



**Smithsonian Institution**

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## **Playbill for The Colored Museum**

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ELT FOR ALL SEASONS

Since 1943, Equity Library Theatre has served as America's most prolific showcase for acting, directing, designing

[[image - black & white photograph of Kim Stanley and Victor Thorley in Saint Joan (1949)]] CLOVELLY

Through the years, you could have seen Tony Randall and Charlton Heston act there in Shaw's *The Millionairess*, Kim Stanley as Saint Joan, Rod Steiger and Martin Balsam in *The Sound of Hunting*, Treat Williams in *Bus Stop*, Danny DeVito in *Call Me Madam*, Jason Robards in *The Petrified Forest* and countless other unknowns who later became famous, all on the tiny stage of the Equity Library Theatre in Manhattan.

Since 1943, ELT has served as America's most prolific showcase for actors, directors, scenic and costume designers. Recently, George Wojtasik, who is ELT's producing director and has been with the organization since 1967, related to us how this unique project was conceived.

"It all began when actor Sam Jaffe and George Freedley, curator of the New York Public Library System, joined forces to help actors who were not well-known on Broadway," recalls George. "That was 1943. Jaffe discovered that during the Depression, the WPA had created jobs for the unemployed by having them build small theatres in 12 branches of the New York Public Library - ten in Manhattan, one in the Bronx and one in Staten Island. These were to be used for chamber concerts, readings and lectures, but when they were not utilized for these purposes, Jaffe proposed that Freedley make spaces available to Actors' Equity members to put on free plays."

George remembers that Aline MacMahon joined the group and that producer John Golden donated \$1,000 to the project. A committee of theatre luminaries was chosen, with Jaffe and Freedley as co-chairmen, and the non-profit organization was founded in November 1943. Appropriately, it was called the Equity Library Theatre.

"From the beginning," says George, "ELT has had a dual purpose: to showcase actors to people in casting positions in order to help them get acting jobs, and to provide inexpensive theatre for people who can't afford commercial theatre." There was no admission charge for productions in the early years. Today there is a donations of \$10 (\$5 for senior citizens).

Some early basic rules were established:

by Louis Botto

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