

The Roxy Theatre

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The Coleman theatre of Alberta established a new sense of culture while maintaining and reflecting the small mining town's way of life and values. Although it was the prominent industry of coal mining that drew residents into Coleman, Alberta, it was cultural institutions like the Roxy Theatre that reflected and supported the community's resiliency and helped it develop its own distinctive culture. It will refer to culture as the arts of verbal, physical, and emotional expression that represents the traditions, universal values, or way of life of a particular group of people. This paper will explore this by beginning with a historical background of theatres in Canada, reflecting particularly on nationalism, architecture, and interior design. This will be used to contextualize an examination of The Roxy Theatre in Coleman and show how it not only reflects the culture of the town but also develops a new one. This paper then concludes by drawing in important considerations and current events that reflect the past.

After becoming a province in 1905, Alberta's economy was dominated by the coal and agriculture industry. Between 1897 and 1910, the province saw a boom in coal production. A considerable amount of this production came from the Crowsnest Pass after the Canadian Pacific Railway extended a branch line there. This subsequently led to an upsurge in miners from around the world moving there to work underground in the mines. In 1903, just after a major rockslide had devastated the town of Frank, International Coal & Coke Co., one of the largest mining companies, sub-divided a new area in the Crowsnest Pass called Coleman. Coleman developed exponentially during the coal boom; growing in population and accumulating several small businesses and social facilities including the Union Opera House. Beginning in 1920, the Union Opera House underwent numerous changes of ownership, all consistently choosing motion pictures to entertain their residents. During a short downturn in coal demand during the Great Depression, Coleman lost its Opera House to a community hall. Once the coal demand

grew during and after World War Two, it was not long until Coleman again had another theatre, this time called The Palace Theatre. In 1948, a fire destroyed the theatre which was soon to be rebuilt by the same owners and named The Roxy. In the mid-to-late 20th century, the theatre continued to undergo four more management changes and hosted entertainment ranging from motion pictures to live performances. Theatre is one facet of culture whose examination allows for a better understanding of society.

In Canada, theatres have a long history in which they were forced to overcome hurdles and unknown territory, ultimately contributing to a culture that Canada could identify with. To start, European theatre began in French Canada but continued to struggle with the church's disapproval.<sup>1</sup> Though there is no evidence to say that The Roxy Theatre had to face these hostilities, it was these early theatres that paved way to allow for The Roxy Theatre to be culturally immersive and expressive in communities like Coleman. Amateur theatre and the boom of small theatres are two key aspects when looking at the history of theatre. In this case, amateur does not simply refer to the quality of entertainment so much but instead looks at the writers and entertainers and their past studies and experience. Amateur groups and plays grew in popularity and were the dominant form up until the fifties. British and French people used their mother country and followed similar styles.<sup>2</sup> Most theatres remained this way as there were few opportunities to professionalize with no formal training.<sup>3</sup> The Roxy Theatre also made use of the Canadian amateurism movement through local talent. Entertainment such as stand-up nights, skits from locals, talent shows, and orchestra performances were held in the theatre. With the rise

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2009, Pp. 55; Indigenous people were performing rituals and dramas as part of ceremonies and celebrations hundreds of years before Europeans came to Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Amy Shaw, "A Canadian Cultural History," (Course at University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta, Spring 2021)

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, 180.

of amateur theatre, comes the rise of small theatres that appeared across Canada. The Little Theatre movement, a term used today for the nonprofessional "community" theatre in Canada, originally referred to an international reform movement protesting commercialism in large theatres.<sup>4</sup> Little Theatre companies began to emerge beginning with The Community Players of Winnipeg in 1921.<sup>5</sup> Little theatres not only preferred traditional culture to modern ones, but most live theatres were also focused less on paving a path for themselves and more on creating a space of culture that people enjoyed. As the prior owner of The Roxy and a former *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* music producer, Ralph Thurn puts it, "I'm not here to make a million, I'm just here to have fun"<sup>6</sup>. Further, little theatres provided positive influences in the community and were able to "lift up the individual morally and spiritually".<sup>7</sup> We see this occurring in The Roxy especially towards the later twentieth century when the owners intended to bring live theatre to the stage once again, allowing for a traditional and culturally fulfilling experience of participatory performances. The history of The Roxy goes beyond 1948 when it was built. The milestones that theatres in Canada took part in gives us a better understanding of what the Roxy theatre represented both culturally and nationally.

