Ontario’s theatrical heritage in the spotlight

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A message from the Chairman

This edition of Heritage Matters marks an important anniversary. This year, Toronto’s Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre – the last operating double-decker theatre in the world – turns 100. Over the decades, theatrical forms may have changed – from vaudeville and burlesque to musical theatre and operas to concerts and feature films – but the bricks and mortar of these repertory theatres still resonate with the voices of past performers and audiences.

The story of the Elgin and Winter Garden theatres is just one of the many that make up Ontario’s rich theatrical history. Local performances in town halls or courthouse – and even in local barns or open fields – have entertained audiences for generations. As our province became more urban, purpose-built theatres began to appear. In some instances, those theatres have vanished over the decades as a result of urban expansion and redevelopment, the introduction and success of cinema houses, or neglect and abandonment. And sometimes, too, other buildings have been adapted for use as new theatrical venues. For example, the Toronto Dance Theatre and the Annex Theatre both occupy former churches, as does the Peterborough Theatre Guild. Of course, in many communities, theatres have emerged as driving forces for jobs and improved local economies – one only needs to think of the Grand Theatre in London, the Ottawa Little Theatre, the Magnus Theatre in Thunder Bay, or, of course, Toronto’s Royal Alexandra Theatre and Massey Hall. Small-town Ontario, too, has benefited, with theatres contributing to cultural identities and serving as economic engines. Stratford and Niagara-on-the-Lake are two examples of communities largely defined by their theatre heritage.

“We hope you enjoy these stories that reflect the value and rich diversity of Ontario’s theatre heritage, and that they may inspire you to join – in some way – the celebration of the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre’s 100th anniversary!”

Tom Symonds

Thomas H.B. Symonds, C.C., OOnt, FRSC, LLD, D.Dilt, D.U., D.C.H., FRGS, KSS

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Cover image: Toronto’s Elgin Theatre at 100 (Photo: Edith Levy)
Celebrating Emancipation Day 2013  By Steven Cook

Emancipation Day commemorates the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act that became law on August 1, 1834. Since the passing of this act, which freed more than 700,000 enslaved Blacks throughout the British Empire, Emancipation Day has been an important expression of identity for the Black community. It provides an opportunity to celebrate the end of slavery in Canada and the British Empire, and acts as an enduring reminder of the tenacity and vision of early abolitionists and refugee slaves. Their legacy is our pride in a free Ontario. Sites such as Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site in Dresden tell the rich history of African-Canadians – from their trials and hardships on the Underground Railroad, to their accomplishments of African-Canadians to achieve equality, the efforts from early abolitionists and refugee slaves. Their legacy is our pride in a free Ontario. Sites such as Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site in Dresden tell the rich history of African-Canadians – from their trials and hardships on the Underground Railroad, to their accomplishments of African-Canadians to achieve equality.

Newspaper clipping: "Commemorating Emancipation Day reveals the struggles and accomplishments of African-Canadians to achieve equality, the efforts from which all Ontarians benefit today," said Henry. Throughout the day, guests were entertained by soulful vocalists Jennifer Harvey and Juno Award-winner Sonia Colymore. Self-taught drummer and songwriter Odell Johnson joined artist, producer and radio host Kobena Aquaa-Harrison for a drumming clinic. Guests were encouraged to bring their own percussion instrument and join them onstage. And Toronto comedian Jay Martin’s unique take on growing up as a young Black man in Canada kept the atmosphere light and lively.

The RBC Foundation has demonstrated its commitment to supporting social development and diversity within our communities. Steven Cook is the site manager at Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site, which is owned and operated by the Ontario Heritage Trust.

Partnering for conservation  By Erin Semande

The Ontario Heritage Trust has a number of conservation tools available to protect and preserve heritage throughout the province. Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between heritage property owners and the Trust that protect significant features of a property. Recently, the Trust and the City of Toronto completed an easement agreement to protect the provincially significant John McKenzie House in North York. Located at 34 Parkview Avenue, John McKenzie House is owned by the City of Toronto and leased to the Ontario Historical Society (OHS) as its head office. The easement will protect the impressive Edwardian classical-style house constructed in 1913, as well as the attached coach house (1918), milk house (1907), stable (1915), the McKenzie Parkette and community garden.

