

St. Luke's Players

The Daily Colonist, Sunday, July 28, 1974

By Margaret Belford

Back in the 1940s, an energetic, theatre-minded woman whose name was Flora Nicholson, founded an amateur theatre group called the Kalamalka Players. Perhaps nobody in British Columbia remembers that group – if they have ever heard of them in the first place.

Most people, though, will have heard of the Vernon Little Theatre, which was what the Kalamalka Players became. Today, that name is so well known in B.C. theatrical circles as to be a byword in our time. Oddly enough, the Vernon Little Theatre has a link with Victoria because the woman who founded it also founded St. Luke's Players.

For Flora Nicholson did not stay in Vernon, but pushed on westward until she and her family reached Victoria where they made their home. Furthermore, she continued to make theatrical history, for she had not been in Victoria long before that old urge hit her again. The result was the formation of the Doncaster Little Theatre whose home was Doncaster School on Cedar Hill Road.

The Doncaster Little Theatre was founded in 1948. The group was not to be known by that name long, however, since in 1950, they moved their headquarters along the road to St. Luke's Church, where they made the Church Hall their home. From that time forward the name of the group was changed to St. Luke's Players, and that, as we all know, has been their title ever since.

Incidentally, the first play put on at St. Luke's was *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*. Which was an enormous success with Blossom Johnson playing the part of the mother, Mrs. Otis Skinner. Mrs. Nicholson, of course, directed and the play ran for two nights during February of 1950.

This was only a beginning, however, for before the year was out that new group out on St. Luke's Cross Road put on four other plays. Five plays in one year! For an amateur group just starting this was certainly something of an accomplishment.



Captain Gibson looking over old theatre records in his study.

Indeed, only those who have worked in amateur theatre, trying to juggle a day-time job along-side evenings spent in memorizing lines and endless rehearsals can have any idea of just what an accomplishment it was.

However, for this young group it was a mere beginning. The following year they put on seven plays, and the year after that in 1952, the tally went up to 10 plays during the 12 months.

So it went on during those early productive years, and, of course, the

driving force behind all this was the redoubtable Flora Nicholson.

In researching this story, I have been fortunate enough to talk with many people who knew Flora, and it is obvious from what they tell me that from the very beginning, Flora Nicholson was a force to be reckoned with. She was lots of fun too, I hear. Along with this, though, she was a woman of driving personality who knew what she wanted and usually succeeded in getting it into the bargain.

Flora, who was affectionately known

to her friends and associates as Nicky, was not a professional actress, but rather she was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable amateur who was literally tops in her field. She could and did turn her hand to playwriting as well, so that it was nothing unusual to note on the current program that the director of the play was also its author.

On going through the old records, it seems that Nicky wrote four plays for St. Luke's, and in all she directed 33 productions for them. In all that time, perfection was her watchword, and anything less would have brought the roof down upon the unfortunate actor.

Sid Brooker was one of those who worked with Flora Nicholson and he handled the lighting for many of her plays. He recalls that she was a martinet but this, he thinks, spurred everyone connected with her to give of their very best. This went for sound effects and lighting, too.

One of the hardest plays for effects was, he thinks, *The Glass Menagerie*, and for that Sid had to install a phone from one side of the stage to the other in order to keep contact with his helper.

Harlequinade was another very successful play, but that, he recalls, called for many sound effects such as thunder and lightning. It is interesting indeed to discover what an electrician can get up to once he gets involved with a group of amateur players!

From the very beginning, Flora Nicholson had the knack of drawing out those parts of a play which were important to the whole. She had something to give, and she gave it with all her heart. Thus, those who worked and acted with her very early learned to become totally involved too.

One of the actresses who has now



Kathryn Roberts, Doris Stewart, Tom Kerr and Margaret Martin on stage in 1952.

gone on to professional theatre recalls with a chuckle the day when Nicky rounded on her cast and told : "You are nothing but a bunch of amateurs."

Since that was what they were, they might have been pardoned for feeling that they were not to blame for that. However, it is recalled that one and all took it as a sort of insult not to be born. As a result, the entire cast put forward that added extra effort she called for.

St. Luke's Players have, from the beginning, entered drama festivals, and their awards have been many. As a matter of fact, in 1950 during their first year, one of Flora Nicholson's own plays were entered in the third Annual Victoria Drama Festival which was held in the old Club Sirocco.

I have it on good authority from Captain Gibson, himself a long-time member of the group, that on arrival at the Club, they found they were somewhat cramped for room. The

reason – a dog show was taking place at the same time and in the same building. A dog lover himself, Captain Gibson insists that the dogs gave no trouble. One shudders to think though of just what the punctuation of a series of sharp yaps could do at a moment when an eager thespian was making a telling pause for effect!

At that same festival, St. Luke's also put on *Victoria Regina*, and with this they won Best Play, as well as taking the award for Best Actress.

