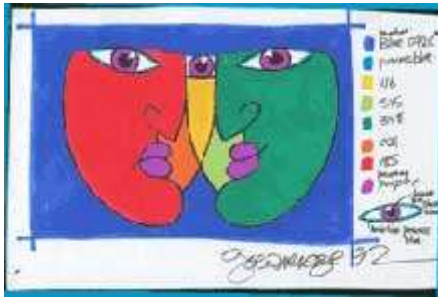


founding of the greater vancouver professional theatre alliance

by pamela hawthorne



The Vancouver Professional Theatre Alliance grew out of an informal meeting of theatre managements that took place in the early to mid 1970's. The meeting was called in response to the newly elected NDP government that was issuing numerous statements about funding for the arts. The main thrust was a populist one in which the dollars were to be used for social recreation rather than professional efforts.

Essentially the Alliance came together as an activist group with a political agenda. We felt there would be strength in being united.

One of the earliest endeavours was a city-wide media campaign highlighting the arts in a "generic" way. Out of this successful campaign we continued to push for essentially promotional ideas that we felt would be generally beneficial. For example, the theatre directory columns and ads in the two daily newspapers were a direct result of our efforts.

The Jessie Awards were also the result of a decision taken that an awards ceremony would highlight and enhance the value of the local professional theatre scene. The success of the Theatre Alliance led to the formation eventually of Vancouver's Cultural Alliance.

The Theatre Alliance for the first decade or more of its existence relied totally on volunteer labour to undertake its initiatives. Special funding was sought for special initiatives, but the administration of the organization was completely voluntary and overhead costs were covered by membership dues.

The Theatre Alliance formed not only an excellent advocacy service for the theatre and arts in general, but also provided a forum for the discussion of mutual concerns.

jessie richardson awards society



Every year, the Jessie Richardson Awards Society presents the Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards, locally known as "the Jessies". First presented in the 1982-83 theatre season, the Jessies celebrate excellence in professional theatre in Greater Vancouver.

For information on Jessie eligibility, nominees and winners, or to contact the Society, link to the [Jessie Richardson Award Website](#).

theatre in vancouver 1921-1984 some milestones

by dorothy somerset

1984 - How Rich We Are Today!

Samples of offerings in the arts during a few weeks in April and May:

- Visits to new Vancouver Art Gallery
- Vancouver Symphony Orchestra - Final concert of 1983-1984 season
- "Amadeus" by Peter Schaffer, at Queen Elizabeth Playhouse
- "DuMaurier New Play Festival", at Waterfront Theatre
- Arts Club Theatre, "Twentieth Anniversary Celebration"
- "Piaff" at City Stage
- "Mass in B Minor" by Bach, presented by Vancouver Chamber Choir, Cantata Singers, and orchestra
- "Masterpiece Music Trio", in concert at Vancouver East Cultural Centre
- "Norma", presented by Vancouver Opera Society

What is the story? How did Vancouver achieve this high profile in the arts? This is an informal, personal, and predominantly theatre account, beginning in the 1920's.

The 1920's: By contrast - As It Then Was!

- NO Vancouver Symphony Orchestra
- NO Vancouver Art Gallery
- NO Vancouver Opera Society
- NO Radio or Television
- Black and white "silent" movies ("Talkies" in 1929).
- English and American theatre touring companies on seasonal visits
- Visiting international musicians in concert
- A few years of English and American theatre stock companies

Vancouver Canadian Theatre - The Amateur Spark!

- The "Players' Club" of the University of British Columbia founded by Professor F.G.C. Wood in 1916
- The Vancouver Little Theatre Association founded in 1921

The 1930's: The Arts Catch Fire!

- 1931 - Opening of first Vancouver Art Gallery
- 1931 - Establishment of Vancouver Symphony Orchestra
- 1933 - First Dominion Drama Festival, in Ottawa (British Columbia represented by Vancouver Little Theatre entry)

Canada-Wide Amateur Theatre Explosion:

- Little Theatres, Community Drama Groups, Festivals
- 1938 - First U.B.C. Summer School of Theatre, opened by Dr. Gordon Shrum, dedicated to improvement of amateur standards! Hopes for future Canadian professional theatre.

The 1940's: Preparing For The Leap Forward:

Throughout this decade across Canada, tremendous increase in community theatre activities, including school drama groups, and a proliferation of festivals.

- 1940 - Theatre under the Stars" opens at Brockton Oval, professional and amateur performers
- 1946 - "Everyman Theatre" founded by Sydney Risk. The first Western Canadian professional theatre company based in Vancouver, touring four western provinces
- 1946 - Community Arts Council formed
- Outstanding period for Canadian radio drama, originating in Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Vancouver - professional actors, excellent Canadian drama playwrights emerge. Producer: Andrew Allan.
- U.B.C. Extension Department cooperates with C.B.C. for three seasons, broadcasting theatre instruction to community drama groups throughout the province. Peak registration - eighty-three groups.

The 1950's: The Trumpets Sound!

- 1952 - First Frederic Wood Theatre opens in two converted army huts
- 1953 - Stratford Festival, Ontario, opens its first season
- 1957 - The "Canada Council" established by Act of Parliament

- 1958 - Academic recognition for Department of Theatre at U.B.C. First Head of Department: Dorothy Somerset
- 1958 - Vancouver International Festival - first season. Artistic Director: Nicholas Goldschmidt
- 1959 - Queen Elizabeth Theatre opens its doors.
- In this decade "Holiday Theatre" for children founded by Joy Coghill (1953)

The 1960's: Continuation of Growth - Consolidation!

