



### **Performing Arts in Berks County**

In 1872 [John D. Mishler](#), a prominent Reading businessman took over the management of the Academy of Music theater. This theater, which was located at 533-535 Penn Street, was the first modern theater in Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

The [Grand Opera House Theater](#) on Penn Street below 4<sup>th</sup> Street opened in 1873. During its time, it offered over 1500 performances including a reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by its author Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Other famous theaters in Berks County include the [Rajah Theatre or Rajah Temple](#) (now the Sovereign Performing Arts Center) which was built in 1922. It operated as a performance arts venue for vaudeville, operas, concerts, plays, and a movie theatre at various times during the 20th century.

Also well-known was the [Astor Theater](#) on Penn Street an Art Deco theater built in 1928 and demolished in 1998. The theater's chandelier and gates became part of the new building on its site, now the Santander Arena.

On January 13, 1908 a Berks County theater became nationally known because of a tragedy - the [Rhoads Opera House](#). Trying to escape a fire, people were trapped behind the theater's doors that opened inward. Although people escaped, 171 died in the fire. The tragedy spurred the creation of laws to improve the safety of buildings.

In the early 1900s Berks County was known for acrobats, circus performers, and vaudeville acts. In 1909 the [New York World newspaper](#) described the importance of Reading, Pennsylvania as a center for acrobats, bare-back riders, and other performers. The Bard and Luken training gymnasiums produced professional acts - the Four Bards, the Four Lukens, the Four Londons, the Four Melvins, the Four DeHomans and the Four Readings. The family of TV actor [Nancy Walker](#) were vaudeville and circus performers from Reading including her father [Dewey Barto](#) (born Steward Swoyer) and grandfather Charles "Roxy" Swoyer, and several aunts.

Today there is still an active local theater community in Berks County including:

[1<sup>st</sup> Street Players](#)

[Genesius](#)

[Reading Civic Theatre](#)

[Reading Community Players](#)

[Reading Theater Project](#)