

IMPERIAL THEATRE SOUVENIR PROGRAM



SAINT JOHN • NEW BRUNSWICK

1994

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

The history of the Imperial Theatre reveals a priceless record of the city, the province and the country. Within its walls, Canadian forces being sent off to both the First and Second World Wars listened to inspirational messages just prior to departure. MacKenzie King spoke from the Imperial's stage. The theatre was billed as the "finest in Eastern Canada" when it first opened in September of 1913, and it regained that distinction upon its grand re-opening in May of 1994, some 81 years later.

Showcasing the rich tradition of musical and theatrical talent in Saint John was one of the aims of Walter H. Golding when he conceived the theatre and spearheaded the drive to have it built. As the theatre's first manager, he also imported the world's most renowned entertainers to perform on its stage and brought in the best films available in an era when the motion picture was coming of age. At that time, Saint John was on a prestigious theatrical circuit that included London, England, New York and Boston.

Pioneers in establishing that circuit were the Keith-Albee Company of New York. Golding, a local man, was their Saint John representative who managed the Nickel movie theatre. Golding persuaded the Keith-Albee Company to build the Imperial on the site of the old Lyceum, which had opened in 1857, but had been destroyed by the Great Fire of 1877 (75 percent of the city had been destroyed). Prior to the fire, Saint John was considered one of the theatre capitals of the world—with five major performing arts centres as well as several smaller companies.

Although the Keith-Albee Company introduced films into vaudeville and instituted the 'continuous show', blending movies and live performance, vaudeville was eventually eclipsed by the popularity of talking pictures and the double film bill. In 1929, Famous Players and R.K.O. leased the Imperial. Later, Famous Players purchased a half interest, linking it to a chain of 700 first-class theatres across North America.

The Imperial was renamed the Capitol and Walter Golding remained its manager until his death in 1945.

With the outbreak of World War II, War Bond Rallies and patriotic concerts at the Capitol featured some of the most illustrious names in show business - John Sousa and his band, Gracie Fields, Ethel Barrymore, Edgar Bergen and Walter Pidgeon (who was born in Saint John and made his debut at the theatre).

Through the war years, Dave Thompson led the audience in a community singsong every night during scene changes.

The army and navy also staged variety entertainments to raise funds for their regiments. The wives of enlisted men received free passes to performances.

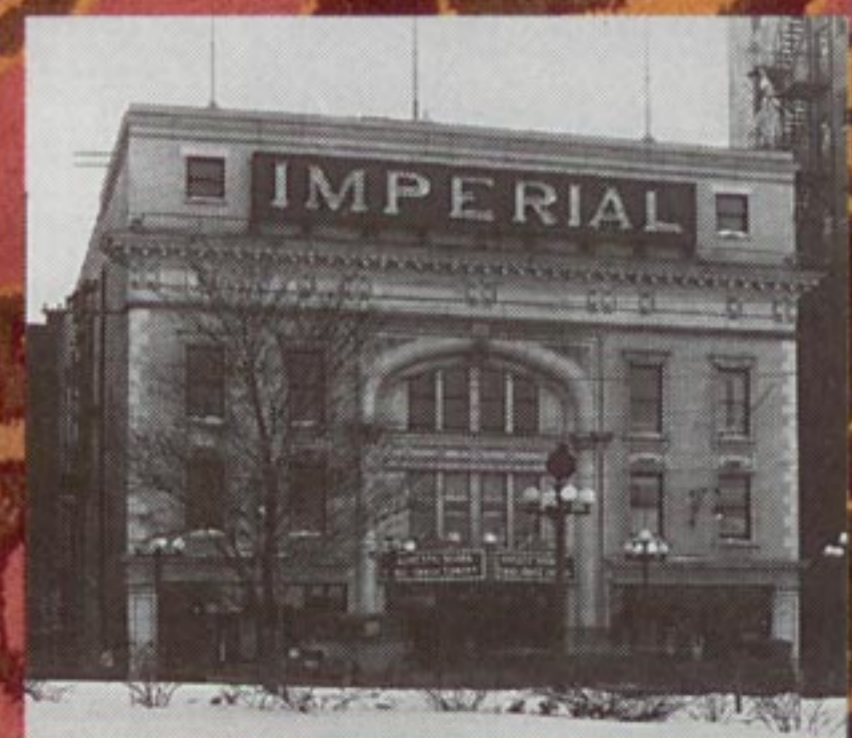
After the war, the National Ballet of Canada and the Winnipeg Ballet performed at the Capitol theatre. In 1952, the Dominion Drama Festival was held on its stage. But television was making inroads into the film industry and Famous Players closed the Capitol in 1957. The building was sold to the Davis sisters for \$166,000. They gave the building to the Full Gospel Assembly Pentecostal Church.

