



# WHO WAS JOHN KENLEY?

John Kenley was born on February 20, 1906 near Denver, Colorado, after his parents' immigration from Slovakia. Making his stage debut at age 4, Kenley worked in show biz as a female impersonator, acrobat, and dancer throughout his childhood and early adulthood. By the 1920s, Kenley had arrived in New York and began working as a performer in the *Greenwich Village Follies*.

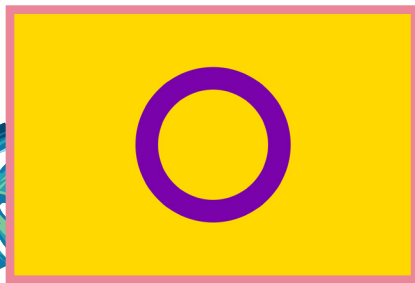
Soon after, Kenley left performing and became an assistant to established New York producer Lee Shubert (who was credited for discovering Lillian Hellman and *The Children's Hour*). John then left the theatre world and served in the merchant marines during World War II, before returning back to Ohio. From there, he moved on to start producing his own shows with The Kenley Players, his summer stock theatre company. The Kenley Players produced over 500 shows featuring Broadway, film, and television stars from 1940 to 1995, led by Kenley for its entire lifespan.



**JOHN KENLEY**

Photo courtesy of The Billy Rose Theatre Division of The New York Public Library.

The Kenley Players were a huge success: Kenley's insistence on theatre being for everyone allowed people from all walks of life to enjoy live performance. He charged the price of a movie ticket for his shows (much to his fellow competitors' chagrin), filling his seats night after night. Additionally, in 1950, he welcomed people of all races to his Washington DC performance of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, stating that tickets were "available to any paying customer, without regard for race." This broke down the color line, and after a sold-out two weeks of performances, Kenley was praised for this groundbreaking decision. On October 23, 2009, he passed away at the age of 103.



**INTERSEX PRIDE FLAG**

By many reports, Kenley was born intersex. This means he was born with sex characteristics that, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies." At birth, Kenley's parents decided it would be easier for them to go through life as a man rather than as a woman, and thus he was named and socialized as male. During the off-season, Kenley lived in Florida as Jean, though much of her story is unknown. Kenley dealt with this choice, and was known to say that androgyny was overrated.

[https://www.cleveland.com/onstage/2009/10/legendary\\_ohio\\_impresario\\_john.html](https://www.cleveland.com/onstage/2009/10/legendary_ohio_impresario_john.html)  
<https://variety.com/2009/legit/markets-festivals/producer-john-kenley-dies-at-103-1118010715/>  
<https://www.daytondailynews.com/local/remembers-kenley-players-and-the-megastars-who-performed-at-memorial-hall/M6F7Y6H3CVAR7MM32DUD3BC42U/>