As the momentum of amateurism grew, soon after the Canadian Confederation, there was also a drive towards the development of cultural nationalism within the content of theatres. In Canada, there was a substantial need for Canadian-made arts that were not tied to any mother or neighbouring country. The first Canadian play was written and published in 1788 but the play failed to gain popularity until the 1960s and '70s, continuing the lack of Canadian plays up until

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<sup>4</sup> David Gardner, "Little Theatre Movement". In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. December 16, 2013. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/little-theatre-movement>

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, 277.

<sup>6</sup> Roxanna Maron, *The Pass Promoter*, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, 278.

then.<sup>8</sup> Jesse Edgar Middleton stated in 1914 that, “There is no Canadian Drama. It is merely a branch of American theatre, and, let it be said, a most profitable one”<sup>9</sup>. World War Two played an important role in changing this by both encouraging and demanding the constructing of Canadian culture and arts, diverging from the British and American roots to Canadian-made theatre.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, in the 1970s, small theatres had a mandate to develop and produce Canadian plays appearing in every province. And so, the intentions of these new little theatre companies were nationally and regionally oriented, highlighting the importance of Canadian material.<sup>11</sup> The Roxy Theatre hosted many Canadian-made dramas and talent throughout the season. These were generally amateur writers, writing about Canadian events that reflected the local and national history, people, and culture. One play that the Coleman theatre played throughout the summer season in 1997 was TOK OMO Law, which was based on the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and local history as well. Later, the paper will go further in-depth about the plays, but it is important to see Canadian nationalism and local history incorporated into small-town communities and their culture.

The Roxy’s architecture and interior design also reflected the history of Canada and its people. The Roxy Theatre was constructed in 1948 and the design is a Quonset-style hut attached to a two-storey building in front. The Quonset hut was designed during The Great War as a lightweight, easy-to-assemble structure that could be easily shipped anywhere to provide a variety of uses.<sup>12</sup> After World War Two as the military were decommissioning their operations and selling off their surplus, Quonset-style theatres became very popular and over one hundred

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, 177.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, 241.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, 177.

<sup>12</sup> Municipality of Crowsnest Pass, “Heritage Inventory Project – Phase 1,” Community Design Strategies Inc., September 2013, <https://www.crowsnestpass.com/public/download/documents/13944>

and forty of these theatres were built across the world.<sup>13</sup> Today, twenty of these theatres are still open including two in Canada, one in Puerto Rico, and seventeen in The United States.<sup>14</sup> This does not include The Roxy Theatre due to its closure in the early 2000s. It is important to discuss the 50's themed interior as it plays a role in culture as well. Interior design can play an important role in immersing an individual in an experience and invoking a feeling of nostalgia. The Roxy does this by taking individuals back to the "good ol' days" and invoking happiness or excitement about reliving an old memory. It was important to create these enjoyable experiences and alternate worlds, especially in a coal mining community to allow for people to step out of their lives and into the '50s once again.

The style and programming of the theatre reflects this small coal mining community through tradition, values, way of life, and history. These four aspects create a story that is then expressed through interior design, costume, the performers, stories, and other forms of expression which is shared with the community and tourists. The Roxy Theatre reflects the Coleman community because by looking at the content and origin of the performances on stage, you see the rich history and cultural identity that was created in Coleman prior to the theatre opening. The dramas and plays that Ralph Thurn wrote, shared insight into the small community, its people, and also the history. Holding on to those community values was an important concept when running the theatres. For example, Ralph Thurn, and prior owners, Joseph and John Dobek, took part in charity events for the community. The Dobek's would open their doors to show a free movie for the underprivileged for Christmas and Thurn planned on allowing the Dobek's to

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Budgen, "Media and Presentations," Crowsnest Cando, Accessed February 25, 2021. <https://www.crowsnestcando.ca/media--presentations.html>

<sup>14</sup> Roger Ebert, "Quonset Hut Movie Theaters," Cinema Treasures. 2021. <http://cinematreasures.org/styles/36?status=open>

continue this tradition after they sold it to him.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Thurn donated a portion of the designated night's profit to events such as “Thunder in the Valley” or the Junior Hockey team.<sup>16</sup> Giving back to the community was a special part of The Roxy tradition and both owners valued and honoured it. Next, community dynamic and the value of ‘closeness’ is another aspect of culture that can be recognized in The Roxy. The theatre's role was simply to give people a place to share the culture of the town with family, friends, and neighbours. Lastly, geography can also be reflected in the theatre. Starting with sturdy exterior, built for rugged winters, but also continuing to the values shared within the theatre. Coleman’s identity played a large role in creating The Roxy Theatre’s identity, creating a unique destination for outside interest as well as providing a natural and friendly atmosphere for locals to feel comfortable.

