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A Walking Shadow's Hour Upon the Stage

By Alan Boye

The curtain came down, and in that tiny space between silence and applause, between darkness and house lights: footsteps! Listen: each thump, thump from the ceiling high above sounded in the silent theater and echoed across the rows of seats.

Every person in the Temple Theater that night heard the ghost, but they all simply took note of the sound, wondered how it oddly sounded like someone walking the attic high above them, and then, as the applause for the performance drowned out the sound, simply forgot about it.

Don't come looking for the ghost that haunts the Temple Theater, for it only appears to people who are not expecting to experience the unreal. Countless expeditions of brave students, "ghost experts" and thespians have spent restless nights huddled in the pitch black confines of the ancient building, but not a single one has experienced anything more frightening than her partner's snore.

But talk to the hundreds of others who know. Talk to any one of them about whether the Temple Building on the University campus is haunted and they will tell you.

Talk to Tom Bell. Decades later he still remembered what happened to him as if it was last night. He was alone on the stage. It was night. Just as some of students tucked away in dorms or huddled in Love Library, Tom was doing his homework. He needed to perfect his tap-dancing routine before tomorrow's class, and if he didn't get this one part right tonight he could kiss his grade good bye. From the balcony, someone clapped. Tom squinted into the dark theater. "Hey," he called out. "What's happening?" The slow clapping continued, steady and strong. Tom hopped down from the stage and moved toward the rear of the theater. As he reached the rear seats the clapping stopped. Tom turned back to the stage.

Just as he did someone began tap dancing. Tom stared in disbelief: the stage was empty. The sound of metal taps beat out the precise rhythm he had just tried to master, but there was no one to be seen dancing on the empty stage. Tom raced to the front, and just as he touched the stage, the tap-taping sound of dancing feet stopped.

Tom Bell's ghostly tap-dancer is a recent story, but stories of the ghost at the Temple Building can be found dating back to the year of its construction.

In the late 1930s, for example, a series of events took place that left an impression on more than one drama student: after a band rehearsal one evening an echo of music filtered through the building; then, later – and for a period of several months – witnesses claimed to be able to see lights dancing

all about the darkened building.

Many of the stories about this building date to an event in 1960 when several people heard someone walking across the attic floor. After the pacing continued for several minutes, some people went to investigate. They found only an empty attic. No one was there.

Some people think every strange event can be attributed to the spirit of Dr. Dallas Williams who taught in the building from 1944 until 1971, and who graciously gave me some of the information for this chapter before he died. Flamboyant, engaging, memorable and kind, thousands of students came to know his odd habit of throwing a chair or a book across the room in order to get a day-dreaming student's attention. It follows that during a moment of silence during many a late-night rehearsal when an unexplained crash of furniture rumbles in the attic people claim it is Professor Williams' spirit, alive and well.

The oldest story about the Temple Building's famous ghost begins with the very construction of the building.

It was a fresh spring morning in 1906. The young carpenter stood high above the ground and surveyed the city. He stood with each foot delicately placed on the roof rafters with nothing but four stories of empty air between him and the packed clay earth.

He felt nearly as tall as the white dome of the State House that dominated the skyline. A cable car clanged in the distance. On the streets of the town horses and carriages moved quickly about the day's business.

At his back was the campus of the University. The young carpenter breathed in the April air. It was a good day to be alive. Although he worked for his father's carpentry business, earlier in the year he had started his studies at the University.

His father had not been pleased when the young man told him that he wanted to take classes in drama. There wasn't much future in that, as far as his father could see, unless he planned on becoming a politician or a preacher. There wasn't much of a future in schooling at all, as far as his father could tell. Better stick to being a carpenter.

The young man chuckled at the irony. Here he was, standing at the very pinnacle of the new theater building for the University. Directly below him the classrooms were already taking shape as his brothers worked to complete them.

From where he stood in the rafters above the building's attic he felt free and soaring. He would show them. One day he would perform on the great stage of this very theater. He would play a great part in some play. Along with thousands of others, his father would stand and cheer as he calmly took his bows before them.

It was at that moment, poised between heaven and earth, between a certainty of greatness and the sky, that a great fear seized him.

Despite years of scrambling on the rafters of houses and buildings that his father built in the city, the

young man had never once thought of the danger. Now, on the tallest building they had ever worked upon, he felt his legs freeze. He knew he could not make it off the rafters alive.

During a moment that lasted an eternity he could feel himself tipping forward. It took a lifetime for the arc of his body to pass his center of gravity on its path to the ground below. Remotely, from some far away place he could hear someone screaming. The screeching grew until he realized that it was his own voice shattering the air about his ears.

On the floors below his brothers and his father looked up at the scream. The boy's body seemed to drift to the ground below.

Several other people also watched his body fall. By one of those chances that cause a place to be haunted, to mark it as an oddity of history, the chairman of the drama department happened to be walking by. He was the first to reach the body. It lay on the first floor of the unfinished building. Amid the horror and disbelief, the dean thought it odd that there was so very little blood. The boy's body lay in what appeared to be a very comfortable position. A small trickle of sawdust continued to drift down from the skeleton of an attic high above.

The incidents began almost immediately.

His brothers, who continued to work on the building, thought they heard the young man call to them. Tools of the carpenters and masons began to disappear. At night the sounds of his scream seemed to echo through the half-completed walls.

Dallas Williams, who taught speech and drama, was convinced that the unexplained events in the Temple Building were the work of the young man who fell to his death during its construction. In his years in the building, Dr. Williams was witness to a number of unusual events.

"No one can explain why these things happened," he said. "But often after doing a play we would all hear music. It came from nowhere, and yet was distinct, though very soft. We would search the building trying to find a place where the music could originate. We could never find such a place." After a production of *Marat-Sade* in the early 1970s, a sound echoed through the building. It was described as the sound of a large sandbag falling to the floor. Several people searched the building, fearing that a terrible accident of some kind had happened. No explanation for the crash was ever found.

The number of events seemed to die down for a few years but soon began again and then increased after the completion of the remodeling of the Temple Building in the early 1980s. The stories continue today.

Many people who are alone in the building say that they hear footsteps that seem to vibrate through the walls.

Often lights flicker from the hallways as if lit by white fire.

On Saturday June 5, 1982 everyone in the building reported hearing a loud crash "like the sound of several books hitting the floor." No explanation for the sound was ever found.

Very recently a student on work-study was given the job of sitting in the attic and painting a dozen chairs. He finished the first chair, and then walked across the room to get the second. When he turned around, the first chair had been moved against a far wall. He had not heard a sound. Cautiously, he moved to the chair. He found no fingerprints in the glistening wet paint. He ran from the room and fled the building. He quit his job and never went inside the Temple Building again.

High above the rows of theater seats, the Temple Building's attic sits like many attics: cluttered with spider webs and dust. Through the patches in the floor one can make out the outline of the roof rafters. In the distance the city buildings clutter the skyline. Far below on the stage of the University's theater, actors strut and fret their hour upon the stage and then...?

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