

Last Performance This Season: The Architectural Legacy of Canada's 18th and 19th Century Theatres

by Robert Hunter

In the early years of this century J.E. Middleton, the author and critic, wrote "there is no Canadian Drama. It is merely a branch of the American Theatre, and, let it be said, a most profitable one."¹ While it was arguably true at that time that Canadian drama was not highly developed, the same could not be said of the structures created to house dramatic events, for Canada was emerging from a 50 year period of extensive theatre building. While theatres were numerous, they did in one sense parallel Middleton's perception of the derivative nature of Canadian drama, for they were, if anything, even less specifically indigenous to this country than the productions which appeared on their stages. For these structures were part of an international trend of theatre building, as had been their late-18th and early-19th century predecessors. There had been no significant influence on Canadian, or for that matter, North American theatre design that did not have its origins somewhere in the European traditions of stagecraft and theatre architecture.²

While theatrical, musical or dance performances have taken place in some form in Canada from the earliest days of European settlement, structures designed specifically to house such performances did not appear until the late 18th century.³ A clear distinction must be drawn between simply the site of a performance and a real theatre. Although theatrical and musical performances have taken place in Canada aboard Sir Humphrey Gilbert's ship off Newfoundland in 1583, in gold rush saloons in the 1890s, and in the ballroom of Rideau Hall (figure 2), these locations are not true theatres.

Nikolaus Pevsner, in his *A History of Building Types*, assisted in clarifying that buildings which share a common function also share a common historical development, operational requirements, and, often, common architectural roots.⁴ Structures with highly specific and specialized functions such as theatres prove a particularly clear example of this premise. This is at least partially due to the nature of a theatre's function which focuses primary attention on its interior plan, volumes, and finish, with its exterior detailing proving of secondary importance. While as a general rule 18th and 19th century theatre exteriors exhibited classically-inspired detailing, there were many variations possible, Vancouver's Alhambra Theatre of 1899 (figure 1) being a good example of a particularly eclectic option.

As function is the most important element in defining theatre architecture, then identifying functional differences within the building type is evidently the most useful way of determining common characteristics as well as differences. In examining early theatre architecture in Canada, two major functional types emerge. One group consists of theatres built specifically and solely as the sites of live performances. Typically this building type incorporated an auditorium designed in such a manner as to provide good acoustics, good sight lines towards a stage, and comfortable seats. A variety of lobbies, public amenities, and backstage spaces usually completed these buildings. While they ranged in size in Canada, such theatres were generally quite substantial in scale, were found most frequently in urban areas, were usually privately owned, and were operated for profit.



Figure 1. Alhambra Theatre, Vancouver, built 1899, architect unknown. Demolished.



Figure 2. The ballroom, Rideau Hall, Ottawa, Ontario. In the 1870s a stage with proscenium arch was constructed at one end of the ballroom, and was used regularly for amateur performances for a number of years, but is no longer in existence. (National Archives of Canada PA 27930)



(Vancouver Public Library 30628)

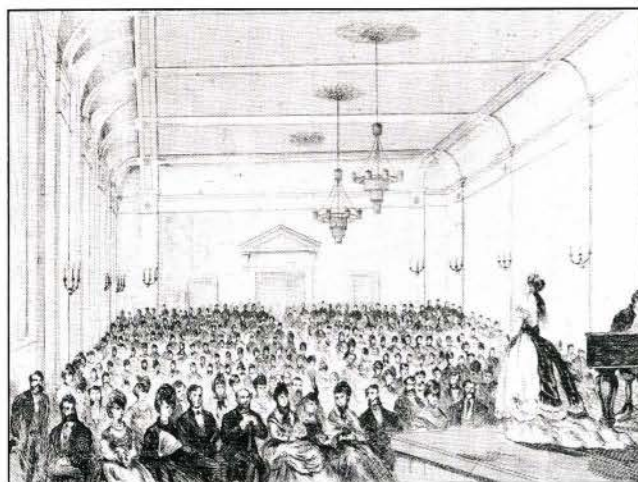


Figure 3. Interior of the Port Hope Music Hall, Port Hope, Ontario, on its opening night in 1871. Demolished. (National Archives of Canada C 54327)

The second group of theatres involves theatres incorporated as only one element of a multi-functional building, often publicly owned and most commonly a town hall. Across Canada early town halls, while containing a small amount of office space or a council meeting room, also frequently contained a market, fire hall, police station or a public meeting hall with stage, of greater or lesser grandeur, often called an opera house. At Barkerville, British Columbia in 1869 one could find the fire hall in combination with the theatre in the joint William's Creek Fire Brigade Hall and Theatre Royal.⁵ Such structures appeared in both urban and rural settings. While theatrical or musical events may have taken place in these halls so did public meetings, dances, and wakes. Theatres in the 18th and 19th centuries were also found in conjunction with commercial premises, public meeting rooms or national halls. The town hall theatres remain today, however, as the best-known and best-preserved element of Canada's early theatrical legacy and as such will not be dealt with explicitly here, as the focus will be upon other theatres, often lesser-known, and usually no longer in existence.

