

LAUGH CENTURY

Celebrating 100 years at The Wilbur Theatre with Blumenreich and Birbiglia

BY SUSANNA JACKSON @SUEDOESTTWEET | PHOTOS BY TAK TOYOSHIMA

Weathermen promise dangerous driving conditions, fierce winds blow through the city, and business owners contemplate closing their doors early. On Tremont Street, the Wilbur Theatre has Mike Birbiglia—crowd-pleasing, self-effacing everyman—scheduled to perform back-to-back shows, his second night of sold-out sets. Owner Bill Blumenreich makes the call: the show will go on despite the frenzied flurries threatening to snowball into a Nor'easter.

It's business as usual half an hour before showtime. Patrons are beckoned by the glowing, electronic marquee advertising upcoming acts—all recognizable faces—and no-nonsense bouncers call for IDs. "You can't drink inside if

you don't show an ID outside," a man with a sizable torso and zero patience hollers. Comedy fans struggle to operate their wallets with gloved hands—they didn't gear up and go out in a snowstorm on a frozen night in February to be denied the warming effects of their preferred toxin.

Despite the menacing weather, the 1,100-seat theater nearly fills up. Blumenreich knows it won't reach capacity though. His customer base is far-reaching—folks from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and all over Massachusetts who will usually make the drive because the Wilbur serves such a hot and exclusive commodity: the biggest names in American comedy. Virtually every act who can elicit endless belly

laughs on any given night has passed through here during Blumenreich's reign, which began in 2008—from David Spade to Kathy Griffin, Bob Saget to Tracy Morgan, Patton Oswalt to Aziz Ansari. If the walls could talk, given the company they keep, the Wilbur would have quite the comically learned filthy mouth.

Nevertheless, on a stormy night like this, even Birbiglia and his nearly flawless timing can't tempt the suburbanites to fire up their SUVs and leave their cul-de-sacs.

As these things go, news that Birbiglia would rock as planned spurred comedy commuter backlash. One perturbed customer railed, "Rather annoyed that @The_Wilbur

**SOME COMEDIANS
WHO FILMED
THEIR SPECIALS
AT THE WILBUR THEATRE**



CRAIG FERGUSON
"A Wee Bit o' Revolution"
(2009)



STELLA
(Michael Ian Black, Michael Showalter, David Wain)
"Stella: Live in Boston"
(2009)



DAVID CROSS
"Bigger and Blacker"
(2010)



CHARLIE MURPHY
"I Will Not Apologize"
(2010)



BRUCE BRUCE
"Losin' It"
(2011)

won't cancel the @birbig's show tonight. My choices are a) risk my life in a blizzard or b) lose \$80." Blumenreich doesn't hit back; unlike a lot of the comedians who grace his stage, he's an adult, and a business-minded one at that. With Birbiglia's permission, he arranges a make-up show on May 10th for all those who aren't interested in testing icy roads. Now twonks are singing a different tune. The Wilbur remains in everyone's good graces, and Blumenreich gets yet another opportunity to fill the house. You can almost hear the cash register ringing.



ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, on April 20, 1914, the Wilbur Theatre opened with "unqualified approval," according to the *Boston Globe*. The spectacle was the work of the Shubert brothers of New York, who had developed a significant number of Broadway theaters and named their Hub venture—designed by C.H. Blackall, who in total designed close to 300 theaters nationwide—for their close friend and venue manager, A.L. Wilbur. A *Globe* piece from last century—descriptively titled "Boston's Newest Theatre Gives a Delightful Impression of Coziness—Colonial in Design and Charming in Simplicity of Ornament"—noted "Were it not for the billboards at the doors of the new Wilbur Theatre on Tremont St. where the old Winthrop School formerly stood, one might well take the building for the home of a rather conservative club, a club fond of rich plainness rather than of ornate splendor."

At first, the noted simplicity was in part because management hadn't finished decorating for opening night, as the debut date was already delayed a week. But in a sense, traces of those initial opinions of the building still resonate. From the street, the Wilbur isn't altogether awe-inspiring. One must go inside for the elegance. Or not, as you wouldn't feel out of place standing under the magnificent original chandelier in Levi cut-offs and combat boots.

The history of the Wilbur is rich: successful careers have been jump-started on its stage, including Marlon Brando and Jessica Tandy after the pre-Broadway appearance of "A Streetcar Named Desire."

But the more recent pre-comedy memories sting, with flops like a generic dinner theater unceremoniously passing through a series of owners and leases. Before Blumenreich came along, several owners tried to pump new life into the landmark, mostly with outcomes that were shy of success. For years, patrons seemed unsure what to make of the ever-changing content, the perpetual identity crisis of Ye Wilbur, as it was initially dubbed.

