

THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA'S ACADEMIC HALL: THE OLDEST PERFORMANCE SPACE IN THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION

By Michel Prévost, University of Ottawa chief archivist

The University of Ottawa is fortunate to have the oldest performance space in the national capital region. This jewel is located in Academic Hall, 133 Séraphin Marion (formerly Wilbrod). Shows have been presented there without interruption since 1923. Naturally, the building's walls have been witness to plenty of happenings and a rich history.

After the disastrous 1903 fire, which completely destroyed its main building, the University of Ottawa was without a performance hall. This need persisted until 1923, when, at a cost of \$12,000, the administration converted the museum in the science building into an academic hall. Lectures, concerts, debates of both the English Debating Society and the *Société des débats français*, and, of course, plays, all took place there. After the closets on both sides of the room containing the zoological and ornithological collections were cleared out, seats were installed.

But the original layout wasn't right for cultural and artistic events. Through the wonders of renovation, in 1944, the hall, which had an east-west orientation, was turned to face south-east. It could seat 450.

In 1969, the old stone heritage building, constructed between 1899 and 1900, was completely renovated to be home to the Faculty of Administration. As the performance hall no longer had the necessary space to host large shows, it was also renovated. Work was done on the stage, the dressing rooms, the hall and the lighting. As well, audiovisual equipment was installed to allow for wider use by University faculties and schools. The curtain rose once more February 21, with Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, presented by the Drama Guild.

In spring 1975, a fire caused by a University alumnus seriously damaged Academic Hall. The blaze was concentrated in the lobby, backstage area and second floor classrooms. The smoke and water also damaged the theatre. Damage was estimated at between \$100,000 and \$200,000.

Shortly after the fire, major work was done on the theatre. The renovations, at a cost of \$300,000, were completed in March 1976. This allowed for changes to the performance space, the lounge and the dressing rooms, and the addition of theatre props, a console, lighting equipment, seat upholstery, the chandelier in the lobby, and bleacher seating, to offer a better view of the stage. The Comédie des Deux Rives opened the new 185-seat hall with *L'impromptu de la Salle académique*, a medley of scenes from Molière's plays.

In 1986, more work was done on the building to welcome the Department of Theatre. The department and its performance space were finally under the same roof, creating a

sense of belonging and giving theatre more visibility on campus. The performance space got a facelift as well, by Martineau et Martineau, at a cost of \$50,000. The wooden stage floor was sanded down, the magnificent sculpted tin ceiling cleaned and the walls replastered and covered in wallpaper.

To sum up, despite undergoing many changes since 1923, Academic Hall, where students and members of the community have enjoyed hundreds of shows, continues to be a reflection of the University of Ottawa's rich theatrical and cultural traditions.