For so many years, residents of Coleman saw the theatre primarily as a movie theatre however, when Ralph Thurn brought his skill to the Crowsnest Pass, members of the community had opportunities to immerse themselves in the culture of live theatre. The development of culture can also be seen occurring during the years that The Roxy was open. This meant that a new culture was created based on something brought into the group – ultimately alternating the previous way of life and values. Witnessing the talent from outsiders performing on The Roxy Theatre stage is significant in itself because the young and old are being exposed and inspired to learn these new skills and forms of expression. The development of new skills in children and even adults build character and creates intellectual community members. Equally important was the opportunities that Thurn provided the community when he chose to hire local actors.<sup>17</sup> Lastly,

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<sup>15</sup>Historical/Architectural/Archaeological/Significance, n.d., Records of the Historical Resources Management Branch of Alberta Culture, 78.

<sup>16</sup> Francine Kilgannon, “Roxy Opens with a Blast!” *Crowsnest Pass Herald*, March 1998.; Francine Kilgannon, “Roxy Comes Alive,” *Crowsnest Pass Herald*, March 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Roxanna Maron, *The Pass Promoter*, 1996.

this paper will further discuss the importance of having influences from other theatres such as The Roxy name and film making occurring in Coleman, convincing the people of Coleman that they too can be a part of high culture.

As discussed, plays and performances can both reflect the culture of the town and create a new one. The most recognized way that the theatre portrayed Coleman's culture was by representing their way of life and the history of the town. Ralph Thurn was able to use his experience as a music producer in Calgary to write and direct plays that best related to Coleman. *The Shooting of Constable Lawson* was a re-enactment of the murder of Constable Lawson by Emilio Picariello.<sup>18</sup> *TOK OMO Law*, already briefly mentioned, was a play that told the story of a young boy, eager to fulfill his dream of becoming a Royal Canadian Mounted Police Officer, like his Grandfather who served during the days when notorious rum runners ran rampant in the Rockies.<sup>19</sup> Rum running was a large part of Coleman's history and is a shared part of the culture to this day. These plays were a way to educate tourists on the history of Coleman. Just like many theatres across Canada, travelling talent was brought in to perform as well. *Seven Womyn for Seven Men* is a politically correct version of the musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* which made one appearance in Coleman after selling out in Calgary Alberta. One other performance held in The Roxy that came from Calgary was The Stampede Chorus.<sup>20</sup> Thurn also brought in a magician and Hypnotist, Marc Savard, in 1998 who now performs in Las Vegas.<sup>21</sup> Although Thurn valued local talent to represent the Crowsnest Pass, he also saw value in bringing quality live entertainment from outside the Pass and valued its importance when looking for improvement and inspiration in a culture.

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<sup>18</sup> Brad Wykes, "Action at Roxy Spills Onto Street," *Crowsnest Pass Promoter*, August 1998

<sup>19</sup> The Roxy Theatre, *Roxy Opening Night: TOK OMO Law* (Coleman, AB, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> "Roxy Theatre," (Advertisement) *Pincher Creek Echo*, March 1998.

<sup>21</sup> "Roxy Theatre" (Advertisement)



In Canada, theatres were created based on the way of life and the need for positive distractions. One group that was desperately in need of entertainment and distraction were miners. Without entertainment, the life of a coal miner is dark, depressing, and repetitive because they spend long hours underground to provide for themselves and their family. An example that best shows this is in 1858, in Fraser River where the discovery of gold brought in a great deal of not only gold miners but also travelling groups of performers looking to profit from entertaining the miners.<sup>22</sup> Although there is no documentation on why the theatres were built before The Roxy, there is proof that the theatre was at its peak during times that the mines were also experiencing a boom. There is an economic explanation to this but perhaps there was a vision to entertain miners just as there was in Fraser River. During the war, culture also provided an outlet for enjoyment from the harsh and emotionally depressing experience and news coming in. Having theatres lifted spirits and gave people hope. After the war, industrialization and urbanization contributed to the emergence of leisure time because the labour needs began to change and labour movements advocated for shorter hours.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Canada saw a transportation revolution that allowed people to move around faster, allowing for people to expand into new activities. This meant that more Canadians were able to attend cultural activities such as theatre and escape the chaos of life for a night. The Roxy Theatre provided an outlet for hope, resiliency and escapism for miners and their families.

