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## THE ROYALL TYLER THEATRE

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The Royall Tyler Theatre owes its existence to a providential fire, which in 1886 demolished the University's ramshackle gymnasium. By 1898, both under-exercised students and faculty hotly protested the lack of physical culture facilities at UVM, so the next year President Matthew Henry Buckham reported that for \$20,000 a very plain gymnasium could be provided. A site next to the Old Mill was selected in 1900, and plans were prepared by the Boston architectural firm of Andrews, Jaques, and Rantoul. President Buckham, unwilling to erect a costly building though expecting a gymnasium that would be harmonious with existing buildings, must have taken comfort in the fact that these architects were pupils of H. H. Richardson, whose handiwork, Billings Library, graced the campus.

Work began in April of 1901, in anticipation of finishing the basilica-type structure in October. The nave measured sixty feet in width, one hundred forty feet in depth, and fifty feet in height and was flanked by aisles of twenty feet. The brick exterior walls were ornamented with brownstone similar to that used in the Billings Library. North Carolina pine paneling stretched from the peak of the ceiling to the hardwood floors in the interior. As the work progressed, the costs mounted. Thirty thousand dollars, raised through subscriptions of alumni, faculty, and five hundred resident students, was required to finish and equip the new construction.

The first public exhibition of the new Gymnasium, held on 14-16 October 1901, was a gala one, as it housed the Vermont Musical Festival, featuring the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a choir of four hundred. A spacious hall, the Gymnasium seated 1200 at each of the five concerts and at many others afterward. The structure proved a suitable location for physical activities, military drill, dances, Kake Walk, baccalaureate and commencement exercises, but especially for musical entertainments. Over the years, the roster of artists whose talents inspired the building is most noteworthy and includes John McCormack, Jascha Heifetz, Fritz Kreisler, Geraldine Farrar, Mischa Elman, Alma Gluck, Amelita Galli-Curci, Jan Kubelik, John Philip Sousa, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shaw, Carolina Lazzari, Ephrem Zimbalist, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Anna Pavlova, and Paul Whiteman, who presented Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" soon after its original performance in New York.

The Gymnasium also housed dramatic performances, both amateur, and professional. Various University theatre groups staged productions in the edifice, which also was the scene of performances of the Ben Greet Shakespearean troupe, including a youthful Sybil Thorndike and Sidney Greenstreet.

By 1911 the use of the building as a drill hall was impractical, so a glass-roofed addition was erected at its rear. The initial construction and the annex housed indoor baseball as well as other sportive activities, while doubling as assembly and concert hall into the 1940's. Soon the University's physical education program outgrew the Gymnasium, which then was used for offices, classrooms, and the support facilities, while cultural presentations were housed in local theatres and the Memorial Auditorium. Meanwhile University theatricals were produced alternately on the lawn at Grasse Mount, in Southwick Auditorium, in the Arena Theatre in the Fleming Museum, and, at last, the arts have returned to the Gymnasium, now the Royall Tyler Theatre.

The genesis of the Royall Tyler Theatre was not without pain and disappointment. Compatible facilities for the fine arts were envisioned by President Carl Borgmann as early as 1955, but funds were not allocated for devising a workable plan until 1967. In conjunction with a noted firm of Chicago architects, UVM's artists, musicians, rhetoricians, and thespians devised a performance complex that centered upon the old Art Building and the Fleming Museum, but these ambitions were not realized because of diminished budgets. Nor was money available in 1969, so Director of Theatre Edward J. Feidner revived a proposal that the old Gymnasium be fashioned into a new theatre. The plan offered distinct advantages: a campus architectural gem could be preserved and put into worthy use while saving money. Feidner's scheme was adopted and is now a happy reality.

Passing beneath intricately carved eaves and entering through the ornate Romanesque arch, the visitor steps into a large foyer that contains box office, marketing office, business office, classroom, and the

grand staircases that ascend to the upper lobby. From the stairwell one sees the magnificent woodwork of the original ceiling. The lobby itself serves a vestibule and concert hall. Faculty offices open onto the lobby as well. The spectator then passes through the main entrances to the auditorium decorated in warm shades of brown and red. Because of the fifty-foot ceiling, there is a sense of airiness and intimacy, for each of the 295 seats commands a clear view of the stage, which can be adapted to thrust, arena, and proscenium staging.

Backstage are dressing rooms, a green room, and other spaces necessary to mount stage productions. Beneath the level of the stage are scenery and costume shops, stage areas, classrooms, and faculty offices. The Royall Tyler Theatre is a facility designed for teaching and learning, the goal of which is the liberation of the mind and enrichment of the spirit to which the College of Arts & Sciences is dedicated.