

THE BUSHNELL CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Over the last seven decades, more than 28 million people have experienced The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts. In addition to bringing symphony orchestras, dance troupes and the best of Broadway to Hartford, The Bushnell has staged cooking classes, spelling bees, ice shows, magic acts, circuses, rodeos, war-relief efforts, naturalization ceremonies, political conventions, lectures, graduations, awards ceremonies, charity benefits and other events, including a 1996 Presidential Debate.

The Bushnell is approaching its 75th anniversary in 2005, and has become more than a beloved venue. In its mission as “a center for the benefit of the public,” The Bushnell is a home for local arts organizations and a presenter of renowned performers from around the world. Through the years, The Bushnell has adapted to embrace ever-changing and diversifying art forms and tastes—remaining mindful of the transformative influence of the arts in daily life, and of the opportunity to benefit the region by bringing arts, education and community together.

Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the most celebrated artists in the dance world, launched his recent tour in Hartford, gracing The Bushnell's Belding Theater stage for two sold-out performances in May 2003. The engagement was a co-presentation of The Bushnell, Dance Connecticut and Baryshnikov Dance Foundation. Photo by Thomas Giroir



The Bushnell's new 90,000-square-foot addition, built adjacent to the current Mortensen Hall, opened in November 2001 and includes the 900-seat Belding Theater and such amenities as a café, gift shop, classroom and reception space. Photo by Robert Benson Photography

It all began when Dotha Bushnell Hillyer (1843–1932) wished to pay tribute to her father by creating a “living memorial”—a place where the community would come together to celebrate life, and where art in its many forms would elevate people's spirits.

The Reverend Horace Bushnell (1802–1876) was an esteemed minister, philosopher, and civic leader. Although he spent his early life in rugged existence on his family's farm, at age 21 he enrolled at Yale and spent his next 10 years earning four degrees. An early advocate of public parks and waterworks, he believed in the redeeming and soothing powers of green spaces, or “common ornamental grounds” as he referred to them.

In 1879, daughter Dotha Bushnell married philanthropist Appleton Robbins Hillyer, founder of the Aetna National Bank of Hartford and director of the Aetna Life Insurance Company. Dotha's dream was to create a lasting gift to the community in which her family lived and thrived—and to commemorate her father's commitment to public service—by constructing The Horace Bushnell Memorial Hall, adjacent to Bushnell Park.

This dream was accomplished with meticulous planning and a bit of luck. In 1919, Dotha took an inheritance of \$800,000 and invested it in the stock market. She drew up the Articles of Incorporation for the memorial, stating that it should be a “center for the benefit of the public.” She asked for design advice from friend William H. Mortensen, who later became mayor of Hartford and managing director of The Bushnell for more than 40 years. The chosen architectural firm, Corbett,

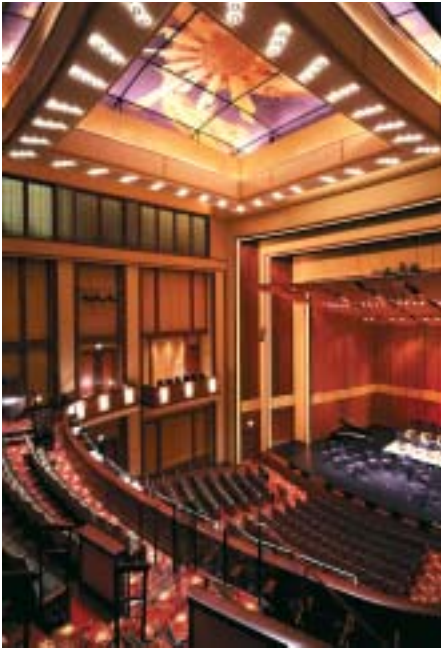
Harrison & MacMurray, used The Bushnell's design as a prototype for their next project, Radio City Music Hall in New York.

By 1928 Dotha's initial stock market investment of \$800,000 had grown to over \$3 million. She withdrew her monies in December 1928, shortly before the great crash, and created a nonprofit corporation and a charitable trust to provide construction funds and a modest endowment.

