

## **Royal Alexandra Theatre**

The Revised Reasons for Designation are intended to replace the Reasons for Designation in By-law No. 512-75 to describe the property's cultural heritage values and attributes as required by the 2005 amendments to the Ontario Heritage Act.

### Description

The property at 260 King Street West is designated under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act for its cultural heritage value. Located on the north side of King Street West between Simcoe Street and Ed Mirvish Way, the Royal Alexandra Theatre (1907) is a theatre complex. Commemorated by the Government of Canada as a National Historic Site, the Royal Alexandra Theatre is also recognized on the Canadian Register of Heritage Properties. The site was listed on the inaugural City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties in 1973, and was among the first properties in the City of Toronto designated under Part IV, Section 29 of the Ontario Heritage Act by By-law No. 512-75 in 1975.

### Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

#### **Design or Physical Value**

The Royal Alexandra Theatre is a rare example of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre with Beaux-Arts inspired styling that displays a high degree of craftsmanship and technical achievement. Recognized as one of a select number of "New York style" theatres built in Canada, its design was purportedly inspired by the New Amsterdam Theatre. The interior features an elaborate decorative program reflecting the Louis XVI style, based on late 18<sup>th</sup> century Neoclassicism and drawn from Greek and Roman architecture.

The property demonstrates technical achievement as one of the original "fireproof" theatres in North America using hollow clay tile partitioning and floor construction. To improve sightlines and acoustics, the interior columns were eliminated, the balcony and gallery (now known as the upper balcony) cantilevered, and the floors steeply raked. When constructed, ice was stored beneath the auditorium to assist in cooling the premises, purportedly making the Royal Alexandra the first "air conditioned" theatre in Canada.

#### **Historical or Associative Value**

The Royal Alexandra Theatre is important to the City of Toronto and beyond as an institution intimately linked with the social history of Canada through the development of its theatrical arts. Originally designed to host touring productions from London's West End and New York's Broadway, over the last century the Royal Alexandra has offered a succession of over 3000 live theatrical performances, ranging from opera and ballet to musical comedies and drama. The stage has welcomed local and internationally revered performers, including Mary Pickford, Anna

Pavlova, Al Jolson and Edith Piaf. Following its restoration by Ed Mirvish Enterprises, the facility has served as the setting for Canadian works and productions, as well as co-productions with national and international artistic companies. The Royal Alexandra is known as the oldest legitimate theatre in continuous operation in North America.

The Royal Alexandra is linked to people who are identified with the commercial and cultural development of Toronto. The theatre was commissioned by a syndicate headed by Cawthra Mulock, a successful businessman from an important political family (his father, Sir William Mulock, served as Canada's Post Master General) who was dubbed "Toronto's youngest millionaire." In 1963, Toronto entrepreneur and philanthropist, Edwin Mirvish (1914-2007), rescued the theatre from potential demolition. Identified with his well-known department store, "Honest Ed's," Mirvish refurbished the Royal Alexandra, engaging noted designer Herbert Irvine to restore the Edwardian interiors. In recognition of Mirvish's contributions to the cultural life of the King-Spadina neighbourhood, where his company refurbished many of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century warehouses, Duncan Street between King Street West and Pearl Street was renamed Ed Mirvish Way.

The Royal Alexandra Theatre also reflects the practice of the important Toronto architect John M. Lyle (1872-1945). Following training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, Lyle worked with architectural firms in New York City, including Carrere and Hastings who received commissions in Toronto and were involved as consultants in the planning stages for the Royal Alexandra. With the success of this project, Lyle opened a solo practice in Toronto and developed a successful career that included local landmarks like Union Station (as part of an architectural team) and the Runnymede Library.

Historically, the Royal Alexandra Theatre features a famous interior mural entitled "Venus and Attendants Discovering the Sleeping Adonis (or Aphrodite)", executed by Canadian painter Frederick Sprouston Challener (1869-1959). A graduate of and teacher at the Ontario College of Art, Challener was a founder of the Society of Mural Decorators. Among Challener's best known projects are murals at the Ontario Legislature, King Edward Hotel and Ottawa's Chateau Laurier, as well as works for "The Canadian War Memorials," the Canadian government's official war art program commemorating World War I.

