

STORIES FOR VAGABOND PLAYERS

Wonderful years & wonderful memories – thank you all for being part of my life!

Mary Spani (Member since February 1966, Life Member since September 1996)

I'll try to start at the beginning.....

1963-'64 season: I came with my Mom & Dad, to see several shows.

A couple of memorable moments:

Mildred Franklin's incredible entrance & stage presence – I think it was in "Critic's Choice" – she swept in & came down some stairs, tall, elegant & commanding in a gorgeous formal gown & white fur stole she reminded me of Rosalind Russell in *Auntie Mame*.

Paul Goodrich in *Because Their Hearts Were Pure* – a melodrama. He portrayed a lost young man who was rather "vacant" looking & "dim-witted". At intermission, my mother commented on how wonderful it was that the theatre group gave the poor young fellow a chance on the stage; she couldn't believe he was a normal guy, after all, it was only amateur theatre & where would they find such a good actor that wasn't a professional? It just so happened that Paul's mother was in the audience that night – she overheard & was furious! She even told him later about the insulting comments. Several years later, once we were engaged, our parents were introduced – his mother recognized my mom they did become friends in spite of those comments

1965-'66: March '66 show, *Teach Me How to Cry* – the first show I actually worked on.

My task was to do the costumes & changes for the 4 younger people – 2 girls & 2 guys, near my own age (17!). The lead was Judy Collyer, who went on to be the first Miss New Westminster to become Miss PNE. She worried constantly that I'd have cold feet & get sick – always barefoot so I could move quickly & quietly - & made me a pair of slippers out of bright orange terry facecloths.

Fall 1966 – opened 4 days after my 18th birthday! *Mary, Mary*- my first show in charge of costumes. Verlie Cooter directed – she was even shorter than me, but very much "in control" of her show. About 2 weeks before opening, Verlie was standing in the doorway to the lobby, arms crossed, watching everything intently. Frank Cooter came on stage, stumbling over lines, forgetting blocking etc. Verlie comes striding down the aisle, pointing in the "angry mother" fashion, shouting "*Frank Cooter, you get off my stage & don't you dare come back until you know your lines!*" Everyone froze, he slunk offstage like a little kid – she told everyone else to break 5 minutes. *Exactly* 5 minutes later, the actors resumed the scene & Frank did a letter perfect performance.

1967 – for the centennial we put on *The Crime of Louis Riel* – had a huge cast. I assisted Marjorie Shiles with the costumes. We even managed to borrow an authentic Blackfoot beaded vest from my aunt & uncle, for Riel to wear. Marjorie never let it out of her sight. The Stage Manager informed us that all backstage people were needed to fill out the crowd scenes & although I *really* didn't want to, I ended up onstage. I was still too new at the job to realize I could say no... In the first part, on as a native, full make up & even a "Bay" blanket – another authentic piece. Then rush off stage, off make up, help with fast changes; 2nd act – white settler in the court scene. Again rush off stage, off makeup, help with changes & clean up. It wasn't until the play opened that I realized Marjorie was not in costume or on stage....

When I commented on that, she just smiled her sweet smile & said something like "I leave the stage to the actors". I'm not as sweet a person as she, but I've certainly followed that advice since then. That show was the only entry from the lower mainland in the Dominion Drama Festival, which was held in Kamloops that year. And what a train trip that was! There were some many of us that we took over a whole train car – and a lot of us were rather "blitzed" on the way up there. Singing, dancing in the aisles & generally just having a great time.

A story from the Drama Festival Gala & Awards dinner ----

I was sharing a hotel room with 2 other young women in the cast – one was playing “Marie” – Riel’s young love interest....The actress was younger than me – only just 17 I think & rather un-worldly. In those “olden days”, the newspapers actually sent critics out to the local theatres – the one that was attending the Festival shall remain nameless, but he later became the “mushroom man” on TV – he was a lot older than us. Anyway – he was known to like the pretty young actresses & occasionally, if advances were spurned, panned their show. He fixated on our “Marie” – turned up at our room while we were trying to get dressed & barged right in with flowers & offers to find an iron & ironing board if she wanted one....She panicked & hid in the bathroom – I convinced him to leave. Later that night, he was pestering her all during the party. She was afraid of what he’d write if she didn’t go along with him. The other girl & I managed to divert him momentarily, while she slid under a table (had long tablecloths) & crawled the length of it to the door to escape – all this in a lovely long formal gown! He was a bit miffed when she disappeared but didn’t retaliate. Didn’t see much of her at our theatre after that though.....

1967 – *Barefoot in the Park* – Larry Tamkin stole the show each night. Started out as a small walk-on part with no dialogue. He was playing the Delivery man who had to come up several flights of stairs, but he played it as a very old man & did it so well that it got longer & longer each night. He got a huge round of applause each night too.

1974 – *Arsenic & Old Lace* – another Larry Tamkin story. In this show, he had an entrance dressed as Teddy Roosevelt & charged up the stairs & off stage. Vickie Sayer & I were jammed into a very small area to help him change very quickly – Vickie did the upper part – off hat, shirt/put on another shirt, tie ; I did the lower half – off boots, jodhpurs & into other pants, shoes on. One night, as I grabbed the jodhpurs on outer side of each leg to pull down (he undid the buttons himself) I heard a frantic whisper from Larry – “wait – I forgot – old underwear, no elastic left, I gotta hold ‘em up”.....I *did not* look up – my head was really just at the wrong level to do so.....short pause, heard a quiet “ok”, then down come the pants, into other pants, shoes on & back on stage – still in character! Amazing..... It was so hard to not break into all-out laughter before we got downstairs.....

