization.

The complete history of the Shubert brothers — Samuel, Levi "Lee" and Jacob "J.J.," who all grew up in Syracuse — and their rise to power in the theater in the early decades of the 20th century has been told elsewhere. Schoenfeld gives a brief summary of their emergence as the dominant players in the industry during the 1930s and 1940s, before his arrival on the scene as a junior member of the law firm working for the brothers. As a law school graduate with no particular interest in theater, Schoenfeld fell into the business by chance in 1949 when he obtained a low-level position



Gino Domenico / AP, 2001

GERALD SCHOENFELD, chairman of the Shubert Organization, died in 2008. His memoirs have just been published and provide a look at the showbiz giant founded by brothers from Syracuse. Schoenfeld represented the company in 1991 when the Shuberts were among the first inductees to the Syracuse Walk of Stars downtown.

in the firm conducting legal dealings for the Shuberts.

Of which there would be many. Within a year Schoenfeld finds himself in charge of marshaling a defense against an antitrust suit brought by the Justice Department against the Shuberts. Lee and J.J. (Sam had died in 1905 from injuries received in a train wreck) were widely reviled in the industry for their domineering ways, and they loathed each other, too. While sharing control of the company, they refused to speak to each other and worked separately in offices on opposite sides of 44th Street.

Before the antitrust suit was settled — the Shuberts were ultimately forced to sell many theaters — Lee had a stroke and died. A brief, bitter, internecine battle for control followed, with J.J. emerging triumphant,



Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

JACOB "J.J." SHUBERT (left) and his brother Levi "Lee" are shown as young men in this undated photo, with a portrait of their brother, Samuel, who died in 1905 in a train accident. The Shubert brothers started their theatrical empire in Syracuse. In later years, they didn't speak to each other, working from offices in separate buildings in Manhattan.

phant, but it was by no means the last skirmish in the family. Litigation appears to be a favorite hobby of just about everyone in the Shubert orbit.

These tales of backstage backstabbing are often juicy. But Schoenfeld's descriptions of years of legal wrangling among various Shubert heirs and their

hangers-on slackens the book's generally crisp pace.

The "stars" and the "shows" of the subtitle dominate the second half of the book, after the Shubert board names Schoenfeld chairman in 1972 and gives the company presidency to Bernard Jacobs, another lawyer and old friend. Schoenfeld brought into the business. Broadway was then in rampant decline, and the company was struggling to book shows into its theaters. Times Square had by this time become the grimy epicenter of the city's sex business.

Schoenfeld was among the leaders of the battle to turn its fortunes around, although some of his tactics seem dubious in retrospect.

Schoenfeld's tales of star handling are scattershot and sometimes trivial. It's nice that Joan Fontaine appears to have formed a crush on him, but is a whole chapter about his brief appearance in Woody Allen's film "Broadway Danny Rose" all that necessary?

From poverty in CNY to power in NYC

The Shubert brothers — **Levi "Lee"** (1873?-1953), **Samuel S.** (1875?-1905) and **Jacob J. "J.J."** (1879?-1963) — were theatrical managers and producers of the largest theater empire in the 20th century.

The family left Eastern Europe and moved to Syracuse in 1882. Their father, an alcoholic, could not support his family, and the boys were forced to go to work.

At the age of 10, Lee Shubert began selling newspapers in front of a Syracuse theater. He was soon joined by his brother, Sam, who also got a small part in a play. Sam went from actor to program boy at the Bastable Theatre, to assistant treasurer of the Grand Opera House, to treasurer of the Wieting Opera House, Syracuse's most distinguished theater. His brothers also worked in various theatrical management jobs.

By 1900 the brothers had risen out of poverty to manage five theaters in New York state. Intensely ambitious, they moved in 1900 to New York City, which would become the home base of their theater and booking organization.

— Encyclopedia of World Biography (© Gale Research), pbs.org

Book is best when it sticks to lunacy

BOOK, FROM PAGE C-2

I found more pleasure reading about the perversities of the lunatic Shubert clan than in Schoenfeld's recounting of his mundane, business interactions with the likes of the directors Trevor Nunn and Peter Hall.

One of the book's most entertaining passages relates the curious history of J.J.'s son John, whose relative cordiality in business comes as a relief after his father's maniacal cruelty. But John causes his own legal headaches when he becomes a quasi-bigamist, marrying his girlfriend in Mexico without divorcing his wife.

He then promptly dies, and the noxiousness of this odd family comes through hilariously when Schoenfeld describes John's minutely detailed instructions for dealing with this eventuality:

"One: Make sure I'm dead. Leave me un-embalmed as long as the laws allow.

"Two: Don't rush me into the ground. Take your time. Let the survivors suffer as long as possible."

And he was the nice one.