

**Two Twelve**  
**DOWNTOWN JAZZ**  
 Peter Appleyard Quartet  
 June 24, 25 July 1, 2  
 9 p.m.-2 a.m.  
 212 King Street West  
 977-0212

**THEATRE** / *The splendid restoration of the Imperial theatre in Saint John was an act of civic courage on the grand scale*

## The jewel in the town

BY RAY CONLOGUE / *The Globe and Mail*  
 Saint John, N.B.

**S**AINTE JOHN went through a long period of low self-esteem," acknowledges Don Wishart. "But we've made great strides, and the theatre caps it off."  
 The theatre in question is the newly glittering, 930-seat Imperial, which rises like a jewel in the somewhat tarnished setting of one of Canada's poorest and often-overlooked cities. When it opened May 24 with more than

200 local performers — from impressionists to female baritones in barbershop quartets — it immediately began to reaffirm the city's belief in itself.

For Saint John, the restoration of the Imperial was an act of civic courage on the grand scale, and it was not without its share of foot-draggers and frightened politicians. By the time Wishart, who is now president of the board, and other principal movers got it completed, it had taken 12 years and cost \$16-million — nearly as much as the high-profile renovations of the Elgin and Pantages theatres in Toronto. This in a city of 80,000 whose population has declined 20 per cent in the past two decades.

Saint John has lately been trying to turn itself around and become once again the buoyant port city that, back in 1913, treated itself to a new vaudeville house with an imposing terracotta façade.

The Imperial had a few glory moments, not least including visits from the city's favourite son, film star Walter Pidgeon. But the theatre lived on to see not only the death of vaudeville, but also the

decline of Saint John. By the fifties, it had even lost its utility as a movie house, and was sold in 1957 to a fundamentalist church.

The Saint John's Full Gospel Assembly put a baptismal font on the stage and became, in its way, attached to the building. But the hollow old ceiling vault, with rain seeping through its darkened plaster cherubs, was of no esthetic interest to the church. Even basic maintenance had become a chore.

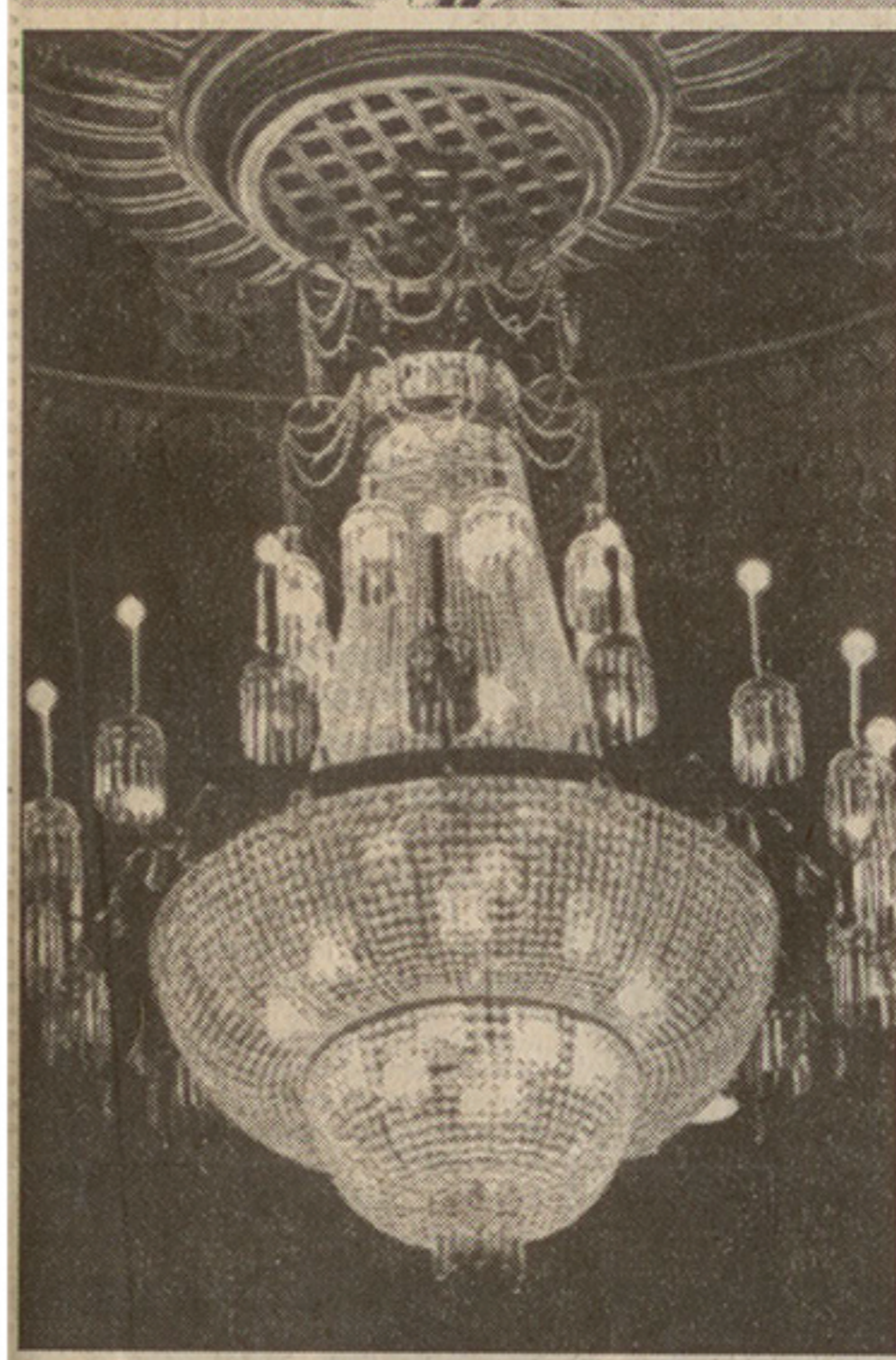
"All my life, from 1957 to 1982, this place was a church," recalls Jack McDougall, who would become the Imperial's own variety of saviour. "The congregation were Holy Rollers, and I don't say that in any negative way. But I would arc around this building when they would be out in the square proclaiming their faith."

