

Solange De Santis

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Ed Mirvish, Toronto theater impresario, dies at 92

By Solange De Santis

Edwin Mirvish, a producer with an exuberant personality who redefined the theatrical landscape in Toronto and restored London's Old Vic, died July 11 at the age of 92.

He made his fortune with a discount store ironically dubbed Honest Ed's, then branched into theater, restoring the Royal Alexandra Theater in Toronto and a fringe space, the Poor Alex, and building the Princess of Wales theater.

He expanded the possibilities for touring shows and with his son, David, eventually oversaw the creation and casting of shows in Toronto. Mirvish also steered the development of restaurants, shops and galleries near his theaters and store, creating two entertainment districts in Toronto. With his open-to-all birthday parties – he would have been 93 on July 24 – his promotional stunts and discount-store giveaways, his gaudy restaurants and enthusiasm, he was an essential and much-loved part of the life of Toronto.

Born in Virginia, he moved to Canada at the age of nine. When he was 15, his father died and Mirvish dropped out of school to take over the family's failing grocery store. In the 1940s, he and his wife, Anne (an accomplished sculptor) opened a women's clothing store that, in 1948, became a general store offering bargain prices. The store became known for its jokey signs – "Don't just stand there! Buy something!" – turkey giveaways at Thanksgiving and Christmas and huge, Las Vegas-style lighting along its block-wide exterior.

In 1962, he saved the historic Royal Alexandra Theater from the wrecking ball and this year, it celebrates its 100th anniversary. It offered a 1500-seat alternate venue to the then-new 3,000-seat O'Keefe Centre and Mirvish correctly judged that Toronto was ready for an expansion of entertainment choices. By 1988, the Royal Alex had 52,000 subscribers for its four- or five-show seasons.

In 1982, he bought an icon of British theater, the Old Vic, refurbished it and handed it to such renowned directors as Peter Hall and Jonathan Miller. It was never a moneymaker and Mirvish sold it 16 years later to a theatrical trust, now headed by Sir Elton John.

In 1993, he built the Princess of Wales theater in Toronto to house *Miss Saigon*, which ran for two years. "There has never been anyone like him in the theatre," recalled producer Cameron Mackintosh. "Completely down to earth and one of the only people in this business you never needed to sign a contract with. Win or lose, he stood by his deal." Other long runs in Toronto were *Les Miserables*, *Crazy for You* and *Mamma Mia!*

In recent years, Mirvish encountered setbacks with *Lord of the Rings*, *The Producers* and *Hairspray*, none of which ran as long as expected, but *We Will Rock You* is a current hit at the Royal Alex and *Dirty Dancing* has generated record advance sales for the fall of 2007.

He received many honors, among them Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and is survived by Anne, David, three grandchildren and a sister, Lorraine.

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