- 1962 - Queen Elizabeth Playhouse opens its doors
- 1963 - New Frederic Wood Theatre opens, as part of the "Norman MacKenzie Fine Arts Centre" At the University of BC, the Fine Arts Building and the Music Building are added to the Fine Arts Centre
- 1964 - The "Arts Club Theatre" founded by Yvonne Firkins
- By the 1960's Vancouver C.B.C. Television is increasingly offering jobs to actors, directors and designers

The 1970's: The Ripples Fan Out!

- Multiplication of groups in all arts - theatre, music, fine arts, dance, etc. - seeking to establish themselves on a professional basis; seeking to find outlets for performance and exhibition; seeking to win audiences and financial support
- New "show cases" multiply; converted small shops, warehouses, and at least one church, old dance halls, Robson Square Media Centre, and a significant number of private art galleries
- There was struggle, there were successes, and there were failures. That's the way it always will be - in the arts
- 1972 - "City Stage" opens its doors on Howe Street
- 1974 - Vancouver East Cultural Centre inaugurates its programmes in the arts
- 1978 - Arts Club Theatre opens its second operating theatre on Granville Island
- 1979 - Waterfront Theatre on Granville Island begins its programme of workshop productions of new Canadian plays, under the direction of Pamela Hawthorn. For convenience, opening of Firehall Theatre, 1982, is listed in the 1970's

The 1980's: After 1984 - What of the Future?

Four factors appear to be paramount: standards of programme and performance; efficiency of operations; audience support; financial assistance from public and private sources.

Above all, no complacent plateau! The future will demand imagination, creativity, and a continuing striving toward the highest vision and standards.

In Conclusion:

This informal and personal remembering of theatre highlights between 1921 and 1983 has been prepared for His Worship, Mayor Harcourt, and for the members of the Vancouver City Council, as a token of appreciation for their support of the arts, and as a heartfelt thank you for the "Civic Merit Award" with which I was honoured on May 1, 1984.

Dorothy Somerset
Dorothy Somerset

collective creation in vancouver
by marietta kozak

Oh What a Lovely War is one of the earliest and most famous collective creations of the contemporary twentieth century theatre. Joan Littlewood and her company, Theatre Workshop developed the piece in the early 1960s, at a time when the traditions of the British Theatre were changing radically and rapidly, and commonly understood theatrical practices were being re-evaluated. Canadian Theatre began its own revolution in the late 1960s and the birth of collective creations companies in Vancouver followed soon after in



the early 1970s. To this day, Vancouver maintains one of the strongest collective creation traditions in English speaking Canada.

First, the backdrop. In the early 1970s, there was a burst of creative growth in the professional community, both in the number of companies producing and in the number of locally written plays and projects. Some of this activity, indeed most of it, can be traced to the injection of funds into the community through the employment grants then available, as well as an increased presence by the Canada Council and the development of the B.C. Cultural Services Branch (now the B.C. Arts Council). However, a groundswell of nationalistic fervour, post Expo '67, is commonly acknowledged to be directly responsible for the large increase of locally written and developed works, assisted and encouraged by the growth of the New Play Centre under Pamela Hawthorn.

An important cultural manifestation of this nationalism was the collective creation. In the rest of Canada, plays like *1837-The Farmer's Revolt* and *Paper Wheat* were being produced by companies like Theatre Passe Muraille and Saskatoon's 25th Street House Theatre respectively. In Vancouver, the brilliant company Tamahnous was also working in the genre. In addition to scripted works produced by the company, including many plays written for the group, Tamahnous Theatre was known for, and was based in, collective creation. It was a mark of the collaborative nature of this group that even the scripted works developed by the company's writers went through a workshop process with all of the members of the troupe, and had input from everyone involved with the project.

After the 1980s, the number of Tamahnous' collective creations declined and the company went in other directions. However, collectives continued in the city, under Roy Surette's direction with Touchstone Theatre. With the collective creation, *Sex Tips for Modern Girls*, the company's further exploration of this type of play making continued. This work seems to have been the one of the first productions to significantly adapt the collective model, as it had a designated writer who was neither a performer nor director. The writer's presence in this case was strictly to create a text based on the collective's overall explorations, leaving the performers and director to focus on their own roles after the initial development period.

In *The Number 14*, (co-produced by Touchstone Theatre and Axis Theatre), perhaps the country's most successful collective creation was born. The show has toured around the world a number of times, and ten years after its creation, continues to generate royalties and employment for its creators.

After 1996 and Touchstone's move away from this style of theatre, a few younger organizations including The Electric Company and Boca Del Lupo began to work almost exclusively in collective creation. In their relatively short life spans, these companies have produced works like *Flop* and *The Last Stand*, and the collective process has been developed in yet another direction. These companies are similar in their make up and operations to the earlier Tamahnous, with a core of creators who rotate in their artistic and administrative roles. However, both organizations generally augment their creative teams with outside artists on a per project basis, sometimes in key roles, although this is less so with Boca Del Lupo, who tends to keep its creative teams very small.

While there have been and are other companies and groups in Canada who have produced collectives, Vancouver always has at least one company producing work that is based in artist-driven collective creation. The attraction of this type of work is perhaps due to the now illustrious tradition of interesting and provocative theatre produced by collective companies, or, perhaps it is the lack of traditional playmaking rules that reflects the rough and tumble of this last of the frontier cities, or it is a wish to share equally in the

joy of creation. In any case, collectives continue and the form develops in a particular Vancouver way, while companies keep building their reputations and repertoires through this most difficult of play creation models.

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