By 1977, the Full Gospel Assembly found the theatre too large for its needs and were considering selling, though the congregation was divided on the issue. Many felt the building represented their religious life - a generation of christenings, marriages and funerals - and they were reluctant to move to another building. Renovation was an alternative being considered in May of that year when two local Kiwanis clubs expressed an interest in trying to acquire the theatre for community use. It was decided, however, that the undertaking would be too expensive.

Later that same year, the Saint John Women's Symphony Committee proposed to Common Council that the City buy the theatre, but it rejected the idea.



Original Imperial Theatre Program from Grand Opening in 1913



The Capitol Theatre circa 1928



Don Wishart, left, president of the Board of Directors of the Imperial Theatre and MMC architect Douglas Köchel stand in front of the Theatre under renovation.



"Antiquing the decorative plaster molding"



For the first six months of 1984, the Bi-Capitol Project was taken up with selecting a first-rate team of architects, engineers and various theatre specialists and consultants. Applications for these positions arrived from all parts of Canada, the US and Europe and were judged by an expert External Review Board consisting of top engineers, professors, theatre administrators and performers. The architectural firms of A.J. Diamond Associates of Toronto and Mott, Myles & Chatwin of Saint John were selected.

Feeling he was not the best person to coordinate the Bi-Capitol Project during the upcoming construction and operations phase, Jack MacDougall resigned. In March of 1985 he was chosen as one of five outstanding young Canadians to receive the Canada Jaycees' Vanier Award for his work on the project. Ronald Neatham replaced him as coordinator.

The Bi-Capitol Project was awarded \$75,558 by the Federal Government for renovations and refurbishing.

Thirteen jobs for 227 work weeks were created by Employment and Immigration to dismantle walls put up by the former tenants and remove all furnishings from the auditorium.

In May of 1984, the provincial government under Premier Hatfield stepped forward with a \$1 million commitment for the project.

However, federal funding was delayed by a string of elections over the next few years.



Good news alternated with bad news as the months and years passed. The Irvings generously agreed to provide the Imperial with additional land so that the stagehouse could be enlarged and access provided backstage.

Instead of having funds to turn the job over to a contractor who could deal with all aspects of the work, the Bi-Capitol Board was forced to work piecemeal with architects—a stop/start, time-consuming and expensive procedure.

By 1989, the old theatre stood there in all its sadness, exposed to the elements, a grim reminder of hopes raised and dreams in jeopardy. The Market Square Corporation was commissioned to assess the situation and after a thorough review endorsed the project with a recommended downsizing. During this period the Directors sought and received renewed public support for the project.

Through hard work and cost-cutting measures, the Board of Directors, with the help of the Market Square Corporation completed the project for \$11.3 million.

Of that total, the federal government funded \$8.3 million, the provincial government \$2 million and the City of Saint John provided \$1 million.

Donald Wishart succeeded Dr. Condon as President in 1991. Councillor Dennis Knibb and Tim Isaac have been on the Board since the beginning. Saint John lawyer, Michael Wennberg, Saint John High Vice Principal Richard Thorne, and N.B. Tel executive Brian Reid have held key positions for many years. Over the years, the Board has always comprised a good cross section of the Greater Saint John Community, and its members have given greatly of their time and talents to its ultimate success.