Julius Cahn's Official Theatre Guide, published in New York City in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, included in its 1909 edition a Canadian listing of over 90 theatres.⁶ While this was cited as only a partial listing and included numerous theatres in town halls, it effectively illustrates a major theme in the study of Canadian theatre building, for the majority of these theatres no longer exist, and those that do exist are usually in town halls. No complete inventory exists of 18th and 19th century theatres built in Canada, and the compilation of such an inventory would be a daunting task given the fluid, not to say volatile, state of Canadian theatre building, as theatres appeared and vanished with great rapidity.

These vanished theatres are today known only through contemporary written accounts and the occasional surviving drawing, plan or photograph. Clear descriptions of them are seldom available as commentators tended to discuss these structures, if they did at all, in terms of pleasantness and commodiousness — or lack thereof. Contemporary records tend to concentrate on their place in theatrical and social history, including information on performers and performances and discussion of their role in furthering the cultural life of the community. For theatres obviously did not exist in a vacuum, but were created to house entertainments which satisfied a variety of social needs. Whether this was in the Port Hope, Ontario Music Hall of 1871 (figure 3) or Toronto's Massey Hall of 1892-94, the motivations were essentially the same. The physical form which theatres took in late 18th and 19th century Canada was determined by successive waves of settlers, primarily British, who brought with them social conventions and a way of life which included a desire for theatrical entertainment. These attitudes were tempered by economic necessity and the realities of frontier Canadian life. Initially, there was neither time, money, technical knowledge nor the cultural impetus to construct first-rate permanent playhouses. By the mid-19th century, however, people in many parts of the country were able to demand and enjoy theatres both as symbols of an emerging cultural life and as places of enjoyment.

This cultural life was often blighted by the scourge of fire as theatres burnt down, were rebuilt, and burnt again with alarming regularity, due often to their unique lighting requirements. These frequent and devastating fires partially explain the disappearance of the vast majority of 19th century Canadian theatres. Although fire prevention was written about extensively and fire codes made progressively more rigid, theatrical fires remained a problem into this century.⁷

T H E A T R E,
KING-STREET.

On *FRIDAY* the 10th Inst.

WILL BE PERFORMED,
A COMEDY, called
“*Every One has his Fault;*”
To which will be added,
A FARCE, called
“*All the World’s a Stage.*”

Between the 4th and 5th Acts, will be introduced a New Scene, representing *Partridge Island, the Light House, &c.* with a Song called *Heaving the Lead.*

And by particular desire, previous to the Farce, will be spoken, Mr. *Garrick’s* celebrated Prologue to *Barbarossa;* in the Character of a *Country Boy.*

Every precaution will be taken to render the Theatre comfortable.

➔ **TICKETS** to be had at Mrs. *Mallard’s.*

Doors to be opened at Six, and the performance to begin precisely at Seven o’clock. *St. John, April 7. 1795.*

Figure 4. Playbill for Mallard’s Theatre, Saint John, New Brunswick, 1795. (Courtesy of The New Brunswick Museum)

Canada’s first known permanent theatre was the New Grand Theatre on Argyle Street, in Halifax. It opened in 1789 under the auspices of the Halifax garrison, but as with so many of these earliest theatres virtually nothing is known about it.⁸ What is clear, however, is that it was rare to find a true, purpose-built, free-standing theatre in Canada before 1825. Prior to this time most theatres were located above taverns or commercial premises.⁹

Two types of theatrical activity coexisted in Canada throughout most of the late 18th until the early 20th century as both local amateur companies and professional touring troupes met varying degrees of acceptance and success. During much of this period both types of companies, amateur and professional, performed in the same type of theatres.¹⁰

Amateur actors converted Mallard’s assembly room “into a pretty Theatre” in 1789, and used it for the first recorded dramatic performance in Saint John, New Brunswick.¹¹ As a playbill of April 1795 records (figure 4), not all that encouragingly, “Every precaution will be taken to render the theatre comfortable.”

