

VICTORIA'S PERFORMING ARTS HERITAGE



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SITUATION BRIEF #25

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Numerous historic sites and places mark Victoria's rich intangible heritage as an entertainment destination and centre for community arts celebrations.



First Nations

In Old Town Victoria, on what is the traditional territory of the Songhees peoples, there remains spiritual and material evidence of significant Lukwungen (now known as Songhees and Esquimalt) culture, in the songs, stories, and social

trading systems that, for example, accompanied the harvesting and distribution of foods. Before and after the building of Fort Victoria (1843) there were First Nations homes and villages and burial grounds dotting the area. Some big houses were supported by carved totem poles, while large scale ceremonial activities such as potlatching and mimic warfare continued regularly until the early twentieth century, typically bringing in visitors from the Island, mainland and Washington State.



First Nations camped and sold curios and artifacts at Hope Point. Beacon Hill Park (Meegan), before British colonization, was a place of rest, recreation and sports (Coqwialls). At the base of the hill stood a fortified village and, on the hill, a ceremonial burial ground with still existing cairns. Camas fields, many still in evidence today, provided an important source for food and celebration.

Songhees and Metis helped build Fort Victoria and many chose to locate nearby and became deeply involved with the work and economy of Fort Victoria (originally named Fort Camosun). At present-day Market Square are imprints of important creeks, while Fort, View, Vancouver, and Quadra Streets mark the margins of the food gathering areas. The tidal mud flats of James Bay contained valuable clam beds—long since buried to build the Empress Hotel. Burial grounds, sites of prominent ceremony and carved statuary, were located

at Laurel Point and at Songhees Point. It is important to remember that much of this cultural activity is detailed in many written and photographic records such as Grant Keddie's book, *Songhees Pictorial, A History of the Songhees People as Seen by Outsiders, 1790-1912*.

Early docking wharves

This was the entry point for first immigrants--as those who arrived on ships such as the *Norman Morrison*, bringing British cultural entertainment as Dr. Helmcken's reporting of "a night of private theatricals" (1852). In 1858 the Royal Engineers, sent by the colonial secretary Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, were to "found a second England on the shores of the Pacific."

The Royal Engineers had already been producing plays and publishing a newspaper with theatre reviews aboard their ship, *Thames City*; they went on to construct the first theatre building in the interior at New Westminster.



Naval On-Boards

These entertainments were first recorded in 1853, on a British warship in Esquimalt Harbour, the *HMS Trincomalee*, to which local colonists and “Gentlemen from the Fort [Victoria]” were invited to a varied program, likely consisting of comic, sentimental, and historical material connecting the British immigrant audience to their homeland. Theatricals staged by the navy, both on shipboard and in various city music halls, often joined by participating civil amateurs, remained the prevalent form of theatre in the young city until the early 1880s. These performances were very much social events often accompanied by music and dancing; occasionally topical material was included alongside the plays with typical British characters and situations.

Fort Victoria

Built in the early 1840s, with Lukwengen and Metis assistance, the Fort became the hub of economic and cultural life for the HBC workers and early settlers. HBC men staged amateur theatricals in the Fort’s Mess Hall, in 1857, with a production of a full-length British classic play, *The Rivals*, by playwright, R.B. Sheridan. Hudson’s Bay employees and Royal Engineers participated.

In the early days of Fort Victoria, the great barn on what is now Langley St. was cleared of its livestock to hold early dances to the tune of HBC veteran Jon Tod’s fiddle, and a young HBC employee who formed a tin whistle from a shipment of sheet tin. It wasn’t until 1853 that the community’s first piano arrived, shipped all the way from Europe. With the coming of the Gold Rush in 1858, and the subsequent influx of immigrants, a melodeon, barrel and pipe organ quickly arrived and were installed in local churches. In 1859 the very first Victoria Philharmonic Society was founded by Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie and Arthur Bushby, shortly followed by the Germania Singverein (probably Canada’s

first German musical society) in May 1861; Les Enfants de Paris in August 1861; the Victoria Musical Society (an amalgamation of two brass bands) in 1864; and a Glee Club in 1866. The city's first resident professional theatre company was Bastion Theatre (1963-1988), named for the iconic northwest redoubt of Fort Victoria.

Victoria Hotels

The Royal and Union hotels fixed up interiors or added halls for public entertainment. Victoria's first professional theatre troupes, often on tour from the US, played in hotels. The first known company, the George Chapman Pioneer Dramatic Company, played (1859) at the Assembly Building on Broad Street; they were followed the same year by a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Edmon S. Conner performing at the Royal hotel. More recently (early 20th century), the Empress Hotel featured regular entertainment, notably Billy Tickle's orchestra for dining and dancing, as well as the annual Christmas feast, where performers in Elizabethan costume (jesters, trumpeters) carried in a Yule Log and roasted boar's head. The hotel has been designated a "National Historic Site of Canada" (1981).

First Theatre buildings

On returning to Victoria after touring, in 1860, the Chapman's converted a music-hall on Government Street into a respectable theatre, "suitable for ladies," called the Colonial, the "first legitimate stock theatre built in the Canadian Far West." The venue was used by other American touring players such as the John S. Potter Dramatic Troupe (1860). In 1864 the famous British actors, Charles and Ellen Kean, played in Victoria, likely at the Theatre Royal.

Musical Groups and Associations

Music held a place of great importance in Victoria's social landscape from the earliest days of colonization. In addition to professional touring musicians and shows, local musical organizations thrived in the 19th century, with an abundance of church choirs that showcased the prodigious talents of families like the Parfitts and the Mowats.

