

Jo Phoenix and Neville Worsnop: Century Church Theatre 20 years on

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

The 20th Anniversary of the Erin Arts Foundation - The Board of Directors of the Erin Arts Foundation, past and present, are proud to recognize Neville Worsnop and Jo Phoenix for their dedication, commitment and tireless effort for bringing quality theatre to Hillsburgh, Erin and the surrounding community. Through their combined leadership, Century Church Theatre has virtually become a beacon for the arts.

This is the tribute on the plaque presented to Mr. Worsnop and Ms Phoenix, at the Gala to celebrate the anniversary on June 1, this year. Praise indeed.

Neville Worsnop told the Citizen, "Jo wept and I was gob-smacked by the plaque."

He continued by telling us a little of his personal history, "I played my first part in a church production when I was 14. I went to a hotel school in Blackpool, at 16, too young to work in licensed premises. So, I started part-time theatre college in Blackpool, while I was at the Blackpool hotel school."

They were located quite close to each other. In the course of the three years in which Mr. Worsnop studied at both, he participated in nine productions ...nine plays, doing the lighting, assistant Stage Manager, pyro technics, when it was still allowed for Journeys End. That was revived last year in the West End [London].

"Then, I was conscripted to join the army as a commissioned, then regular officer in the catering corps; then, in Nottingham, at a place that had a theatre. I was able to work with the commanding officer's wife, who was the theatre's director at that time. By then, I was hooked.

"I loved doing farce. I think it's important to us that the audience have fun but it's also important that the actors have fun."

A three week stint with a local repertory company followed that.

However, "when I got married the first time, I was ten years without doing any theatre. I came to Canada in 1968 and got involved in community theatre right away. I was one of the founding members of Peel Pantomime Players. With the Georgetown theatre, I directed and played in productions too."

Having met and married, Mr. Worsnop and Ms Phoenix, "were moving from Acton to Hillsburgh and found there is a local theatre in the high school. So, we were driving back from a trip to Indianapolis, talking about theatre and I said, Why don't we form an arts foundation that would include live theatre? So, we did.

"The then mayor of Erin, Rob Finley, suggested we get in touch with the trustees of the Hillsburgh community church and ask if we could use their basement for rehearsals without charge. While we had to walk through the church to get to the basement, I kept thinking 'what a wonderful performance space the church would provide'. The trustees agreed that we could do what we needed to make it a performance space. What you saw [the stage on which the production that evening, Will You Still Love Me in the Morning was performed] was the result of 15 years work.

As for Jo Phoenix, who directed the play, "When I was in a theatre in London [England], I thought theatre was something you watched. So, when we did come up here I started to watch Neville and began to get involved."

A bit of her history, "I was an educator; I was a consultant for Peel Board [of Education]. I wrote a number of books on methodology ? they don't do teach spelling ? I was trying to prevent the future from happening."

She continued, "That was my real life: the writing became a full time job. When I married Neville, he retired and he came along with me to a few workshops that I was giving."

"Neville was the road manager. I was writing workshops on teaching, in the States, the UK, all across Canada, Alaska and, even, Singapore, for 20 years. So, we spent a lot of time in the car thinking about what else we could do. We still went to England.

"The problem is that everyone thinks they're an educator because they went to school," she commented wryly.

"Soon, though, it was less work and more theatre. It's very nice that Neville and I can do this together. Retirement activities that we share, with golf some of the time."

As for time off, "There isn't a lot of time in between seasons. I'm directing *Quartet* [opening September 6, 2019] and, today, we had auditions for *Sleeping Beauty*.

"The Board is now seriously looking at the next season, for 20/21. Neville takes the lead; there's a reading committee; I look at plays from a directing point of view. We create a short list of plays and the Board makes a decision about what goes together. "Doing all that, for the middle play we leave that to somebody else. We get away in the winter, for a month."

"We like to think that our production values are as good as anybody," commented Mr. Worsnop, "That's what we strive for, to do the best we can do.

"I would like it to go on for the next twenty years. We will leave it in good condition. One thing we find with the youngsters, once they get to college, they tend to leave and go away and, once they leave college, they have a family. It's a challenge to find young people. It's something that one has to consider in choosing theatre. We all want to go to the theatre to be entertained."

The backbone of community theatre is the volunteers, who run it entirely, "We have to start backing away so that other people start taking over."

They agreed, "Our ambition is just to continue and get better. We're very well equipped now and I have designed a revolve for the stage."

Practicality matters so much: "All our sets we take apart and put together again some of it we're deciding to replace."

For anyone who would like to become involved with a community theatre, he invited them, "Come along; see what we do; see what involves your time, your energy; what do you want to do to satisfy yourself and see what you can do? A community theatre is a group of people who want to be together parachutists happy to have them along."

From Ms Phoenix, "Above all, we chose things that are going to be entertaining we like to see that people are leaving the theatre smiling."