



Face-lift sp

Fallen queen

BY JUDITH FITZGERALD

COBOURG, Ont. — She is Victoria Hall, Cobourg's reigning queen of King Street and, as ladies go, she's one of the grandest. Her stature is such that she stands out in a crowd. She has been around a while, but her impressive elegance promptly dispels whispers about stuffiness. True, she had a face-lift recently, but it improved her appeal. After all, she *did* turn 123 this year.

Victoria Hall's history stretches back before Confederation. Cobourg's first inhabitants envisioned their small settlement as a booming and prosperous hub of Canadian activity and assumed the rest of Canada would share that vision. Cobourg, they optimistically forecast, could (and should) become the capital of Upper Canada.

In their enthusiasm, Cobourg's earliest settlers hit upon the notion of sponsoring a competition to determine which Canadian architect would be responsible for designing their town hall. Hogtown's Kivas Tully (already famous for creating Trinity College on Hoskin Avenue) won the competition and designed Victoria Hall (named in honor of Queen Victoria). Her son, the Prince of Wales (and later King Edward VII), officially opened Cobourg's landmark in 1860. At the time, Cobourg's population was 5,000. Of course, Cobourg didn't become the capital of Upper Canada but it did end up with one of the most impressive specimens of Victorian architecture in existence.

By 1970, Cobourg's population had risen to 12,000. At the time, lawyer David Stewart was a member of the Cobourg Opera and Drama Guild, which was presenting a production of Hello Dolly in the second-floor grand concert hall of Victoria Hall. During one of the performances, Stewart noticed that the floor was a bit too bouncy for his liking. Beneath the grand concert hall was the courtroom. Entering the courtroom, Stewart saw that its central chandelier was swaying frantically. Structural engineers were called in. Victoria Hall was closed as unsafe and Hello Dolly said goodbye.

Cobourg town council had just

about had enough of Victoria Hall's goings-on. She was in a downhill skid on the road to ruin. For two years, council wrestled with its fallen queen. Should they raze the building and put up a parking lot? Should they save their landmark and do her up grand? Back and forth they debated. Pros and cons of each approach were scrutinized. The councillors reached an impasse. Fortunately, it was short. Councillor Lenah Field Fisher embarked on her own campaign to save Victoria Hall. On Valentine's Day in 1972, a group of concerned citizens, with the aid of Miss Fisher, incorporated itself as the Society for the Preservation of Victoria Hall. In all fairness, to preserve Victoria Hall, it was first necessary to give her a complete overhaul.

Which is what the society did. It took 11 years. The first (and initially, the only) phase of Victoria Hall's restoration cost \$1-million. When it was completed, structural engineers uncovered further structural faults, and the society went back to the drawing board (and the public's purses). In 1974, Colonel Cedric P. Haynes became president of the society and led its members to victory in early 1983. In effect, the impossible had been accomplished.

At the outset, the society wisely had Victoria Hall designated as a heritage building, a fact which enabled the society to tap funds from all levels of government. Col. Haynes, a retired corporate executive and one-time army intelligence officer, inspired and challenged the society to gather the \$5-million needed to complete the restoration when the additional faults were discovered. The small group of citizens who were members of the society gathered the necessary revenue from local and national industries, foundations and private individuals.

The final phase of the project included a complete overhaul of the grand concert hall. The bouncing floor Stewart had noticed was replaced with poured concrete and finished with wide oak planks. The original ornate work was duplicated during the restoration, and the building now stands as Kivas Tully originally designed it due, in large