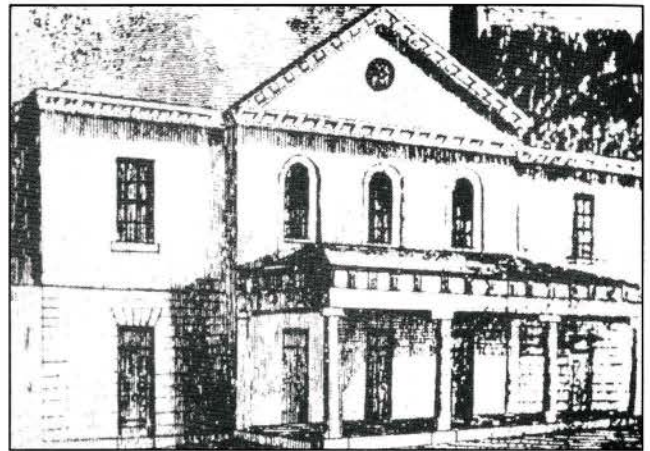


Figure 5. Theatre Royal, Montreal, Quebec, built 1825, architect unknown. Demolished. (Drawing by Christig Adolph, 1832)

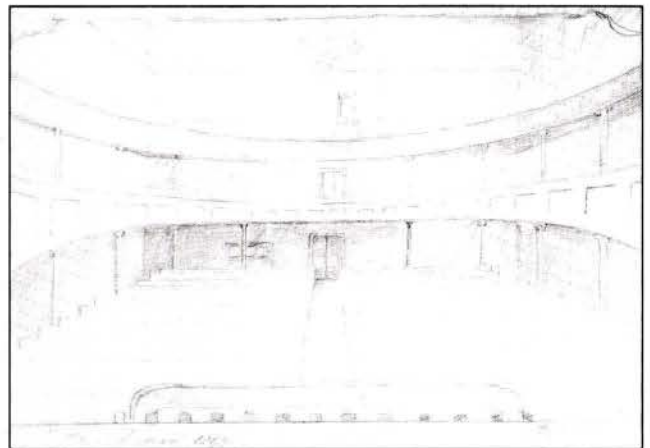


Figure 6. Royal Lyceum Theatre, Toronto, Ontario, built c. 1848, architect unknown. Burr 1874. (Drawing by T.H. Granger, date unknown. Metropolitan Toronto Library Board T 12935)

While theatres were often makeshift and temporary they were not necessarily bare. Joseph Howe, reminiscing about early Halifax, stated that William Rufus Blake and his friends decorated “both sides of the proscenium of an improvised amateur theatre”¹² with the paper peeling off the walls of the abandoned Prince’s Lodge, a cottage built for the Duke of Kent.

Differences in the quality of theatrical spaces certainly existed. Local patrons thought these halls quite adequate for their needs but visitors often labeled them unsatisfactory. W.H. Prigmore’s theatre, situated on the second floor of Armstrong’s tavern in Quebec City, was 40 feet long by 30 feet wide with a 24 foot ceiling. Yet John Bernard, who performed in Quebec City frequently before 1811, dismissed it as a “paltry little room of a very paltry public house, that neither in shape nor capacity merited the name of theatre.”¹³

While temporary theatres of this type continued to be built and received with general approval, the degree of acceptability was based both on the theatre’s location and the date, as what was deemed to be an elegant theatre in Halifax or Montreal in the 18th century would almost certainly have been seen as substandard in most European and some American cities at the time. The most popular theatre form in the 18th century in Britain was typified by Bristol’s Theatre Royal, which contained shallow balconies and a projecting stage with a flat

