

THEATRE ARTS GUILD

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Canada's Oldest Continuously Operating Theatre Company



THE POND PLAYHOUSE

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The official newsletter of the Theatre Arts Guild

A Letter from Our President

As we continue to muddle our way through yet another lockdown, I hope you are all surviving as well as can be expected and finding joy in the little things. I have been told watching cat videos on YouTube can be beneficial! If you like cats...

Congratulations and thank you to those who collaborated for *The Fifth Biennial Playwrights Festival* in March. It was a different approach we were forced to take, but the team pulled together (virtually!) and presented some great work. We had many people sign in to view the 2 plays over the 3-day period. If you did not have the opportunity at that time, fret not! You can still access the link on our website.

The small cast and crew of *Mrs. Walford: A Month in Halsey Street*, written by Brenda Tyedmers and directed by Cheryl Theriault, were fortunate enough to have a few in-person rehearsals before the latest wave of restrictions. The presentation date is currently unknown, however, the cast and crew continue to meet online weekly and will do so until it is safe to reconvene at the theatre to prepare for an online performance. What a teaser. Stay tuned for additional details about the show and dates.

On that note, you may have noticed that we have not announced anything about a 2021/2022 season. We remain cautiously optimistic but we are not able to proceed at present.

May of 1931 marked the first ever performance for the Theatre Arts Guild. We are officially 90 YEARS young and still going strong. I saw my first show at TAG in 2002, but my history with the theatre pales in comparison to others who have been supporting us for decades, in one capacity or another. This milestone simply could not have been achieved without the loyalty of our members and patrons. It would be easy during these difficult times to lose hope, and lose interest. Fortunately, thanks to years of tireless work, dedication, and love for the theatre from many, many people, our organization has maintained its strength and viability. It would have been nice to honour this occasion with a little more artistic flair, but I know that when we are able to gather once again, there will be a wonderful celebration. Happy 90th to TAG, and a very enthusiastic round of applause to you, our fine members and supporters!

Wishing you a wonderful summer, whether it be close to home or elsewhere. Stay safe and stay healthy!
~ Rayna Smith-Camp

Message from the Artistic Director

I'm writing this on April 22nd, just after watching Premier Rankin and Dr. Strang deliver the COVID-19 briefing that puts HRM and some neighbouring communities back into lockdown for 4 weeks. It didn't really change the message I was going to write, but it certainly drove home the reasoning behind it. Things change amazingly quickly and advance planning is nearly impossible.

I'm extremely disappointed that, like last April, we will not be holding a Season Launch this year, or announcing a 2021-22 season of live theatre. It is too difficult to plan anything in advance, and, even if Public Health restrictions are relaxed, it's unfair to ask our volunteers to begin the hard work of creating a play that could then be shut down by new restrictions. The most important thing we do these days is make sure that our volunteers, and eventually our audiences, are kept safe. All of us appreciate the herculean efforts of Dr. Strang and his team at Public Health to keep Nova Scotians safe.

I'm so grateful that you have continued to support our online efforts like *Playwrights @TAG*, the *Almost Annual Variety Show* and our audio offerings through the Telescope Theatre Project. We will continue to produce these safely while following all Public Health regulations so that you can continue to enjoy Community Theatre in the safety and comfort of your own homes. Please check our website on a regular basis, and follow us on Social Media so that you don't miss any of these offerings.

Mrs Walford – A Month on Halsey Street, Brenda Tyedmer's sequel to her *Playwrights @TAG* entry of 2019, had just started live rehearsals when the lockdown came into effect, but continues online and will be filmed as soon as restrictions are relaxed enough for us to safely proceed. It's worth waiting for. Rest assured, that when Dr. Strang gives the go ahead for live performances, and we're all confident and feel safe moving forward, we will be ready and excited to get back on stage, backstage and in the booth and do what we love to do – present entertaining and thought provoking theatre for you, our members and patrons.
~Esther VanGorder, Artistic Director

Thank you friends of TAG!

<https://tagtheatre.com/friends.html>

*Available on YouTube:
He Said/She Said
and
Playwrights @ TAG 2021*

Did you miss our recent productions, He Said/She Said or Playwrights @ Tag? Good news! You can still catch them on YouTube.

