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**Dr. Henry  
Morgentaler**

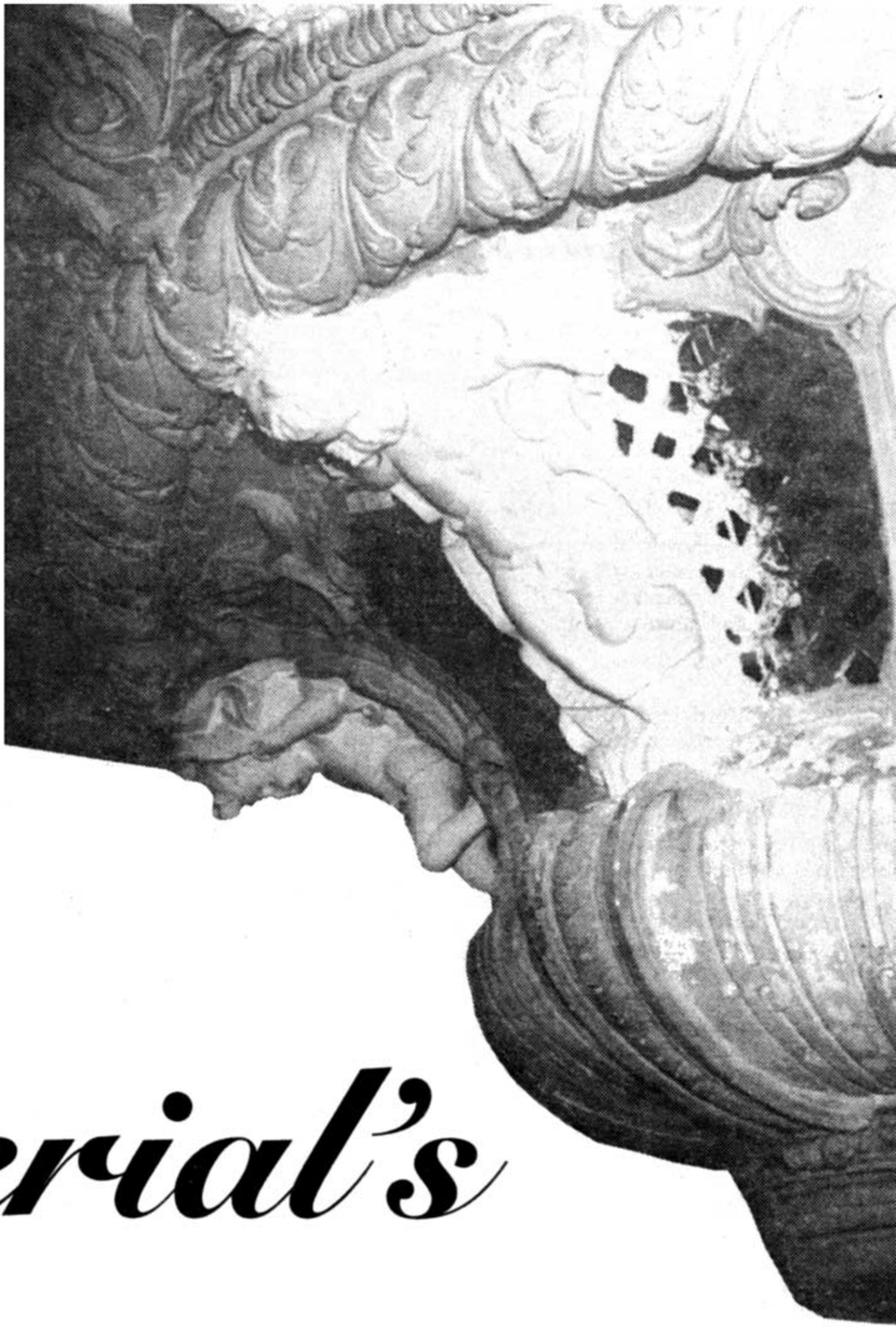
*by Philip Lee*

**The Imperial's  
master plasterer**

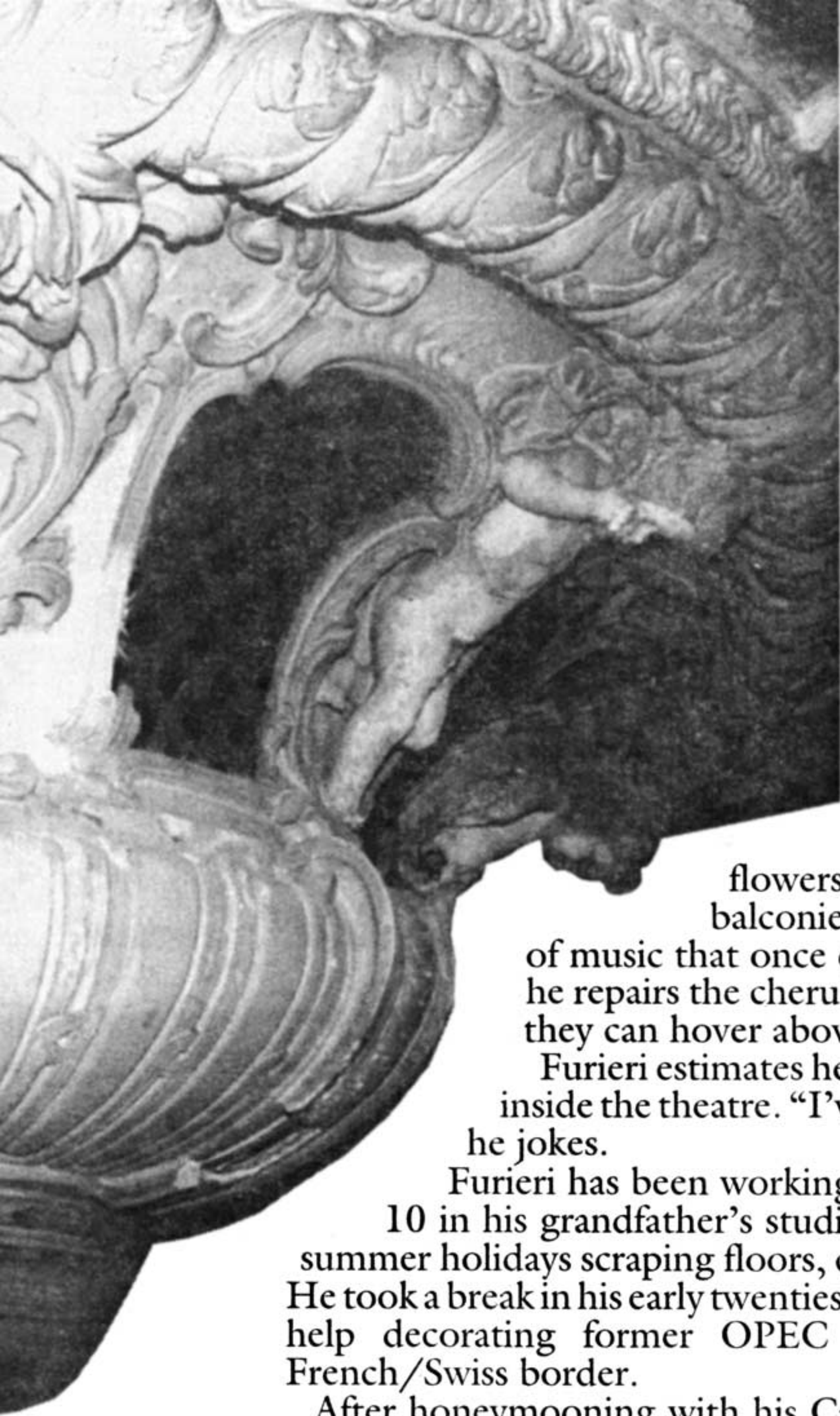
*by Christiane  
Vaillancourt*



*Jean-Francois  
Furieri brings  
European  
craftsmanship to  
the renovations of  
Saint John's  
venerable theatre*



*The  
Imperial's  
master  
plasterer*



*W*HITE footprints provide the main clue to what Jean-Francois Furieri does for a living. The former French judo champion leaves a trail wherever he goes.

Furieri, the master plasterer of the Imperial Theatre in Saint John, is restoring all the plaster ornamentation inside the auditorium. He reattaches swags of fruit, garlands of

flowers and elaborate medallions to the front of the balconies. He puts back the violins, Pan pipes and sheets of music that once decorated the pilasters lining the side walls. And he repairs the cherubs' wings and their chubby little arms and legs so they can hover above the auditorium again.

Furieri estimates he has already used about 30,000 pounds of plaster inside the theatre. "I've made a heavy duty contribution to the project," he jokes.

Furieri has been working with plaster for 28 years, starting when he was 10 in his grandfather's studio in Bordeghera, Italy. He spent weekends and summer holidays scraping floors, cleaning tools, mixing plaster and making molds. He took a break in his early twenties to study law but gave it up when his father needed help decorating former OPEC president Sheik Yamani's residence on the French/Swiss border.

After honeymooning with his Canadian bride in Niagara Falls, Furieri opened a branch of the family business – Iconoplast Designs Inc. – in Toronto in 1986. There are still quite a few fibrous plasterers in Europe, he says. In Canada, he can count them on one hand.