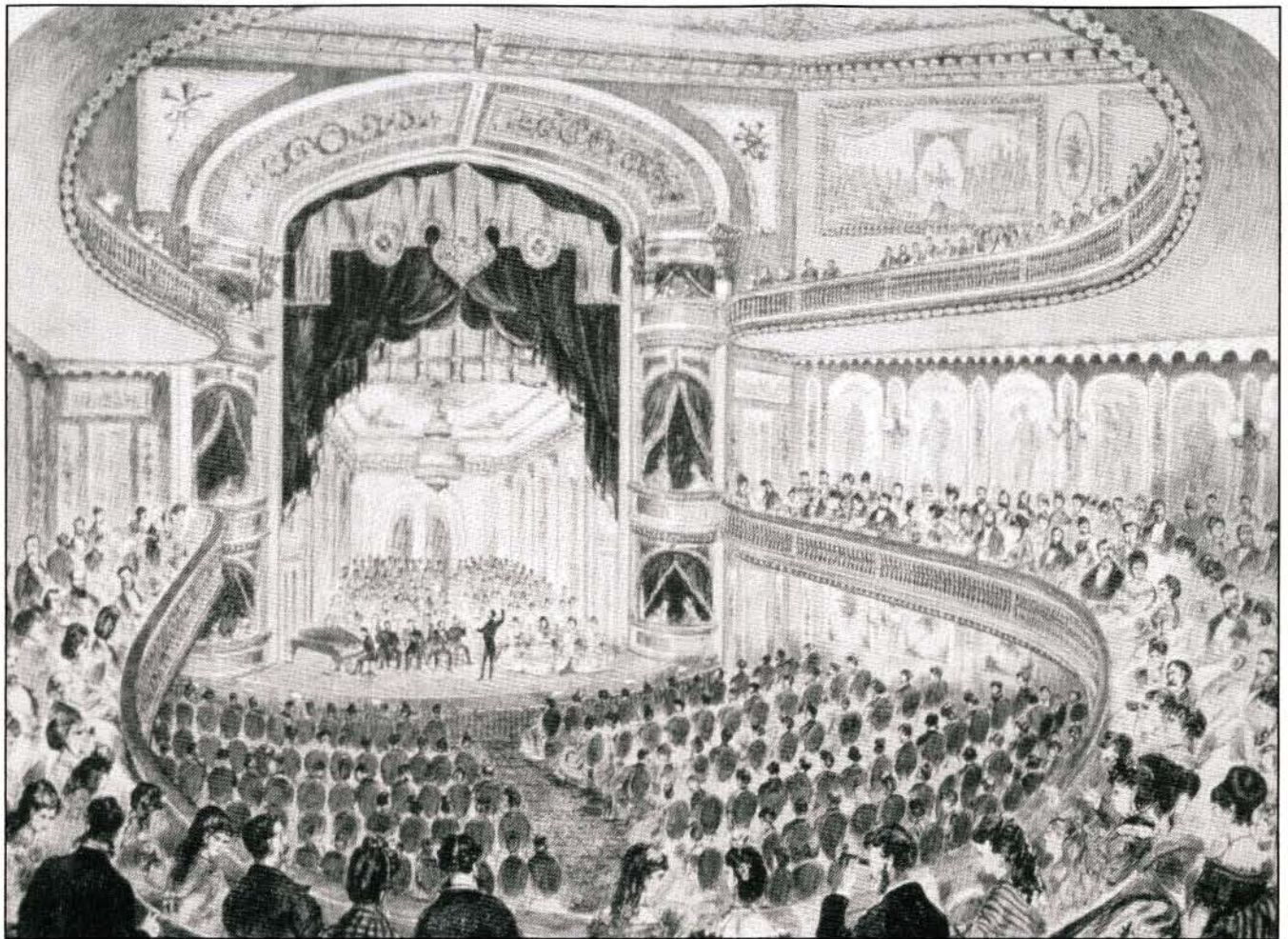


Figure 7. Interior of the Academy of Music, Saint John, New Brunswick, on its opening night in 1872, Mr. Washburn, architect. Burnt 1877. (Drawing by E.J. Russell. Courtesy of The New Brunswick Museum)

proscenium arch pierced by doorways.

Early American theatres, as with the earliest Canadian examples, were clearly related to British theatre architecture. Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Theatre, built in 1794, the first American theatre of which interior views exist, was modeled after the Theatre Royal, Bath: the plans had been sent from England to the American owners. It contained three levels of shallow balconies which ringed the hall.¹⁴ The same influences may be detected in the building of Montreal's Theatre Royal in 1825, which proved to be a milestone in the increasing sophistication of Canadian theatre building and became the standard against which other Canadian theatres were judged for many years (figure 5).

On 21 November 1825 the Theatre Royal presented its first production, and in so doing gave Montrealers an opportunity to enjoy the city's first properly designed and equipped theatre. Financed primarily by John Molson, the Theatre Royal was a two storey stone structure, 60 feet by 100 feet, the facade of which was graced by a portico of Doric columns. Two tiers of boxes, a shallow gallery, and a pit provided seating for 1,000 spectators, while dressing rooms and a green room for the actors were located in the basement. With interior woodwork of cherry, a domed ceiling, and a drop curtain depicting the ruins of Athens, the theatre was vastly superior to any other Montreal

had yet seen. This first Theatre Royal operated until 1845, after which several other establishments successively bore that name.¹⁵

Toronto theatres initially were of the same temporary or converted nature as those in Montreal, with an upstairs room in Frank's Hotel serving as a theatre after 1821. Toronto's first structure built as a theatre was the Royal Lyceum of *circa* 1848, financed by John Ritchey and located on the south side of King Street, west of Bay. Behind its pedimented facade, the theatre seated 650 in its ground floor pit and two shallow horseshoe-shaped galleries (figure 6).¹⁶ It was one of Toronto's major theatres until its destruction by fire in 1874.

The presence of theatres in Toronto alarmed the city's Calvinists and Methodists who, as J.M.S. Careless has written, "saw theatre as mid-way between the temptations of taverns and the sins of bawdy-houses."¹⁷ Ironically, the role played by the theatre in 18th and 19th century Canada was more often one of reinforcing the colonial social structure. A strong tradition of amateur performance was based upon the belief in the morally-improving role it could play. By the 19th century middle-class British immigrants brought with them an interest in theatre as a reminder of home, which could also gratify their mid-Victorian zeal for both moral improvement and personal cultivation. The physical plan of most theatres, divided into sections by price, served to echo and reinforce the existing social divisions.