Following the initial influx of new musical societies at the end of the 1850s and early 1860s, the next wave of immigration in the 1880s saw yet more amateur groups emerge, including dramatic and operatic societies. The modern Victoria Operatic Society had its roots in the 1880s, though it has been through several iterations since. The Arion male voice choir was launched in 1892 and remains Canada's oldest secular choir.

With rich histories of Gilbert and Sullivan, pantomime and vaudeville performances stretching well into the 20th century, Victoria's status as a city with a strong music culture is evident to this day through its amateur and professional musical and dramatic organizations like the Victoria Operatic Society, Victoria Symphony, Pacific Opera Victoria, Langham Court Theatre Society and more.



Parades

Regular, often annual, included May Day, May 24th and Labour Day parades, local societies (Native Sons of BC, Daughters of Rebecca, etc.), the Victoria Fire Department, many local merchants and dignitaries, as well as military units in field uniform who might also march and assemble in the area of the Parliament Buildings. Popular routes have been along Government and Douglas Streets. Ceremonial arches were built along downtown routes to welcome visiting dignitaries, the most elaborate for the visit of Governor General the Earl and Countess Dufferin in 1876. In permanent form, the Gate of Harmonious Interests on Fisgard Street, emblemizes these VIP “progresses” through City.



Parks

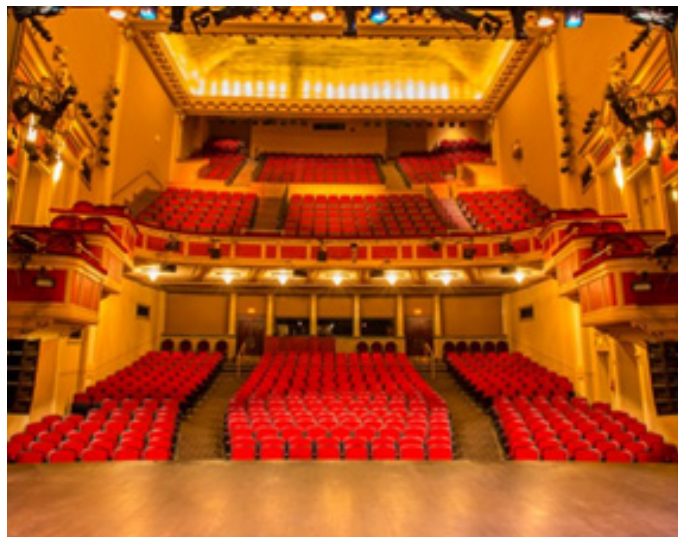
Beacon Hill features tracts of undisturbed natural flora, with notable man-made cultural activity. Established (1882) as a pleasure garden, the park has notable heritage structures: one of the world’s tallest totem poles (Mungo Martin) and a pebble bridge erected (1945) by Alice Carr in honour of her famous sister, Emily. Especially in its earlier days, the park was a major gathering place for civic events such as Victoria Day celebrations, sporting tournaments, horse racing, “sham”

military battles, and regattas. Local and military bands entertained afternoon strollers from the ornate Victorian band stand. It now hosts an interpretation kiosk narrating the history of the park.

Pioneer Square was originally a cemetery for former residents of Fort Victoria. The Wakefield system—The Art of Colonization—of urban planning was followed, as the site was first a Victorian-era cemetery, later an Edwardian park. For years it was the destination for elaborate funeral processions, a staple of community cultural life in the Victorian period.

Later theatres

The McPherson Playhouse, built as the Pantages theatre in 1914 (and renamed the Coliseum in the mid-1920), for impresario Alexander Pantages, offered connections to dominant North American theatrical and motion picture chains, the Pantages circuit and Famous Players. The structure now restored as the familiar Old Town neo-classical theatre reflects the city's booming interest in tourism in the early twentieth-century. The theatre, expanding with integrated modern architectural elements, became a prominent feature in the city's development of Centennial Square in the mid-1960s.



The Royal theatre, opened in 1913, under the direction and funding of the Victoria Opera House Company Ltd., and, especially since the early 1980s, has become a major touring destination for national and international performances, as well as local groups such as the Victoria Symphony and Dance Victoria. Noted for its expansive interior and neo-classical front façade, the theatre has been designated (1987) a “National Historic Site of Canada.”

Observations

- Victoria boasts a rich performing arts tradition. Local venues and performance entities should be encouraged to build the memory of that tradition into their own institutions. Historical vignettes in programme notes, reviving past performances in the manner of their original presentation, commissioning plays based on Victoria’s history (both the brighter and darker side) would build a wider popular appreciation this tradition.
- A First Nations Cultural Centre that includes a performance space (similar to the First Peoples House at UVic) could provide an appropriate setting for demonstration performances.
- The City of Victoria could to redouble its efforts, bonus density agreements for instance, to reinsert small performance venues throughout the City core. CRD arts programming funds could support “small-venue buskers” during the tourist season. In recent years the “gentrification” of Old Town has meant a drastic reduction in affordable spaces for artist studios, music rehearsal spaces, dance and yoga studios.
- Public spaces in local performing arts facilities (such as the Royal, the McPherson and the Belfry) could host permanent display on Victoria’s theatre history, and the particular histories of those venues.
- A major performing arts loss was the disappearance of Chinatown’s Chinese

opera house. Along with the proposed Chinatown Museum perhaps this could be recreated as a real or virtual visitor experience.

References

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