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STATE PRESERVATION OFFICE FINDS GUTHRIE THEATER IS ELIGIBLE FOR NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) today announced its opinion that the Guthrie Theater Building is eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. The Register is the National Park Service's prestigious list of properties considered to be worthy of preservation. The SHPO undertook a review of the property in response to considerable public discussion and media coverage that came following the Guthrie's announcement of its planned move to the Minneapolis riverfront. Public interest intensified as the Walker Art Center, which owns the Guthrie Theater building, began expansion plans that would call for its demolition.

Nina Archabal, State Historic Preservation Officer, said that the Guthrie Theater,

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both as an organization and as a place, is one of Minnesota's most important cultural treasures. Many people have had profound and wonderful experiences at the Guthrie and Minnesota has benefited in many ways from its existence.

"The opening of the theater in 1963 could be regarded as one of the major cultural events in what has been a remarkable florescence of artistic activity in Minnesota and specifically the Twin Cities," she said.

The Guthrie has played an indisputable role in the advancement of regional theater. The extraordinary talents of Sir Tyrone Guthrie, stage designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch, numerous legendary performers and internationally recognized architect Ralph Rapson gave the theater a vitality that continues to fuel the Guthrie today. It holds a central position within the Twin Cities' remarkable panoply of arts organizations and has been the generator for a veritable explosion of theatrical activity and appreciation in the state.

The Guthrie theater building has significant historical associations. Its location on Vineland Place was the choice of community leaders, and the innovative building – with its thrust stage – were inextricably linked to Guthrie's theatrical style and his vision of the theater as the flagship of a regional theater movement.

Eligibility for the National Register rests on the evaluation of a property relative to criteria specified by the National Park Service. In considering the Guthrie's eligibility, the State Historic Preservation Office has focused on two criteria: architecture and

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historical association. Eligibility may result from satisfying one criterion.

In the case of the Guthrie, it is widely acknowledged that the building has undergone a series of substantial alterations that have compromised its architectural integrity. The building's most identifiable original feature, a multidimensional façade designed by Ralph Rapson, has been replaced by the building's current glass exterior. Interior changes have been made to the lobby, stage, acoustics and lighting.

"These changes dealt a major blow to Rapson's design. The façade screen has vanished, and many of the building's design details have been lost in a series of building alterations," Archabal lamented. "It is simply not reasonable to conclude that the present Guthrie Theater has enough of its architectural integrity remaining to warrant a finding of eligibility based on architecture."

Regarding historical association, the case for the Guthrie's eligibility is stronger. Its association with such major figures as Guthrie, Moiseiwitsch and Rapson, and its position as the lynch pin in the development of professional theater around the country, is undeniable. To be eligible for the Register on the basis of historical association, a property must have sufficient physical integrity intact to convey those associations. Despite the many changes to the Guthrie theater building over the years, the State Historic Preservation Office finds that the basic integrity of the theater's interior remains. In Archabal's words, "The experience of attending a play at the Guthrie today is

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essentially unchanged. As the trumpet fanfare calls the audience to the performance, people make their way through the asymmetrical lobby space to the theater's familiar interior with its seating arranged around the stage."

Archabal cautioned that it is important to recognize that a finding of eligibility for the National Register is ultimately a matter of judgment, and she acknowledges that the call on the Guthrie is a close one. Ordinarily, the National Register requires that buildings be at least 50 years old at the time they are determined to be eligible. It also requires that the persons with whom the property is associated be deceased. Only Tyrone Guthrie of the theater's three principal creators is no longer alive. These guidelines are clearly intended to ensure historical objectivity, but there is no requirement that they be applied arbitrarily. The fact that Guthrie is not yet 40 years old has complicated the case.

The State Historic Preservation Office's review encompassed: discussions among staff preservation experts; a review of selected writings about the Guthrie building and theater company; consideration of the analysis of consultant and Rapson biographer Jane King Hession; talks with the Keeper of the National Register; and the State Historic Preservation Officer's experience in preservation issues.

Eligibility for, nomination to, or even listing on the National Register does not protect a building from demolition. In this case, the Walker Art Center, has made public its intentions to remove the theater as part of an expansion plan and its intention to reject

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listing on the Register, as is its legal right. The SHPO's opinion was not influenced by the fact that this resource is threatened or that a new use of the building has not been identified. Neither factor speaks to a building's historical importance under National Register guidelines.

The Guthrie Theater will continue to make history as it builds on its tradition of excellent regional theater on its new stage on the riverfront. The fate of its current home is in the hands of its owner. The State Historic Preservation Office's review began in an arena of lively public discussion about the preservation and possible future uses of the Guthrie Theater. Archabal concedes that the discussion is likely to continue.