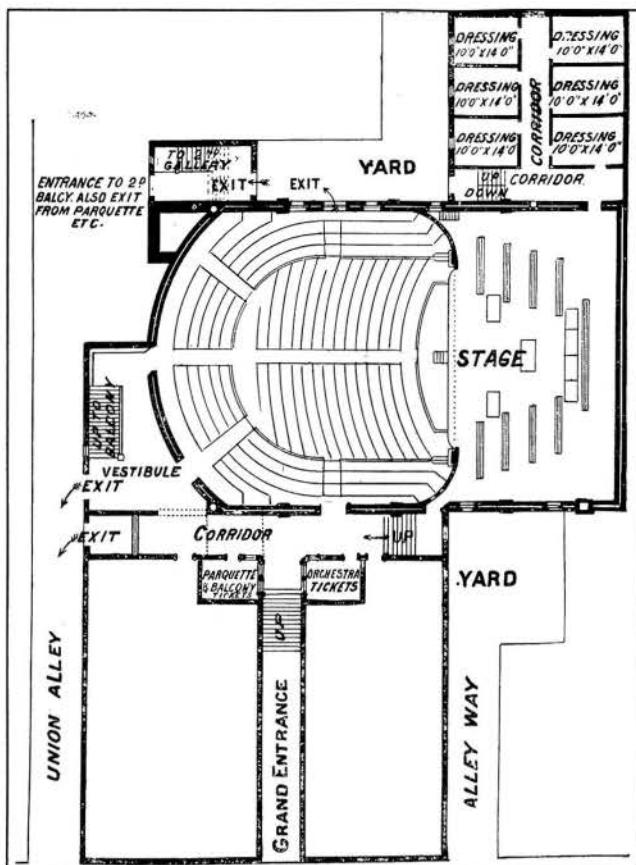


Figure 8. Plan of the Saint John Opera House, Saint John, New Brunswick, built 1891, J.C. Dumaresq, architect. Demolished. (Courtesy of The New Brunswick Museum)

The increasing sophistication of Canadian theatres is clearly seen in a structure such as the Quebec City Concert Hall, designed in 1851 by Charles Baillairgé, and marking the first time in this country that an important and truly talented architect was involved in the creation of a theatre (cover). Later known as the Academy of Music, this theatre was a substantial three storey stone structure with a handsomely detailed Greek Revival facade. Paired Greek Doric columns, windows with eared trim, and carved cresting led to this hall being hailed as elegant and tasteful.¹⁸ Its plan reflected ecclesiastical interiors, with side galleries supported by Doric columns. Baillairgé equipped the theatre with all the most modern conveniences, including extra fire exits and gas lighting for the hall and footlights — likely for the first time in a theatre in Canada.¹⁹

The Academy of Music remained Quebec City's premier theatre throughout most of its existence, finally being destroyed by fire in 1900. When the noted British actor Henry Irving performed in Quebec City during his 1884 tour of Canada, it seems that the theatre in which he played was the Academy of Music. During that engagement Irving's private secretary wrote to a friend:

The theatre here would make you shriek. It is a cross between a chapel and a very small concert room and the stage is about half the size of that of St. George's Hall. The entrance is being washed now, but no amount of soap and water will repair the broken windows.²⁰

Obviously the perception of a theatre's merits was based upon the design sophistication of the theatres with which one was most familiar.

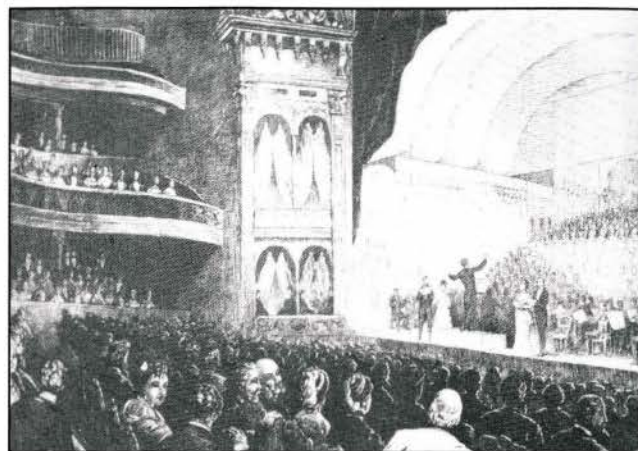


Figure 9. Interior of the Grand Opera House, Toronto, Ontario, built 1874, burnt and rebuilt 1879, Thomas R. Jackson and Lalor and Martin, architects. Demolished 1920. (Metropolitan Toronto Library)

