

# Stratford Festival of Canada



LEFT: TOM PATTERSON, FOUNDER; TANYA MOISEWITSCH, DESIGNER; TYRONE GUTHRIE, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, 1953.

ABOVE: CHILDREN IN THE ARTHUR MEIGHEN GARDENS, FESTIVAL THEATRE.

It was in this environment that Tom Patterson was raised. Attending the collegiate in the late 1930s, he frequented the nearby Shakespearean Gardens with his school chums to ponder the future. Here he first raised the idea of a Shakespearean festival as an economic opportunity for Stratford. After service overseas during World War II, he took a job as a magazine editor in Toronto, and began to promote his idea of the Festival to anyone who would listen on his trips home to Stratford.

"With one bold stroke that has left our big cities gasping, Stratford, Ont., will this summer claim its birthright with a Shakespearean festival." This was how *Maclean's* magazine saw the beginning of the Stratford Festival in 1953. It was bold indeed for an upstart community of 19,000 to think of establishing a permanent professional theatre in a country that had only half a dozen professional theatre companies and various summer stock companies. Yet the Stratford Festival quickly succeeded in becoming the largest classical repertory theatre in North America.

## BACKGROUND

The Canada Company, the settlement company in this area, had created the birthright in 1832 by naming the proposed town (and its river) after Shakespeare's home in England. Over the years, various leading citizens had taken the Shakespearean connection seriously. In the 1850s this included the naming of the town's five wards (and subsequently the public schools) as well as the two villages of Shakespeare and Gads Hill. In 1864 the town held a celebration for the tercentenary of the Bard's birth that was announced in newspapers as far away as Boston. Upon becoming a city in 1885, a citizens' meeting adopted the nickname "Classic City" to continue the theme.

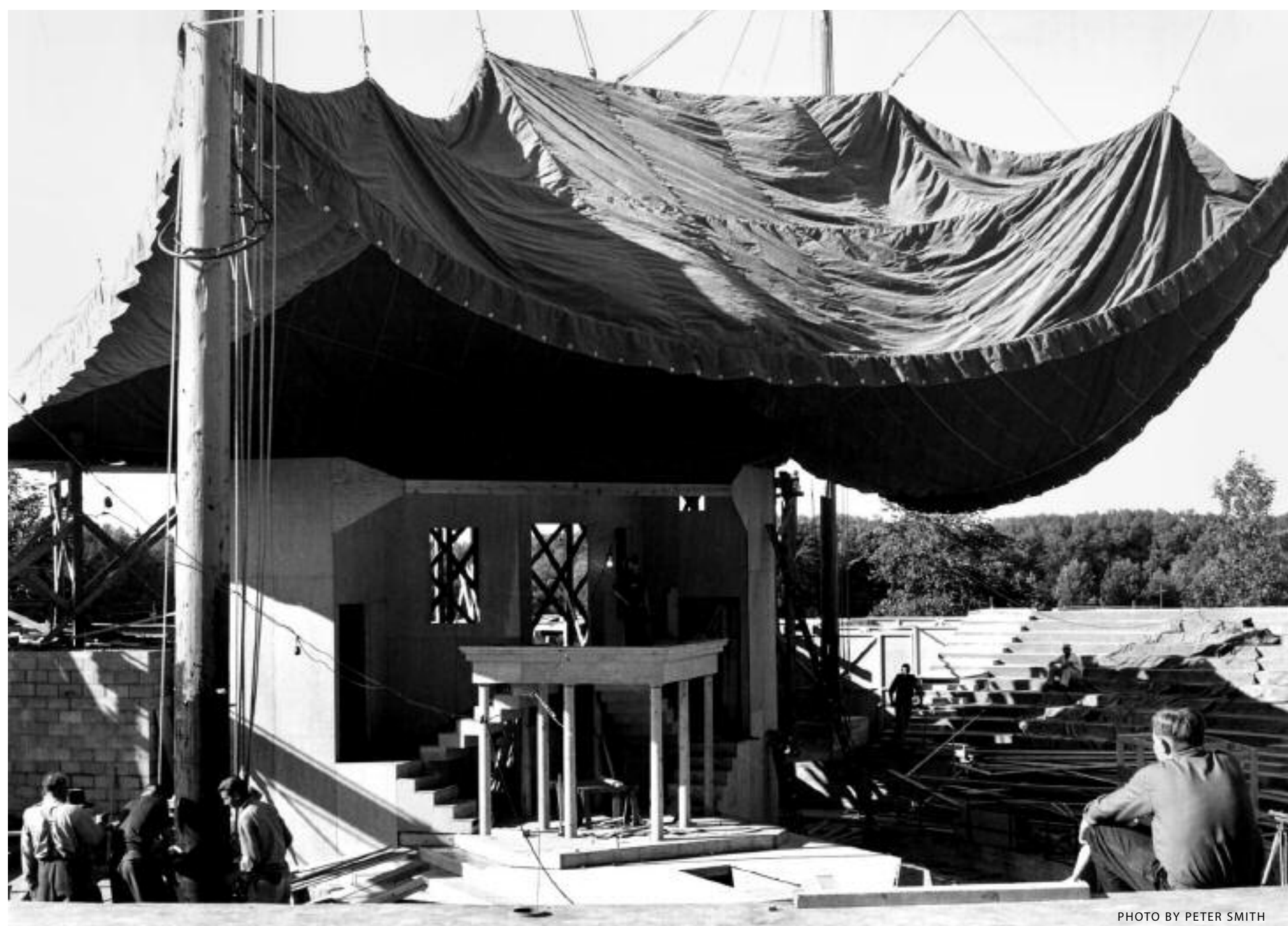
Amateur performance of Shakespeare became an annual event at the Normal School (Teachers' College) after it opened in 1908, as well as periodically at Stratford Collegiate under teacher Rose McQueen. In 1936 the Shakespearean Gardens were opened, with a bust of Shakespeare finally dedicated in 1949. After the construction of the bandshell in the park in 1929, there was a proposal to stage Shakespearean plays there in the summers, but the economic depression seems to have ended the discussion.

