

ONTARIO HERITAGE CONFERENCE

FRIDAY, MAY 13, 2016

You may have noticed that the world is making a bit of a fuss about Shakespeare this year. That's because he died exactly four hundred years ago last month – April 23, to be exact. Four centuries is a pretty big milestone, and certainly cause for . . . well, maybe not celebration, exactly, because after all this is a death we're talking about, but certainly for commemoration.

As it happens, April 23 is also traditionally accepted as Shakespeare's birthday, 52 years earlier – though we can't be certain about that because we don't actually have a record of his birth, only of his baptism. Nevertheless, this coincidence of dates does allow a celebratory note to creep into what would otherwise be solely the anniversary of a loss.

But what really gives us licence to celebrate this anniversary is the idea of inheritance – the idea that Shakespeare's death in 1616 marked the start of his legacy. He left us a body of work – a unique and priceless heritage of at least 37 plays – that still enthral us today. (I say "at least" because claims are sometimes made for others. But those 37 are the ones you'll find in your Collected Works.)

Now, I don't know how many of you in this room are Shakespeare fans. But I'm prepared to bet that even if you've never seen a Shakespeare play in your life, and never intend to, you'd probably agree that they're worth keeping. Shakespeare might not be your particular cup of tea, but he *is* one of the pillars of our culture. It's hard to conceive a world without him, just like it's hard to conceive one without Mozart or Michelangelo or Tolstoy.

In the four centuries since his death, Shakespeare has grown into a global phenomenon and a global industry. His impact has been incalculable, culturally and economically. But if it hadn't been for the foresight of just two men, that impact would have been quite literally cut in half.

In 1623, seven years after the playwright's death, two of his friends and fellow actors – John Heminges and Henry Condell – published the first ever collected works of Shakespeare. Now known as the First Folio, it contained 36 of those 37 plays – 18 of which had never been published before. If Heminges and Condell hadn't gathered together Shakespeare's manuscripts and prompt scripts, none of which survive today, and put them into print, all those 18 plays – half the canon – would have been lost forever.

The world, and Stratford, owes a huge debt to those two men. Without them, the Stratford Festival – if it existed at all – would have a severely diminished repertoire of plays to present. We certainly wouldn't be doing *Macbeth* or *As You Like It* this season, because those plays wouldn't exist today.

We wouldn't have *Twelfth Night*, either. Or *The Tempest*. Or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Or *Julius Caesar*. No one since Shakespeare's time would have seen or read any of those plays. In many cases, we'd never even have *heard* of them.

I've started off on this tangent just to demonstrate just how easily great chunks of a priceless cultural heritage can be lost – a heritage that, in Shakespeare's case, helped shape the cultural landscape of the entire world.

All very well, you may be thinking, but this isn't *quite* the kind of heritage we're all here to discuss. Still, when I looked up the word *heritage* in the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, I noticed that only the second and third definitions pertained to the kind of heritage this conference is about: "A nation's buildings, monuments, countryside, etc., especially when regarded as worthy of preservation."

The first definition offered by the dictionary is this: "Things such as works of art, cultural achievements and folklore that have been passed on from earlier generations."

These two ideas of heritage – the tangible and the intangible – converge in the notion of the "heritage landscape": the kind of physical environment that stimulates and nurtures cultural creativity.

History offers a celebrated example here in Stratford, a town that once relied on industry for its economy. For more than a century, beginning in the mid-1850s, this was a railway centre, first for the Grand Trunk Railway and then for Canadian National, both of which had their regional headquarters here. We also had a flourishing furniture-making industry, among others.

Industry was what our town needed to survive, so its demands were naturally accorded a lot of weight. And this was a time when railways were still central to our lives, the way cars and computers are now. It was inconceivable that we could manage without them.

So in 1904, when the Canadian Pacific Railway, wanting to compete with Grand Trunk, proposed a plan for a new track through the scenic parklands on the south bank of the Avon River and Lake Victoria, it seemed like a no-brainer. So did the station and freight sheds that would accompany that track.

Sure, it would have meant ripping up the parklands. But look at the economics. How could investing in the future of a flourishing and essential industry not be good for the city?

The mayor of Stratford and 12 of the city's 14 aldermen agreed. So did many local businessmen. But there were dissenters, who felt that losing the parklands was too high a price for economic advantage – an opinion shared by the city's Board of Park Management.

The civic debate that ensued went on for the better part of a decade. It coalesced around three specific bylaws, one of which would give the go-ahead for the CPR plan. A public vote on these proposed bylaws was to be held on March 10, 1913.