This developmental process in theatre design may be seen in microcosm by examining three Saint John, New Brunswick theatres from the period 1857-77. After experiencing the typical progression of theatrical spaces in houses and buildings converted from other uses, Saint John in 1857 finally became the site of a purpose-built theatre, James Lanergan's Dramatic Lyceum. Designed by William Campbell, this theatre had an auditorium 78 feet long and a stage 30 feet deep. The Dramatic Lyceum boasted a dress circle, gallery, and boxes in addition to the pit, seating 850 in total. By 1870 Otis Small built a large structure which combined commercial premises, a warehouse, and a theatre which, although far from elegant, held over 1,000 spectators and proved successful. The Academy of Music was constructed in 1872 and far surpassed its competitors in comfort and elegance. Designed by a Boston architect named Washburn, the Academy presented a handsome facade with classically-inspired detailing, while its interior (figure 7) boasted an auditorium floor raked towards the large stage, two horseshoe-shaped galleries, and stage boxes in the high proscenium arch. Classically-inspired mouldings and balcony rails in combination with luxuries previously unknown to Saint John such as upholstered, hinged seats made this the city's most sophisticated theatre.²¹

Between 1872 and 1877 Saint John could then boast three theatres, each seating approximately 1,000 spectators. The Saint John fire of 1877 wiped out these theatres along with most of the centre of the city, returning the city theatrically to a point it had been at many years before when its Mechanics Institute (built 1840) was the only site for theatrical and musical performances. Similar cycles of theatrical boom and bust were familiar stories in many 19th century Canadian cities. In Saint John there was not another high quality performance space available until September 1891 when the Saint John Opera House opened.²² Designed by J.C. Dumaresq, the Opera House was a brick structure seating 1,200 spectators, with a stage 58 feet wide by 35 feet deep, and illuminated by electric light (figure 8). Saint John could boast a theatre designed following the fashionable U-shaped interior plan, with a deeper balcony, well decorated, and fully up-to-date in being electrically lit. Developments in terms of more spacious lobbies and other front-of-house amenities were paralleled in backstage improvements involving extensive wing and fly space, and decent dressing rooms.

Major centres such as Montreal or Toronto had many theatres by the 1870s, Toronto in particular having not one but two opera houses.