pruces up a historic hall

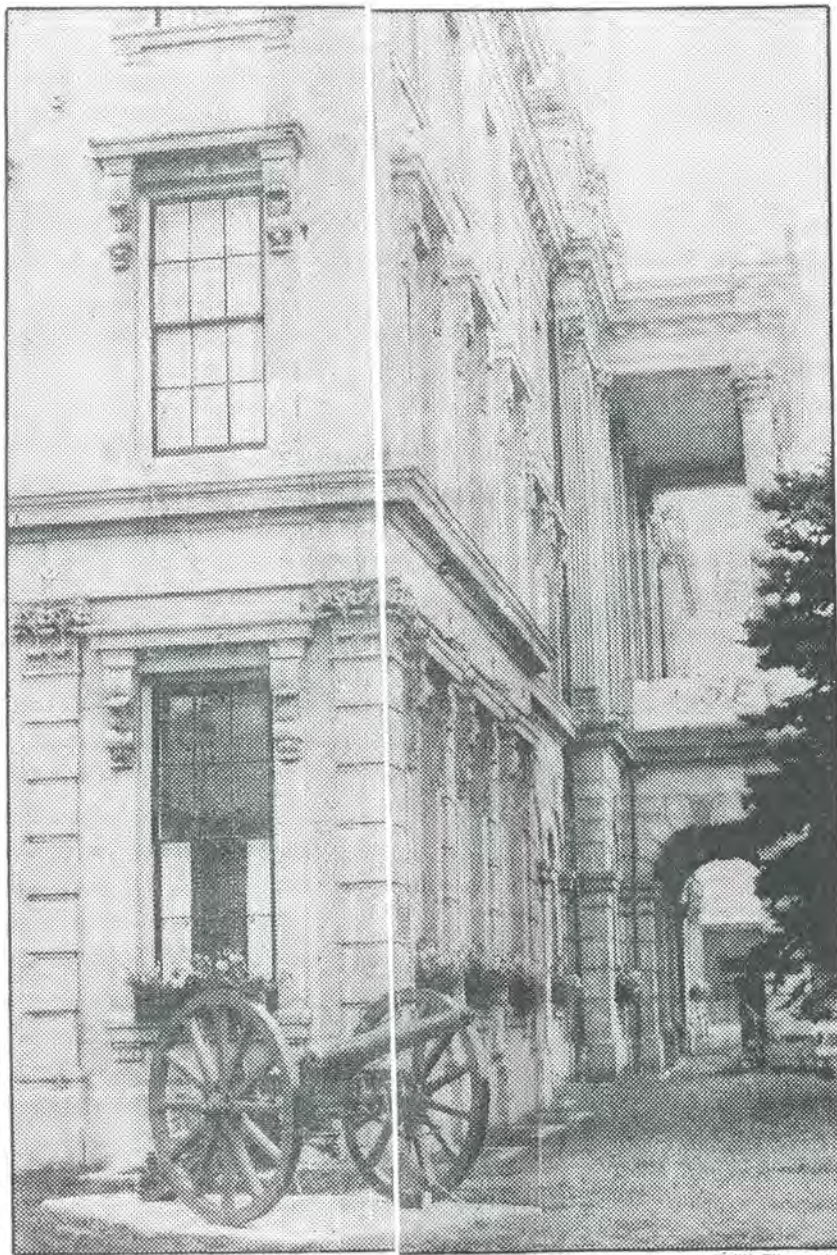
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—Judith Fitzgerald

part, to the restoration and renovation work directed by architect Peter John Stokes. Created in the Palladian mode, including Greek-Roman temple fronts and roofed porches, Victoria Hall stands an impressive 15 metres high. Three of her sides are covered with detailed stonework. Four Corinthian columns flank the entrance over which parapets have been added. Victoria Hall has a total of 96 windows, and

its cupola has four large clocks. Inside, Tully's original blueprints included the "Old Bailey" courtroom, quarters for town officials and the sheriff, various "meeting" rooms and the concert hall itself. All these areas are still in operation in the hall, which also contains The Art Gallery of Northumberland.

The society's mandate, from its inception, was "to restore the visual dignity of the 1920s while preserv-

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A Victoria Hall

Tracks



Two views of Cobourg's Victoria Hall: an 11-year overhaul.

rating the efficiency of the 1970s." Earlier this month, both the visual dignity and efficiency were showcased in a contemporary fashion. The opening-night performance of *Tracks*, a musical commissioned by the newly formed Town Hall Theatre as the first production in the grand concert hall, took place on Aug. 10.

Jennifer O'Rourke, the administrator of the Town Hall Theatre, explained that a summer theatre production was chosen as the best way to inaugurate the grand concert hall. A nation-wide search was conducted for an artistic director, and Burton Lancaster, founder of Magnus Theatre Northwest in Thunder Bay, was selected to pilot Town Hall Theatre's premiere performances.

Writers bp Nichol and Mary Burton were chosen to write a play based on events that took place in the Cobourg area during the 1850s.

and combined the optimism over Victoria Hall during that time with the optimism generated by another ambitious project — the building of the Cobourg-Peterborough railway.

As a result, the musical drama *Tracks* centres on the dreams of one Cobourg family whose personal hopes are linked with those of the community in general. The music, humor and dance in *Tracks* provide patrons with an upbeat offering and a little history on the side. The audience, which can number as many as 300, sits close to the action on stage because of the hall's theatre-in-the-round design.

Miss O'Rourke considers opening night a success. "It went very well for its first performance, ever," she said, "and the play was well-received. Two weeks before it opened, I said I'd never do it again. Now, since it's opened, I'm eagerly looking forward to next year. I almost wish it would run beyond its Sept-