## THE BEGINNING

After discussing his ideas with Mayor Simpson at a trade show in 1951, Patterson was able to get support for exploring the idea from the Chamber of Commerce, the Industrial Commission and, in January 1952, the City Council. He had asked the council for \$100 to travel to New York to try to meet with Laurence Olivier, but the council raised the amount to \$125. Although he never did meet with Olivier, he did get useful ideas from others. More importantly, key organizations in Stratford had shown an interest in his plan.

A committee of prominent Stratford citizens was formed in the meantime, which soon developed into the Stratford Shakespearean Festival of Canada Foundation. At the advice of leading Canadian director Dora Mavor Moore, Patterson contacted world-renowned director Tyrone Guthrie at his home in Ireland and interested him in the idea. Intrigued, Guthrie came to Canada in July 1952 to check things out. Rather than a committee "mainly of artistic and excitable elderly ladies of both sexes, with a sprinkling of Business Men to restrain the Artistic People from spending money...", he was surprised to find a committee of mainly young business and professional men and women, many of whom had no link with the artistic community. Guthrie was impressed that he would be given a free hand to develop all aspects of the theatre.

This gave Guthrie the opportunity to fulfill his dream of building a thrust stage that would emulate one of the key features of Shakespeare's theatre. At Guthrie's suggestion, designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch and leading actor Alec Guinness were signed on, and subsequently leading actress Irene Worth – all at the height of their careers. Their eager participation in the risky venture gave much support to the professional status of the new theatre. Other than two other actors brought from Britain, the rest of the cast and crew were Canadians, chosen in auditions held across the country.



ERECTING THE STRATFORD FESTIVAL TENT, 1953; IRENE WORTH WITH COMPANY MEMBERS IN *AS YOU LIKE IT*, 1959; SIR ALEC GUINNESS IN THE TITLE ROLE OF *RICHARD III*, 1953.

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(The Stratford Festival continued)



A major addition to the backstage area was completed in 1985 to accommodate the wardrobe and properties workshops and a rehearsal hall. Major renovations in 1997 included the reshaping of the concrete amphitheatre into wider and higher tiers to improve the comfort of the seats. Two outer aisles were also eliminated. This reduced the number of seats by 450, so that now the theatre accommodates 1,826 people. New front lobby areas were also created to allow room for a store, reception room, more washrooms and the box office.

