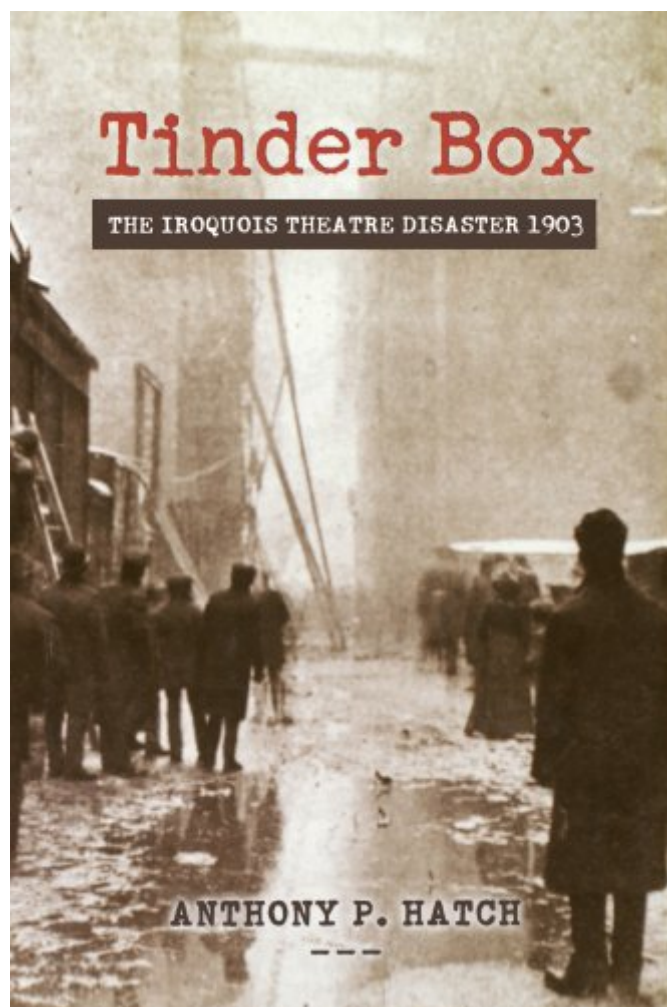


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# Tinder Box: The Iroquois Theatre Disaster 1903



## Synopsis

This the 100th anniversary of one of worst man-made disasters of the 20th century. When the Iroquois Theatre opened in Chicago on November 23, 1903, it was considered one of the grandest structures of its day, a monument to modern design and technology, as well as "absolutely fireproof." This was a theatre that would rival any in New York or Paris. Instead it became the funeral pyre for hundreds of victims. Tony Hatch, former CBS reporter and Emmy Award winner, tells the grisly story in meticulous, riveting detail, based on more than forty years of research, including many exclusive interviews with eyewitnesses. In *Tinder Box*, he tells the Iroquois story as it has never been told before. In a rush to open the theatre on time, corners were cut, and the Iroquois lacked the most basic fire-fighting equipment: sprinklers, fire alarm boxes, backstage telephone, exit signs and functioning asbestos curtain. Some exists, for aesthetic reasons, were hidden behind heavy draperies, doors opened inward and exterior fire escapes were unfinished. But Chicago officials, the theatre owners and managers, the contractor, stagehandsâ "all looked the other way. Then, on December 30, 1903, disaster struck. The theatre was packed, overcrowded with a standing-room-only audience, mostly women and children who had come to see the popular comedian Eddie Foy perform in the musical fantasy *Mr. Bluebeard*. A short circuit in a single backstage spotlight touched off a small fire that, in minutes, erupted into an uncontrollable blaze. More than 600 people died. Because of the magnitude of the catastrophe and the obvious corruption that allowed it to happen, building and fire laws were changed to prevent it everhappening again. *Tinder Box* is a riveting history of a traumatic and costly calamity.

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## Customer Reviews

On December 30, 1903, the Iroquois Theatre in Chicago was crowded beyond capacity with theatergoers eager to see Eddie Foy in "Mr. Blue Beard". The well-written and well-researched "Tinder Box" by Anthony Hatch describes what happened that tragic afternoon when a spotlight short-circuited starting a fire that eventually killed over 600 people. Considering the fact that the fire happened over 100 years ago, with no living witnesses to interview and many facts have been lost in time, Hatch does an admirable job describing the events leading up to the fire, the fire itself, and the aftermath. He does an excellent job describing how the Iroquois came to be built and the haste with which it was built (it only took five months) and the shoddy workmanship involved, as well as how many officials were willing to turn their heads and ignore the many fire code violations at the Iroquois. His description of the crowded theatre the day of the fire is mind boggling; one victim in fact called the theater a fire trap as she went to her seat. There were over 500 more people than capacity in attendance; the exit doors opened in instead of out; and the person who was supposed to operate the fire curtain was a substitute who didn't know which lines actually worked the curtain. There was little done to help the audience and incredibly enough the actors continued to perform while the fire was burning. Hatch also gives descriptions of the fire victims and survivors, which make the tragedy even more real. Some of the ways people escaped the fire were incredible and there were many heroes that night. There were also many villains that night and Hatch describes they way people robbed some of the dead.

Virtually forgotten in the present era, the 1903 Iroquois Theatre fire killed more people in less than an hour than the celebrated Chicago Fire of 1871 which raged over the course of several days and destroyed much of the central district of the city. Thousands of people pass the site of the Iroquois tragedy on a daily basis without giving it a moment's thought. A combined theater and office building occupies the exact site of the Iroquois Theatre on Randolph Street today. The theater has been extensively remodeled and stages Broadway quality performances. As the author explains Iroquois

fire was a disaster that could have been avoided. The construction of the building was not completed when the theater was opened to the public. The architect failed to incorporate significant fire safety features into the cost cutting design. In many instances, the building contractors had not finished their work: two examples, the rooftop ventilation system and the exterior fire escape, itself, were not even fully functional! The closed vents trapped toxic gases and smoke which asphyxiated audience members in their seats. The pennypinching theater owners failed to purchase adequate fire extinguishers to be placed throughout the building and assigned only one employee to act as fireman for the entire building. The supposedly fire resistant curtain was shoddy both in terms of the inexpensive materials substituted for asbestos and its poor workmanship. When put to the test, none of the stage hands knew how to operate the curtain and it jammed during its descent. Thus the fire could not be contained on the stage and it spread into the auditorium. Panicked patrons struggled to find their way out, but the emergency exits were not clearly identified and many of the doors were locked.

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