The Coleman theatre played a large role in reflecting and utilizing the geography and people of Coleman by using the community atmosphere and nature and beauty that a rural community can offer. Also, The Roxy Theatre could take advantage of the influence that

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<sup>22</sup>Jonathan Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture*, 78.

<sup>23</sup> Robin Anderson. *Canadian History: Post-Confederation: 10.16 Sport and Leisure in Post-Confederation Canada*. University of the Fraser Valley. May 17, 2016. <https://opentextbc.ca/postconfederation/chapter/10-16-sport-and-leisure-in-post-confederation-canada/#navigation>

professional filmmakers had on community members while filming several times in Coleman. Because the communities in the Crowsnest Pass were so close together, members experience a closeness that could not be achieved in a larger city. Community atmosphere provides people with the ability to trade skills and knowledge, have a heightened awareness of opportunities and events, and an increase in civic engagement which in turn, has a positive impact on the theatre.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Pass Herald*, reporter Francine Kilgannon shared her experience with the theatre and community atmosphere in the local newspaper when she wrote, “It is wonderful to be able to boast of our own live theatre in Coleman and not have to travel afar to view others, where the performances may be grand but you sure can't say you know the actors by name”<sup>25</sup>. Later in the 20th century especially, tourism played an important role in keeping the theatre alive. The appeal factor came largely from the beauty and nature that Crowsnest Pass has to offer but also the special events taking place in the town. It is unclear as to which was more valuable to tourists, but The Roxy did well-taking advantage of summer tourism and bringing Coleman to the attention of outsiders. For example, in one summer show, *Minnie The Coal Miner's Daughter*, close to half of the audiences attending travelled in from Calgary.<sup>26</sup> Lastly, the geography and beauty of the Crowsnest Pass, as well as the historical value of Coleman, played a role in attracting professional filmmakers, such as the Disney franchise, who filmed *The Journey of Natty Gann* there.<sup>27</sup> This created an atmosphere and culture in the town which then was reflected in the popularity of the arts in the Crowsnest Pass. As previously mentioned, it is with professional film and theatre production like these that inspires local actors and writers with new

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<sup>24</sup> Communibee, “5 Surprising Statistics About Communities (And How CommuniBee is Addressing Them),” n.d. <https://communibee.ca/5-surprising-statistics-about-communities-and-how-communibee-is-addressing-them/>

<sup>25</sup> Francine Kilgannon, “Roxy a Grand Hit!” *The Pass Herald*, July, 1997.

<sup>26</sup> “Playful comedy was a hit in the Crowsnest Pass.” *The Alberta Report*. November 24th, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Lamb, “Pass Theatre Owner Finally gets his Gann,” *The Herald*, 1985

ideas and skills. Because of this, many groups and individuals pursued theatre, dance, orchestras, and/or other live performances and shared their talent with the community. The mountains, lakes, rivers, proximity between towns and the preservation of heritage buildings in the Crowsnest Pass represented and continues to represent the community's uniqueness and contributes to the theatre and culture of Coleman.

After the fire in 1948, the theatre was rebuilt and renamed, this time taking on the name, *The Roxy*.<sup>28</sup> As unique as it may sound, The Roxy has a long history throughout North America. The theatre's name was derived from the original Roxy Theatre built in New York City in 1927 by Herbert Lubin and managed by Samuel Lionel "Roxy" Rothafel. The monumental movie theatre was the showcase for leading Broadway films throughout the 1950s and was also noted for its flamboyant stage shows.<sup>29</sup> Although it closed in 1960, its legacy continued, and the name *Roxy* proliferated as a generic theatre name throughout the continent and around the world. In Alberta alone, there were eleven Roxy theatres.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the Coleman theatre was among the eleven and its name developed a reputation of cultural importance in the town. The name gave Coleman an edge in the cultural industry providing a sense of high culture in the community as the theatre represented a professional and a well-known center for cinema and live productions. For this reason, the town gained an appealing factor for tourism and gave members a greater sense of confidence, pride, and self-esteem.