Featuring the stellar cast of Tony Marshall and Cheryl Theriault, and directed by Joshua Law, enjoy He Said/She Said on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/8pny6XPU6K0>

Our 5TH BIENNIAL PLAYWRIGHTS @ TAG FESTIVAL - COVID EDITION features two plays reflecting life in lockdown and is hosted by the one and only Debora Pollock. Watch on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/DDK3Z-5rFxA>

Loved watching the productions? Make a donation: <https://tagtheatre.com/donation.htm>

TAG Grant News

TAG has received two federal grants plus a grant from the city through Councilor Shawn Cleary to complete work at the theatre.

We received a New Horizons grant from the federal government to complete landscaping in front of the building, and Shawn Cleary was generous enough to top up the grant with the city portion to add permanent benches to the project. Work is expected to begin in the near future.

We also received a second New Horizons grant to renovate the tech booth. This work is scheduled to begin in the summer, and will result in a significant improvement to the equipment and space.

Be on the look-out for volunteer requests to help with the work in the near future!

Become a TAG Member!

Join or renew your TAG membership for our 2020-2021 season. *All memberships purchased June through August will be extended to include the next full season.*

This year we're celebrating our 90th year!

All memberships are only \$15.

Join online here:

<https://tagtheatre.com/membership.html>

Want to support TAG? Donate today by credit card or PayPal:

<https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/the-theatre-arts-guild/>

The History of TAG: 90 Years and Counting Trends in Theatre

Trends might not be a word we normally associate with theatre, but, like any other art form, fashions in plays, what audiences like or don't like, and what audiences will pay to watch(!), change from decade to decade. With 90 years of successful productions (that's over 500 plays), we can follow the trends and influences that have resulted in each of TAG's seasons. These influences come from a variety of sources—directors, actors, TV show, film, historical event with a local or national connection, period piece (providing the opportunity for a new set of costumes to be constructed).

For the newly formed Guild in 1931, the influence is clear—it's English (the concept of a Canadian theatre and style is still in the future). In May, the play which introduced audiences to the new Guild was *The Dover Road* by A. A. Milne. Yes, the Mr. Milne who would later achieve worldwide fame as the creator of Winnie the Pooh and his friends from the Hundred Acre Wood. Milne first found considerable fame as a playwright with several plays shown on the London stage.

I can hear you asking, "What influenced this choice for the debut?" Well, it was in tune with the times—funny and witty, a pleasant enough story on the surface, and it had a moral. The main character doesn't like husbands running off with women who aren't their wives and makes sure that the couples who arrive at his door eventually see the error of their actions—all during a pleasant weekend!

In the beginning, the Guild presented that most English of playwrights, William Shakespeare, with *Twelfth Night* in 1937 and *The Merchant of Venice* and *Taming of the Shrew* in the 2 succeeding years. From the photos in the archives, there must have been considerable effort to create the right Elizabethan flavour for the sets and costumes, because everyone looks very authentic!

Remember, TAG had only existed 8 years when World War II was declared and what had been a theatrical troupe

Trends in Theatre continued from page 3...

morphed into a concert party. In those 8 years (apart from the examples noted above), no particular style emerges though evenings of one-act plays were popular (which I interpret as providing opportunities for more members to take part). When normal operations resumed after the War, seasons settle down to a pattern of romantic comedies, dramas, and mysteries (including our first Agatha Christie, *Witness for the Prosecution*, in 1957). Included were some classic pieces which have stood the test of time—*Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier (which had a recent reworking on television starring Lily James and Armie Hammer) and *Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*. Molière was represented too (once as it turned out), with *The Miser* in 1956.

There is a definite sea change coming and the 60s and 70s include plays that are not romantic or mysterious and sometimes don't even make sense! Playwrights, particularly in Europe and North America, discover the Theatre of the Absurd, where the boy doesn't get the girl, the ending isn't always happy and life is viewed as it is—cruel, unequitable, and hard to understand. Though popular plays still appeared in season planning, TAG does present plays from the leaders of this movement—*Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Bertolt Brecht (1963), *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett (also 1963) and the quizzical *Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco (1964). Ionesco himself called this play an antiplay. I think it was one of those periods in theatre history when an audience member had to keep an open mind and not expect the play to have any relation to what they were familiar with on the stage!