The house is representative of a significant economic pattern that occurred across the province – the subdivision, sale and development of farmland to residential neighbourhoods. In 1912, John McKenzie began dividing his farmland for development and created one of the earliest Willowdale subdivisions. McKenzie’s large Edwardian classical house was one of the first to be constructed in the newly surveyed subdivision. McKenzie continued to farm on a smaller scale, retaining a milk house and constructing a stable – two buildings that hearken to North York’s farming roots. Descendants of the McKenzie family lived in the house until the 1970s. By the 1980s, it was in the hands of a developer and then the City of North York, which planned to demolish the buildings for road construction. The OHS lobbied to retain the buildings and the City agreed to relocate the proposed road. In 1993, the OHS proposed the restoration of the property as its headquarters, which resulted in a long-term lease agreement with the City. Today, much of the area surrounding John McKenzie House is heavily developed with highrise condominiums lining nearby Yonge Street. The easement will ensure that the heritage features of the property – including the buildings and its open space – are preserved for present and future generations.

Erin Semande is a Researcher with the Trust.
Performance venues command an important presence in Ontario communities. They tell us about the aspirations of the people who built them, and they reflect the development of the province as a whole. Starting in the late 18th century when Upper Canada was established, the formation of military settlements created the first ready audiences capable of making theatre viable. Although the development was slow in this early period, the preconditions required to give rise to performance venues had taken root. As the population increased, so too did the demand for live entertainment.

Although live theatre was an irregular activity in the early 19th century, American touring companies, by the 1820s, began visiting towns and villages in Ontario as part of their tours. As settlement began to reach farther into new territory and rapid industrialization led to a network of towns and villages in Ontario as part of their tours. As settlement began to reach farther into new territory and rapid industrialization led to a network of towns and villages, the preconditions required to give rise to performance venues had taken root. As the population increased, so too did the demand for live entertainment.

In the second half of the 19th century, with urban expansion and its associated civic pride, town halls became more than just council chambers, and included jails, firehalls and performance venues. Many of these structures and their theatre spaces still exist behind edifices both modest and grand. Civic pride and a growing hunger for entertainment set the stage for the earliest performances of the Shaw Festival in 1962 and continues to be used by the Festival to this day.

Adaptability, however, was often a two-way street with a number of other historical structures being converted into performance venues. Cobourg’s Firehall Theatre, for example, is housed within the Second Empire-style former Second Street Fire Hall, constructed in 1882. Churches have also been successfully converted into theatres with Gulf’s First Delta Baptist Church, designed in a mixture of Romanesque and Italianate styles by architect Thomas Broughton in 1887, converted to a theatre in 1982. Similarly, St. Brigid’s Church in Ottawa and the Century Church Theatre in Hillsburgh have recently found new uses hosting various public performances within their walls.

Even barns have been repurposed as theatres – as seen in the 4th Line Theatre in Millbrook, which provides the setting for a series of summer performances, a nod to the tradition of outdoor theatre. Seasonal venues continue to thrive, including the Kie to Bala, a dance hall and performance space for live bands in Muskoka, and various bandshells erected in community parks across Ontario. Port Hope’s bandshell, conceived as a memorial to the town’s fallen soldiers in 1945, is one such example, as is Toronto’s Canadian National Exhibition bandshell, which was inspired by the art deco Hollywood Bowl and constructed in 1936. All of these venues attest to the importance of live performance space in the evolution of Ontario’s communities. As a reflection of the history of Ontario, they retain their value not just from the architectural, historical and contextual significance, but also from their ongoing use and existence.

Thomas Wicks is the Heritage Planner with the Trust.
The evolution of the panto

By Ellen Flowers and Gordon Pim

It is always entertaining to watch a troupe of actors sing, dance and throw their audiences into hysteric. This is something we witness every year at the Elgin Theatre when Ross Petty Productions repackages a classic fairytale and offers up a comedic pantomime that leaves audiences rolling in the aisles.

