

Bev Nicolas talks about his six decades in theatre

By Constance Scrafield

In May, Shelburne's Tipling Stage Company presents its production of the 1950 play *Murder Mistaken* by British playwright Janet Green.

We contacted Director Bev Nicolas to chat about the business of running a play for community theatre as opposed to professional theatre.

'I'm in my seventh decade of theatre,' he admitted, adding coyly, 'of course, I started very early. My wife and I were both professional theatre actors on both sides of the Pond. I was also somewhat involved with radio and television in Britain.'

Mr. and Mrs. Nicolas both acted in Agatha Christie's *Mousetrap* in Toronto, where it had an extremely long run of more than 25 years here as it did in London, England: the longest running play in history. In Toronto, it was staged in a converted church for all that time.

'People still sat in the pews,' Nicolas told us, 'but, of course, they had cushions by then.'

During his long life in the theatre, on both sides of the money, as it were, that is, as a professional or a volunteer, he has acted and directed a great many shows.

'Funny thing is, I learn something every time,' he commented. 'When I stop learning, I'll quit.'

To begin, we had a chat about the upcoming play with the Tipling Stage Company.

For a brief synopsis, Nicolas told us, 'It's was written by Janet Green in 1950. In her notes, 'This is a very straight forward play,' she says. 'Play it straight.' So, that's what we're going to do. It needs to be kept in 1950. It can't be brought up to modern times. There were no computers then and the references are different.'

He added, 'As long as the diction is good and people don't bump into each other, it'll be fine.'

For the story, a young man charms a much older woman into marrying him with a view to inheriting her wealth. Unknown to him, she changes her will, leaving everything to her sister. When he murders her, he winds up with nothing, hence the title. The rest of the play is taken with his next intended older wife and whether he can get away with the first murder.

There are six roles to fill: four ladies and two men. Although the part of Monica is short as she dies in the first scene, it is a very good part, Nicolas assured us. Otherwise, there are the scheming, murderous young man, an elderly housekeeper, a Canadian lawyer, Monica's sister and the second wife 'but will she outsmart her young husband?'

It seems the biggest difference between professional and amateur actors is movement. The trained actor understands moving naturally, using his hands as one does and speaking while in motion as opposed to moving to a spot and then delivering the line.

'Pros know exactly what they're doing,' Nicolas said. 'I was directing Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution* and two of the character have met and will meet again. I asked the two who were auditioning to make up what they thought would happen. They weren't saying the lines but it was very interesting and I used some of their ideas when I was directing it later. Those two got the parts too.'

When directing a community theatre play, 'I make people move on stage. Some people are stiff but only because they feel nervous. What I'm looking for is why they move 'because I told them or because they feel they should. Lots of actors don't have too much idea of moving.'

About saying their lines, he commented, 'I have never given people a line reader because I think they should read as they feel. I learnt this when I was a young man. Directing 'I want you to make your own way down here.'

Connection to the audience is important, even when not breaking the 'fourth wall.' Nicolas quoted Noel Coward as saying, 'You never immerse yourself totally into the character 'just 75 per cent, because the other 25 per cent is listening to the audience reaction.' Especially for comedy.

One of the things that thrills Nicolas about amateur theatre, as he put it, 'Some are coming out on stage for the first time 'it's wonderful to see. The play the company is doing now (Norm Foster's *The Great Kooshog Lake Hollis McCauley Fishing Derby*) 'one of the ladies is acting for the first time and she is doing a great job. Jean (Jardine Miller) has done a good job of directing.'

'A lot of community theatres in Toronto benefit from the participation of what we call 'rusting' professional actors,' Nicolas laughed.

He confessed that he and his wife Jo are old movie fans. 'I have to strain to hear the dialogue in new movies,' he complained.

Speaking of sound, he said, 'A lot of community theatres use sound systems. There's no need. You have a diaphragm,' he declared, 'Use your diaphragm.'