

The Theatre Arts Guild is Celebrating its 80th Anniversary!

Our History – Some ups, some downs...Some disappointments, but lots of successes!

The Theatre Arts Guild (TAG) is proud to be the country's oldest community theatre with a record of continuous operation. The Guild was founded in March of 1931 and incorporated by an Act of the Nova Scotia Legislature in May of 1934. The activity of 1931 however, was actually the creation of a new theatrical entity from the merger of two existing ones - the Halifax Dramatic and Musical Club and the Garrison Dramatic Club, both with a history going back to the 19th century. Participants from these two Clubs had collaborated prior to 1931, under the banner of 'The Little Theatre Movement.' With a good deal of trepidation (since all had not been plain sailing in the merger discussions), Hugh Mills and Frank Willis oversaw the birth of the Guild in the spring of 1931. When the dust had settled, they considered that significant progress had been made in their search for the 'perfect Little Theatre organization.'

"Dover Road," by A.A. Milne was the choice for TAG's first production in May, 1931 and was performed at the Garrick Theatre (the present Neptune Theatre). By February of the next year, the group had a home, a former church hall on the corner of Coburg Road and LeMarchant Street in Halifax. Renamed the New Playhouse, this location was used until 1935, when a move was made to Nelson Hall, the auditorium of the Navy League building (Barrington and South Streets). Four years later, Canada was at war and the building was requisitioned by the military authorities. After only eight years of existence, TAG was once again without a home. The indefatigable Hugh Mills however, was not one to let a global conflict stand in the way of theatrical activity(!) and, with those TAG members still in Halifax, formed the 'Halifax Concert Parties Guild,' to provide entertainment to the troops flooding into the city.

Even after the cessation of hostilities, it took a while for the group to return to normal. The gymnasium of HMCS Scotian in the Naval Dockyard became the base for performances and then, in 1952, a former elementary school at number 27 College Street. Here, the group flourished, with membership peaking at 1,100 and a season's subscription available for \$6.00. On January 25th 1959, however, fire broke out and the building and its contents were destroyed. One of the secret mottoes of TAG must be 'Never Say Die,' because nineteen days later, the play being rehearsed that fateful night was presented in the auditorium of St. Patrick's High School.

The effect of the fire, the loss of all resources and the situation of being, once again, with a home had a demoralising effect on the organization. Membership began to drop and support fell away. Events took a decided turn for the better in April of 1966, when the Guild acquired a former church hall at 6 Parkhill Road in the City. This property, backing onto the Frog Pond, was renamed The Pond Playhouse and has been TAG's home ever since.

Putting down roots at the Pond Playhouse has led to a resurgence in the fortunes of the Guild and a considerable improvement in resources and facilities. After conducting fundraising over several years, a new sound and lighting booth, in conjunction with a new lighting control and power system was installed in 2004. From 2006 to February of 2008, a two-storey addition to the Playhouse was constructed, with a rehearsal hall on the upper level (Gratwick Hall, named for benefactors John and Lyn Gratwick) and lobby, bar area, kitchen, washrooms and office on the ground floor. Later that year, the auditorium was completely refurbished and a new seating layout established. All this work (plus a grant from the Municipality and the Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage) has given us, as one visitor described it, 'the perfect little theatre.'

Eighty years from the hopes for a perfect Little Theatre organization to the perfect little theatre and a whole lot crammed in between – seasons of musicals, classic pieces, mysteries and dramas, all supplemented by workshops, outreach performances at other venues, an annual Variety Night, participation in the Liverpool International Theatre Festival (with an award for Best Canadian Performance and Best Actress in 2008), a trip to Ireland in 1995 for the Dundalk International Maytime Festival and Aruba in 2000 as Canada's representative at the International Amateur Theatre Festival.

Eighty years during which time the members of the Guild have never wavered in the mandate 'to promote the study, practice and knowledge of the dramatic and musical arts in the city of Halifax and its neighbourhood' and have managed to have fun at the same time!

~ Judy Reade, TAG's Archivist