The pantomime – or panto as it has become known – has been making people laugh for generations. It is a theatrical form with a long history of slapstick, bawdy humour, cross-dressing characters and often raucous audience participation. Grounded in classical theatre, there is evidence of pantomime having been performed in ancient Greek and Roman times. Today’s panto takes elements from the Italian commedia dell’arte (several of the characters – Harlequin and Columbine – and traditional comic-tragic storylines still resonate in modern pantomime), mummer’s plays from the Middle Ages (British folk plays performed at holidays with both religious overtones and the coarse humour and stage raucous audience participation), and 16th- and 17th-century dell’arte comedie (the Yonge Street theatre), renowned for its “warmth of colour and light drama, from 10 to 15 minutes each – ran continuously in the lower theatre. In the upper theatre, the same show was presented once an evening to reserved, higher-priced seats, theoretically bringing two audiences to each show, thereby doubling the box office take.

To make his dream a reality, Loew purchased property in the theatre block between Yonge and Victoria streets, north of Queen Street, and enlisted the help of leading theatre architect Thomas Lamb, and the first double-decker one in Canada. The classical architecture of these theatres was typical of Ontario’s theatrical history, pantomimes have played their parts in shaping our theatrical landscape. Toronto’s Royal Alexandra Theatre opened in 1907 – and its opening play was, not surprisingly, a pantomime. When the Orillia Opera House was newly destroyed by fire in 1915, the subsequent rebuilding and reopening in 1917 was marked by a pantomime. And now, since 1996, Petty’s annual panto at the Elgin Theatre has become an anticipated part of the holiday season for many. The popularity of panto,” notes Petty, “comes from the unique element of audience interaction with the performers and ad lib about daily news events. There’s as much entertainment value for adults as for children.”

The modern pantomime continues to be an important part of our theatrical repertoire. And given the popularity of these annual productions for celebrities who claim an opportunity to bring “play” back to the stage, the panto shows no signs of disappearing – despite all the “boos” and “hisses.”

Looking back

When theatre entrepreneur Marcus Loew brought Loew’s Theatrical Enterprises to Toronto in 1912, he envisioned an “intricate, money-making machine,” a double-decker theatre designed, decorated and equipped to be profitable by showing films and vaudeville acts. Vaudeville shows – songs, dances, gymnastics, ventriloquists, farces and light drama, from 10 to 15 minutes each – ran continuously in the lower theatre. In the upper theatre, the same show was presented once an evening to reserved, higher-priced seats, theoretically bringing two audiences to each show, thereby doubling the box office take.

To make his dream a reality, Loew purchased property in the theatre block between Yonge and Victoria streets, north of Queen Street, and enlisted the help of leading theatre architect Thomas Lamb, and the first double-decker one in Canada. The classical architecture of these theatres was typical of vaudeville stages, set apart by its lavish interiors. The lower theatre (the Yonge Street theatre), renowned for its “warmth of colour and coziness,” was decorated in modern French Renaissance style – with gilt, imitation marble, red damask and ornamental plasterwork of festooned grapes, ribbons and musical instruments. The Winter Garden, inspired by the European tradition of rooftop theatres, was enchanting. Its walls were decorated with garden murals. Beech leaves and branches were suspended from the ceiling, illuminated by every colour of twinkling light, above which floated a peaceful moon that was said to “suffuse its rays over the whole fairylike picture.”

The lower and upper theatres opened in December 15, 1913 and February 16, 1914 respectively. Both theatres presented vaudeville acts and silent moving pictures until 1928, when the Winter Garden was closed and Loew’s Yonge Street transitioned from vaudeville shows and silent movies to talkies, culminating in the golden era of moviemaking. Throughout its life, the theatre witnessed significant periods of Canadian history, and served a cross-section of Toronto society and people over time – from the First World War and the Great Depression to the Second World War and post-war economic boom.

After the lower theatre closed in 1981, the Ontario Heritage Trust acquired the building, restoring and upgrading it. The Elgin and Winter Garden theatres were designated as National Historic Sites in 1982, the double-decker complex being recognized as provincially and nationally significant for its architecture. The building is one of the few surviving theatres designed by Thomas Lamb, built during an economic boom.
In 1981, when the Ontario Heritage Trust stepped in and purchased the theatre, the Winter Garden had been abandoned for more than 50 years and the Elgin had just closed, creating a vacant building under threat. But the Trust had a plan—to revitalize the facility as a commercially viable heritage, cultural and economic resource for the performing arts, in support of Ontario’s growing indigenous commercial theatre industry.