All things considered, it's hard not to look at Blumenreich as a kind of savior, the guy who built a gold mine where innumerable others failed. But while his business smarts and track record in comedy have helped, there's no

"IF THEY WANT DANCING MONKIEYS, I GIVE THEM DANCING MONKIEYS"

doubt the space itself is at the center of his plan. The Wilbur is a charmer, and thanks to relatively recent fixes, the old broad looks better than ever. In 1989, former owner Robert S. Merowitz invested \$500,000 in renovations, which included re-rigging the stage, soundproofing the place, restoring seats, and making rows handicapped accessible. Under current ownership, the building's rusty old marquee was swapped for a digital light show, while the original lobby has seen a fresh polish. Someone's ready for an anniversary.



PRIOR TO LEASING THE WILBUR, and after an unhappy stint as a stockbroker, Blumenreich first owned and operated the iconic 490-seat Comedy Connection in Faneuil Hall. Those days were memorable, but he upgraded to the larger space in 2008 because the golden age of comedy clubs, he feels, has come and gone. To Blumenreich, comedy clubs were to the '80s as disco was to the '70s. And both fads died at the end of their corresponding decade.

"When I got into the business, a lot of very funny comedians in Boston would stay in Boston because there were so many comedy clubs and they were making a lot of money, maybe \$200,000 a year," he says. "Now local comics can't make a lot of money working in Boston."

Sure, he admits there's a demand for local comedy, but says the Boston market is covered by Nick's Comedy Stop. The Warrenton Street venue cut its seating in recent years, but remains a stage for area talent to entertain tourists, therefore getting the word out about Boston acts. "There is a place for local comedy," he says. "And I'm glad there is."

When he set up shop at the Wilbur, Blumenreich brought a simple philosophy: give the audience what they want, regardless of whether he likes it or not. "If they want dancing monkeys," he says, "I give them dancing monkeys ... Now

it's about national comics. That's why people are lined up around the block, because I got the acts they want to see."

At the peak of comedy club hysteria—say, for example, the Seinfeld Era in the '90s—comedy clubs tended to feature a bevy of comedians who vied for laughs in 10, 15, and 30 minute clips. There was often a standout headliner, but no single comic was responsible for packing any house. Now, even at the smallest of venues, this traditional platform is eroding. According to Blumenreich, folks are more likely to buy a ticket to a show with a celebrity they've seen on Netflix or YouTube. Perhaps some random jester who they worship on Twitter.

Ahead of his four-show stop in Boston, Birbiglia told the *Dig*, "The first time I played the Wilbur I had one show, second time I had two shows, this time I have four shows. Which is like mind-boggling. When I started out, I would be playing at a Best Western in Virginia and it would just be like 'Tonight! Comedy!' and I would go up on stage for a bunch of business travelers and they'd be like, 'Oh, I don't like this kind of comedy.' And then over the years for every 100 people at my general audience show there was like three people who were like, 'Oh, I like this guy.' And now people are coming to see me on purpose."

That's precisely the business model Blumenreich has found successful: bring the names that will stand out in an email blast or print advertisement. Book the acts who people go see on purpose.

For better or for worse, Blumenreich knows that doesn't always mean bringing in the funniest stars. "I hate to say it, but it's not just who's funny today," he says. "It's who can sell tickets. One thing I learned a long time ago is that I don't buy who I think is funny. I buy who the customers think are funny and who the customers want to see. There are a lot of very funny comedians out there. Funnier than some of the national acts. But if I brought them in, they'd have 14 people in the audience ... They'd be embarrassed and I'd lose money."

Blumenreich attributes the change in the market to social media. The larger the web presence a comedian has, the more seats they fill.

"I used to work with a comedian, Dane Cook," he says. "Have you ever heard of him? So about seven, eight years ago I was with Dane at the Madison Square Garden. He had sold out two shows. I was talking to his family and I'm going, 'You know, I don't get this.' At the time, I was also working with George Carlin, who I thought was one of the funniest guys in the world. I said, 'Dane just sold 38,000 tickets. George Carlin on his better day can't sell more 2,000 tickets and at half the ticket price Dane is getting.' I didn't get it. It took me about three years to figure it out. Dane is a very, very smart guy and he mastered social media before people like me knew what it was."

Fueled by his platform, Cook's success was fast and

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KATHY GRIFFIN
"Gurr! Down"
(2011)



TOM GREEN
"Tom Green: Live"
(2013)



TAMMY PESCATELLI
"Finding the Funny"
(2013)



CHRISTIAN FINNEGAN
"The Fun Part"
(2014)



JIM GAFFIGAN
"Obsessed"
(2014)



JIM JEFFRIES
(filming later this year)

LAUGH CENTURY CONTINUED

furious. But as other comics grew wise to the game, Cook fizzled, or, depending on who you ask, moved on to better things (remember: for every *Waiting* there are three or four *Answers to Nothing*). Bad for Cook, but good for Blumenreich, as more and more comedians have since grown savvy about how to fill seats.

