

Queen Elizabeth Theatre Celebrates 50 Years of Entertainment

For Immediate Release

July 3, 2009

Vancouver, BC—On Sunday, July 5, 2009, the Queen Elizabeth Theatre celebrates the 50th anniversary of its official opening. The QET is currently at the end of a multi-year initiative to enhance the theatre's performance capabilities and the quality of the audience experience. The design team for the project, led by Proscenium Architecture + Interiors Inc., is overseeing the improvements while, at the same time, remaining highly respectful of the historic values of the building.

The construction of the QET was the culmination of nearly a half-century of initiatives to build a civic auditorium for Vancouver. A civic centre, including an auditorium, had been recommended as early as 1912, and the area around the present QET had first been identified as an appropriate site in 1915. The theatre was finally built in the 1950s, with later construction of the Vancouver Public Library and the stadiums reinforcing the area as a municipal cultural centre.

The QET complex stimulated the development of the performing arts in Vancouver and allowed the opportunity for many national and international artists to perform here. It continues to have extraordinarily high local historical significance with respect to its origin and construction, as well as national and international prominence because of the many performers who have been showcased over the years.

The new theatres and the Canada Council for the Arts were largely responsible for the launch of the Vancouver Opera Association in 1960, the Playhouse Theatre Company in 1962 and the creation of Ballet British Columbia in 1987. The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra was resident in the QET until the re-opening of the Orpheum in 1977. The QET welcomed many community groups over the years and witnessed the growth of the pop/rock music industry and the mega-musicals of the 1990s. The 'renewal' of the QET will enable the 50-year old theatre to meet the demands of 21st century performing arts and live entertainment.

In 2006, the first phase of the project acoustically and structurally separated the Vancouver Playhouse and the Queen Elizabeth Theatre. During the summer months of 2007 and 2008, the QET Renewal included improvements to the acoustics, climate control and stage lighting.

The final stage of construction this summer will include reconfiguring the audience chamber to a slightly smaller, more intimate space with new seats, better views of the stage and more leg room, and renewing the lobby and interior finishes. Other improvements include improving environmental controls, handicapped access and washroom capacity. The new three-storey atrium in the lobby will return the QET to its original classic modernism with contemporary chandeliers that reflect the original design.

Redevelopment of Vancouver Civic Theatres is the first phase in the creation of the new arts and cultural backbone of Vancouver, enlivening a specific geographic zone of the city, sometimes referred to as 'The Cultural Precinct'. Credit for the renewal project goes to the design team at Proscenium Architecture + Interiors Inc. who has worked on this project since 1993; to Vancouver City Council for making the decision to fund the renewal without any participation from the federal or provincial government; and the support of a handful of private citizens led by Brandt Louie who contributed early funding to the project.

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Abbreviated History of The Queen Elizabeth Theatre Complex

The Queen Elizabeth Theatre opened on Sunday, July 5, 1959 with an invitation-only concert by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. Later that month, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II attended a concert at the theatre and officially gave it her name.

Vancouverites responded proudly to the new building and boasted it was 'one of the world's finest theatres' and 'lifted this city into the realm of urban sophistication.'

The impact of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre on the local live entertainment scene was profound. By 1962, major users of the QET included the newly formed Vancouver Opera Association, as well as the Vancouver International Festival, the Vancouver Symphony Society, World Adventure Tours and Famous Artists Limited run by impresario Hugh Pickett. For the first time, big roadshows such as *My Fair Lady*, came to Vancouver. The city's proximity to Seattle proved advantageous as American promoters were able to extend western tours of Broadway shows with a booking at the QET.

The Vancouver Playhouse, originally the Queen Elizabeth Playhouse, opened in 1962. The Vancouver Theatre Centre, which operated the Playhouse Theatre Company, was formed in 1962, with a mandate to provide professional live theatre in the city. Other original regular users of the Playhouse were the Friends of Chamber Music, Vancouver Women's Music Club, Women's Canadian Club and the Festival Concert Society.

Both attracted a wide range of users in the early years. Drama, opera and the symphony were core activities around which a wide range of other events took place, including the National Ballet of Canada, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and the Kirov Ballet; Broadway shows such as *Les Miserables* and the *Phantom of the Opera*; solo appearances by well-known international performers, such as Harry Belafonte, k.d. lang, Melissa Etheridge, Robin Williams and George Carlin; rock performances by Santana, the Moody Blues and the Tragically Hip; as well as local groups.

In the 1960s, serious efforts to correct some of the more significant flaws in the theatres began to be addressed. Studies were commissioned to try to improve the acoustics (1964) and the air-conditioning (1967), and a new shell was built for the Symphony (1967).

In 1967-68 a series of renovations was undertaken to improve access to the building. The canopy on Hamilton Street was enlarged, the area around the electronic message sign re-landscaped and the signage redesigned by Erickson/Massey Architects. These three components provided the most public face of the complex and their alteration was seen as necessary for weather-protection, promotional and aesthetic reasons.

The number of professional theatres companies in Vancouver quickly expanded in the early 1970s as government subsidies became more readily available. With the growth in groups came expanded facilities. In 1970 the principal theatre spaces in Vancouver were the QET, the Playhouse, the Frederic Wood Theatre at UBC and the Arts Club on Seymour Street. By 1980, there had been significant additions to this infrastructure, including the New Arts Club Theatre and the Waterfront Theatre, both on Granville Island, and the Vancouver East Cultural Centre.

At the civic theatres, this was reflected in a steady increase in the number of bookings. In the first year of operation, the QET housed 182 performances; by 1965 this rose to 460, and by 1976 reached 639 for both the QET and the Playhouse. The most significant change in the 1970s was the move of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra to the newly habilitated Orpheum. At this time, part of the stage floor of the QET was improved for use by ballet and opera.



Expo 86 provided the city with a significant reason to undertake substantial renovations. The work included altering some existing spaces, as well as creating new ones, modernizing technical facilities and public areas finishes and fixtures.

The alterations, carried out in 1985-86, totally changed the character of the two lobbies. The original clean, precise, rectilinear, understated design was replaced by a shimmering ambiguity created by the reflective surfaces, broader columns and more textured finishes. The QET lobby was further altered by the construction of the new control room and by banners installed to camouflage the beams beneath the mezzanine. A dated, but classically timeless interior of the 1950s was replaced by a far more dated interior of the 1980s.

A number of improvements were made to the theatres' public amenities in 1991-92. Washrooms were expanded, new concession bars were built in the lobbies of both theatres and the theatre restaurant was renovated.

The two auditoriums at the QET complex continue to be well used as rental facilities. The resident performing arts companies at the QET are the Vancouver Opera and Ballet British Columbia. The other primary users are large touring shows and band/solo concerts. The Vancouver Playhouse remains the home of the Playhouse Theatre Company, Friends of Chamber Music, Vancouver Recital Society, Vancouver Chamber Choir and the Vancouver Bach Choir.

A long-range capital plan for the three civic theatres was authorized by Council in July 1992 and a strategic plan was prepared by the architects. In the work done in 1996, two elevators were added to the west lobby of the QET and the entry off of Hamilton Street was redesigned.

These changes were the first component of a long-term plan to make improvements that would enhance the theatres' production capabilities, economic performance, audience comfort and enjoyment, life-safety features and positioning in a competitive market.