The inherent design of the EWG presented challenges. The double-decker theatres were essentially vaudeville houses for continuous performance with no intermissions. Generous lobbies, washrooms and other amenities were considered unnecessary when the building was designed in 1913. The Grand Staircase to the upper theatre, despite its grandeur, carried with it concerns about patron comfort and safety. Back of house, an old stair tower rising 62 feet (19 metres) provided access to a warren of 23 small dressing rooms designed for actors scurrying between two simultaneous shows. In short, the historical theatre building, despite the opulence of its front-of-house spaces, lacked the basic infrastructure required for modern theatre production.

Project Architect Mandel Sprachman provided the needed amenities by incorporating the “cascading lobbies” – a series of new, interconnected terrace levels equipped with escalators and stairs, rising in stepped fashion above the Yonge Street lobby, connecting the various orchestra, balcony and mezzanine levels of the two theatre spaces. A new eight-storey addition was constructed adjacent to the theatre’s fly-towers, providing modern production, loading, dressing and rehearsal spaces. Additional administrative and lounge areas were provided through the excavation of a partial basement.

The most visible and anticipated aspect of the project was the restoration of the two theatre interiors. The Elgin had suffered extensive alterations through its declining years of use as a movie theatre. The proscenium arch had been destroyed to accommodate a wider screen and the opera boxes had disappeared. With the original architectural drawings and archival photographs as reference points, the interior of the Elgin with its gilt ornamental plaster surfaces, red damask wall coverings and imitation marble features was painstakingly restored or reconstructed.

By contrast, the Winter Garden had remained a virtual time capsule since its closing in 1927. Its one-of-a-kind interior of scenographic, garden-themed murals needed only to be cleaned and touched up. The hanging leaf ceiling with patio lanterns was replated using local beech trees and the missing theatre seating was replaced. The assembly of rare trade skills needed to perform this work spurred a renewed interest in long-forgotten architectural decorative arts.

The reimagining and restoration of the EWG was the largest project of its kind in Canada. Today, it remains a unique example of Ontario’s theatrical heritage.

Romas Bubelis is an Architect with the Trust.
Today, the Elgin Theatre is regarded by patrons and performers alike as one of the best venues in North America. Its ambience allows an audience to appreciate theatrical talent at its best. Where else could Opera Atelier so successfully achieve the accolades it receives for its brilliant productions of baroque opera? Or Ross Petty present his popular family musicals for nearly 20 years? Or the legendary Christopher Plummer portray earlier legend, John Barrymore, so convincingly? Patrons of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), too, return every year to spend 10 days at the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre, which is regarded as one of the best TIFF venues.

Upstairs from the Elgin, the Winter Garden Theatre has emerged as one of the best mid-sized concert venues in Toronto for jazz, blues, new music and stand-up comedy due to its superb acoustics. It, too, has become a venue for TIFF, following the installation of a new surround sound system. It may have taken nearly 100 years, but talkies have finally arrived at the Winter Garden!

Were Julius Bernstein, Marcus Loew and Thomas Lamb to walk through the Yonge Street entrance today, they would instantly feel at home. The sense they created and managed still thrills its audiences as much as the shows they’ve come to see, and continues to enrich the quality of the urban landscape, and the unique role they play in inspiring artists.

Looking forward by Beth Hanna

Walk with me through the lobby of the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre. Feel the anticipation as we pass the mirror-lined, columned entranceway. For me, there is a growing sense of wonder of understanding – a truly inspiring setting for music, theatre, dance and film, for visual arts and cultural expressions of all types. So come, explore and stay awhile. The magic awaits.

Brett Randall is the General Manager of the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre.

Second run: A new life for an Ontario theatre

Since the early 1970s, Magnus Theatre in Thunder Bay has made a commitment to urban renewal and the reuse and repurposing of community buildings. The theatre has occupied facilities that have ranged from “very thoroughly condemned” to challenging at best. Despite these spaces, Magnus has been able to develop theatre in northeastern Ontario and Thunder Bay specifically.