### **Contextual Value**

The Royal Alexandra Theatre is a landmark in Toronto. Based in part on the successful rejuvenation of the Royal Alexandra Theatre and the adjoining buildings on the north side of King Street West, in 1982 Roy Thomson Hall was completed across the street as the performance venue for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Mendelssohn Choir. In the early 1990s, Ed Mirvish Enterprises commissioned the Princess of Wales Theatre on King Street, west of the Royal Alexandra Theatre. As a result, the section of King Street between Simcoe Street (east) and John Street (west) became the centre of the City's Entertainment District.

### Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes on the **exterior** of the property at 260 King Street West are:

- The theatre complex
- The steel-framed structure with stone and brick cladding and detailing
- The scale, form and massing
- The plan, which is organized into three parts with an entrance block with the reception and administration areas at the front (south), a central auditorium, and a fly tower with staging facilities to the rear (north)
- The two-storey entrance block where the south wall is organized into three parts with side wings (the second stories on the wings are additions) and decorated with brick quoins, stone keystones and cornices
- The main entrance, which is centered and recessed in the lower wall and has three sets of double doors with wood frames and multi-paned transoms in decorative pressed metal surrounds
- Flanking the entry, the flat-headed window openings containing double multi-paned sash windows with voussoirs and keystones
- The marquee above the entry, with a sign reading “ROYAL ALEXANDRA THEATRE” (the marquee is not original but has been in place for over 40 years)
- In the second storey of the entrance block, the French doors, the intricate classical detailing, and the cornice supporting a stepped parapet with a balustrade, cartouche and inscription, “ROYAL ALEXANDRA”
- Covering the entrance block, the mansard roof with segmental-arched dormers
- The side walls (east and west) of the entrance block, which feature stone cladding and, in the lower floor, flat-headed classically-detailed window openings
- Behind the entrance block, the auditorium where the exposed portion of the south façade and the side (east and west) elevations have brick cladding, dentilled cornices, and a parapet that is stepped on the south end
- Rising at the rear (north) end of the complex, the fly tower, which has brick cladding on all elevations with cornice detailing

The door and segmental-arched window openings on the rear (north) wall are not identified as heritage attributes.

The heritage attributes on the **interior** of the property at 260 King Street, and found in the main-floor lobby and foyer (with offices and lounges on either side), the auditorium with its orchestra level, balcony, gallery and stage, and the lounges on the second floor and below the auditorium, are:

- The richly embellished materials, with walnut, marble, plaster, tile and metal finishes, and details drawn from Classical architecture
- The lobby located inside the south entrance doors, with the ticket windows, coved ceiling, and the floor with the initials “RA”
- Flanking the lobby, the box office and interior offices on the east and the lounges on the west, which were altered during the 1963 renovations and have wood wainscoting and surrounds, plaster cornice mouldings and, in the Queen Anne Room (west), a fireplace
- Separating the lobby from the foyer to the north, the wood doors and transoms with glazing

- In the foyer, the plaster cornice mouldings, the wood doors and panelling and, on the east and west sides, the staircases leading to the promenade level
- On the second floor, the lounge with the Classically-inspired detailing beneath a coved ceiling
- Behind (north of) the foyer, the auditorium, which is organized into three parts with the orchestra, balcony and gallery (or upper balcony) under coved ceilings with mouldings
- The side walls (east and west) in the auditorium, which display wood wainscoting and double doors (the hardware on the emergency access doors is original)
- At the north end of the auditorium, the stage that is outlined by a proscenium arch with curved corners and mouldings with figural and floral images.
- Surmounting the proscenium arch, the large painted and framed mural depicting a meeting between the Greek and Roman personifications of love
- Flanking the stage, the four private box seats that are arranged in two tiers and surmounted by painted decoration incorporating the words “COMEDY” (east) and “TRAGEDY” (west)
- The mouldings along the edges of the box seats, balcony and gallery where elaborate the Classical imagery includes theatrical masks, musical instruments and the initials “RA”
- Beneath the auditorium, the lower-level lounge (is a later addition that complements the original design) with the panelling, mouldings, cornices and ceiling treatment

The seating configuration and seats in the auditorium are not included as heritage attributes. The shallow area behind the stage is divided into two levels of anterooms that contain no heritage attributes. On the interior of the building, the fixtures are replacements that are not identified as heritage attributes.