The campaign against the proposal was orchestrated by the rather clunkily named Citizens' Committee Opposing the South Lake and River Route of the CPR. Supporters of the plan – who obviously had a bit more flair for branding – called themselves "Boosters for the Bylaws."

There was endless discussion of the pros and cons: the number and safety of level crossings, the effect on revenue from boat rentals on the river, the impact on the city's water supply, and so on.

But at the end of the day, it all came down to a choice of values. What mattered most: the expansion of an industry that held the promise of economic growth or the preservation of a public space for recreation, relaxation and the contemplation of beauty? Each would have to come at the price of the other, so which was it going to be?

It was a choice between the needs of the body and the needs of the soul – a choice, if you like, between work and play. And that distinction was seized upon by both sides of the debate.

Noting that the parkland represented a rich resource that was accessible to ordinary working people, the anti-CPR faction took to calling it the "People's Playground" – a phrase that their adversaries immediately threw back in their faces.

The two sides argued their positions in newspaper ads. “Parks and playgrounds are necessary adjuncts to our city,” said one ad placed by the Boosters, “but time spent mainly on these does not pay the bills of the butcher, the baker, and the candlestickmaker.”

The Citizens’ Committee came back with an ad of their own: “The well-being of any civic community depends on adequate breathing space.”

“Common sense should outweigh sentiment,” retorted the Boosters. “Romance and poetry are weak and ephemeral. Roast beef and onions – much more substantial.”

In the end, the city voted to reject the CPR proposal and preserve the People’s Playground for public use.

Despite its economic cost, this decision turned out to be the right one 40 years later, when Stratford’s railway industry ran out of steam. At the start of the 1950s, the CNR closed down its Stratford operations, eliminating some 2,000 jobs from a community that back then numbered about 18,000 people.

If that vote had gone the other way, the end result forty years later would have been just another tired, ugly rust-belt town. And when Tom Patterson had his brilliant idea for a new economic engine for his hometown, we wouldn’t have had this ideal location in which to put it. It was in those parklands that the Stratford Festival first pitched its tent, and it is in those same parklands that the largest of our four venues still sits today.

Today, the engine that drives Stratford’s economy is neither steam nor diesel: it is cultural, with the Stratford Festival at its heart. But not just the Festival. One cultural asset begets another. The Festival has helped to create conditions that have made possible other ventures, both creative and commercial.

Today, Stratford boasts its own symphony orchestra and an annual music festival that features international artists. The city has a thriving restaurant scene, lovely B&Bs and small inns, a couple of large hotels, and distinctive downtown shopping. Besides the 1,200 people directly employed by the Festival, another 2,300 jobs are created by those and other enterprises that have flourished because of the Festival’s presence.

All told, the Festival is responsible for generating some \$133 million in economic activity, about \$27 million of it coming from outside the country, along with \$56 million in taxes for all levels of government.

Culturally rich communities with lively arts scenes are desirable places in which to live and work. They attract creative, imaginative people: the kinds of people who, in turn, add value to a community.

All of this sprang from that choice in 1913 to value parklands over railway sheds.

But this is not to paint industry as the villain of the piece. Stratford's industrial past also help shape its present attractiveness. For one thing, the city owes much of its enviable architectural heritage to the railway bosses and other captains of industry who built mansions here.

The more modest homes once occupied by their employees also contribute to the charm that makes our city a delightful place to stroll around – a major asset, by the way, for a destination theatre. If you're going to drive a couple of hours – at a conservative estimate – to get here from Toronto, you don't want to find yourself surrounded by strip malls and 1960s tower blocks.

The factories our industries occupied – big buildings with high ceilings – also feature largely in our city's landscape, not necessarily to its detriment. And while many have lain unoccupied for decades, several have been reinvented to serve the needs of today.

One example is the former shoe factory at 143 Brunswick Street that is now owned by the Stratford Festival. Thanks to my colleagues in the Festival Archives, I know a little bit of its history.

Erected between 1897 and 1900, it was occupied from 1900 to 1907 by the Perth Flax & Cordage Company. Then it fell vacant for a couple of years, before being occupied by a succession of businesses: the Benewitz Manufacturing Company in 1912; Stratford Desks Limited, from 1913 to 1914; Classic Furniture Limited, from 1915 to 1917; and back to flax again in 1919 with the Stratford Flax Company.