Burton Lancaster established the theatre company in 1971, sharing “The Spike” – a two-storey, brick-façaded east-end hovel, with the local amateur group – the Cambrian Players. Working from what was described as not much more than a storage and rehearsal room, Magnus Theatre was onstage and on the road – touring with Theatre North-West.

In 1974, Lancaster discovered the Slobkensky Dam, an ethnic community hall constructed in the early 1930s in Thunder Bay’s east end. The two-storey brick building was of unremarkable architecture, but the swelling roof of the rear inspired Lancaster, who set out to develop it into a theatre.

The hall was transformed and the flat floor raised to provide seating for 194 people. Even with a small lobby, a challenging stage and a filled basement, Magnus was to become the only professional theatre company between Winnipeg and Sudbury by 1977. By the mid-1980s, however, the shoebox Slobkensky Dam was bursting at the seams. The City of Thunder Bay offered an opportunity to participate in a multimillion-dollar 1,500-seat arts complex – but Magnus chose to remain close to its roots – “for drama needs closeness, the intimacy of the artist and the audience.”

In 1983, the sale of the Central School, a heritage building in the Waverley Park heritage conservation district, presented an opportunity to realize the Magnus in the Park theatre project. The Central School stood for years as a landmark on Algoma Street, sitting atop the hill overseeing the harbour below. Designed by architect Robert J. Edwards, the building was constructed in 1904 as the city’s first permanent school in the community. The landmark featured a brick façade dominated by a central tower with a large wheel window and a 1901 addition that blended into the original structure.

Functioning as a school until 1965, the building was later used by the Board of Education and the city. Municipal heritage designation was secured in May 1983. In 1992, discussions arose concerning the reuse of the building and the fear that age and neglect might lead to it being condemned.

Central School stakeholders considered the proposal by Magnus as well as a condominium proposition. After Magnus’s plan was approved, the theatre undertook a four-year fundraising campaign (1991-2001) to offset a $5.5-million renovation. Magnus opened its 30th anniversary season in 2001-02 in this transformed building. By renovating the original Central School for use as offices and administrative spaces, and adding a theatre at the back of the 1961 addition, Magnus finally had a state-of-the-art facility – the Dr. S. Penny Petrone Centre for the Performing Arts.

Pamela Cain is the Heritage Researcher for Thunder Bay’s Heritage Advisory Committee. For more information on the city’s heritage resources, visit www.thunderbay.ca/eng/culture_and_heritage.
From Stratford to Shaw: Transforming smalltown Ontario

By Ellen Flowers and Gordon Pim

It’s hard to imagine either Stratford or Niagara-on-the-Lake being where they are today without their world-renowned theatre festivals. But, before these festivals opened their doors, both small towns had other identities entirely. By adapting to change, these communities avoided becoming outmoded or marginalized. Elements of each town’s unique history, geography and architectural character helped make them ideal locations for their respective festivals.

Stratford, incorporated as a city in 1885, had already enjoyed a boom time. With a burgeoning manufacturing industry aided by the Canadian Pacific Railway that ran through and dominated the town, Stratford quickly became a thriving commercial centre along the Avon River. So successful was the railway development that, in the early 20th century, a number of local advocates – particularly local businessman R. Thomas Orr – had to fight to prevent the scenic Avon waterfront from being developed by the railway. But the Great Depression devastated the community’s economy and the city’s industrial base slowly declined.

But people did not give up on Stratford. Orr was instrumental in developing the extensive parks system that still runs along the river. Orr also developed links between his city and the birthplace of William Shakespeare. Tom Patterson, inspired by the beauty of his hometown, became obsessed with establishing a theatre festival that would put Stratford on the map. In 1952, Patterson established the committee that would become the Festival’s board of directors. Later that year, with assistance from Canadian director Don Mavor Moore, an introduction was made between Patterson and British director Tyrone Guthrie (who became the Festival’s first Artistic Director). Guthrie was intrigued by the opportunity to launch a Shakespearean festival.

The Stratford community rallied around Patterson and the Festival. Local citizens became volunteers on the gates and at the box office, and even opened their homes to provide accommodations for the actors and theatre patrons. The Stratford Festival opened to rave reviews on July 13, 1953 with a production of Richard III.

