

## **The Summer Playhouse: Heritage That Entertains!**

by Katherine McIntyre

*Throughout the country, summer theatre companies are breathing new life into old buildings by attracting sell-out audiences to renovated and restored venues ranging from a 1840s livery stable to a 1950s curling rink.*

### **Red Barn Theatre, Jacksons Point, Lake Simcoe, Ontario**

After 50 years, patrons are still coming to one of the first summer theatres in Canada — the Red Barn Theatre. Located at Jacksons Point, Lake Simcoe, along a gravel road bordered by an old cedar rail fence, it opened at a time when there were few places where a young actor or playwright could launch a career.

Recognizing this, Alfred Mulock, an aspiring actor, leased the red barn for \$18,000 and installed a stage, lights and seats scavenged from an old movie house.

The barn's original wide plank floor and wagon wheel chandeliers give it its unique ambience. Newer additions include more seats, air conditioning and a new box office.

Although Mulock's tenure was short-lived and dissolved in a mass of debts, his basic premise of developing Canadian talent survived. Over the years many of today's Canadian theatrical stars first stepped on to the stage at the Red Barn summer theatre.

### **Showboat Festival Theatre, Roselawn, Port Colborne, Ontario**

It was a win-win situation in Port Colborne, a small city on the Welland Canal, when Roselawn, the city's most elaborate former private home, began to host theatre in the round.

Built in 1867, Roselawn features the turrets and towers of the Italianate style of architecture popular in parts of Canada at the time. After the original owners sold the house to a men's club in the 1950s, a curling rink and dining room were added. Membership declined, the club folded and the building reverted to the city.

Roselawn was rescued from oblivion by enthusiastic local businessmen who wanted a theatre in their city. The mansion was partially renovated as a local arts centre and the dining area became a small theatre. As the audience grew, the committee eyed the curling rink for further expansion.

The director at the time, Blake Heathcote, favoured a theatre in the round similar to one he had visited in Scarborough, England. Under the guidance of Toronto architect Peter Smith, the former curling rink became an intimate 300-seat theatre. The dining room reverted back to its original purpose, fine dining in a relaxed setting.

According to Smith, converting a curling rink to a theatre was not a problem. He centred the stage in the middle of a square of four banks of comfortable seats. For some musicals the banks of seats are rearranged and a conventional stage is used.

Vestiges of the rink remain - the vaulted cedar ceiling stained a rich, warm brown, and the metal girding, now used to support theatrical lights. Excess space became offices. The former showers, locker rooms and sauna are storage and dressing rooms. The Showboat Festival Theatre is now entering its 17th season.

### **The Livery Theatre, Goderich, Ontario**

Just off the town of Goderich's picture perfect town square sits The Livery Theatre, originally a harness shop on the Huron Trail. The stone façade as it appears today was added when the operation was expanded into a livery stable in 1878. Moving with the times, an automobile dealership replaced the horses in 1902.

It was slated for demolition in the 1970s. Local citizens intervened concerned that one of the town's historic buildings would disappear. Recognizing its potential as a theatre, enthusiasts formed the Goderich Arts Foundation to recycle the old livery into a centre for the arts.

Financially, it has been a rocky road to restore and maintain the old building. Volunteers help with the daily upkeep but a recent roof leak that damaged a costume collection - a major disaster – means even more fundraising.

### **Drayton, Ontario - Old Town Halls**

In neglected old vaudeville theatres, hidden on the second floor of fine old Southern Ontario town halls, many local theatre companies have found perfect venues for theatrical productions. Once alive with meetings, political events, social gatherings and riotous vaudeville shows, these halls had faded into obscurity as times changed.

Drayton, in the lush farmlands of Huron County, had such a theatre on the second floor of its crumbling and decaying brick town hall.

"Should we tear the building down or give it a retrofit?" a local residents' committee pondered.

"The theatre was a time capsule with a 'raked stage'. It even had the original gas pipes they used for lighting in the old days," says artistic director Alex Muskakas.

A decision was made. With the help of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Tourism, generous benefactors and volunteers, a retrofit began. Layers of paint were stripped from the old pine panelled woodwork, the stage was enlarged, the entrance and ticket office (the former jail) were upgraded and more recently an elevator was installed. To retain the exterior integrity of the building, old bricks similar to the original were found and used. Drayton Entertainment has acquired four more summer theatres throughout Western Ontario and has won many provincial Lieutenant Governors' Awards for the Arts. It is also debt free since beginning operation.