McDougall, who is now an adviser to Premier Frank McKenna, is a flamboyant, colourfully-spoken guy who manages to look rumpled even in a spiffy suit. Back in 1982, he was a young man sorting out the different directions in which his life might go. "I had just sold a cab company," he recalls. "I was taking a stockbroking course, to see if I'd enjoy doing that, and in my spare time I was acting in plays." That summer, his theatre friend Susan Bate dragged him to the Imperial, where the congregation was trying to auction the theatre's Wur-litzer organ. "It had been left standing under a leak, and it was ruined. So I started looking around the place, and up in the gloom of the ceiling I saw these paintings and plaster statues. I kind of shivered."

Please see 'WE THOUGHT' — C4

(Left from top) the Imperial theatre's new chandelier; plaster cherubs and the architectural drawing of the facade: It took 12 years and cost \$16-million.

Photography by Brian Atkinson



## We thought we could just paint it and reopen

Relief is not just the plaster kind when a theatre restoration is finally complete. Story,

From Page C1

"It came to me for the first time that the place really was a theatre." As McDougall says this, his eyes travel upward along the newly rebuilt balcony. Elaborate scallops, up to 15 centimeters thick and formed of Mexican sisal fibre imbued with plaster, run the full height of the balcony front and constitute its principal decoration. At their base they are linked by curling ocean waves; floral swags complete the plasterwork (gold on dark green), which restorer Jean-François Furiere has said is deeper and more sculptural than the plaster he restored at Toronto's Pantages Theatre.

McDougall didn't know much about theatres back in 1982, and had only the foggiest idea what it would look like when restored. But he had time on his hands and he'd heard the Full Gospel might sell the place for the \$1-million they needed for a new church. Although he had little idea where he'd get it, he went to the pastor and offered \$1-million. "He told me he needed a divine sign whether to sell or not. I told the pastor that I didn't mean to seem irreligious, but I really didn't think the skies would open and a 'sell' sign come down."

It was a classic New Brunswick stand-off: religious fundamentalists looking for divine intervention, and a flat-broke entrepreneur looking for \$1-million. McDougall, who is not without a sense of humour, tied the two parties together in a proposition. If he could raise the million in one year, would the church be prepared to take that as a sign from God?

They would, and so he got to work. It wasn't an easy million. Saint John is dominated by the Irving family, who at first refused to contribute anything to the project. A group of developers who wanted the land were also unfriendly. And two mayors in a row felt the city couldn't afford it.

But McDougall had supporters, especially Bate. "We met in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*," she recalls. "I was playing Linus, and he was Charlie Brown. I like to kid Jack that he stayed in that role for years. He'd always say, 'Nobody likes me!'"

Bate had written a play about Saint John called *In The Fog* "because we al-

those familiar with old theatres will know better. "We thought we could just paint it and reopen," recalls McDougall. The committee got job-training grants and tried to restore using apprentices and semi-skilled local people. Money was raised, money was spent, but the old theatre remained leprous and unyielding.