Today, the Stratford Festival remains the city’s largest employer, generating approximately $140 million in economic activity annually. The community still rallies around the internationally acclaimed festival and enjoys significant economic spin-off – with restaurants, bed and breakfasts, and local shops all benefiting from the hundreds of thousands of tourists flocking to Stratford each year.

Stratford has become synonymous with the arts in Canada and is a leading contributor to the growth of the city’s creative economy. This vitality has also encouraged the development of a progressive business park and has attracted a large number of historical buildings in Stratford have been adapted to house services and businesses that directly and indirectly support the Festival. Additionally, a heritage conservation district protects the downtown. Niagara-on-the-Lake has a similar history that places it firmly on the map as far back as the arrival of John Graves Simcoe and the American Revolutionary Wars Following the War of 1812, when much of the town was destroyed, Niagara-on-the-Lake slowly regained its economic health. But its preferred geographic location was further eroded in the 1830s when the Welland Canal was built. Despite these setbacks, the town continued to expand throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Tourism blossomed during the 1870s when hotels started to appear. Leisure activities flourished and some summer tourists eventually became year-round residents. By the mid-20th century, however, Niagara-on-the-Lake was seen as somewhat adrift. Visitors and residents alike referred to it as quiet and uninviting – or just plain dull. While it could still boast beautiful historical buildings, some of them were falling into disrepair. With steamers and trains now bypassing the town, sleepy little Niagara-on-the-Lake was slowly disappearing.

Then, in 1961, the town’s outlook changed. Brian Doherty, a Toronto lawyer who had moved his practice to Niagara-on-the-Lake, brought together a small group of people to generate ideas to revitalize the town. The conversation almost immediately turned to theatre – Doherty’s passion. He had not only written for the stage (and enjoyed modest success on Broadway), but he had also produced theatrical productions and was on first-name terms with several leading London and New York actors. When the discussion turned to their preferred focus, George Bernard Shaw’s name rose almost immediately to the top of the list.

With a local organizing committee, the backing of an enthusiastic town, an obliging council and with actors and a director secured, the “Salute to Shaw” – as the first season was known – opened on June 29, 1962 with a production of Don Juan in Hell followed by Candida. The Shaw Festival was born.

In the years following the Festival’s launch, interest in architectural preservation grew in the community. The town became known as a centre for conservation expertise and many of its landmarks were restored and rehabilitated in the 1970s. In 1986, the town designated its downtown core a heritage conservation district. In 2003, it became a National Historic District – another example of how the arts and culture served as the catalyst for a renewed interest in heritage conservation and pride of place.

Since the Shaw Festival emerged, Niagara-on-the-Lake has flourished, contributing over $75 million to the local economy each year.

The Shaw Festival – while spending money locally on accommodations, restaurants, shops and attractions.

Throughout the centuries, the towns of Stratford and Niagara-on-the-Lake have each contributed to Ontario’s heritage in unique and compelling ways. Yet each place has also influenced the founding of their festivals through economic circumstances, geography and supportive communities. As these festivals grew and prospered, so too did the communities. It begs the question: Who saved whom?

Ellen Flowers is the Manager of Marketing and Communications at the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Centre. Gordon Pim is the Senior Web Communications and Marketing Specialist at the Trust.

The historical setting and natural beauty of the town has played a large role in how The Shaw has marketed itself. The town of Niagara-on-the-Lake is steeped in tradition, with many families able to trace back their roots to the War of 1812. Careful consideration of local traditions and sensitivities of those living in the town for many years has impacted how The Shaw has done business, how we communicate to our local audience and how we partner with local businesses.

— Odette Yazbeck, Director of Public Relations, Shaw Festival
The vaudeville era is one of the more remarkable chapters in the history of theatre and performance. Vaudeville was a dazzling and colourful genre of live entertainment that reached its peak at the turn of the last century, only to be replaced by radio and motion pictures. Vaudeville was popular throughout North America, with troupes of comedians, dancers, acrobats and musicians travelling anywhere they could get bookings. Ontario had its own array of talented vaudeville performers who travelled throughout the continent. Perhaps all but forgotten today, many of these performers were immensely talented and entertained grateful audiences in the heyday of the vaudeville era.