According to the Wilbur team, a few other clever business moves keep the place packed, and keep costumers happy. Even the funniest comics these days only kill for so long before they lose their audience to antsy pants, so Blumenreich limits shows to 90 minutes (a practice he installed at the Comedy Connection decades ago). As a consolation, he offers the option for some acts to perform twice in one night, which was a major draw for Aziz Ansari, who recently broke records by selling out eight consecutive shows (a ninth is on sale now).

Though it was initially reported that Blumenreich would run theater productions, that no longer seems to be necessary. He books special events and musicians—everyone from Gillian Welch to Wu-Tang Clan—but you won't see "Guys & Dolls" on his stage any time soon.

"You got the Wang next door, and you got the Colonial up the street, and Shubert across the street. That's what they do, so let them have that. Also, there isn't a demand for it anymore. Fifty years ago, people loved to see plays and Broadway shows. There still are some people, mostly an older crowd, but there's enough theaters to carry that."



BIRBIGLIA WEARS a blue plaid shirt and simple blue jeans, with the stage behind him outfitted in the same melancholy color scheme. In no time at all, he has the crowd laughing, as he pokes fun of those who couldn't make it due to the "wintery mix." A few minutes later, a girl

"YOU WOULDN'T FEEL OUT OF PLACE STANDING UNDER THE MAGNIFICENT ORIGINAL CHANDEILIER IN LEVI CUT-OFFS AND COMBAT BOOTS."



cackles maniacally at the tamest of jokes, and Birbiglia calls her out on it, raising his hands to his eyes to try and see her in the crowd through the spotlight. "Who is that?" he asks. "Sam," she calls back through a choked giggle. Despite being in the balcony, Sam's voice echoes loudly. In an intimate moment for such a huge venue, Birbiglia speaks to the mysteriously amused fan directly. The exchange demonstrates why comedy works on this stage.

"The reason why I chose The Wilbur is because the balcony and the mezzanine are very, very, very close to the stage," says Blumenreich. "And those are actually the best seats in the house. It's funny; when we put a show on sale, everyone wants to buy the tickets in front of the stage right away, but the tickets in the mezzanine and balcony, especially those first [rows], are by far the best seats in the house. Now if you go to other theaters, most theaters the balcony is so far back their just terrible seats. Or some of these larger theaters, if you're in the first 10 or 15 rows, it's a great show ...

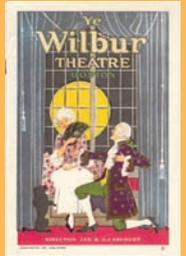
... Anything else, you can't even see and you might as well watch it on television. But in the Wilbur, there isn't a bad seat in the house."

Plans for a centennial celebration are in the works. There are no details just yet, but chances are there will be plenty of respect paid to those who came before, with an emphasis on the current incarnation. Standing in the lobby, Blumenreich's son, general manager Bill Jr., admires the new polish: "It's the shiniest I've ever seen it."

FACTOIDS

Original name: **Ye Wilbur Theatre**

Originally planned to open on April 13, but opening night was delayed until April 20, 1914, making the birthday of ol' Wilbur 4.20, man.



The first production was Eldon Sheldon's "Romance" starring **Doris Keane**. Keane would later star in the film version, her only motion picture role.

Tennessee Williams' play "A Streetcar Named Desire" saw its premiere here in 1947, starring **Marlon Brando** and Jessica Tandy. In the first review of the production, a *Boston Globe* theater critic wrote, "Marlon Brando contributes realistic acting of **200-proof strength**."

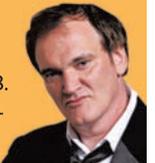


Four years later he would star in the film of the same name. And the rest is history.



It's rumored that **Lily Tomlin** graffiti'd "Lily Tomlin smoked dope here" in the rafters, but after a search we were unable to visually confirm.

Quentin Tarantino was a player at the Wilbur for a short pre-broadway run of "Wait Until Dark" alongside **Marisa Tomei** in 1998. Given the critical reception, it is not surprising he returned quickly to the silver screen.



First performance under the Blumenreich reign (2008-present): **Joe Rogan**. (Yeesh)



In 2009, the Wilbur was granted a **liquor license**, and from then on everyone who took the stage was hilarious.

This March, the Wilbur Theatre broke its own record for selling out the most consecutive events when **Aziz Ansari**'s 8th show sold out. (Former record-holder: Kevin Hart.)



Blumenreich's children Taylor and Bill are managers at the theater. **Bill Jr.** is the guy in the lobby wearing a three-piece suit.

When asked if he could tell a joke, **Bill Blumenreich** replied,

"I DON'T REMEMBER ANY JOKES."