A Saint John construction company, Meridian Construction, was awarded the job of general contractor. Mott, Myles & Chatwin Architects, known as MMC, were contracted as the theatre's principal architects to supervise the reconstruction. With funding in place, the reconstruction took 15 months to complete, employing 50 men for 140,000 man hours.

Former Saint John Member of Parliament Gerry Merrithew can be credited for bringing the federal government onside with the project. Despite the ups and downs of the project, Gerry Merrithew never lost sight of the goal of one day seeing the theatre restored to its former glory.

In 1993, the Board of Directors of the project decided to use the original name, Imperial Theatre/Théâtre Impérial, as the official name of Saint John's new performing arts centre.



Imperial Theatre was billed as the “finest in Eastern Canada” when it opened in 1913. The newly renovated facility builds on that reputation - its glorious interior, state-of-the-art sound equipment and splendid acoustics are attracting the best and the brightest in the theatre, music and dance world.

Many architects have contributed to the look of the Imperial as it has evolved from a vaudeville palace, to a movie house, to a church and finally, to a multi-purpose performing arts centre.

Douglas Köchel of MMC Architects in Saint John has worked hard to incorporate all of the previous interior designs into the restoration.

“Philosophically from the start, our aim was not to simply restore the theatre back to what it was in 1913,” Mr. Köchel says, “but to re-create the essence of the past. So, in a sense, the theatre becomes a physical collage of bits and pieces of history.”

The restored auditorium revives memories of the original, though, in fact, its interior has elements from different eras. The crystal chandelier is a replica of the one that hung over the auditorium from 1929 on. The rose-colored velvet theatre seats are also reminiscent of a later decorative scheme. The floral carpet was custom-designed to resemble a carpet that was installed in the 1940s.

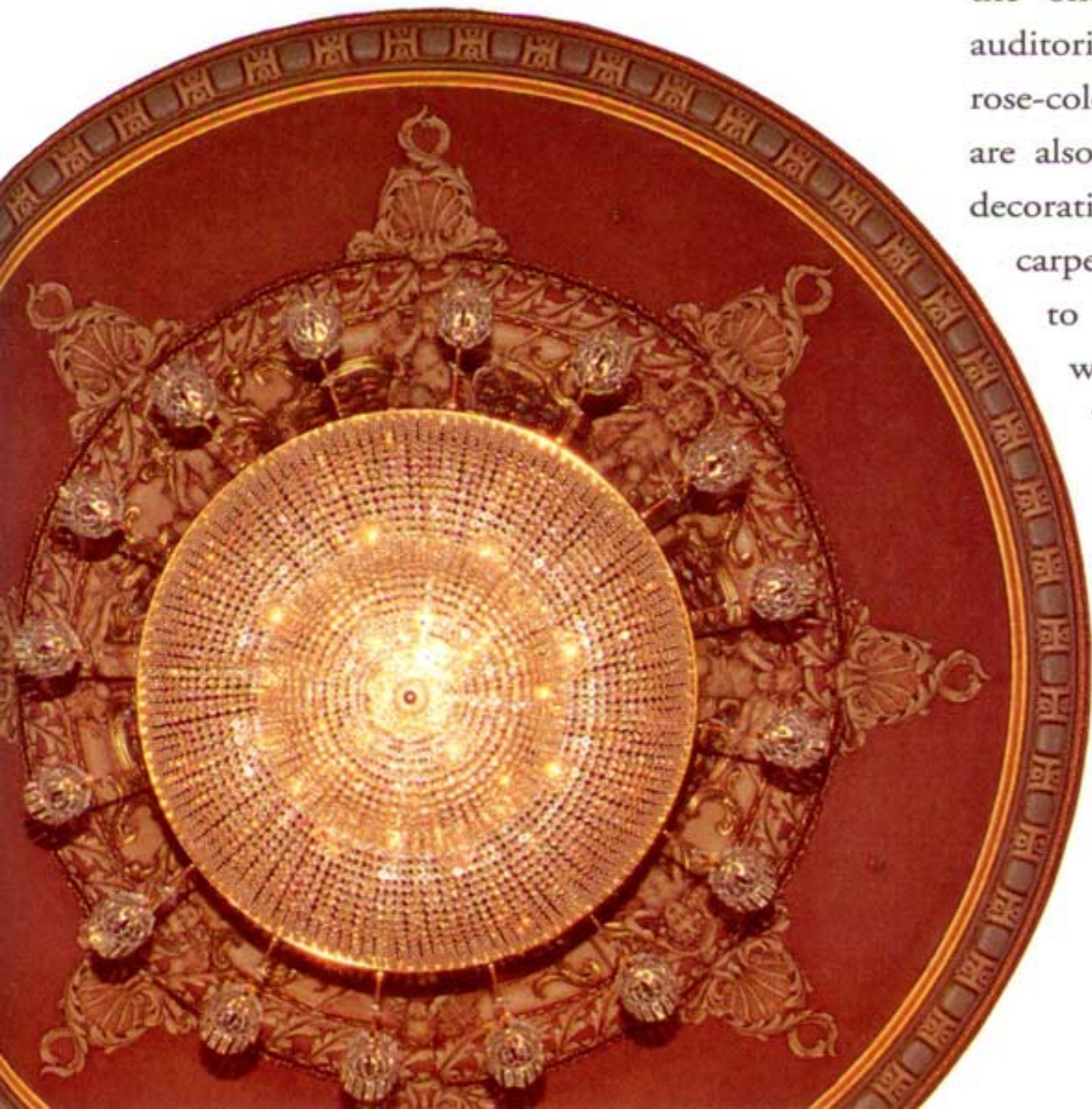
The decorative plaster work and specialty painting are reproduced from the original ornamentation.

