

St. Luke's Players carve niche

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By Ted Gaskell

You have to give St. Luke's Players three A's for their theatrical efforts.

They choose plays which are appropriate for their audience and they do them to the best of their ability.

They have been doing that for more than 40 years since Flora Nicholson started her players groups at Doncaster school then moved to the little church along the road.

Let Bastion and Belfry do the more modern "slice of life" plays; let the University do the experimental stuff; VOS can have its musicals; and Victoria Theatre Guild may show it is a little more sophisticated. St. Luke's does what it knows best and that's what its audience wants.

Things have changed considerably over the years, but not the audience. The club still plays to full houses with the regulars getting to the hall as much as three quarters of an hour before curtain time, perhaps to ensure a good seat in the flat church hall, but more likely to get a chance to meet their many friends and neighbours from the Glebe land housing close to the church. In fact a recent audience survey showed that at least a third of the audience came from the housing at Dawson Heights.

Until last year St. Luke's ran its plays three nights: Thursday, Friday and Saturday. But now, the club has started "split runs" with performances Thursday, Friday and Saturday the first week and from Wednesday to Saturday the following week. They still fill the hall for the seven performances. The Players still do three plays a year, usually mysteries or light comedies, following the philosophy of the late Harry Lukey who stated in a program note when he was president in 1958: "It is our aim to produce good, clean plays for your enjoyment."

But if experimentation and originality are generally being left to the professionals, it wasn't always so. The Players have staged premiers of many original plays.

The group started in 1948 when Flora Nicholson, who was a mainstay of the theatre group in Vernon before she and her family moved here in 1943, founded a drama group at Doncaster school. But then, a couple of years later, the school decided it no longer wanted a theatre group in its hall, and Canon F. Pike, St. Luke's minister, realized that a drama club might prove to be a source of funds for his parish. Nicky, as she was known, took her group up to the church and it has been there ever since.

The minister was right. Under an arrangement with the church the club has donated thousands of dollars to the church funds in exchange for its use of the hall, lighting and heating. In 1971 the club provided cushions for the metal chairs at a cost of \$300 (and added more recently) and got much more back in appreciation from an audience which knew only too well the truth of the adage that the mind can only absorb as much as the seat can endure. In 1972 the club gave \$500 to the church: \$100 a year later and in 1974 spent close to \$600 for new drapes.

The first production of The Players was *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay* by Cornelia Otis Skinner and was staged for two nights. This was the first of 33 plays which Nicky directed including four of her own writing. One year, 1952, the club staged no less than 10 plays.

Many names, now well known to Victoria, appeared on the program of the '50s: Evanne Murray, Margaret Martin (now a professional actress), Walter Cownden, Paddy Stewart, Tom Kerr (who went on to become well known province-wide, as an adjudicator and formed his own professional company), Cliff Clarke, Tony Nicholson, (Flora's son), Nell Horth, Blossom Johnson and others.

Perhaps the best known name, after that of Nicky, to be associated with St. Luke's is that of Captain C. F. Gibson who not only took acting awards but also won the prestigious Hamber Trophy for his contribution to amateur theatre in British Columbia. Commander Harry Lukey is another St. Luke's "name," working for many years with the club as actor and director, and was president for 15 years.

In 1951 the club entered the Victoria Drama Festival with *Harlequinade*, directed by Nicky, which saw son Tony on stage; Capt. Gibson was named best actor and honorable mentions went to Constance Wright and Don Green. The same year, Margaret Martin, a new bride from Vancouver, joined and played in *See how They Run* and Nicky wrote and directed *Man with a Lunch Pail*.

The following year, Evanne Murray made her entrance and Nicky again wrote and directed, this time in *The 7.28* to be presented in Beacon Hill Park for the I Am A Canadian Day. This was the year of the 10 plays which included *Glass Menagerie* and *The Holly and the Ivy*, an award winner for actress Carol MacCormick in the B.C. Regional festival.

The next year, in Nanaimo, Evanne Murray was named best actress; the Canada Day celebrations saw the club present *Cannon Shot*; Margaret Martin did her first directing job as Nicky's assistant. Later Mrs. Martin directed a children's play (a first for the club and presented at three local schools), but decided that side of the footlights was not for her. It was in this year the melodrama tradition began with *Little Nell*, staged for a Good Roads organization convention at the Empress.