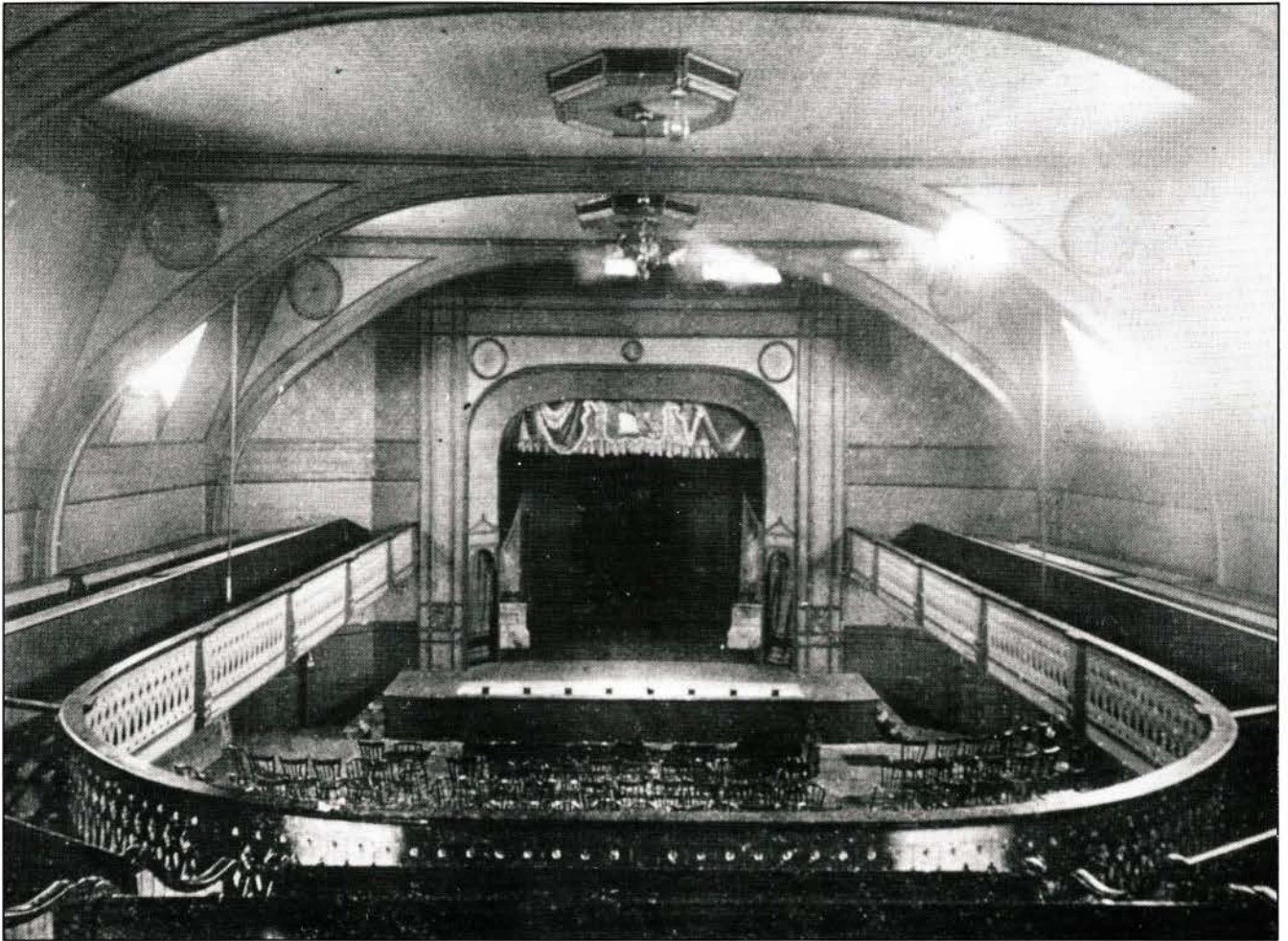


Figure 10. Interior of Hull's Opera House, Calgary, Alberta, built 1893. Demolished. (Manitoba Provincial Archives)

The Grand Opera House, built in 1874 (burnt and rebuilt in 1879), to the designs of New York architect Thomas R. Jackson and the Toronto firm of Lalor and Martin, projected, in its use of the bold and florid Second Empire style, the vigour and confidence which led entrepreneurs to enter the world of the theatre.²³ The interior (figure 9) reflected, in plan and finish, the standard approach to theatre interiors at the time, with two stacked horseshoe-shaped balconies, a very high proscenium arch, and a large stage (the largest in Toronto).

While cities such as Saint John or Toronto could be the site of several legitimate theatres by the mid-1870s, the variability in degree of settlement across Canada left other centres with no real theatres in the same period. The developing western regions of Canada provided fertile ground, especially in a boom-town environment, for the speculative construction of theatres for quick profit. Winnipeg's Princess Opera House of 1883 was an outwardly impressive brick veneer structure meant to signify the progressive and stable nature of a community where culture played an important role. As such it was a vehicle for civic boosterism. It was, in reality, a wood frame structure built in four months with a hall upstairs over several shops.²⁴

Hull's Opera House in Calgary, built in 1893 (figure 10), falls within this same tradition of boosterism, and the resulting theatre played a key role in the evolving cultural and social life of the city. While its somewhat barn-like exterior appearance suggests a certain lack of design sophistication, its interior plan contained all the major con-

stituent elements necessary for a first-class theatre of the period, if in a rather long and idiosyncratic plan with only one balcony.

This same spirit of civic pride and entrepreneurial optimism led the Canadian Pacific Railway to construct the Vancouver Opera House (figure 11). Built on Granville Street adjacent to the original Hotel Vancouver to the designs of Montreal architects J.W. and E.C. Hopkins at a cost of \$100,000, the Opera House opened in 1891 with a performance of *Lohengrin* by the Grand English Opera Company.²⁵ Although the interior was hailed as beautiful and did present a rather heavily opulent appearance with 1,200 plush upholstered chairs, poor design resulted in a balcony with almost no view of the stage. Completely typical in its urban location, relatively large scale, essentially horseshoe-shaped interior plan, deep balconies, and lack of boxes in its proscenium arch, the Vancouver Opera House serves as a paradigm of so many of the demolished theatres of the late 19th century.

Parallel to the construction of theatres by private entrepreneurs was another approach in which non-profit organizations constructed theatres for themselves. While these theatres were sometimes the result of Victorian philanthropy, one of the best surviving examples, Montreal's Monument National, is an equally clear result of nascent Quebec nationalism. As such it has been called with justification "the heart of French-speaking North America."²⁶ The Monument National was constructed as the headquarters of La Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste, which had been founded in 1843 to organize the annual