The Bushnell's exterior echoed architectural elements of Hartford's Old State House in the Georgian Revival style, including a tall Ionic portico and gold-domed cupola. The Hall's art deco interior was considered innovative and daring at the time. Overall,



Katharine Hepburn with Bushnell managing director William H. “Bill” Mortensen before her first Hartford performance in the play Without Love, presented on April 27 and 28, 1942. Hartford Times photo by Ted Kosinski, from The Bushnell's Shepherd M. Holcombe Archives



With the existing 2,800-seat Mortensen Hall booked to capacity, the new 900-seat Belding Theater that opened in 2001 has enabled The Bushnell to present new arts and entertainment options and better accommodate local arts organizations in multiple performance spaces. The expansion has also provided an economic boost by bringing more people to downtown Hartford. Photo by Robert Benson Photography

the architecture intentionally reflected the persona of Horace Bushnell: the conservative, traditional exterior symbolizing his role as a minister and philosopher; the warm, vivid interior reminiscent of the contemporary, forward-looking man.

After two years of construction The Bushnell's opening night on January 13, 1930 was a resounding success. People arrived via trolleys, in new cars or on foot, dressed in black tie and gown. Dotha, however, was too ill to attend, so she experienced the three days of opening ceremonies through a radio broadcast piped into her home by WTIC. Although Dotha lived less than a block away, in her frail health, she only set foot in the Hall once.

Over the years major performing artists from vaudeville to classical have appeared on The Bushnell stage, including Jolson, Chaplin, Toscanini, Bernstein, Horowitz, Rubenstein, Perlman, Pavarotti, Sills, Olivier, Hayes, Garland, Brando, Baryshnikov and

Channing. The Bushnell has additionally provided a podium for such visionaries as Winston Churchill, Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Keller and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The late Katharine Hepburn, four-time Academy Award winner who was born and raised in Hartford, first appeared professionally at The Bushnell in April 1942 in *Without Love*, a comedy written especially for her by Philip Barry, who also wrote one of her best-known film roles in *The Philadelphia Story*.

In recent years, theatre at The Bushnell has expanded to include the biggest of touring Broadway musicals, including *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*, *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*, *Showboat*, *Ragtime*, *Rent* and *Mamma Mia!*

Reminiscent of its founder's planning, the Board of Trustees saw an increasing need for expansion of The Bushnell. In 1998 a five-year capital campaign was begun with a goal of raising \$45 million to construct a new theater and to increase the institution's endowment. The campaign ended in 2003, having raised \$48 million.

The addition built adjacent to the current Hall, and completed in 2001, includes the 900-seat Belding Theater, the Autorino Great Hall for receptions and smaller performances, and several amenities including a café, gift shop, classroom space and more restrooms and elevators. With the existing 2,800-seat Mortensen Hall booked to capacity, the expansion has enabled The Bushnell to present new arts and entertainment options and better accommodate local arts organizations in multiple performance spaces. The expansion has also provided an economic boost by bringing more people to downtown Hartford.

Architects Wilson Butler Lodge, Inc., of Boston and Schoenhardt Architects of Simsbury carefully integrated the new facility with the historic Hall and with the Nationally Registered Historic District surrounding it. The design of the new exterior harmonizes with the stately façade, reinterpreting the use of brick, stone, and copper. But unlike the existing build-

ing, whose symmetry and classical motifs create a formal appearance, the addition is openly transparent and deliberately extroverted.

Beyond the theater walls, The Bushnell has been providing arts-in-education programs within Greater Hartford schools for the last decade. The Bushnell's nationally recognized program, PARTNERS (Partners in Arts and Education Revitalizing Schools), is a cross-community effort presently serving nearly 7,000 students in 32 schools and 17 districts. Since 1993, PARTNERS has offered classroom-based, arts-infused instructional units that are integrated into school curricula, and directly linked to state and national standards. Each unit combines children's literature and a variety of art disciplines to create age-appropriate, hands-on arts activities that improve literacy, enhance self-confidence, encourage creativity and foster the understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures.

The Greater Hartford community has fully embraced the "New Bushnell." Audience attendance and contributions to support theater operations and arts-in-education programs have surpassed expectations. These results continue to illustrate the relevance of The Bushnell's nonprofit mission as "a center for the benefit of the public."

Opened in 1930, The William H. Mortensen Hall is steeped in history and heritage. But, with age, certain physical, mechanical, and aesthetic needs in the theater have been highlighted for restoration. Work will be completed in time for the 75th anniversary of the opening of The Horace Bushnell Memorial Hall in January 2005, returning the auditorium to its original splendor. Courtesy, The Hartford Courant