### **Blyth Town Hall, Blyth, Ontario**

Another old-timer, built just after the First World War, is in the red brick town hall of the village of Blyth. It was rediscovered by Keith Raulston, editor of the local paper. Recognizing that the old theatre was a treasure and a future home for local productions, he set the wheels in motion for restoration.

When engineers declared the roof unsafe, Raulston polled villagers to find if they were willing to fund rehabilitation. Ninety-nine per cent voted "Yes". For 30 years the Blyth Festival has been entertaining everyone within an 80-kilometre radius.

It has become a niche player in the theatrical scene, staging only Canadian plays. Its play development fund supports local playwrights to write about rural issues with a local twist. Many of the plays first produced at Blyth have become favourites in summer theatres across the country.

### **Springer Theatre, Gananoque, Ontario**

It's hard to find a more ideal summer setting than the Springer Theatre in Gananoque, situated along the St. Lawrence River.



Theatre goers spill out onto the verandahs of the former Gananoque Canoe Club overlooking the majestic St. Lawrence River.

At intermission patrons spill out onto the verandahs of the former Gananoque Canoe Club to watch boats plying up and down the river.

This original clapboard building's upper floor is now renovated into a modern theatre. The downstairs lobby, with its dark wood panelling and fieldstone fireplace, remains untouched.

The Springer Theatre is such a success that a second location has been added in the former fire hall up the road from the theatre. Using a grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage to convert a heritage industrial building into a cultural space, plus private donations, the fire station has become a modern small theatre.



A second converted Thousand Island venue, The Firehall, opened after the success of The Playhouse.

### **Théâtre Sainte-Adèle, Quebec**

Forty minutes north of Montréal, in the heart of the Laurentians, sits the Théâtre Sainte-Adèle. Suzanne Paradis and her husband Philippe-Riopelle bought the bankrupt theatre in 1988.

Housed in what was once a Catholic Church stone chapel, they updated the theatre and opened up the foyer. In the former church offices they added a commercial size kitchen and restaurant that seats 120.

Now, by drawing in local patrons, tourists and Montréal theatre-goers, this privately owned summer theatre flourishes without subsidies.

### **Théâtre du Marais, Val Morin, Quebec**

In the village of Val Morin, (not far from Sainte-Adèle) a small, abandoned private synagogue, tucked among the trees and beside a river, has been transformed.

"A little jewel of a theatre," says Sonia Pinché, local co-coordinator.

With one paid employee and a host of volunteers, including a retired theatre director with thirty years experience, the 100-seat Théâtre du Marais offers a wide range of productions suitable for its small size.



A delicate Star of David- shaped window, centred under the eaves of the Théâtre du Marais, recalls its origins as a private synagogue.

### **There Are Challenges**

Most summer theatres would not survive without the vision of their boards of directors and the work of volunteers who find donors, sponsors and government grants. Tickets are reasonably priced so they often don't cover the costs of production.

Maintaining audience members who prefer conventional theatre, while at the same time trying to attract a newer and younger audience, also remains an ongoing challenge.

"We can't fill seats with experimental plays, yet we can't sell the light stuff all the time," says Renee Blake of the Red Barn Theatre.

"You won't find cutting edge theatre on our stage. We specialize in musicals and comedies," says Alex

Muskakas of Drayton Productions.

“Our audience is generally in the 50-plus age and they want to be entertained on a summer’s evening,” says David Savoy of Showboat Festival Theatre.

Suzanne Paradis of Théâtre Sainte-Adèle caters to a similar age group. Capitalizing on her large tourist base, she produces one play per season with an all-star cast drawn from Quebec television and radio. Most summer theatres stage a new play every two weeks to maintain audiences.

All producers want to attract younger audiences. The Bluewater Playhouse in Kincardine, Ontario offers bar services before performances and at intermission. Théâtre Ste. Adèle has similar services offered on a canopied patio at the front of the building.

By partnering with neighbourhood enterprises summer theatres boost local economies. Blyth Festival allies with local churches for an all-you-can-eat supper before weekend performances. Several have theatre schools for local children. Many collaborate with hotels, inns, bed and breakfasts and restaurants.

### **End of Season**

In autumn some theatres shut down, their seats folded and lights turned off. Others revert back to their origins as a community place for meetings, concerts and parties. But all hold the promise of another summer of great theatre.

*Katherine McIntyre is a writer living in Toronto.*