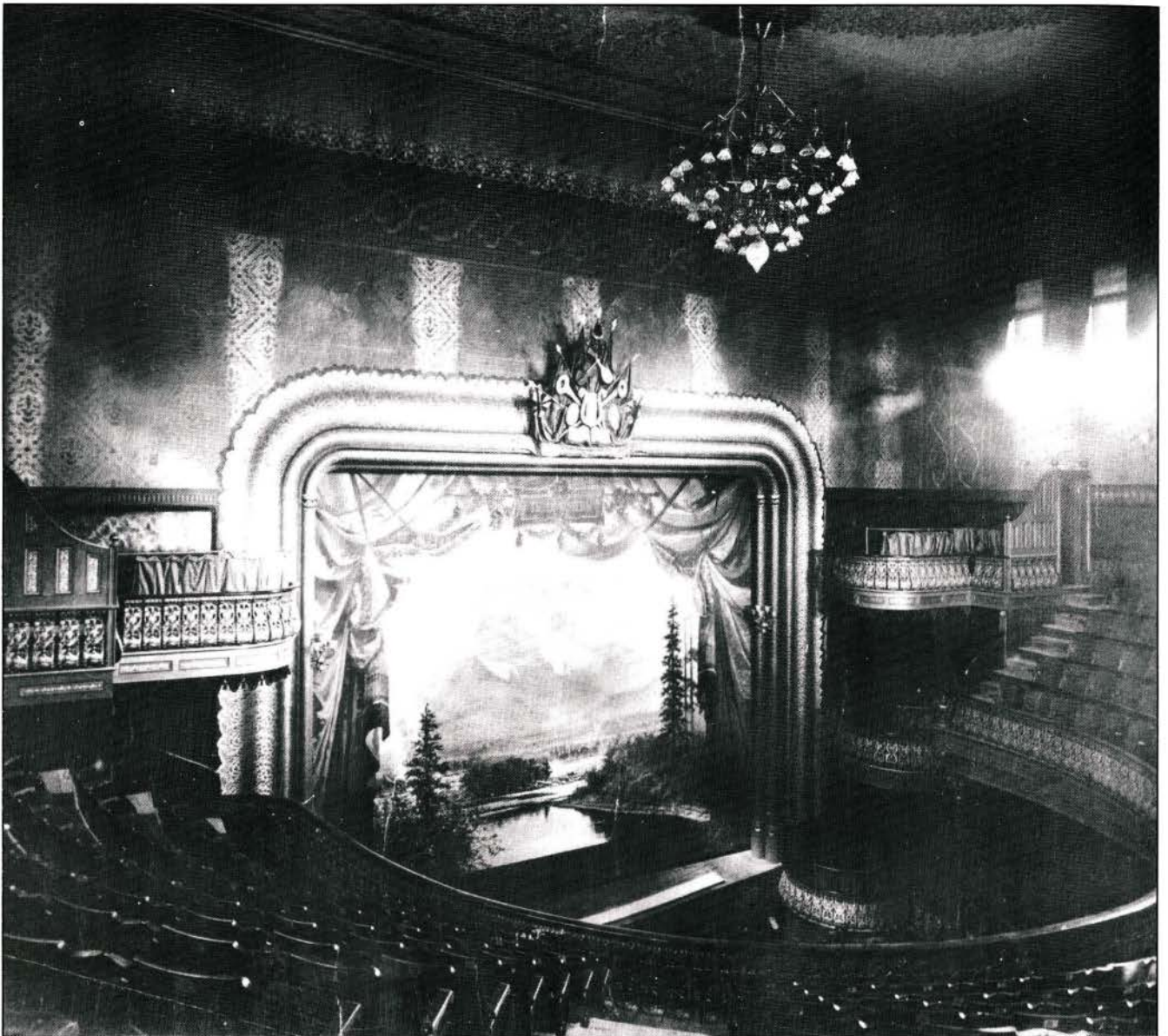


Figure 11. Interior of the Vancouver Opera House, Vancouver, British Columbia, built 1891, J.W. and E.C. Hopkins, architects. Demolished. (British Columbia Archives and Records Service HP 80236)

celebration on the saint's day, promote the French language, and help the needy. It was not until 1891, however, that work commenced on a building for the society. Montreal architects Perrault, Mesnard, and Venne designed the structure.²⁷ Behind the rather grand, classically-detailed five storey stone facade were shops on the ground floor (the rental of which was intended to help pay for the structure), offices and meeting rooms on the second and third floors, while the fourth floor held classrooms. The core of the structure, rising through the second to fourth storeys, is a theatre measuring 134 by 50 feet. Containing a proscenium-arched stage and a raked gallery under a painted arched ceiling, it is in all respects typical of the grand theatres of the late 19th century. The Monument National is today, very appropriately, the home of the National Theatre School of Canada.

The emergence of vaudeville and motion pictures around the turn of the century signaled the commencement of a new era of theatre building. Close to another century of growth, urban development, and changes in social and cultural patterns has led to the loss of virtually our entire built legacy of early theatres. Another legacy remains, one in which the earliest Canadian theatres can be studied and valued through drawings and photographs, for what they can tell us of the society which built them, and the influence which they exerted. As long as this shadowy legacy is valued, there will be no "last performance."

Endnotes

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