Midway through the decade, Margaret Martin was named best actress for her work in *High Ground*, at the B.C. Regional finals of the Dominion Drama Festival; *Simple Simon* was staged in five schools; Cliff Clarke made his first players appearance in *January Thaw* and the names of Gil Bunch and Paddy Stewart are in the cast of *Here We Come Gathering*. *A Kiss for Cinderella* with a cast of no less than 30 was staged, quite an achievement for the club considering the limited space in the church hall.

The following year saw Harry Lukey appear on the scene in the *Princess and the Swineherd*, later reduced to a one-act play for the festival. Director Joan Key won the Best Visual Production award for *The Wonder Hat* in the South Island Festival.

Nicky continued to direct the group and in her *Battle of Wits*, Marlene Dixon won the best actress award in the V.I. finals, and Harry Lukey emerged as a director. Nell Horth joined the group and directed *Love of Art*. John Dreaan made his start, so did Pat Seale. Evanne Murray won the best actress award in *The Laboratory*, which was to be Mrs. Nicholson's last play before she died in 1960.

Her son recalls that one dinner time she was actually still writing the play that was due for rehearsal that evening. His role in theatre was from choice and his mother never pushed him into theatre because she enjoyed it. He became involved, first backstage, then in acting and later became well known as a director.

She ran the group and it has been suggested that the committee might have thought it ran the group but in effect it was Nicky who was the powerhouse there. The secret of her success and the club's success, her son confided, was that she selected plays with the limitations of her people in mind and wrote her plays for specific people. She made them work within their limitations and thus made them look good. Moreover, she pushed people somewhat to get the best out of them. Margaret Martin recalls Nicky once becoming exasperated with a cast and saying rather angrily "you're acting like a bunch of amateurs" which is, of course, what they were. Nicky, however, did not expect them to look that way.

She was missed, and for years afterward, when any action or policy was questioned, there was always someone to say "that's not the way Nicky would have done it."

The '60s opened auspiciously for the group.

The play, *Calf Before the Hearse*, just about swept the board in the South Vancouver Island festival. It was judged the best production, best visual production, Harry Lukey was best director; Capt. Gibson, best actor; Margaret Martin, best actress and in the B.C. finals in Vernon, honorable mentions were made of Capt. Gibson, Miss Martin and Bernie Watcher.

The year 1961 might be called "Community Year" for the Players. They raised \$400 for the St. John's Restoration Fund. The club also presented *On the Eve of Holy Week* on Palm Sunday for the St. George's organ Fund with Archdeacon T.B.C. Ragg, a good club supporter, as First Speaker. John and Betty Dreaan's adaptation of the *Merry Wives of Windsor* won the Burnaby Centennial Award and certificates of merit went to Capt. Gibson, and C. Guernsey. Director was newcomer Bert Farr who was pleased to see the play honoured as best production in the festival.

The late Erith Smith, *Colonist* reporter, became involved that year, so did Dave Shearer, Laurie Westendale and Marge Bridgeman, former professional actress from England.

The next year gave Paddy Haward the best supporting actress award with honorable mentions to Alec Hutchins, Betty Jean-Pierre and to Harry Lukey for direction. Dennis and Lynne Kershaw joined the

club, and before the end of the year, Dennis was directing (and still is). Clo Dowling was another newcomer and she too is still active. Another melodrama, *Lilly the Felon's Daughter*, was staged under Commander Lukey's direction. Roland Goodchild became part of the Players group and directed his own play, *The Grand Duchess*. The club again presented the Holy Week play but this time it was a different First Speaker, new rector Rev. Charles Wolff, who loved drama. He also lent his musical talents to the club as pianist for yet another melodrama, *Dirty Work at the Crossroads*.

When the Rev. Wolff retired in 1977, he was succeeded by the Rev. Edward Moulden, who supported the group. His wife Helen did a good deal of community work involving string puppet shows. When he left the church, the Rev. Ben Ragg, brother of an earlier vicar, David, continued to support the players.

Marge Bridgeman took on directing chores in the '60s with *A Battle of Wits* for presentation at the hall and also for the Victoria Lapidary and Mineral Society gathering. Excerpts from *The Critic*, under Peter Mannering's direction, were presented at the 1965 opening of the McPherson Theatre. In the Island Festival, *The Grand Duchess* was best visual production, and Robert Campbell best supporting actor with Don Martin as runner-up.

St. Margaret's School sponsored a performance of *Pool's Paradise*. The *Poltergeist*, first done in 1957 with Harry Lukey, was presented, again with Commander Lukey in the cast and directing. He was assisted by Betty Jean-Pierre.

