

An Extended History of Proctors

Part 2

The Decline of Theatre

Proctors holds the distinction of being the site for the first public demonstration of television. Dr. Ernst F. W. Alexanderson, one of General Electric's most prolific inventor-engineers, conducted the experiment.

On May 22, 1930, before a live audience and witnessed by scientific writers from around the country, an orchestra in the theatre was led by the image of a conductor on a seven-foot screen that was being transmitted from a GE lab. A plaque commemorating this historic event is located in the Arcade.

Ironically, it was the invention of television that would eventually jeopardize the future of the theatre. After World War II, grand theatres throughout America were adversely affected by the population shift toward suburbia, the growth of shopping malls, and the marketing of a TV for every home. During the 1950s and 60s, Proctors was primarily a movie house, but had fallen into such disrepair that its future looked bleak.

By the 1970s, Proctors had changed hands multiple times, and was eventually taken over by the city of Schenectady after a foreclosure for nonpayment of taxes by a previous owner. It appeared for a time that Proctors would have to be closed indefinitely, perhaps demolished, as its tarnished elegance was seen as a liability for the city. Second-run films and an occasional touring show could not support "the musty white elephant" and its ever-growing operating costs.

Saving the Theatre

Various performing arts groups and concerned individuals felt that the theatre was a valuable asset to the community, as it had historic significance and the potential to become a spectacular center for the arts once again. Courageously, these citizens came together in the summer of 1977 to form the Arts Center and Theatre of Schenectady, Inc. (ACTS) for the purpose of saving the theatre from the wrecking ball. However, by February 1978, the city had closed the theatre for nonpayment of taxes. In order to save the theatre, an expensive feasibility study would need to be done, in order to determine whether or not the theatre could become economically viable.

With help from the community, ACTS was able to fund the \$25,000 study, which showed that Proctors could be valuable to the community once again. In order to make the theatre habitable, ACTS needed money for the initial necessary repairs. They held a successful fundraiser called "Proctor's is Alive and Well," which raised over \$7,000. In addition, approximately \$500,000 in federal and city funds was made accessible for restoring and making the theatre operationally safe. A 13-man SETA (Schenectady Employment and Training Administration) crew erected a maze of scaffolding to clean, paint and re-plaster. A new roof, three new boilers, a sprinkler system and safety railings on the balcony and orchestra pit were installed. Dedicated volunteers took over cleaning the 2,700 seats, which were much too costly to replace.

Proctors was officially reborn on January 3, 1979. A standing room only audience for the "Harry Blackstone Magic Show" heard Mayor Frank Duci proclaim, "This is a significant, historic moment" as he presented the theatre's key and deed to Mrs. Katherine S. Rozendaal, president of ACTS. She in turn gave him one dollar, the price agreed upon by both parties for the purchase of the theatre. Harry Blackstone, Jr., son of the famous vaudevillian who played Proctors in its early days, opened up a new era of magic for this vintage theatre. That same year, the Charlie Daniels Band was the first rock act to

perform at Proctors. Over three decades later, Proctors averages more than 60 shows per season, from Broadway hits to opera, ballet, pop stars and comedy favorites.

Rather than completely shut down the theatre during renovations, Proctors chose to remain open and allow the community to take an active role in the restoration. One program strongly supported by the community, initiated in 1980 to help refurbish the theatre seats, allowed patrons to pay \$100 for a new seat with a personalized plaque. Even famous performers took part-- Vincent Price generously contributed, and actor Hal Holbrook donated money to restore every seat in Row HH of the orchestra level.

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Proctors is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) cultural, educational and charitable organization that delivers exciting shows, excellent educational programming and community events to the extended Capital Region.

proctors.org

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