TAG also participated in the Dominion Drama Festival, a national event founded to promote amateur performances and amateur groups around the country. In the year of the Festival, one play was always singled out as the Guild's entry, receiving more attention than other productions. The Festival was divided into regional competitions, and though TAG was the regional winner on several occasions, it was never successful at the finals in Ottawa.

One thing stands out when I look through the titles presented in the 80s and 90s—the support for 2 playwrights who created controversy when they appeared on the scene—Harold Pinter and Joe Orton. Though Pinter has long since passed into the mainstream, Orton was different (fearing nothing, a homosexual when people still had difficulty speaking the word aloud). I'm proud to point out that TAG performed *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* in 1988 and *Loot* in 1993. Because of his tragic death, Orton's output was limited to 10 plays. Pinter's career was much longer and our audiences have seen *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Betrayal* (recently revived in Britain starring Tom Hiddleston, Zawe Ashton and Charlie Cox), *The Dumb Waiter*, and *Night School* coupled with *The Lover* (the latter winning prizes at the Liverpool International Festival in 2008).

Compiling a season is not an easy job, as I'm sure our current Artistic Director Esther Van Gorder will tell you, but it can be rewarding. It's a question of balancing interests, providing material for a range of age groups, and, because we have a building to maintain (unlike many amateur groups in the province) presenting shows which will bring in the cash! In recent years, this has been accommodated by the inclusion of a pantomime for the Christmas season, which we know will appeal to all ages—families, parents, children, and grandparents, can attend together. I like to work Front of House for the pantomime to experience the end of the performance (when the cast forms 2 lines in the lobby), and watch the expressions on young faces as they meet their favourite characters and collect autographs—something you don't get from watching on a computer screen!

In recent years, and building on experience, there is a definite pattern to the seasons (which still allows for flexibility and the incorporation of other elements) —the annual Variety Show, the biennial Playwrights @TAG Festival (to showcase short pieces by TAG members), short and long-form plays by TAG member Nick Jupp, collaborations with Dartmouth Players, plays that were entries in festivals (provincially, and in Liverpool, Dundalk, Ireland, and Aruba, this last as Canada's entry at the conference of the International Amateur Theatre Association). Mention must also be made of the Reading Series devised by the late John and Lyn Gratwick, consisting of poems, prose, and song lyrics, which filled the gap between the end of one season and the beginning of the next and were pure fun!

Present seasons provide us with a variety—comedies, dramas, musicals, thrillers, and murder mysteries, with the pantomime providing an anchor point for the holidays. The classics are not forgotten, with *A Man for All Seasons* in 2013 creating the opportunity to display a set of Tudor costumes designed by Roberta Palmer, and *Pride and Prejudice* in 2017 giving a similar opportunity for Susan Hall and her team to outfit the cast in early 19th century attire. A new translation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (2018) resulted in sold-out houses and George Bernard Shaw has been represented with *Candida*, *The Apple Cart*, and *Heartbreak House* (with *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in the audition process at the beginning of the pandemic).

Canadian authors are part of the repertoire, with Norm Foster comedies being a staple. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* by an author with Cape Breton connections, Ann-Marie MacDonald, gave us a challenge. *Thirteen Hands* by Carol Shields proved popular, as did *Blood Relations* by Sharon Pollock. Our choice of Wendy Lill work was *Corker* and *Halo* by Josh MacDonald brought back a writer who appeared in *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown* in 1989, when he was a Halifax high school student! *Tainted Justice* (2000) was a Canadian rarity, an adaptation of a book by Point Edward writer David Newton (father of Laura and Andrew Newton who acted, sang, and danced many times at TAG), based on a murder in Sydney in the early 20th century.

The pandemic has affected TAG, as it has so many things, but I hope that, when we can pick up the threads of normal seasons again, you will join us. I've given you a taste of what we've done in the past; please join us in sharing what we can do in the future! ~Judy Reade, TAG's Archivist