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Lending a voice, finding a voice

By BROCK WEIR

This towering figure almost seemed immortal. But, alas, nothing ever is.

Canada lost a titan on Friday afternoon when the venerable Christopher Plummer died due to complications from injuries sustained in a fall. As a thespian who went beyond the label of ?actor? to become a legend in his own time, he was a performer who, despite his 91 years, transcended generations.

For most of us, our first introduction to Christopher Plummer was The Sound of Music, a simple fact that often made him wince. Beyond that, we likely all have our own ?gateway? to Plummer beyond the Trapp, as it were.

Maybe it was his acclaimed portrayal of journalist Mike Wallace in The Insider. Perhaps his memorable turn as Tolstoy in The Last Station. If you're a relatively recent movie-goer, maybe his appearance as a famous mystery writer who finds himself murdered in the comedy Knives Out sent you down a Plummer rabbit hole. You may have also been moved by his Academy Award-winning performance in Beginners, as a recently widowed octogenarian who, following the passing of his much-loved wife, decides to live authentically as an out gay man for the final act of his life.

For me, I followed a slightly different track.

The Sound of Music, of course, was a film I was introduced to very early on ? and instantly loved ? but I never really considered the film's patriarch beyond that role until a high school trip to the Stratford Festival to see King Lear.

Sitting through a three-hour or so production of the play, despite it actually being my favourite of Shakespeare's offerings, was not necessarily at the top of my list. Reading a play is one thing that can be done at your leisure; sitting in amongst the peers in your Grade 11 English class with likely no chance to escape to stretch your legs was something else again.

That something else again was what I saw on stage. His performance was mesmerizing and unlike anything I had ever seen. It moved me in a way that, as far as theatre is concerned, almost felt foreign.

I was hooked ? both on the theatre, this one instance opening up my eyes to entirely new dimensions, and also on catching up on the Plummer I had missed. Eagerly, I sought out the films I hadn't seen and was more than eager to follow what he was working on next.

?Lucky? doesn't come close to describing how I felt on Friday as loving retrospectives of his work flooded our airwaves as I was fortunate enough to have caught him on stage several more times after that, including Stratford's productions of Caesar & Cleopatra and The Tempest (after which I had my only face-to-face encounter with the man after the performance when he hosted a signing of his autobiography In Spite of Myself) and, in Toronto, in Barrymore.

But, as lucky as I felt, this feeling was tinged with sadness.

It is always sad when an era comes to a close and we lose someone who has brought so much joy to the world, yet I couldn't help but think there was something more here. Yes, there was the Canadian factor, but Plummer's death coincided with those of several other individuals who transcended generational boundaries, including fellow nonagenarians Cloris Leachman and Cicely Tyson.

Some people dismiss individuals who grieve over people they don't actually know, but consider this: we might not have known these people individually, but they are often a part of our lives. It isn't that we're just consumers of their products. If you're a film or theatre buff, you make a concerted effort to get out to see their latest offerings. If they made their mark primarily on the small screen, by the act of flipping on the TV or clicking on streaming, we're literally inviting them into our homes.

In many ways their work inspires, giving us food for thought, a spark for ideas that could lead to something more, and pique our interest in areas that can take our lives in unexpected trajectories.

In their cases, is not just the death of an individual, nor is it just the dimming of lights that once burned bright, it is a loss of inspiration.

But, in my view, it also underscores the often-underestimated importance the arts have in shaping our lives and our identities as individuals, and as a people.

Over the course of the pandemic, it has been pointed out to me more than once by members of local theatre companies and arts and culture organizations that in situations like these arts programs ? and arts offerings of any kind ? are usually the first to go and the last to return to society.

Sure, they may have more of a vested interest in most in this sector, but they are certainly not wrong.

Take our schools. Arts face similar issues in our public education systems when governments and school boards look to tighten their belts. Music, drama and creative writing, among other subjects, are almost invariably the first on the chopping block with funds redirected to core subjects.

But not all students find their footing in math, the sciences, and language. Nor are all students equipped or able to develop those all-important feelings of teamwork, bonding and camaraderie through physical education and sport.

The arts are not ?nice to haves.? Not only are they levellers, but they are essential in stimulating minds and opening up doors to the world and grasping opportunities that simply can't be found in textbooks.

Consider the solace and comfort so many of us found during the profound feelings of isolation from the start at this pandemic through arts. You might not consider the act of standing on your porch banging pots and pans to salute our frontline workers during the evening shift change the arts, but guess what? It's a creative outlet. Some used this time to pick up an instrument they haven't played in years, or discovered an instrument that was completely new to them. Others took up painting, drawing to fill voids, as did others who picked up crayons and markers as adult colouring books hit something of a renaissance.

When the Global Pandemic is over, it will be up to the arts to preserve this human experience for generations to come. It will help us collect and process what we have been through, channel our emotions, rediscover our voices, and ultimately rediscover each other.

The voices of Christopher Plummer, Cicely Tyson and Cloris Leachman may have been silenced, but their bodies of work, their legacies, will continue to inspire and help people discover what is in themselves for generations to come.

As long as the opportunities are there. As we look to what the future entails, the arts can't be left on the backburner. They are part and parcel of our recovery.