From that time forward there were few drama festivals in which the group did not take part. In the next eight years, they took Best Actor, Five Best Actresses, Best Visual, two honorable mentions, and several honor performances.

Flora Nicholson directed her last play in 1958. It was *The Laboratory* in which Evanne Murray, now a veteran player in her own right, won her first Best Actress Award. One might have thought that with the

passing of that beloved figure, Nicky, some of the pep and verve might have gone out of the company, but such is far from the case. For what Flora Nicholson had started, others have carried on.

Indeed, under the able leadership of Commander Lukey who was president of the group for the next 15 years, St. Luke's Players soared to even greater heights when in 1960 they swept the board with their production of *The Calf Before the Hearse*.

With that one production they took eight awards. A hopeful indication, indeed, for the future!

But, of course, the life of an amateur company is not only told by the amount of honors and awards they gain. One of the points which has helped to make St. Luke's Players a rather outstanding group is the fact that, over the years, they have provided the cradle and nurturing ground for a number of actors and actresses who have since become well known.

Since, during its existence, some 240 players have been members and have paced the boards for St. Luke's Players, it would be quite impossible to include a long list of all those who have appeared, but some names come easily to mind, such as Cliff Clark, John Drean and Gil Bunch. Another was Tom Kerr, a one-time timber cruiser from up-Island who came south to work under Flora Nicholson.

I gather that in the early days, Tom was reserved and found it quite hard to put expression into his face. Yet that same Tom Kerr is now a force in theatre and currently runs his own professional theatre company. He has become a very well-known and respected director.

Another Actress who feels a great closeness to the Players and who

says she really got her start with them is Evanne Murray, who at the recent B.C.D.A. Finals in Kelowna, took the Kelowna University Women's Club Award for speech and diction.

Marge Bridgemen is another actress well known to local audiences who has worked a great deal with St. Luke's. True, she was already an actress before she came to Canada, and apart from her work at Bastion Theatre and St. Luke's, she has for the past few years nightly charmed summer audiences out at Butchart's Gardens.

And then there is Margaret Martin, first introduced to Victoria audiences by St. Luke's Players. She freely admits that without Flora Nicholson and the players she might never have reached the spot she holds today. (One takes that with a grain of salt, however, for Margaret is an acting natural.)

Nicky, she tells me, taught her a lot, however, and the fact that this director always looks on her players as professionals did a lot to foster the professional attitude in Margaret.

Margaret, after appearing in many of the St. Luke's plays, went on, of course, to work with Bastion Theatre and the Guild. In 1966, she appeared in a Wonderful World of Disney film entitled *The Wild Heart*, which was shown on TV. At the present time, Margaret is busy playing the lead role in a CBC documentary special, *The Little Old Lady on the Edge of Nowhere*. The part she plays is that of Emily Carr, and she tells me that the film's title is taken from one of Emily Carr's own books in which she describes herself as "the little old lady." Also, earlier this year, Margaret was down in New Brunswick taking part in the first ever coast to coast theatre exchange. Looking back, she still feels that she has continued to benefit over the

years from her early training under Flora Nicholson.

As with any theatrical group there are always the little episodes which make for excitement, humor, and almost panic from time to time. Blossom Johnson, a long-time member who went on to teach drama at one of the local schools, has a great fund of such stories. For instance, there was the time when Victoria Regina was being performed at the festival. Apart from the natural anxiety felt over the fact that all costumes were authentic and therefore very fragile, Blossom, who was doing the 'book,' found at the last moment that the script was missing, thus making prompting impossible. Blossom sat in the prompt corner with a fake 'book,' trying to look calm and praying earnestly that nobody would need a helpful whisper from her. To her immense relief, nobody did!

Blossom also has memories of Margaret Martin in *A Kiss for Cinderella*. Margaret as Cinderella had a very pathetic scene with the policeman who was also the prince. Since the actor in this case portrayed two characters he had to do some snappy costume changing, and on this particular occasion he overlooked his policeman scene with Margaret and gaily changed into his prince's costume ahead of time. Of course, he just could not go on stage, and Blossom, to this day, remembers with admiration the way Margaret ad libbed all on her own on the otherwise quite empty stage.

That particular play must have been a bit of a traumatic experience for Margaret since, on another occasion, when she was wearing her rags under her princess gown, her dresser, in a special dash of speed, succeeded in removing both costumes at once – a happening which is enough to throw any actress who finds herself shivering in the wings in nothing but her underwear while an enthusiastic

audience awaits her speedy return to the stage!

To date, St. Luke's Players, who are the second oldest group in Victoria, have put on 99 productions. Indeed, their centennial production is likely to appear some time this fall.

Meanwhile, through many changes, they still continue to turn out good and acceptable work. An instance of this is the fact that at the recent B.C.D.A. zone festival, they swept the board by taking all four main awards. They went on to take part in the finals at Kelowna where Hilary

Young took the award for Best Supporting Actress.

Surely a result which would have gladdened the heart of that grand trouper, Flora Nicholson!