And then in 1920 it became home to the Grosch Felt Shoe Company, which hung on to it till sometime in the early to mid 1960s. At that point, my kindly researchers balked, telling me that, because of a change in the way records were kept after 1964, it would take way too much of their time to identify subsequent tenants of the building.

Anyway in the early 2000s, the Festival took it over, transforming it into a new home for our scene shop, formerly at the Avon Theatre. We leased it at first, then purchased it in 2015, when we started building an addition to house our Costume and Props Warehouse and our Archives, formerly located on Burritt Street. We also renovated part of the upper floor to house our call centre, relocated from the Festival Theatre.

That building became once more a going concern: a place from which to conduct our business, a place in which to store the vast treasure house of material in our archival collection. In turn, by offering us a new space for our scene shop, the Brunswick Street building enabled us to turn our *old* scene shop into a whole new performing venue, our 250-seat Studio Theatre.

It isn't just industrial properties that have enabled our Festival to grow and flourish. Our second-largest venue, the Avon Theatre, was originally built in 1900 as a vaudeville house called Theatre Albert. It was later converted into a movie theatre, but had long been abandoned when a group of actors from Le Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, who were playing the French court in our 1956 production of *Henry V*, had the bright idea of putting on three plays by Molière there in their spare time. We then started renting the space as a venue for our music concerts, and purchased it in 1963.

The Casino, built around 1907 as a curling rink, became our Third Stage in 1971 and then our Tom Patterson Theatre.

Right across from the Festival Theatre is a graceful Italian Renaissance-style building that until 1973 housed a Normal School for the training of aspiring teachers. It's one of four such facilities that were constructed to an identical design in the 1900s – the others being in North Bay, Peterborough and Hamilton – and the only one that hasn't been substantially altered. It currently houses offices for our Education and Finance departments, as well as rehearsal rooms and our Festival Shop. At one, time it also housed the Stratford Perth Museum.

In all these cases, an old building has been given a new lease on life. But I feel as if some kind of benefit has also flowed the other way. I feel that a building itself – its history, its character, the bones of the past that you can still discern under every present-day face-lift – in some ineffable way informs the work that's done in it.

Perhaps I'm being fanciful here, but I think it makes a difference to our Education staff to be working in the same creaky-floored rooms where rural Ontario teachers once trained. I think it means something to our craftspeople to be working in the same spaces occupied by those long departed shoe makers.

And I certainly feel that seeing a play or a musical in the Avon Theatre – reputed, by the way, to be haunted by the ghost of its original owner, Ambrose Small, who disappeared in mysterious circumstances in the early 1900s – is an experience made all the richer by my sense of the long-forgotten artists who previously trod its boards. Somehow their spirits still imbue its walls.

A couple of seasons ago, we transformed the Masonic Concert Hall at the corner of Church and Ontario streets into a venue for one of our productions, a four-person chamber version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The director, Peter Sellars, had specifically wanted a venue that *wasn't* originally conceived as a theatre: he wanted it to come with other associations.

And the designer, Abigail DeVille, turned that performance space into an art installation: a kind of civic memory frozen in time as it tumbled toward the stage like cosmic debris toward a black hole. Old artefacts from Stratford's past were suspended from the ceiling: car fenders, lawn mowers, kitchen appliances, even chairs that had seated patrons in the original tent. It was an incredibly evocative example of new artistic creation being informed by a community's past.

We're not the only creative people in Stratford to benefit from our city's industrial heritage. A building at 163 King Street has been operating for some time now as Factory 163: a centre for performing and visual arts. Its opening made possible the flourishing of our city's annual SpringWorks festival.

There's a lot of creativity in this town, and while artists generally don't have much money, they can do a lot with a little. What people are looking for is affordable space in which to create. And those old buildings, even when they're not in great shape, can fill that need.

So far, I've spoken of existing spaces. But the Festival created its own spectacular addition to Stratford's heritage: the Festival Theatre, our largest venue. It opened its doors in 1957, after the gigantic tent that had housed our first four seasons had been taken down for the last time. Its architecture – its circular footprint and distinctive roofline – evokes and pays tribute to our origins under canvas.

That's another way in which we maintain our heritage: not simply by preservation or even adaptation, but by *evocation* of the past – by identifying something of importance and trying to find a way to embody it in modern terms.

Preservation isn't always the answer: sometimes a building is just too far gone to be worth saving. But even if complete replacement is necessary, let's look at what a building has been, what it represents. The richest and most interesting results are achieved when tradition is regarded as something to be built *on*, not *over*.

