

HOPE ABELSON

1910-2006



LESTER AND HOPE ABELSON FUND FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Established as a donor advised fund at The Chicago Community Trust, the Lester and Hope Abelson Fund for the Performing Arts honors the legacy of an arts icon who is sorely missed, particularly in the Chicago theater community.

The Hopie Awards were created to commemorate the first anniversary of Hope Abelson's death. Each year, these awards honor two performing arts organizations that exemplify the innovation, creativity and inspiration that Hope helped to advance throughout Chicago. The awards are presented by Katherine Abelson, daughter of Lester and Hope and trustee of the Fund.

The Lester and Hope Abelson Auditorium of Court Theatre of the University of Chicago (Lester's alma mater) is the only building to bear the Abelson name. It was dedicated shortly after the death of Lester Abelson in 1980.

Hope earned many honors for her work in the arts, including the Moscow Arts' Stanislavsky 100th Birthday Medal in 1962, a Silver Medal from the city of Stratford, Ontario in 1969, and a Joseph Jefferson Special Honors Citation in 1986. The American Ballet Theatre presented her with its Movado Award, and she was a recipient of the prestigious Bravo Award from Rosary Dominican University in 1988.

In September 2006, Chicago lost a gracious, generous, astute, and innovative supporter of the arts—Hope Abelson. For more than 50 years, Hope exuded her extraordinary passion as a performer, producer, and patron of the arts in her home town of Chicago, as well as in New York and Canada.

Her career in the arts began locally as the co-founder of the Chevy Chase Theater in Wheeling, and as a producer at the Music Theatre in what is now Northfield.

She was lured to New York to serve as a member of legendary producer Cheryl Crawford's staff, where her accomplishments included bringing Tennessee Williams' "Camino Real" to Broadway. A year later, in 1954, she co-produced the first Broadway mounting of "The Rainmaker" by Richard Nash. Among many other productions was another triumph, Peter Shaffer's "The Royal Hunt of the Sun" in 1965.

Hope also worked on behalf of Canada's Stratford Festival where she was a Life Governor. She was the first member of its Board of Governors from the United States. Her association with the Stratford Festival began in 1969 when she led a citizen's committee in bringing two plays to Chicago and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for the festival's first U.S. tour.

She later co-founded the Fellowship Program of the Chicago Associates and continued to sponsor numerous Chicago actors who benefited from the experience as they pursued careers with Court Theatre, Writers' Theatre, and other ensembles.

Hope returned to Chicago in the early 1970s, becoming an ardent booster of local nonprofit theaters, offering advice, as well as support. She was instrumental in the founding of the League of Chicago Theatres and sowed the seeds of her wisdom and risk-taking with emerging off-Loop companies that have since become the hallmarks of Chicago theatre.

Hope's determination to ensure that her enthusiasm for cultural enrichment would endure for future generations was demonstrated when she endowed the Abelson Fund for Artistic Development at the Goodman Theatre and the Artist in Residence at Northwestern University School of Speech.

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Hope was honored by the Drama League of Chicago in 1994, received the Sidney Yates Arts Advocacy Award from the Illinois Arts Alliance in 1997 and that same year earned the 25th Anniversary Distinguished Service Award from the League for the Creative Arts. She also received an honorary doctorate degree from Lincoln College in Springfield. She received honors from the Association of Fund Raising Professionals, the League of Chicago Theatres and has had a proclamation in her honor presented to her by the City of Chicago's Mayor, Richard M. Daley.

Although she worked tirelessly on behalf of the arts, she always found time for her family, introducing her two children to theatre, travel, skiing and sailing. Hope and Lester encouraged their offspring to express themselves through charitable acts. She adored her grandsons and served as an inspiration to everyone due to her generosity and tireless attention to the arts.

Hope's extraordinary career in the theater is reflected in working papers, production notes, awards and photographs archived at the Newberry Library in Chicago. Curated by Martha Briggs, the collection can be accessed by appointment or in this [online archive](#).

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111 East Wacker Drive
Suite 1400
Chicago, IL 60601
312.616.8000
www.cct.org