

THE 'HONEST ED' STORY



In 1983, Ed Mirvish met the Queen Mother at the opening of the Old Vic in London. Six years later he was summoned to Buckingham Palace, below, to be made a Commander of the British Empire, or, as he liked to say, 'Creator of Bargains Everywhere.'

Some 80,000 customers crowded into the store during the three days and nights of the marathon, spending \$75,000, six times more than Mr. Mirvish had ever made before in a single week in February, the slowest sales month on the calendar. Four years later, they did it again — as a Twist Marathon to capitalize on the dance craze made famous by singer Chubby Checker.

Mr. Mirvish had his share of fights, including a major brawl over late-closing hours in the early 1950s. "I've always felt any merchant should be able to charge as little as they want and stay open as long as they want to," he said in his memoir. "After all, it's their business, their labour, and their time." When he opened Honest Ed's, the local bylaw said retail establishments had to close by 7 p.m. Sixteen Toronto police officers were sent in the middle of the night to check out his dance marathon, and laid four charges against Mr. Mirvish. He paid the fine without arguing, calculating that it was small potatoes compared to his gross from the marathon. But, by flouting the embargo against staying open late, he'd drawn press and public attention to a silly bylaw and, before long, it was changed.

THE SUPREME COURT

In 1959, a pharmacist, Norman Englander, tried to set up a discount drugstore in Honest Ed's. Mr. Mirvish rented the pharmacist 72 square feet for \$6,000 and 6 per cent of gross receipts. The Ontario College of Pharmacy refused to register Mr. Englander, and the wholesale drug companies wouldn't deal with him. All of this was on the spurious grounds that selling bargain-priced drugs didn't serve the common good. So, Mr. Mirvish went to the press — "Abject persecution," one columnist complained — and then to court. Eventually, the Supreme Court of Ontario ruled that the College of Pharmacy had no right to refuse to register a qualified pharmacist. Mr. Englander was back in business, filling 6,500 prescriptions in his first year at

Honest Ed's.

While Mr. Mirvish made his money from selling cheap goods to immigrants, when it came to real estate, he was a committed buyer, no doubt believing that real estate is a finite commodity. He usually paid cash at bargain prices and held on while his property values increased over the years. He bought up the rest of the late Victorian-era houses on the west side of the first block of Markham Street, intending to knock them down to create a parking lot. The residents protested and the city refused the application because the street was still zoned residential.

ARTIST'S COLONY

Coincidentally, his wife, who had had serious singing ambitions as a young woman, was restless. It was said that she was thinking of leaving Toronto to study art in New York City. Mr. Mirvish never divulged publicly whether it was the fear of losing her that persuaded him to turn the Markham Street houses into an urban artist's colony, but he acquired the houses on the other side of the street, painted them all pastel colours (following a suggestion from his wife) and leased the premises to art dealers and artisans, including his son, who operated an art gallery on the street for several years. Eventually, the city renamed the street Mirvish Village and designated it, and Honest Ed's store, as tourist sites.

"She's a sculptor and an artist and she would force me to cultural events that ordinarily I wouldn't have seen," Mr. Mirvish once admitted about his wife, explaining that she had sparked him to begin his own short-lived artistic career. "Anne took me to an art show in New York and one of the exhibits was just a mattress nailed to a wall with the stuffing and springs jumping out of it. I thought I could do as well as that."

He made two sculptures from bits of machinery and placed them in the lobby of the Poor Alex, a fringe theatre near Mirvish Village that was one of Mr. Mirvish's less-cele-



brated creations. "Anne took one look, called David to say I was ridiculing art and made me remove them."

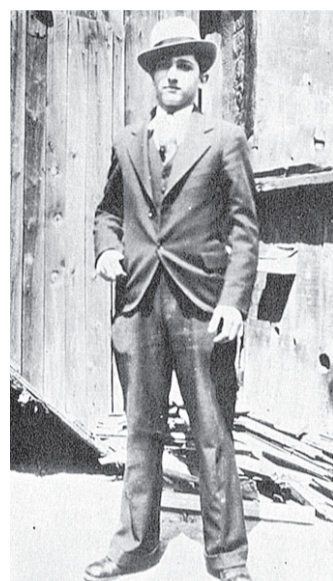
A hobby that turned into an obsession was ballroom dancing. He and his wife took dancing lessons before his son's bar mitzvah in 1958. Mrs. Mirvish dropped out after a couple of classes and took up jazz, instead, but he was hooked. For decades, he spent Tuesday and Thursday evenings twirling and whirling and trotting the fox around Arthur Murray's dance studio.