By 1987, McDougall dolefully recalls, there were "pigeons in the fly tower" and a politician was running on the slogan, "Doze it!" But Saint John had not stood still during the eighties. A bit of the optimism of that decade had washed up the Fundy bay, and the city had established the Market Square Corporation to renovate its historic downtown. In 1989, Don Wishart, a hustling young accountant and successful businessman, came on board the Imperial project.

Wishart, slender and boyish, represented a new kind of New Brunswicker. He can recount folksy anecdotes (he likes to tell how the theatre's chandelier had been "broken up by a priest as gifts for favoured parishioners"), but he also found

**'I told the pastor that . . . I really didn't think the skies would open and a "sell" sign come down'**  
 — Jack McDougall

Jack McDougall's way of doing things "romantic."

"He raised a million to buy it, and didn't think beyond that," says Wishart, who decided to close things off and start again. This time, there would be a general contractor — the Market Square Corp. — and a realistic budget: \$11.3-million.

A final obstacle, in the view of all the Imperial's saviours, was then-mayor Elsie Wayne. Wayne wanted an athletic centre for the city. "She couldn't care less about the Imperial," says one prominent New Brunswick artist.

Wayne says that Saint John couldn't borrow money to help on the restoration because "it didn't own the theatre," and she didn't want to take money from a poor city's operating budget ("from street cleaning and sewer building") either. Her

she took. She also took the stand — in talks with Premier McKenna — that there wouldn't be an Imperial unless there was also an athletic complex.

Against this background of public discouragement and backroom politicking, Don Wishart became associated with the Imperial project. "I'd hear people on the elevator at work call this place an eyesore, and here I was the president of it!"

Wishart, like McDougall the previous day, is sitting with me in the orchestra of the former eyesore. It is, with the possible exception of London's Grand, the most beautiful restored theatre I have seen in Canada. Dusky rose is the dominant colour, together with gold leaf and accent colours which approach the "Moorish tints" called for in the original design.

Douglas Kochel, the Philadelphia architect who moved to Saint John to do the restoration, has said he was "perfectly faithful" to the plan created by Albert Westover in 1913.

By this he does not mean literally faithful. He retained the original walls and proportions of Westover's theatre, but in order to make room for modern lighting and mechanics — not to mention taller modern theatregoers — he reduced the seating from 1,800 to 930.

He also maximized space by rounding corners and putting a gentle curve into side walls. When work was completed early this spring, it was discovered to everyone's relief that the changes had not disturbed the acoustics described in a 1913 newspaper review of a piano solo as sounding as if "wires had been run from the piano to each seat".

Kochel even restored the orchestra pit, albeit using a new Quebec-designed system in which the pit can be ratcheted upward to become part of the playing area onstage in a matter of minutes.

Somewhere along the line, Wishart and the architect agreed that the back wall of the stage would have to be knocked out and the stage deepened if it were to accommodate modern touring theatre productions. In this they were influenced by the unhappy story of the Capitol in Moncton, which was beautifully restored and reopened last summer at a modest cost of just over \$3-million. But it has kept its tiny vaudeville stage, and it is already having problems.

Playhouse in Fredericton that might attract the kind of glossy touring Broadway shows that have long ignored the Maritimes.

But for the moment they have agreed on a conservative policy of one- or two-night shows of the variety type — the nearest equivalent of old-time vaudeville. The two weeks following the opening gala saw The Nylons and Frank Patterson succeeded by Polka Dot Door Live and Night of a Million Laughs.

Wishart is aware that the approach is middle- to low-brow, but he feels there is no point in Saint John pretending to be anything other than a "blue-collar city. Even white-collar people here are blue-collar in the way they think. It's hard to make them feel at home [in the theatre]."

Grant, an Ontario theatre manager, says he came to take over the Imperial because studies showed that Saint John "was at the top of the list" in terms of demand for the performing arts. But how much of that wish list will turn into real attendance — now that there is a theatre

**'I'd hear people on the elevator at work call this place an eyesore, and here I was the president of it!'**  
 — Don Wishart

— remains to be seen.

"We're in a market that wasn't a market before," says Grant. "We have to convert people from, say, sports."

Everybody agrees that it would be wonderful (for example) to bring the Neptune's production of *Les Miserables* from Halifax to the Imperial, but nobody has the slightest idea how to do it, or whether the Imperial can take the chance.

There will probably be a more incremental evolution toward serious presentation. Theatre New Brunswick's first show in the theatre, for example, will be a first play by N.B. novelist Bill Gaston this fall. "We're already seeing our subscriptions in Saint John increasing," says Shamata, "because there's finally a theatre for them to go to, not a high school auditorium."

Susan Bate calls the May 24 gala open-