

The Grand is Grand Again

After enduring decades of tasteless “modernization” and neglect, Calgary’s historic Grand Theatre has reopened. As the home of Theatre Junction, a local performance company, the Grand has been given a new lease on life as the city’s “hothouse for cultural and social activity” with regular performances by Alberta Ballet, Decidedly Jazz Danceworks and the Calgary International Film Festival.

Built in 1912 by James Lougheed, the Grand was the city’s first theatre and the largest one in the Canadian West with a seating capacity of 1,500. It attracted performances by Fred Astaire, the Marx Brothers, and Sarah Bernhardt and played host to local political rallies, debates and speaking engagements.

From 1912 until Lougheed’s death in 1925, the theatre operated as part of the vaudeville Orpheum circuit. It was purchased by Famous Players who held it for 46 years before selling to Odeon Theatres, who twinned the auditorium. Over the years much of its magnificent Edwardian décor, including two tiers of private balcony boxes, ornate plaster work and stained glass windows, marble wainscoting and brass railings, were removed or encased.

By 2000, the theatre had been dismally reduced to an indoor golfing range and the city had granted a development permit to demolish it and the adjoining Lougheed Building. Three years later, Neil Richardson of Heritage Properties, a local firm with an interest in heritage conservation, began work on the two landmarks. In March 2004, after the building was damaged by fire, the city and province put its financial weight behind the \$12-million project. The Grand also received \$2.5 million through the federal Cultural Spaces program as well as \$6 million in private donations.

“It’s a really contemporary space, but there are some remnants of the 1912 design,” said Theatre Junction’s artistic director Mark Lawes of the newly rehabilitated Grand. Structurally, the theatre has been built anew, except for exterior walls and some details, to meet modern code requirements. The theatre’s original coffered ceiling, although cleaned and stabilized, remains in its “as found” state.

University of Calgary On Campus Weekly, 11/18/05; *Theatre Junction Web site* <http://www.theatrejunction.com/>; The Calgary Journal, 03/04/06; FFWD Calgary’s News and Entertainment Weekly, 03/04/06.