GENEROUS SOUL

For years, he went down to the Toronto Star so he could personally read the proofs of his ads, all the while casting a glance at what the competition was offering so he could go them one better. Nevertheless, it wasn't all about the bottom line. For somebody who billed himself as cheap, he was a generous soul. Beginning in the late 1980s, he hung a sign on his store every Christmas that read, "You've got a date with a turkey," and gave away more than 1,000 frozen turkeys to the needy and shipped enough food to a Salvation Army shelter to give another 2,000 people a turkey dinner. On his birthday, he threw an annual party for himself at the store on Markham Street, giving out presents to customers and hiring clowns and jugglers to roam the street entertaining crowds as large as 60,000 people who showed up for free pizza and pasta. In recent years, the city returned the favour by declaring July 24 Ed Mirvish Day.



Ed Mirvish, right, took over running the family store on Dundas Street. By 1961, below, his new location was a runaway success.



Ed Mirvish at 6 and, at 14, wearing what may have been his first suit.

Mr. Mirvish had a fixed rule that employees must retire at 65 — until he himself turned 64. He immediately scrapped the rule and let anybody stay on the payroll as long as they wished, and as long as they remained productive. In 1986, he made a concession to his age (he was 72) by bringing his son into the business. Nonetheless, he continued to spend mornings in the store, the noon hour at one of his restaurants and the afternoon working on his theatre operations. Except on those nights when he was committed to ballroom dancing, he was usually in bed by 10.

He missed his 89th birthday party in 2003 because of a serious bout of double pneumonia, but organizers still served 25,000 free hot dogs and 20,000 bags of potato chips and presented large cheques to local causes. At an age when most had retired, Mr. Mirvish remained active and in good health. Spending winters down south or in other sunny climes, Florida was not his idea of a good time. "It's okay for a few days, but I have more exciting things to do. I like action."

In May of 2004, he made his first public appearance in

more than a year when he arrived in a wheelchair (pushed by Toronto's mayor) at the Fairmount Royal York to receive the Jane Jacobs lifetime achievement award from the Canadian Urban Institute. A month later, the Mirvishes made it a family affair when father, mother and son were granted honorary degrees by the University of Toronto for their contributions to arts and entertainment. In all, Mr. Mirvish received more than 250 awards, including the Order of Canada. Five days after Mr. Mirvish's brother Robert died of cancer at 86, friends and family gathered on June 29 to celebrate Ed and Anne Mirvish's 66th wedding anniversary at a garden party at their home.

ED MIRVISH

Yehuda (Edwin) Mirvish was born in Colonial Beach, Va., on July 24, 1914. He died at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto on July 11, 2007. He was 92. He is survived by his wife, Anne, his son, David, three grandchildren, his sister Lorraine and his extended family.

The funeral will take place at Beth Tzedec Synagogue, 1700 Bathurst St., on Friday, July 13 at 11 a.m., followed by a private family shiva.

THREE THEATRES » THE ROYAL ALEXANDRA, THE PRINCESS OF WALES AND THE OLD VIC

Ed Mirvish the impressario

BY SANDRA MARTIN

By the 1960s, with the success of Honest Ed's assured, Mr. Mirvish began looking for new ventures. He toyed with the idea of buying the Victory Burlesque Theatre (an old vaudeville house on Spadina Avenue that had been turned into a strip house) and transforming it into a legitimate theatre. Experts advised him that the Royal Alexandra, on nearby King Street, would be a much better investment if it ever came on the market. The Royal Alex, which was built by Cawthra Mulock, scion of two Family Compact families, in 1907 for a cost of \$750,000, went on sale in 1962 at less than a third of that figure. The building was distinguished both architecturally and theatrically. Among the greats who had appeared on its stage were Orson Welles, Paul Robeson, the Marx Brothers, Katharine Cornell, Jessica Tandy, Sir John Gielgud, Raymond Massey, Mary Pickford and Hume Cronyn.

Egged on by his wife and his son — "Anne and David had always loved the theatre. And I had always loved bargains," he said later — Mr. Mirvish acquired it for \$200,000 cash and the promise not to raze the building. He was to run it as a legitimate theatre for at least the next five years; after that, he could convert to another use if the theatre couldn't sustain itself.

Instead, he spent twice the purchase price renovating the theatre, replacing the original tea room with a bar, furnishing the lobby with his own Louis XV furniture, hanging framed photographs of famous performers who had appeared in the theatre in the lobbies and staircases and mounting a marquee sign outside with 1,362 flashing light bulbs. Audiences and critics raved about the reopening on Sept. 9, 1963, even though they panned the premiere production of *Never Too Late*, starring William Bendix.

Two decades later, he bought the Old Vic Theatre in London. Although he'd never been in one of England's most famous theatres — he had never even been to London — Mr. Mirvish had heard tales of the Old Vic from touring actors including Sir Ralph Richardson, Sir John Gielgud and Peter O'Toole. In June of 1982, he heard that the Old Vic was up for sale and that impresario Andrew Lloyd Webber had offered \$500,000. He learned, too, that director Trevor Nunn was pledging a similar figure. Thinking Mr. Webber was bluffing, Mr. Mirvish put in a bid for £550,000 pounds and was stunned to learn it was the winning bid. "For a guy who considered himself pretty shrewd with a deal, I'd overbid them by about a hundred thousand



In 1991, he showed Diana, Princess of Wales, around the new Toronto theatre he had named after her. BILL BECKER/CANADIAN PRESS

bucks," he complained later. Still, when Mr. Lloyd Webber offered to take the theatre off his hands for £600,000, Mr. Mirvish said no, and refused again when the British impresario asked if he could come in as partner.

