



James Joyce's "Ulysses in Nighttown" at the Poor Alex. Harry Pollock and Merle-Ann Marshall in this one of many excursions into the vital world of Experimental Theatre.

## *PLANT A MIRVISH, GET A MIRACLE*

*By Ron Evans*

When millionaire Edwin Mirvish was a boy, he delivered groceries from his family's debt-ridden store in midtown Toronto on a bicycle.

There was no telephone in the store so young Mirvish had to pedal from house to house, picking up the orders. Seasoned customers developed a cunning ploy. "... And on the way back from the store", they'd instruct the lad, "stop by the bakery and get me a loaf of bread and pick up my pills at the drug store".

Mirvish always obliged.

Today, at 51, one of the most successful merchants in North America, Honest Ed Mirvish is still delivering more than he bargained for.

But now it's culture he's picking up and passing out to his customers on the way to and from the store.

It all started three years ago when



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Mirvish, then known only as the canny developer of Canada's biggest and craziest discount house, spotted a bargain in real estate. The Royal Alexandra Theatre, built in 1907 by Cawthra Mulock ("the Astors of Upper Canada") at a cost of \$750,000 and a jewelled landmark in Toronto for half a century but lately run to seed, was up on the block.

Toronto's artistic establishment shuddered at the word that it might be sold and levelled for a parking lot or office building—but they did nothing. Mirvish looked at it as a

real steal for \$215,000 ("The land's worth more than that!" he protested) and bought it.

Then he sunk another \$450,000 or more into the old playhouse to restore it to its original splendor, recovering the seats, walls and floors in scarlet velour and broadloom, re-finishing the lobbies in ivory and gold, restoring the elaborate murals and hanging a massive crystal chandelier, and opened it for business again.

Still that was only the start of Mirvish's strange, middle-aged excursion into the arts. There was a ton or two of old furnishings left over from the refurbishing of the Royal Alex—faded-but-still-serviceable crimson curtains, extraneous seats, the discarded marquee—and it seemed a shame to waste it.

Well, as someone once said, "put



Cast of "La Ronde" by Arthur Schnitzler, presented by Aries Productions at the Poor Alex. Left to Right: Paisley Maxwell, Norma Clark, Morna Wales, Bill Osler and Emmy Fuller.

Ed Mirvish on the horns of a dilemma and he'll convert them into bookends".

In this case, he cleaned out the ground floor of his plastics factory, a few blocks from the store (he also owns engineering and drug concerns), moved in the Royal Alex cast-offs and opened a second theatre, the tiny (100-seat), sardonically christened Poor Alex.

Quite enough good works for one man, you'd say. But wait.

Parking was always a problem at Mirvish's three-storey, floor-tilted, sign-plastered discount store. The neighbors complained about the invading cars, the police growled about traffic jams and the city fathers began to lean on Mirvish. Always obliging, Mirvish bought up a block of houses adjacent to the store on declining

Markham Street (for \$350,000) with the intention of smashing them down for a car park. But when he applied to have the property rezoned from residential to commercial, the city fathers rather treacherously turned him down.

Mirvish was stuck with 12 narrow, ugly, three-storey houses ("so dreary", said one wag, "even the spiders had nervous breakdowns")—and what to do with them? More horns: more bookends.

The enterprising merchant prince sent his permanent store maintenance crew down the street; they scrubbed up the houses inside and out, painted their faces bright purple, green and orange, laid a tiled piazza in front, set out tables with gay umbrellas and, hey presto, a delightful artists' village on drab old Markham Street.

Another bonus for the customers. Yet still Mirvish hadn't finished.

Early this year, in a newly purchased (\$525,000) office-and-warehouse building next door to the Royal Alex (where he hopes eventually to operate an exclusive theatre club), Mirvish opened what is already one of the liveliest, most novel dining rooms in restaurant-rich Toronto. Called Ed's Warehouse Restaurant, the establishment, decked out in Gay Nineties fashion and serving only roast beef (but "the best in town"), is jammed from wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling with theatrical mementos.

