

# Making Spaces for Art

## A Case Study: The Registry Theatre



**“Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments”**

The story of The Registry Theatre is intimately and irretrievably entwined with that of J.M. Drama and the City of Kitchener. Originally built in 1939 as the Waterloo County Registry Office, it is one of the few art deco buildings in Waterloo Region. Yet what became The Registry Theatre was the result of its own

perfect marriage between the City of Kitchener and J.M. Drama. Like all relationships, they have their own romantic tales and foibles. But make no mistake, this marriage not only is growing strong, but still has its spark.

J.M. Drama began as a group of alumni sharing an emotional connection. Putting the “J” and “M” in J.M. Drama, graduates of St Jerome’s High School, and St Mary’s High School established this group with the intent to perform in 1984. They performed in various locations throughout Kitchener, ending up at the Victoria Park Pavilion. They quickly realized that an affordable performing arts space was needed for the community as well as themselves. Beyond affordable, it also needed to be financially viable and sustainable. The emotional connection that pulled the group together logically led to a location—the turn of the century buildings of the St. Jerome campus, one of their former high schools.

In the 1990’s, the Mayor’s Committee on Downtown, agreed. A feasibility study determined that a performing arts space for the community was needed and that the St. Jerome’s campus was indeed a good fit. J.M. Drama, whose membership now had expanded beyond alumni, worked together with the WalterFedy Partnership (a top architectural and engineering firm) on the proposal. All good marriages begin with a proposal of course. Alas, rejection. After hundreds of volunteer and donated hours working on the plans, and a significant price tag to boot, the owners of the site refused to sell. Undeterred, the members found another site. That site too, was quickly removed from possibility.



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Enter the City of Kitchener. In the 90's, the City of Kitchener acquired the former Registry Building at 122 Frederick Street in a land deal with the Regional Municipality of Waterloo. They approached J.M. Drama and asked them to see if it suited their needs. Don Bourgeois, and the other members of the Board of Directors inspected the site. Bourgeois laughs about how he was the only one who didn't see the potential of that first date – but others did. J.M. Drama enthusiastically said yes.....with some conditions.

Wiser with experience, J.M. Drama wanted a “planned, phased approach” and a “long term relationship.” What was to become The Registry Theatre was going to be a relationship built in many steps. To begin, it needed to be feasible. The building itself needed to be converted. And at each step, the negotiations between the City of Kitchener and J.M. Drama allowed for transparency, accountability and the option to “opt out” at any time by either party.

The Registry Theatre is a building that is a public asset with a public purpose. Like a prenuptial agreement, the terms of the contract negotiated between J.M. Drama and the City of Kitchener that gave birth to this space is designed to protect both parties from mutual risk while affording maximum benefit to both parties and, more importantly, the community they serve. “Everything was at risk for J.M. Drama” says Bourgeois. At the time, they were a small non-profit with an annual operating budget of \$15,000-\$20,000 with no staff and no line of credit. If the deal went bad, it would bankrupt the organization and leave them without a space. They were taking a huge risk leaving their (then) current 12,000 square foot space in the former Lang Tannery Building at a monthly cost of three hundred dollars. They negotiated clauses with the City so that they could only be kicked out of the Registry building if they breached the agreement. J.M. Drama would also retain the right to occupy part of the building whether they continued to manage the facility or not. By the same token, the City of Kitchener needed to protect its efforts. The facility had to be sustainable and completed at a reasonable cost to the taxpayer. The City agreed to manage the contracting process and provided financial support with a loan of \$224,000 interest free. They also managed the relationship with the WalterFedy Partnership, the firm retained to complete the designs. The task was daunting, fraught with its own renovation nightmares, and yet simultaneously completely perfect. Soul mates.

An essential element of the project was the timing. An economic downturn and the turn of the millennium gave access to funding that otherwise would not have been available. The business plan for The Registry Theatre stated that funds for the capital improvements would need to be secured through grants and donations and that operating costs would be covered through facility operations.



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Additional capital funds were secured through the government's Millennium Fund. Interestingly, timing made the renovations to the building cost so much more. With the recession, contractors were ironically very busy and bids were coming in 20-30% higher than anticipated. Renovations were ultimately completed creating a viable, affordable space for the community to rent. On New Year's Eve, 2001, Don Bourgeois and many other volunteers rang in the new millennium painting at The Registry Theatre.

Once the space was opened, it was an immediate success. In their first six months of operation, 101 days were rented. They were already at two-thirds capacity. In their second and third years of operation, they applied for an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant for part time management to relieve the stress on volunteer time. In 2004, they were able to hire someone to direct programming.

Part of the formula underpinning this success is the philosophy. What started with J.M. Drama wanting a space to perform became a completely successful and distinct brand known as The Registry Theatre. On the books of J.M. Drama, The Registry Theatre is set up as a separate, charitable project of the organization, with its own bank account and mission. The Registry Theatre is dedicated to building audiences and allowing artists an "affordable place to fail." Yes, fail. Artists require a space within which they will not be bankrupted by failure—a space where they can mature as artists and learn their craft. At a daily rental rate of \$250-\$300, they do not discriminate between professional and amateur. And as such, they want a space where professionals can flourish, and amateurs can develop by making mistakes, learning and thriving. The Registry is also building audiences for jazz, folk, classics and other forms of art. More recently, The Registry Theatre lobby art gallery was installed for visual artists. J.M. Drama continues to invest in The Registry Theatre, upgrading lighting and sound systems, staging, back of house, and preparing for the next phase of its existence.

The overall vision of the Registry Theatre is to be a place for arts and culture to flourish and to develop. And flourishing is something that The Registry Theatre does consistently. From the "willingness of others to collaborate to achieve a public benefit," came the beautiful marriage of J.M. Drama and the City of Kitchener. This is one marriage we can't wait to celebrate the diamond anniversary of!