There was a big fuss in England about a foreigner buying up a national treasure. Mr. Mirvish flew to London and held a press conference to defuse fears that he might be intending to move the Old Vic to Toronto, the way London Bridge had been transplanted to Arizona. On the contrary, he

said — he wanted to restore it the way he had refurbished the Royal Alex. He finally won over the hostile media when he declared, "They're calling me a foreigner. But I'm really just a lad from the colonies." The Queen rewarded him with a CBE, making him a Commander of the British Empire, a gong that Mr. Mirvish, typically, translated into "Creator of Bargains Everywhere."

He said he spent almost \$4-million upgrading and sprucing up the aging theatre to its high Victorian splendour. At the re-opening on Oct. 31, 1983,

he personally welcomed Her Majesty the Queen Mother, the Old Vic's patron, to the theatre and escorted her to her seat. There were rumours that he had greeted her by saying "Hi, I'm Honest Ed," but he denied it. Although he didn't know it at the time, a building across the street called The Old Vic Annex was part of the deal. After letting The National Theatre use it as a rehearsal space for more than 15 years, he sold it in 1998 for close to \$3-million. Even though The Old Vic was celebrated for winning awards, the Mirvishes could never make it break even and in August, 1997, they put it up for sale. The deal — for an undisclosed price to The Old Vic Theatre Trust — was concluded in September, 1998.

His next and final foray into theatre-building was to turn the parking lot next to the Royal Alex into a new venue named The Princess of Wales. He'd had the idea for building a temporary theatre in the parking lot to accommodate *Miss Saigon*, when it finished its West End run in London.

When he learned that it would cost \$10-million just to mount *Miss Saigon*, he consulted with his son David and they decided to go for broke, once again, and build a new theatre.

"I had the feeling that the fastest growing trend in the theatre was bigness!" he wrote in his autobiography. "Shows like

ED MIRVISH THE RESTAURATEUR

Ed's Warehouse and eateries

BY SANDRA MARTIN

Having jumped into the precarious live theatre business with his purchase and refurbishing of The Royal Alexandra Theatre in the 1960s, Mr. Mirvish embarked on another risky venture. There were very few places to eat near the Royal Alex in those days, and he decided to open a restaurant.

He bought a six-storey dry-goods warehouse next door to the Royal Alex for \$525,000 in cash, decorated it with antiques and stained glass that he had picked up at bargain prices, hung out a blazing sign advertising "Ed's Warehouse" and opened for business on Jan. 20, 1966. One critic described the decor as "Baroque bordello," but the food was simple — roast beef and Yorkshire pudding — and the prices were cheap.

Two of the regular patrons — Mayor Nathan Phillips and his wife Esther — taught him a money-saving lesson. Mrs. Phillips always asked to have her prime rib served with the bone still attached. "It finally dawned on me," Mr. Mirvish said later, "that if dem bones were good enough for the mayor's wife, other diners might like them too." He told the restaurant staff to save the bones, barbeque them and sell them separately — which they did with great success. Later, he calculated that before offering ribs on the menu, the restaurant had thrown out the equivalent of \$65,000 in its first two years of operation. "That's 10 times more than my father earned in his lifetime," he lamented.

Before long, Mr. Mirvish acquired more property along King Street and opened more restaurants. By the mid-1970s, he had six eateries along King Street, serving close to 6,000 meals, from Italian to Chinese, on busy nights. They ran full tilt until the mid-1990s, when, faced with competition from a range of high-end restaurants and bars in the area, Mr. Mirvish began closing his down. The last to shut was Old Ed's in 2000. The building now houses Toronto Antiques on King.

Cats, *Les Miz* and *Phantom of the Opera* were also breaking records. The top stage producers of the nineties were selling vastly expensive yet hugely visual presentations which the public was buying like mad." The Mirvishes built a state-of-the-art facility with a huge stage and 2,000 seats. The theatre cost \$50-million (\$23-million in construction costs, \$20-million for the value of the land and \$7-million in additional parking). It was the first privately built theatre in Toronto since the Royal Alex in 1907.

Staging *Miss Saigon* cost another \$12-million. They requested and received permission to name the theatre after Diana, Princess of Wales, who acquiesced in a letter in which she wrote, "I am delighted to be associated with a project which, I am confident, will be of great importance to the City of Toronto, a city of which I have many fond memories."

The official opening was May 14, 1993, 10 years after the restoration of the Old Vic and 30 years since the reopening of the Royal Alex. *Les Miz* ran at Royal Alex for 15 months after its 1989 opening and another 16 months in two subsequent productions, then for 22 months in four separate national tours for a total run of 4½ years in Canada, before a combined audience of six million people.