One side is covered with the backdrop from a summertime production of Flower Drum Song, old ornate props stand in every corner and the rest of the walls are literally plastered



Rehearsal of "The Rehearsal" by Jean Anouilh—another Aries production. Left to Right: Bruce Gray, Norma Clark, Paisley Maxwell, Sean Mulcahy, Morna Wales, Raynold Gideon and Douglas Ney.



Andrew Allan and cast of "The Rehearsal." The Poor Alex now attracts Canada's top directors.

Robert Christie, director, working out the intricacies of William's "Suddenly Last Summer".



Bruce Gray as George, Morna Wales as Mrs. Venable, with Emmy Fuller as Mrs. Holly in "Suddenly Last Summer".



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with glossy photos of stage personalities, current and forgotten.

A restaurant of gay and superior standard cheek-by-jowl with a theatre, a restaurant where the theatre ushers turn up to warn of curtain-time, has caught on instantly with the play-going public. After all, there's always the possibility you may see the star of the show dining at the next table.

Well that, to the moment, is the Mirvish stake in Toronto's cultural life, an investment that may conservatively be reckoned at \$2,500,000.

And yet that's not entirely true, either, because Mirvish's true share in the city's artistic vitality cannot be measured in dollars and cents. It extends beyond the edges of the ledgers.

In the Royal Alex, for instance, Mirvish has introduced something more than fresh plush and replastering. Finding after two seasons that he could not keep the theatre going on imported productions alone because the road was rapidly drying up, he put together his own production company to fill in the holes in the schedule. He brought in producers Michael McAloney and Joyce Sloan, who, in turn brought in director Charles Tate, designer Peter Wingate and choreographer Vivian Ainslie, and they put together five musicals and one straight comedy during the '65-'66 season.

Now the resuscitation of such dead-horse shows as *Brigadoon*, *Oklahoma!* and *Teahouse of The August Moon* would hardly be worthy of note, except that Mirvish has tried, wherever possible, to put Canadian talent to work in these shows. It hasn't been easy because, though this country is well-stocked with fine actors, it is short, through lack of opportunity, on experienced musical comedy performers. Yet *Teahouse* was an all-Canadian show

and most of the others have had only one or two leads imported from the U.S., the supporting players and corps being drawn exclusively from the native talent pool.

Not all these home-made productions have been successful, in fact, only two, *The King And I* and *Oklahoma!* could be counted small triumphs. Yet they are a start towards some kind of indigenous programming in the Royal Alex, the first in perhaps 20 years.

Meanwhile, the second Mirvish theatre, the Poor Alex, has had an even greater impact on Toronto, though it is just a fifteenth the size of the elder playhouse. Since the excellently equipped and furnished Poor Alex was opened two years ago (with a production of *A Taste of Honey* that subsequently won the Dominion Drama Festival), it has been dark scarcely a week since. Offered to any reputable producer at the price of \$20 a night, \$100 a week, the theatre has had candidate companies queuing up since the start for one- or two-week occupancy and the result has been a remarkable resurgence of amateur theatre in Toronto.

Presented with professional facilities in a charming little theatre, the amateurs (and some semi-professional companies, such as Aries Productions) have scrambled to bring the latest West End and Off-Broadway shows onto the stage in a healthy competition for attention. And the juxtaposition of perhaps two dozen individual productions in the same playhouse within a single season has served to push standards steadily higher and higher.

Ironically, the vitality stimulated by the opening of the Poor Alex has proved a little embarrassing for the Royal Alex. For, though the shows down at the big theatre may have had more polish and glitter this season, it has been the tiny Poor Alex (in company with the equally new, 100-seat Colonnade Theatre) which has provided the more interesting fare. New Canadian plays (*The Duke and the Devil*, *A Stranger Unto My Brethren*), neglected plays (*Anouilh's*

*The Rehearsal*, *Williams' Milk Train*) and experimental works (*Joyce's Ulysses in Nighttown*), have all found a home at the Poor Alex.