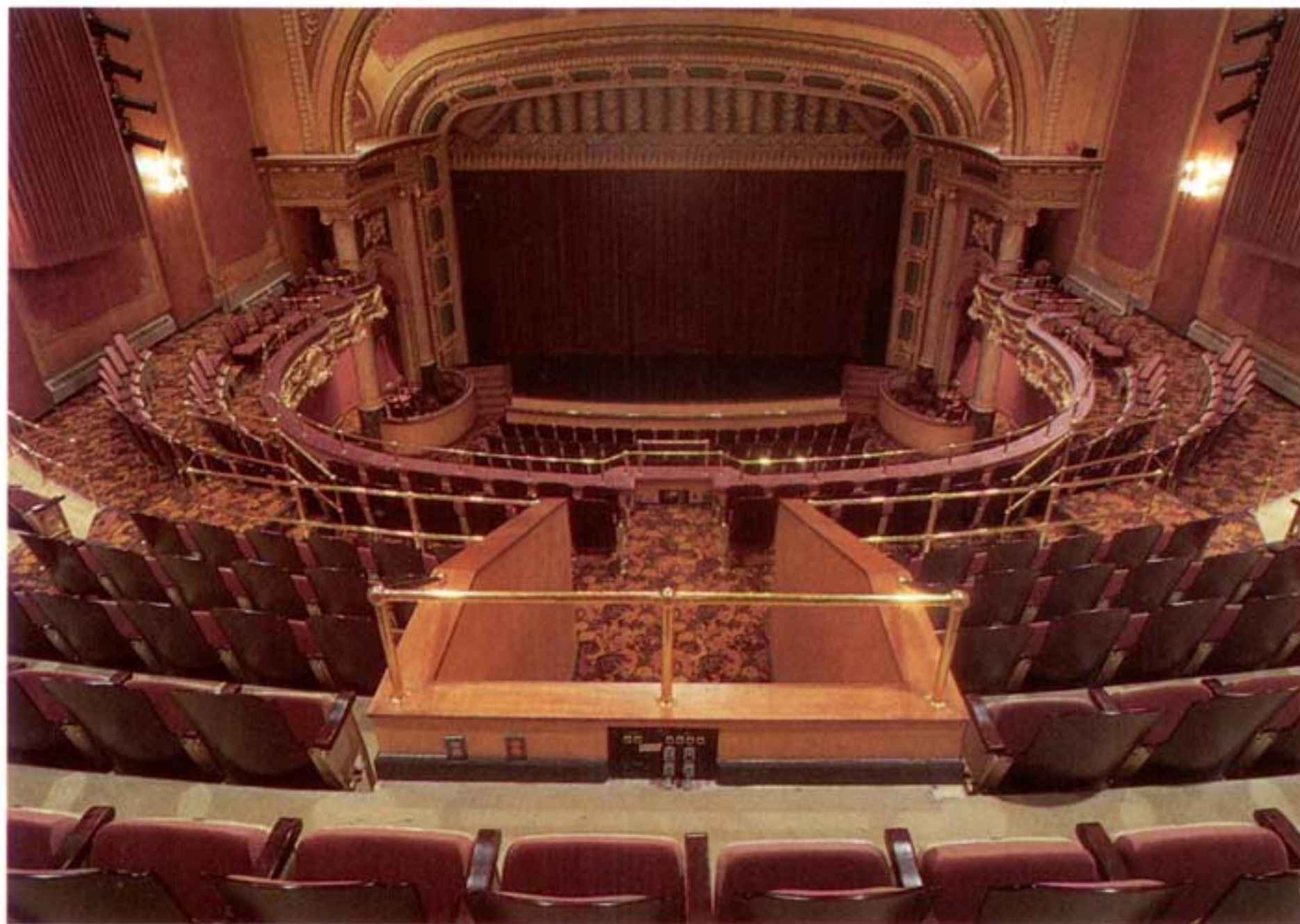
Master plasterer Jean-François Furieri made plaster molds from the originals.