## AVON AND STUDIO THEATRES

As the Festival expanded its program, it became necessary to find new performance spaces in Stratford. Starting in 1956, the Festival rented the Avon Theatre on Downie Street. The Avon was originally opened in 1901 as a vaudeville house known as the Theatre Albert. It became the Majestic movie theatre in the 1930s and was renamed the Avon about 1941.

Credit is due to those Stratford citizens who stuck with the project through its highs and lows, especially contractor Oliver Gaffney, whose firm, Gaffney Construction, proceeded to complete the foundation and the stage of the theatre without any guarantee that they would ever be paid. About two months before the July 13, 1953, opening, the whole project was almost called off, but it was decided to proceed on faith. In the end the first season was so successful that it was extended from four weeks to six and had a deficit of only \$4,000, despite exceeding the original budget of \$150,000 by \$60,000. Every performance was sold out, and some were oversold, requiring extra chairs to be placed in the aisles and along the edge of the stage.

## FESTIVAL THEATRE

For the first season it was decided to build only a concrete foundation for the amphitheatre and to construct the thrust stage, as designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch. A huge tent was erected over this for the first four seasons, during which 400,000 visitors saw 260 stage performances, occasionally accompanied by thunderstorms and train whistles.

When the tent came down after the 1956 season, building started immediately on the rest of the permanent building. Through the Herculean efforts of Gaffney Construction and 150 workers, the building was finished just on time for its dedication on June 30, 1957, and the opening of the fifth season the next day. With a balcony above the amphitheatre, the new theatre had seating for 2,276.



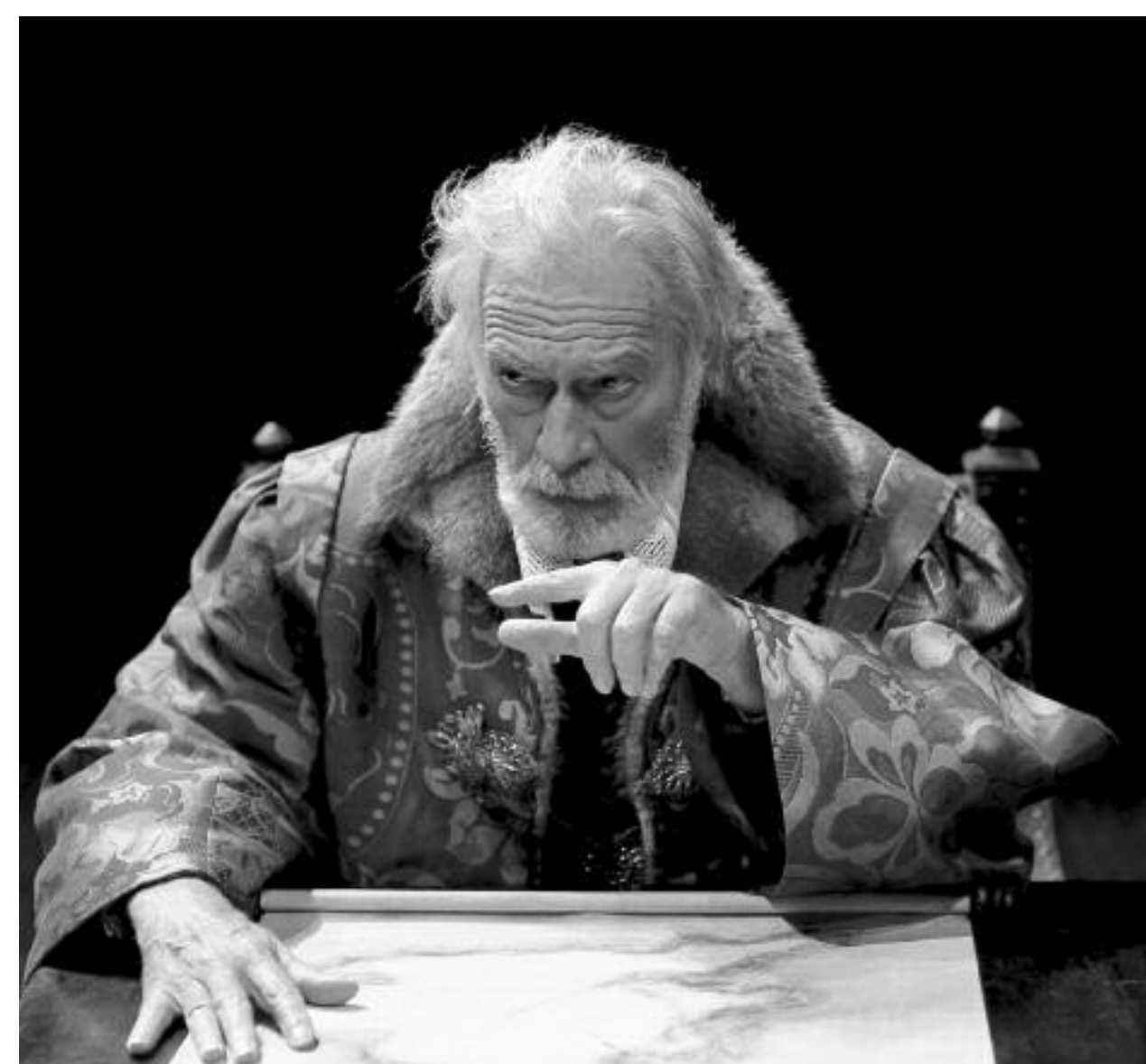
The amphitheatre and the building were designed by architect Robert Fairfield, of the firm of Rounthwaite & Fairfield Architects. Fairfield was also involved in all subsequent additions to the building to date. To continue the theme of the tent, the roof of the new building was designed to imitate the roofline of the tent. This was an extra stroke of genius, which made the uniquely shaped building as famous as the acting that occurred inside.