Like other rural communities, Crowsnest Pass populations are ageing and struggle to retain youth in the community. However, some professionals are arguing that cultivating arts and

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<sup>28</sup> John Kinnear, "Looking Back: Long Live the Roxy," Crowsnest Pass Herald, November 18, 2020, <http://passherald.ca/archives/201118/index3.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Wikipedia. "Roxy Theatre (New York City)." February 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roxy\\_Theatre\\_\(New\\_York\\_City\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roxy_Theatre_(New_York_City))

<sup>30</sup> Kinnear, "Long Live the Roxy."

cultural programs will help cease the current tide of out-migration of the youth and ultimately increase the quality of life for residents.<sup>31</sup> According to Dr. Nancy Duxbury and Heather Campbell, to revitalize a community, you must not only give youth the tools for economic and career opportunities but also have the presence of galleries, music, performances and other venues that provide aspirational jobs and examples of entrepreneurship.<sup>32</sup> Involvement in the theatre was an important motivating factor for young people to live in the Crowsnest Pass. It built self-esteem and confidence, develops creativity, and motivates thinking.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, theatre arts also help to “develop leadership and decision-making skills, and provide young people with a means of self-expression and self-understanding”.<sup>34</sup> During the nineties, there were summer camps that offered onstage and offstage skills in the performance industry as well as concluding with a public performance for the community.<sup>35</sup> The theatre created a culture through opportunities such as these summer camps that helped revitalize the town by targeting young populations with cultural opportunities and the development of the character. By using the theatre as an ally of Coleman and the Crowsnest Pass, it helped to keep in younger populations and draw in tourism at the same time.

As this paper has examined the importance that The Roxy Theatre had on the reflection and development of culture, it is important to answer the question regarding why the Coleman theatre was so important to Coleman. Further to my previous comments, I mentioned that the Coleman theatres had two fires, including one that burned the theatre right down, and despite that, the owners continued to rebuild and restore it. Unfortunately, since 2003, the theatre has

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<sup>31</sup> Nancy Duxbury & Heather Campbell, “Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity: A Literature Review,” Centre for Policy Research on Culture and Communities Simon Fraser University, March 2009, [https://www.creativecity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/rural\\_communities\\_arts\\_2009.pdf](https://www.creativecity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/rural_communities_arts_2009.pdf), 1

<sup>32</sup> Duxbury & Campbell, “Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities” 2

<sup>33</sup> Duxbury & Campbell, “Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities,” 173

<sup>34</sup> Duxbury & Campbell, “Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities,” 173

<sup>35</sup> The Roxy, “Roxy Theatre 6 Day Summer Camp,” July 3, 2000

closed and has not been occupied since. One explanation for the desire for restoration and revival after the two fires could be that the owners saw an opportunity that would bring life, culture, and a better economy into this town – and the community saw the need for this as well. Not only this, but film theatres became a standard feature of small-town life, providing a popular recreational and cultural outlet for citizens. This was not any different for the theatre in Coleman as it has been described as “the hub of social life for decades in Coleman” and the community lacked a proper performance space without it.<sup>36</sup> Currently, the Crowsnest Pass is working hard alongside cultural society, Crowsnest Cando, and community members to “Revive the Roxy”. They argue that the culture and economy are thriving, and the Crowsnest Pass once again needs a proper platform for many groups and performers to share and express culture in this community. When the Roxy can open once again to host live performances, the economy will thrive with the potential tourism growth. Most importantly, the Crowsnest Pass will come alive once again and minimize the youth out-migration. Live theatres give a community something to talk about and identify with, which has and still will, work to bring members of the Crowsnest Pass closer together and give life to Coleman.

The role that the Coleman theatre played was not just solely for entertainment. Its role went deeper than that by contributing to society economically, intellectually, culturally, emotionally, and educationally. Economic contributions stem not only from the influx in tourism while The Roxy was open, but the role of having a theatre can also contribute to a society in the long term by maintaining the young population. Intellectual contributions stemmed from the building of good character at any age. The Roxy provided the function of creating and maintaining a culture in Coleman that allowed for the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and

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<sup>36</sup> Donald Budgen, Media and Presentations, Crowsnest Cando

practices that characterize this community. Emotionally, the theatre allowed for a distraction from the community's daily life which plays an important role in uplifting a society. Lastly, The Roxy was an educational platform because it preserved and taught locals and outsiders the heritage and history of Coleman. The historical and current impact that theatres, such as the one in Coleman had on small coalmining towns created a cultural identity for the community which helped nurture the resiliency and strength of the Crowsnest Pass.

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