1974 or early '75 – Marjorie Shiles, Mom & I were at the theatre, tidying & sorting costumes. I think it was about the time Marjorie was preparing to pass the position of Costume Mistress on to my Mom. My daughter, Moreen, was with us, having a blast dressing up in fancy clothes & being a princess. Sometime in the afternoon, I suddenly realized I hadn’t seen Moreen for a while – I called up to Mom in the upper room to see if Moreen was with her - nope, Mom thought she was with Marjorie. Marjorie was on the stage vacuuming – hadn’t seen Moreen & had assumed she was with Mom & me. PANIC! Searched the theatre. No kid! Searched around outside. No kid! I finally called the police to report her missing. The Constable took the information & then asked me to hold on; came back on & said a woman had just called in to report a lost child, found on Queens Avenue, just across from the Japanese Gardens by City Hall – many blocks away & she was only 4 years old. I think the description of how she was dressed was the recognition factor – how many little girls would be out alone & dressed in several crinolines, crowned & in high heels, with a magic wand in hand? And she didn’t think she was lost, just a princess out over-seeing her domain. Theatre is in the blood....

1975 – *The Apple Tree*. Each night the show opened to a shocked gasp from the audience - as the curtains opened on an apparently nude male form lying on the ground. (Paul Goodrich as “Adam” – he & Nancy Ebert as “Eve” were in skintone body suits – courageous actors both of them) Mom did the costumes & asked me to help with some sewing & fast changes. One was extraordinary – Colleen Winton, on stage as a grubby chimneysweep, & had to transform into a glamorous star – a la “Monroe”. Mom created a slinky, iridescent hot pink gown (actually a bodysuit with skirt over it) with ruffles of net from knee to hem – mermaid style - & a stole to match.

From the stage, it looked like marabou. Colleen came off stage, changed completely including shoes, earrings & gloves, while Larry Nash (the Narrator) remained on stage & said 3 magic words – “Plink.... Plank.... Plunk....”) – stretched it out to just under 20 seconds! Kudos to the actress – she was always calm & controlled, never panicked or missed a word.

.....I think it during that same show that Mom & I blew out the lights – during a performance – by plugging in the iron in the costume room!

Two more memorable fast changes:

Fall 1977 – *Babes in Arms* And this is why I always replace metal zippers.....

Nancy Ebert had to come off stage to change – fast - into a gorgeous beaded cherise brocade gown.. & she had to keep dialogue going with an actor on the stage during the change....

She slipped on the dress, I zipped it.... & the zipper came right off the top, the dress gaped open...

Under my breath...”oh shit”.... I told her don’t move, I’ll pin it....she carried on with her lines, as I have my hand up the dress to make sure the pins don’t jab her, put in about 10 safety pins....& on she went, did her song & never missed a line or a beat. She did change her blocking slightly, so her back was never visible to the audience.....WOW! A consummate performer!

December 1977 – *The Frog Prince* – a panto, the prince was Joan Dahl. The wicked witch was a marvelous singer, but not used to lines & tended to forget what scene she was in, so she needed a helper – one of the few times Howard was persuaded to go on the stage – to keep her on cue. When the prince was cursed by the witch, “he” fell down the well – also known as the trapdoor. Mom & I were there to change Joan into the frog – a full & complete frog, including head & feet. The spell was a whole song, except for one performance - the witch sang only the beginning & the end – skipped the whole curse! Howard looked down the trapdoor hole – Joan looked up – frog head on – the rest of the costume in transition – OH CRAP! – up she went, only the head showing & started her lines, as we finished changing her below the floor! Howard said when he talked to the “witch” later; she didn’t even realize she’d missed anything..... Joan – another amazing actress....

And on to the **1980’s** – we got “new “seats.....

We managed to wangle the seats from the failed theatre on the corner of Carnavon & 12th. All we had to do was take out our old ones & go get the new ones.....easy? Uh-huh....not as easy as we thought – the hydro had been cut off at that theatre & it was *very dark* in there. We went in with flashlights, Coleman lamps & old-fashioned hand tools – screwdrivers, wrenches & hammers...

Took a lot of people & truckloads, but we got them. A few months later, Jason gave me a photo – taken of me, sitting on the back of the truck after it was all unloaded, (in some awful navy & white striped flare-legged jeans) chug-a-lugging a cidertypecasting?

1988 – During rehearsals for *Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever* - my son, Daniel was in the show, I was doing the costumes. The piano was in the corridor, closed & covered. Daniel was in the auditorium, near the exit door, watching & waiting for his bit. I heard the piano playing & so did he. He knew the piano was off limits & figured one the younger kids (& there were lots in that show!) was messing around, so he went into the corridor to tell them to leave it alone .I came in the other way, from the costume area. He had a rather odd look on his face when I asked if he had been playing it. The piano cover was unchanged, the piano was still closed & no one had come out & passed either of us. It kind of spooked Daniel - he had heard about our ghost but had never experienced him until then....

And I think I’ll stop hereI could fill a small book with theatre – related stories, as I’m sure most of us can. And most of the rest of you are better writers than I am...