TOP: WILLIAM HUTT AND MICHAEL THERRIAULT IN *THE TEMPEST*, 1999. ABOVE: ROBERT FAIRFIELD'S DESIGN OF THE FESTIVAL THEATRE, 1957. TOP RIGHT: CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER IN THE TITLE ROLE OF *KING LEAR*, 2002. CENTRE RIGHT: DYLAN MUNDY AND KEN DUBBLESTYNE, PROPS DEPARTMENT. RIGHT: THOM MARRIOTT WITH JODI-LYNN MCFADDEN AND ANNE MARIE RAMOS IN *THE ADVENTURES OF PERICLES*, 2003.

The building was purchased by the Festival in 1963, at which time the interior was remodelled to include enlarged stage facilities and an auditorium seating about 1,100. The exterior was redesigned in 1967, and a three-storey building was added on the back in 1985 for workshops. The building was renovated and the front entrance redesigned in 2002. A small 260-seat experimental theatre, known as the Studio Theatre, was added at the rear of the Avon building at the corner of George and Waterloo Streets.

## TOM PATTERSON THEATRE

The need for a more flexible theatre for contemporary or experimental productions and for workshops led to the opening in 1971 of the Third Stage in the casino belonging to the Stratford Badminton Club on Lakeside Drive. The theatre has 481 seats around three sides of its rectangular modified thrust stage. In 1991, the theatre was renamed in honour of Festival founder Tom Patterson.



It later became the home of the Young Company (founded in 1975), although members later appeared in all of the Festival's regular performances. Recently, the training program has been restructured as The Birmingham Conservatory for Classical Theatre Training at the Stratford Festival of Canada.



Today the Festival is one of the major industries of Stratford, employing close to 1,000 people at the height of the season. Many local businesses, including hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, restaurants and shops, benefit from the tourism resulting from about 550,000 visitors the Festival brings to town each year. However, the city has been successful at not creating a one-theme town, retaining its largely Victorian downtown and its extensive parks system for the enjoyment of the visitors and residents alike.



Many world-renowned actors have emerged from or played at the Festival over the years. Many actors, as well as designers and other artistic staff, have made Stratford their home, even when working periodically elsewhere. The Festival and its personnel continue to be a valuable part of the community.

BY L. RIEDSTRA, STRATFORD-PERTH ARCHIVES