Finally, there's Mirvish's Markham Street Village to be reckoned with. This has turned out to be far more than a rather gawdy tourist trap, though it proved to be a godsend to the artisans and craftsmen who were driven out of the downtown Gerrard Street village when it was levelled for redevelopment. Today, the Markham Village boasts an excellent little French restaurant (the first restaurant was closed on some zoning technicality. Mirvish, with typical wry humor put up a sign saying, "Opened by mistake, closed by City Hall"), a book shop, antique and curio shops and amongst others, son David's posh and prospering art gallery.

But more important are the artists the village has attracted. In the beginning, when studio space was first offered at \$25 to \$40 a month, the artists were distrustful.

But that has lately changed. This season, the Village has been tremendously enhanced by the arrival of the Artists Workshop, a small art film studio, and many other worthwhile enterprises.

So Merchant Mirvish quietly, and in a number of surprising ways, has gone about enriching Toronto's cultural landscape with generous helpings of money and imagination.

No one, least of all Honest Ed himself, has suggested that he has done this because within burns a pure, unquenchable love of the arts. Mirvish is the first to admit that his first love in the theatre is the American musical comedy and that he can't make head or tail of most of the canvases sold in his son's gallery. (Mirvish, frankly, gets most of his non-commercial pleasure out of ballroom dancing, on which he's spent \$9,000 for instruction over the last eight years.)

But the Mirvish motives are somewhat less important than the Mirvish record. And the record shows he's still delivering, always delivering, to the community.

It would be injudicious to presuppose that a parallel might be drawn between Florence's Lorenzo de Medici and Toronto's Edwin Mirvish, thus implying that a new Renaissance is just around the corner . . . and that latter-day Michelangelos and Machiavellis are being nurtured in the hinterland of a cut-price emporium.

A few comparative values are, however, discernible.

Lorenzo has been described as a man of complex character and versatility; at once a poet and patron of art and learning, a statesman and diplomat.

Any poetic inclinations possessed by Mr. Mirvish are, at present, hiding under his rather ornate bushel; and his statesmanship is confined to his business, as was Lorenzo's. So be it!

The complex character and versatility of Mr. Mirvish are self-evident. His patronage of the arts, and deep

involvement therewith, are undeniable.

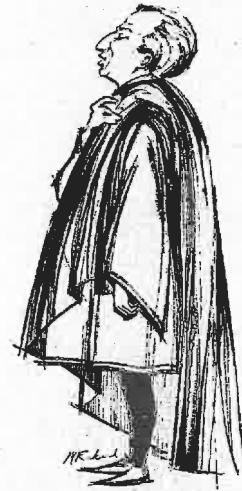
The Medici empire has long since crumbled . . . the Mirvish sphere of influence is in embryo.

Lorenzo, and grandpa Cosimo before him, sent for teachers of Greek and Latin, who stayed awhile, until the Florentines were sufficiently schooled to be able to found their own Platonic Academy.

Edwin, without grandpa, founded his own "academy" (by buying it) and also sent for the presumably "au courant". The parallel continues for, this year, the famed and fanfared seem to have been unceremoniously eased aside, and the local boys are, indeed, making good.

Medici, there is no doubt, was largely responsible for the da Vinci and Raphael originals in the Uffizi Gallery. Is it audacious to wonder what the hell is going on in Markham Street these days? Will students of

## ED THE HONEST



"The Prince."



the arts (circa 2500 A.D.) speak of Mirvish and the Torontine School? Will they pay homage and make pilgrimage to Markham Street? Impossible? Yes, possibly! Unlikely? More than likely unlikely! But . . .

Perhaps "Teahouse of the August Moon" with an all-Canadian cast did inspire the wrath of the critics. But they equally liked Oklahoma! And who remembers now the ghastly notices that "Mandragola" received! After all, by developing his own fine taste and judgment, Lorenzo overcame a lot of bad advice.

May his empire flourish and his renaissance bloom. May his patronage and interest wax strong, and his box office receipts increase daily.

When history books mention Lorenzo de Medici, perhaps one day they will mention Ed the Honest in the same paragraph!

"Lackeys to the Prince."