*S*INCE moving to this country, Furieri has restored the lobby of the Cinemas Egyptien in downtown Montreal, refurbished the Yale Simpson Lounge at the Royal Alex Theatre in Toronto, created decorations for the Silk and Satin chain of lingerie stores across Canada, reproduced ornamental details for a concert hall in Phoenix and worked on several private residences in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal.

His most unusual commission was to duplicate the frame surrounding Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa.



*'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.'*

– Jean-Francois Furieri, master plasterer

"I had to work from a photograph taken on site at the Louvre behind the protective glass. I duplicated it (the frame) and you can see it in the movie *The Freshman* with Marlon Brando."

Furieri's biggest project to date, however, was the restoration of the Pantages Theatre in Toronto—home of the Phantom of the Opera. The plasterer provided more than 3,500 pieces of ornamentation and recreated the great dome that was sliced in half when the original theatre was divided into six small movie cinemas. He also restored two 25-foot-long lacy grilles that stand on either side of the stage. His work on the Pantages helped the theatre win the

Award of Merit from the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario and prepared Furieri well for the restoration of the Imperial.

**W**HEN Furieri saw the photographs of the original decoration in the Imperial Theatre, he couldn't wait to work on the project.

"The original is one of the best 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."

The plasterer describes the style of the ornamentation as Louis XIV with a touch of Art Nouveau. "It is very special because it is extremely bold. I have never dealt with any ornamentation of that depth. It is the epitome of styles for fibrous plasterers."

A cherub from the Imperial, for example, is about six inches thick. A similar figure from the Pantages is less than an inch thick. When the figures lie side by side, the one from the Pantages is flat while the Imperial cherub rises like a cake.

"The architectural components are developed to the maximum," Furieri

explains "They took the design and extended it to the maximum projection they could and it's very spectacular. This is why you'll be able to enjoy the complete detailing of the ornamentation from anywhere in the theatre."

Furieri set up a temporary studio at the Imperial, 65 feet above the theatre's auditorium. A false floor was built seven feet from the ceiling so the craftsman and his five-man crew could work on the ceiling medallion and the decorative trim at eye level. The floor of the studio is covered with a thin layer of white plaster dust, making Furieri easy to find. Just follow the white footprints up the four flights of stairs and



One of Furieri's assistants, works on the side of the proscenium arch.

across the makeshift bridge onto the temporary floor.

The craftsman is surrounded by bags of powdered plaster and tubs of water. Buckets and pails, drills, trowels and other tools are also within his reach, as are several five-foot pieces of cornice moulding. Furieri yells instructions to his assistants, who attach the moulding to the auditorium walls and ceiling.

**F**URIERI made the molds for the Imperial's trim in Toronto because most of the original pieces were in such bad shape they could not be used. The theatre's original decorative elements were removed from the walls, balconies and proscenium arch seven years ago. Crews cut them down with chain saws and put them in wooden crates. The crates were stored in an unheated garage behind the theatre.

When Furieri opened the crates last spring, he found bits and pieces of ornamentation that were either warped or badly cracked.

"Most of the parts were not supposed to be removed, so when they were removed with chain saws and limited equipment, the plaster couldn't take such pressure so it became brittle and broke into many pieces."

Furieri saved what he could. For the rest he made molds from which he cast the decorative elements.

The hardest part of the process was finding enough pieces to make the moulds. None of the ornamentation survived intact. So, to restore a capital, for example, Furieri used what was left from one capital and glued it to what was left from several others. There were still sections missing. So Furieri studied photographs of the original and sculpted those sections to look exactly the same. The plasterer then made a mold of his reconstruction, from which he cast eight capitals that will sit on the top of the eight pilasters lining the side walls of the auditorium.

Gary Hughes, the chief curator at the New Brunswick Museum, is impressed with the reproductions. "I think it's very



Above: A detail of the proscenium arch. At right: A detail of a cherub's face.

good. His reproductions are very accurate. We can see photographs of the original work and viewing the work that the expert has done, up close, it's very, very true, very good."

Furieri started working on the theatre in September. It has come a long way.

**W**HEN Furieri first stepped into the auditorium last fall, he saw bare walls that were heavily pocked and badly stained. There were no balconies and no proscenium arch. The few pilasters left standing were badly damaged, as were their capitals. The only decorative element that was recognizable was the ceiling medallion — which was being used as a nest by several pigeons.

Today, a ribbon of bright white plaster laurel leaves wraps around the stage opening, bright white cherubs dance above the auditorium and bright white plaster faces peer out from the front of the balconies. Soon, all will be painted to look as they did 80 years ago when the Imperial Theatre first opened its doors to the public. Rumor has it that theatre-goers will get a first glimpse of the renovations in late March, when the Saint John Theatre Co. opens its production of *The Incredible Murder of Cardinal Tosca* by New Brunswick playwrights Alden Nowlan and Walter Learning.

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