Ian Poole, later to make the theatre his career, appeared in a revival of *Lilly the Felon's Daughter* along with Marge Bridgeman, Dennis Kershaw, Blossom Johnson, Betty Jean-Pierre and Don Martin. Harry Lukey repeated his directoral role. Then-lieutenant-governor Georges Pearkes and Mrs. Pearkes attended one performance. Capt. Gibson appeared as narrator and the club helped in the production of *the Bethlehem Tableau*, produced by the congregation.

To end the decade, the club presented another melodrama, *Love Rides the Rails*, with a cast, large for St. Luke's, of 20. Harry Lukey was again at the helm, and by this time Rev. Wolff's daughter Dorothy had joined the group, so had Dorothea House, and Don Layman started what proved to be a lengthy career as the club's stage manager.

Another "name" to direct for St. Luke's was Alan Purdy, who went on to become president of the Victoria Theatre Guild, founder member and president of the Community Arts Council and founder member, director and president for three years of the McPherson Foundation. The same year, the late Dave Foster joined the club, so did Jutta Woodland.

The next year, the club again went into the community for students from Reynolds Road school, and the singing group, The Skylarks, for Betty Jean-Pierre's *Curses, Foiled Again*, for presentation at Edward Milne school as well as for hall audiences. Jo Pepper directed.

Dr. Rod Symington, of UVic, directed Tom Stoppard's *Separate Peace*. Dennis Kershaw won honorable mention in the Island Festival.

Marge Bridgeman continued to direct, this time Agatha Christie's *The Hollow*, and Jo Pepper's play, *The Other Side*, earned Marlene Whitworth a best actress award, in the festival at Cedar.

The year 1973 proved important for Victoria playwright Joan Mason-Hurley who saw the first of three of her plays to be done by St. Luke's go on stage with great success.

In that year, groups were asked to look at Canadian plays and St. Luke's chose Peter Mannering to direct Hurley's *Get Away Somewhere Quiet*. The play was for men and women, although later she was to concentrate on all-women plays.

In April, her *Passacaglia* was entered in the South V.I. Festival and won best production award, best director for Jo Pepper, best supporting actress Hilary Young and best actress Judy Kinch. Goron Mason directed the play for the B.C. finals in June and again Hilary Young was best supporting actress.

A Fate Worse Than Death, the club's 100th production, was the next Betty Jean-Pierre melodrama and then the club returned to the more serious side of theatre with another Mason-Hurley offering, *Parent's Day*, another triumph for club and writer as the play was named the best production, best original play, best ensemble, best backstage crew and best actress award for Phyl Gaskell who was also runner-up in the B.C. finals and Kim Cowley shared runner-up honors for best support.

Mrs. Mason Hurley went on to more plays and eventually her book, *Canadian One Act Plays for Women*, was published. As Joan Austen-Leigh (the Austen from her connection with the Jane Austen family), she went on to write two best-sellers, *Stephanie*, the story of a girl in school in Victoria, and *Stephanie at War*, the sequel.

By this time Adrian and Monica Jarvis joined the club and brought their acting, directional and design skills. Their son, Stephen, now a professional actor in England, appeared in a St. Luke's play. Adrian and Monica are also in Britain, running their own professional theatre company in the west of England. About this time, the writer became involved as actor and director and served a term as president.

Jack Droy became involved as a director (and still is) toward the end of the decade. Kay Averill, (still active) joined, so did Brian Lenton, who has since done work with the Theatre Guild and the Victoria Operatic Society. Peter Mannering's skill and experience were called on more than once to guide the club through more difficult and ambitious plays.

Many actors and directors have worked with St. Luke's then gone on to other clubs. The Players, however, still manage to attract thespians, and we see the club with its solid core of workers whose names keep popping up: Kay Farnsworth, Bill Austen, Maureen Gee, Kay Averill, Clo Dowling, Doreen Crook, some of whom have worked, not only on stage but on the executive in various capacities.

But the man upon whose shoulders the mantle of Gibson and Lukey appears to have descended is Dennis Kershaw, who first appeared with the club more than 25 years ago and is still active with a

number of executive posts and five directoral jobs in as many years, not including the most recent, *A Fate Worse than Death*, an up-to-date version of Betty Jean-Pierre's melodrama which was the club's 100th production.

No one theatre can fill the needs of a community. There is a place for the groups which do the classics, the sophisticated, the experimental, the musical and there is, and probably always will be, a place for St. Luke's.