“
Ladies
&
Gentlemen...

Imperial
Theatre.

”





Seat decoration reproduced from a period casting

He estimates he used more than 30,000 pounds of plaster to recreate the swags of fruit, garlands of flowers, musical instruments and Art Nouveau faces that decorate the balconies, walls and ceiling of the auditorium. "The original is one of the best examples of plaster work we've seen," he says. "The old style pieces are quite unique. It's of the calibre of an opera house in Italy. This is the quality we're talking about."

Specialty painter David Hannivan is equally impressed with the theatre's interior. Hannivan was responsible for all of the gilding, marbling, glazing and stencilling in the orchestra hall. He says the Imperial Theatre was the most gratifying project he's undertaken. "You can put your heart and soul into a restoration job and it still looks ugly - because it was ugly when it was built. That's what is so pleasing about this one. It was beautiful from the beginning."

"The finest in Eastern Canada!"

Although beautiful, the Imperial was built without a large lobby, adequate space backstage, and an orchestra pit.

Architect Douglas Köchel responded to the needs of a modern performance centre by tripling the area behind the stage curtain, building an elevating pit lift, providing for an orchestra shell and adding three spacious lobbies. "In the lobbies and the other new elements of the building, no attempt was made to make the spaces appear original", he says. "We did not want the additions to be confused with the historical spaces. We wanted a contemporary design that is compatible with the historic auditorium."

The theatre's reputation as 'the premiere touring facility in the Maritimes' is spreading. General Manager Jamie Grant is inundated with calls from touring companies eager to perform in a newly restored 929 seat house, with an extra large stage, a pit lift that can be adjusted to three positions, a computerized lighting system and enough dressing rooms to accommodate a corps de ballet.

But above all, Mr Grant says, "performers talk about wanting to entertain the enthusiastic audiences that make them feel welcome in Saint John."

Exquisitely designed chairs ensure hours of comfort in the theatre's private boxes

