



God Off-Broadway : The Blackfriars Theatre of New York

Matthew Powell

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The Blackfriars Theatre, founded in 1940, was one of New York's first Off-Broadway playhouses. It was unique in another way: it was started by two Catholic priests and was the only professional level theatre in the United States under Roman Catholic auspices. It was the first such theatrical venture by any religious group. *God Off-Broadway* examines the efforts of the Blackfriars staff to meld theatre and religion between 1940 and 1972. While not as commercially successful as the founders had hoped it would be, Blackfriars contributed in many other ways to the American theatrical tradition. The first play ever to move from Off-Broadway to Broadway (*Career Angel*, 1945) was a Blackfriars production. Blackfriars also started and showcased many young performers who later went on to successful careers, among them: Shelley Berman, Anthony Franciosa, Eileen Heckart, Darren McGavin, Patricia Neal, and Geraldine Page. Although by the late 1960s the company was reduced to producing routine religious dramas and innocuous family comedies, daring and innovation characterized the early years of the theatre. Blackfriars took artistic and social risks in the 1940s by producing plays about racial justice.

Powell based the book on primary sources, including Blackfriars archives and interviews with Blackfriars veterans. Playwright Robert Anderson, who had his New York debut at Blackfriars, contributes an introduction to the book. In addition to a complete chronological treatment of the theatre group, the author provides a survey of the relationship of the Catholic Church and the theatre in America. Eighteen black and white photographs complement the text.

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