Historical documentation about Ontario’s vaudeville legacy is limited, but what does survive is captivating. For instance, there is a series of 70 or so remarkable photographic images captured on glass plate negatives in 1910 by the Roy Studio in Peterborough. Known simply as the “Vaudeville Series,” these photos capture images of different travelling companies, including perhaps Canada’s best-known—the Marks Brothers Dramatic Company, known as The Canadian Kings of Repertoire. The Marks Brothers Dramatic Company originated in the 1870s in Christie Lake, a small town near Perth, Ontario. They performed for nearly 50 years, delighting audiences across North America, and were known for lavish and dazzling stage design and flamboyant performances. In a Macken’s magazine retrospective written in 1918, they were called “the most remarkable theatrical family in Canadian history.” But with the decline of vaudeville, the Marks Brothers touring company folded in 1920.

In 2000, the entire collection—which captured virtually every facet of daily life in a small Ontario community—was acquired by the City of Peterborough, thanks to a generous donation from Jim Balsillie, co-founder of Research in Motion (makers of the BlackBerry) and a former Peterborough resident. Not long after the Peterborough Museum and Archives secured public ownership, it became clear that this visually stunning vaudevillian series could be the focus of a travelling exhibition. Funding was secured from the federal department of Canadian Heritage. In August 2005, the museum launched “Voices of the Town: Vaudeville in Canada,” which explores the remarkable history of vaudeville using the Roy Studio images. The exhibit has travelled the country and is still touring today—a testament to the allure of vaudeville, the quality of the Roy Studio images and the curatorial expertise of the Peterborough Museum and Archives. Vaudeville may now be a distant memory, but at least this archival treasure survives and the historical information it holds can be revealed and shared.

The Peterborough Museum and Archives, after acquiring this nationally significant collection, launched a relocation project to transfer it from the basement of the studio to a purpose-built storage facility at the local public library. A collections management plan was developed focusing on conservation and documentation. The plates were inspected, cleaned and stabilized. Digitization was another key task, since there was a tremendous public interest in seeing the images.

The Vaudeville Series captured public attention well before the Roy Studio acquisition was finalized. Some of the images from this series had surfaced over the years, but only after public acquisition could the full breadth and scope of the photos be revealed. Glass plate negatives produce images of unusual clarity and crispness. Some of the negatives are as large as 16 x 20 inches (41 x 51 cm), providing even sharper detail. Many of these negatives had not been seen since they were created in 1910. They show performers in full costume. Some are conventional portraits. Most of them, however, depict troupe members in dramatic poses presumably as would be seen onstage. We also see performers looking into the camera lens wearing comical or grotesque makeup. Fortunately, the Roy Studio adopted a solid record-keeping system from the beginning. All of their negatives were routinely housed in paper sleeves. Photographers jotted down information about the subject along with key dates and other pertinent details.
WHAT'S ON . . .

– Christopher Plummer

“This is a delightful trip through a time when English Canada’s theatre with such luminaries as Christopher Plummer, Joy Coghill, plays of the time and selections from McNicol’s interviews happened in the years leading up to that moment. Centre stage, but the real birth of professional theatre ultimately showed the world that Canada was ready for and many more. In 1953, the Stratford Shakespeare Festival decided that Canada needed its own professional theatre after the second world war, when a host of theatre people unbroken chain of Canadian professional theatre began just the majority of those taking the stage at Stratford were Festival. But Susan McNicol asks how this could be, when theatre began in 1953 with the founding of the Stratford Festival. The conventional opinion is that professional Canadian playwrights and theatre practitioners from across Canada. The National Arts Centre (NAC) focuses on the accomplishments of Ontario museums and how they build stronger communities. For more information or to register, visit www.museumsontario.ca. November 8, 2013 at 8 p.m. and November 9, 2013 at 3 and 8 p.m. – Tango Fire, Elgin Theatre, Toronto. With passion and desire, Tango Fire returns to Toronto. For more information, call Ticketmaster at 1-855-622-ARTS (2787) or visit www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg. November 21, 2013 at 8 p.m. – Emilie-Claire Barlow, Winter Garden Theatre, Toronto. Canada’s incomparable vocal-jazz jewel speaks to the theme of the archaeology of the Niagara peninsula. For more information or to register, visit www.ontarioarchaeology.on.ca. November 21, 2013 to November 23, 2013 – 19th Annual Latornell Conservation Symposium 2013, Niagara Falls. This year’s symposium speaks to the theme of the archaeology of the Niagara peninsula. For more information or to register, visit http://ontarioarchaeology.on.ca. www.shawfestival.ca. www.ryerson.ca/theatreschool/index.html. www.nationalartsceneca.ca/index.html. www.theatremuseumcanada.ca/index.html. www.theatreontario.com. www.theatrendontario.ca/blogpost.ca.