The tent was a great way to start a daring venture that might well not have worked. It had an immense emotional resonance – and still does, for people who remember it. But it leaked. It didn't keep out the noise of the passing trains. It was insufferably hot. We really had to replace it.

But something miraculous had happened in that original tent, and we wanted to have some enduring physical reminder of that first venue. So the new permanent building paid homage to our roots, evoking what it replaced. And it became an icon in its own right.

Let me come back to Shakespeare. His plays are more than 400 years old, but you don't need to be a literary historian to enjoy them. You can tell right away that their creation was far in the past, and yet when they are brought to life in stage, tenanted by new energies, new ideas, they illuminate our world today and thrill you with exciting, vibrant, modern life. The same is true of plays that are even older, such as the ancient Greek tragedies, written two and a half millennia ago.

To people who work in the theatre, the idea of reinvention, of infusing with new life, is fundamental. The incidental details of a classical work of art, or of a building – the ornamentation, the colour scheme, etc. – may be old-fashioned, but those are not its essentials. It's the shape, the structure, the wealth of possible meaning, the way it makes us feel now, that makes that work seem forever modern. The richness of experiencing the classics comes from the intriguing complexity that is generated by the creative meeting of past and present.

I think that's true of everyday life as well. We don't just wipe the slate clean with every new generation. We can see in a daughter's face hints of her grandmother's features. Our sense of who we are grows out of awareness of where we came from.

And here's a curious thing about the really great plays, the all-time classics. They often seem to have imperfections, awkwardnesses, rough bits, things that don't quite match up, odd nooks and crannies whose original purpose is now a mystery to us. In many ways, they're like old buildings, with their slanted floors and exposed pipes and beams you can bang your head on.

Hamlet, for instance, is so full of inconsistencies that T.S. Eliot famously called it "most certainly an artistic failure." Some failure!

I'd argue that the imperfections of old buildings, like the imperfections of great plays, don't diminish their value but can actually contribute to it. Because they are the essence of humanity.

Imperfection, inconsistency, irrationality, lack of logic: these are fundamentally human characteristics. We are ourselves paragons of imperfection, of flawed construction. Evolutionary biologists will point, for instance, to the bizarre optics of the human eye, which is basically built backward with a serious blind spot where the optic nerve comes out the back, which the brain has to compensate for by feats of software.

Our art, our culture, the physical and cultural environments we create for ourselves, resonate with us not despite their imperfections but because of them. They are what *we* are: organic, evolutionary. That's why we feel at home in them.

Sure, it's nice to have everything clean and shiny and convenient, and all the floors level, and the walls straight, and form relentlessly matching function. But it's so much more *interesting* to inhabit a space that was created long ago, in a different world, created in accordance with different assumptions and expectations, but still able today to awe and inspire us with its grandeur, its grace, its beauty, its capacity for ambiguity and mystery.

Such is the power of imperfection.

I don't know much about architecture. In fact, I don't know anything about architecture. But here's what I *believe* about it.

In purely utilitarian terms, it doesn't really matter what a building looks like as long as it keeps out the elements and doesn't fall down about our heads. But architecture isn't just about

meeting the basic human need for shelter. Like drama and the other arts, it's a means of expressing and embodying the human spirit.

From cathedrals to theatres to railway stations to individual homes, buildings – like art – are a way of giving form and structure to our experience of the world. In shaping space, they help shape *us*: a good use of space will liberate the spirit, open the doors to the fulfilment of human potential. Conversely, a poor use of space will oppress the spirit and constrict our power to achieve. Great architecture, like great art, enlarges our sense of what it is to be human.

I believe that Stratford the theatre town is a far richer, more interesting place to live – a place more likely to attract people of imagination and creative enterprise – for having once been the Stratford renowned for furniture factories and railways. Our parklands, our architecture, the spaces created by our predecessors: this is our heritage landscape.

That landscape played a significant part in enabling Stratford to become a centre for some of the finest theatre in the world, and a community that thrives culturally and economically. Let us always seek to make that landscape ever richer, ever more beautiful.

Someone once told me about a remark made by former City of Stratford archivist James Anderson, who was apparently a great devotee of gardening, and it has stuck in my mind. "Put some flowers in front," he said. "Shows people there's civilization there."

One flower may not be much in itself, but its seeds can spread. Once someone claims a little corner of ground for civilization, others are encouraged to follow suit. Beauty begets beauty, so let's nurture it wherever and whenever we can. We never know when we're going to need it.