

Actress recalls glory years at Neptune | The Chronicle Herald

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Joan Gregson, upper right, poses in 1963 with fellow actors in Neptune Theatre's first company, clockwise from left, Diana Leblanc, Una Way and Dawn Greenhalgh.

Joan Gregson's professional acting career began almost 50 years ago, when she was invited to join Neptune Theatre's first company.

She remembers very clearly the call from Leon Major, who had awarded her best actress when he judged the regional finals of the Dominion Drama Festival in Halifax in 1960. She had been acting in amateur theatre at the Theatre Arts Guild and on radio.

Major planned to start North America's only full-time, year-round repertory theatre company in Halifax. "He called me and said, 'Would you like to be in The Fourposter?' and I said, 'Leon, that's a two-character play,' and he said, 'Would you like to do The Fourposter?'"

Gregson, who has just finished wrapping up the second season of *My Babysitter's a Vampire*, jumped at the chance. She was in Neptune's opening play, *Major Barbara*, and appeared on the theatre's stage for the next 31 years before she moved to Toronto in 1995.

Several members of the original company are gone but on a Christmas visit to Halifax to visit her two daughters, Gregson remembers that first company vividly.

On opening night, July 1, 1963, the social elite turned out in evening dress. "Leon was furious because he wanted people to come in jeans. This was not a society theatre; it was theatre for the people."

While opening night was "huge," says Gregson, "there were times when the cast was bigger than the number of people we were playing to, when we did *Arms and the Man* in particular.

"The night that really came up was the night Kennedy was assassinated. People did come to the theatre but (actor) George Sperdakos was furious. A, he said, we should never have been playing. And B, the fact that there were people coming out, it was a disgrace."

The play went ahead. "I felt people were there and had paid to see the show and they deserved to have a show," says Gregson, adding, "We were all agonized about Kennedy's death, but this was Canada."

Gregson, born in Paris, moved with her mother to Dartmouth when she was nearly six to join her mother's parents, after her British father died at age 38 from tuberculosis. She lived close to Evergreen House and remembers famous folklorist Helen Creighton returning from her trips with heavy recording equipment in a wheelbarrow.

When Gregson was 13 she went to the Edgehill School for Girls (now King's-Edgehill) in Windsor. That's where she discovered theatre. "The new girls had to stage a play. I guess I wrote the thing and we did that and it was well received. We did plays in French, comedy, drama, opera."

To be in Neptune's full-time professional company of actors, including Ted Follows and his wife Dawn Greenhalgh, Diana Leblanc, Bernard Behrens, Norman Welsh and the late Molly Williams, was "very exciting — an absolute thrill," she says. (Greenhalgh is the mother of Anne of Green Gables star Megan Follows.)

"I learned so much in that first year. You made such really good friends. I see Diana and Dawn from time to time.

"It was a cohesive company and everybody worked towards the same end and nobody was a star. Leon said, 'There are no stars in my theatre!'

"His thesis was to create North America's first full-time, year-round repertory theatre, and it was. Eventually the board determined we should cut out the summer season. It should run September to spring. They felt money was tight. I still think it was a mistake to cut the summer season. Tourists come in and want to see plays in the summer."

Gregson still has the horse's head from *Equus* in which she played the mother while the late David Renton played the psychiatrist. "It hangs up in my living room. Nothing attracts attention like the horse's head."

Gregson has a picture of herself and former artistic director John Neville dressed up as a maid and a valet after they were auctioned off to serve a dinner at the home of theatre patrons Jack Craig, a longtime board member, and his wife, Joan.

When, during artistic director Robert Sherrin's tenure, *The Servant of Two Masters* returned to the Neptune stage after a tour, she was sitting in the audience opening night and watching Tedde Moore play the lead role of Florindo. "Then came the swordfight and I thought, 'Oh, look at how she's trembling,' and suddenly Tedde collapsed to the floor. She had a miscarriage and Bob Sherrin came to see me and said, 'Can you go on tomorrow?'"

Gregson went on the first night with a script, by the second night she had memorized the first act and by the third, she knew the whole play.

Among her most memorable roles are acting in *The Fourposter* with Bernard (Bunny) Behrens, in *Arms and the Man* and in *An Evening with Oscar Wilde* compiled by David Renton.

"Same Time Next Year, that has to be one of my favourites, and playing that with Brownie was hysterical. The run was extended twice and I did it again with Sudsy Clark at the old Dartmouth rink. It must have been a benefit." Brownie is the nickname for David Brown; actor, musician and radio drama producer. Sudsy Clark died in Vancouver last year.

Gregson, who hopes to be part of Neptune's 50th anniversary season next year, decided to move to Toronto after filming *The Scarlet Letter* in Shelburne. She was Elizabeth Cheever.

"We did that for months so I suddenly realized I had some money. I wanted to make the move because there was more work up there in film and TV and I thought I'd better get up to Toronto straight after *The Scarlet Letter*, before it was released and everybody realized it was terrible."

She arrived on Feb. 13. "It was mid-June before I got a job in a commercial. What a relief that was."

Today she is perhaps best known to the younger generation as Benny's grandmother, the Earth Priestess, on Teletoon's *My Babysitter's a Vampire*, which started as a movie of the week and then a series in 2010. She just wrapped up the second season. The first season starts its first full run in Canada tonight on Teletoon.

"Apparently Disney just loves it. We're hoping there'll be a third season."

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