Here are some of the events and activities occurring over the next few months. Visit our website at www.heritagetrust.on.ca for more details!

October 18, 2013 to October 20, 2013 – Doors Open Niagara, Niagara, Ontario and New York. Join us as the 2013 Doors Open Ontario season comes to a close with this exciting binational event. Visit www.doorsopenontario.on.ca for more information. #DOntario


October 25, 2013 to October 27, 2013 – Ontario Archaeological Society Symposium 2013, Niagara Falls. This year’s symposium speaks to the theme of the archaeology of the Niagara peninsula. For more information or to register, visit http://ontarioarchaeology.on.ca. October 31, 2013 to November 2, 2013 – Heritage Canada Foundation 40th Anniversary Conference, Ottawa. In association with the Canadian Association of Heritage Professionals, Heritage Canada hosts this annual conference at Ottawa’s Fairmont Chateau Laurier. For more information or to register, visit www.heritagecanada.org.

November 6, 2013 to November 8, 2013 – Ontario Museum Association 2013 Annual Conference, Markham. The conference focuses on the accomplishments of Ontario museums and how they build stronger communities. For more information or to register, visit www.museumsontario.ca. November 8, 2013 at 8 p.m. and November 9, 2013 at 3 and 8 p.m. – Tango Fire, Elgin Theatre, Toronto. Burning with passion and desire, Tango Fire returns to Toronto. For more information, call Ticketmaster at 1-855-622-ARTS (2787) or visit www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg.

November 15, 2013 at 8 p.m. – Emilie-Claire Barlow, Winter Garden Theatre, Toronto. Canada’s incomparable vocal-jazz jewel leads her stellar band through innovative arrangements of American songbook treasures, rhythmic bossa novas and elegant ballads. For more information, call Ticketmaster at 1-855-622-ARTS (2787) or visit www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg.

November 16, 2013 – 19th Annual Edwardian Christmas Tea, Fulford Place, Brockville. Come and enjoy an Edwardian-themed tea with delicious fancy sandwiches, sweets and beverages served by costumed maids. Tour the mansion that is decorated for Christmas and enjoy live musical performances throughout the afternoon. Tickets go on sale November 1 (call 613-498-3005).

November 19, 2013 to December 15, 2013 – Trees for Children, Fulford Place, Brockville. To highlight this new partnership event between Brockville's Little City Charm Daycare and Fulford Place, local businesses will decorate trees with the theme of “A Christmas Long Ago.” Proceeds will be divided equally between a local elementary school, children’s mental health programs and educational programs at Fulford Place. Call 613-498-3005.

November 20, 2013 to November 22, 2013 – 19th Annual Latornell Conservation Symposium 2013, Nattawasaga. This year’s theme is Preserving for a Healthy Environment. For more information or to register, visit www.latornell.ca for details.

December 14, 2013 at 8 p.m. – The Bad Plus, Winter Garden Theatre, Toronto. After two sold-out Glenn Gould Studio concerts in 2010, The Bad Plus brings their unique jazz stylings to the enchanting Winter Garden Theatre. For more information, call Ticketmaster at 1-855-622-ARTS (2787) or visit www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg.

October 26 to November 2, 2013 – Abduction from the Seraglio, Elgin Theatre, Toronto. A revival of Opera Atelier’s highly successful production, this opera – featuring some of Mozart’s most demanding arias – is the perfect showcase of vocal prowess and comedic acting. For details, visit www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg.
Elgin Theatre Chandelier

Last seen in 1935. Approximately 100 years old.
Stained glass with brass trim.

Please contribute to the Chandelier Project.

Visit [www.heritagetrust.on.ca/EWG100](http://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/EWG100) or call 416-325-5025.

Illuminate our past. Light our future.