

# **The High School Theatre Enhancement Program**

## **Introduction**

This project has come into being as an initiative of two professional theatre practitioners Lois Brown and Ruth Lawrence, based in St. John's, who have adjudicated high school theatre festivals in Newfoundland and Labrador. Both Lois and Ruth have found that in sub-regional, regional and provincial theatre festivals student experiences are invariably better than the norm when the actors are working on local material rather than plays selected from Samuel French or other catalogues. Local plays are either written by a teacher, a student, a parent of one or more of the actors, or written collectively by the student actors, or are the result of collaborative effort involving student actors and their teachers. In recent years and currently, on average, 5-10% of the 85 to 100 plays performed annually in high school theatre festivals are created in this province.

Lois and Ruth asked me to join them in a project to encourage more high school students, in their theatre festivals, to perform plays written by their teachers, peers, parents, or themselves, and to facilitate teacher-student collective collaboration to create their own plays throughout the province. We jointly concluded that the best way to accomplish this aim was to show those currently involved in teaching English and directing student plays, and their students, some of the high school theatre that has been created in schools throughout the province over the past twenty years and to make it available to them. Since the collective tradition is so strong in some areas of the province (ie. Burin Peninsula and Labrador), we felt a need to encourage it in other areas. These plays encourage playfulness, co-operation, individual approach, and a sense of community. They empower the performers because the material is important to them. We also sought brief essays on relevant experience, which teachers gained in working with their students. We believe that the in-service dissemination of this work is a tribute to those who create and produce it, and we hope it will foster a remounting of some of the plays included in the project. As well, of course, we hope that more teachers and students will be inspired to create new plays.

The project began at the end of October 2002 when we approached the Department of Education with our proposal to undertake this project, with the understanding that our work on the soliciting, vetting, and editing of plays and essays would be voluntary. We wanted the resultant texts to be made available to all high school teachers and students involved in theatre province-wide through the Department of Education website. Rex Roberts, Program Development Specialist in English Language Arts (K-12), gave us names and addresses of teachers throughout the province who had been actively involved in high school theatre in recent and past years. Ed Jones, now retired from the Department of Education supplied us with programs from past drama festivals. In mid March, 2003, we sent letters to all the identified

teachers explaining the project and informing them of those teachers who we knew were involved. We asked them to identify any colleagues whom we had missed, to name plays they would like to submit – and to submit them by the end of June, 2003 – and to select essay topics for submission by September, 2003 on subjects such as: Writing plays for small schools; Guidelines for collective creation; Individual (teacher or student) creation; Collaborative efforts other than the above; Directing of such works; Other related topics, which may arise.

Our aim is to get former and current teachers' and students' work out there so that it can be performed again, perhaps geographically far from where it originated. It should be made easy for teachers and their students to perform each other's texts, or to adapt them for their own situations, or to say, "We can do this too." We hope this project will lead to an increase in Newfoundland and Labrador content in all levels of future provincial theatre festivals. At our current level of 5-10% we are approximately three times the national average. We chose a wide variety of styles for our sample scripts. From ensemble plays with no dialogue to full situation comedy to an adapted classic, there is something for every taste and skill level.

We acknowledge the value of published works, which disseminate Newfoundland and Labrador theatre texts that have been achieved so far through publications of plays, such as that by Ed Kavanagh, *The Cat's Meow: the Longside Players selected plays*; and editions by Denyse Lynde, *Voices from the Landwash*; Gordon Ralph, *Boneman: An Anthology of Canadian Plays*; and Tim Borlase working with Carol Bolt, *Who Asked Us Anyway?* There is valuable information on collective creation and improvisation in the latter book. Our aim is different – it is an in-house, web-based distribution of teacher and student material for theatre education use province wide.

Our seven plays from Labrador were created and performed between 1995 and 2002. They are, in chronological order: *IkKaumajannik (Memories)*, Hopedale, 1995; *Jacob's River*, Happy Valley-Goose Bay, 1998; *Bully Wise*, Happy Valley-Goose Bay, 2002; *Corner of Jarvis and Queen*, Happy Valley-Goose Bay, 2002; *Remember When*, Hopedale, 2002; *Orphan Boy: An Innu Legend*, Davis Inlet, 2002; and *Something to Be Proud Of*, Postville, 2002. These plays in their subject matter deal with Inuit and Innu people's appreciation for their culture and family values and their taking charge of their own lives; they deal with Labradorians, in general, facing bullying, stereotyping, and general issues of youth growing up and dealing with local and international disasters. In form the plays can be hilariously funny; highly sophisticated, mystical, and/or beautifully choreographed; or they can simply be mimed action without dialogue.

Our seven selections from Newfoundland are no less impressive. They are: *The Servant of Two Masters*, St. John's, 1983; *The Twenty-Minute Psychiatric Workout*, St. John's, 1986; *The Incident at Dusty Falls*, Lamaline, 1995; *Oh Grow Up!* St. John's, 1999; *Convergence*, Lamaline, 2002; *Deep Down*, South East Bight, 2003; and *It's Like...*, Grand Falls-Windsor, 2003. Nationally known Newfoundland performers Beni Malone, Rick Mercer, and Andrew Younghusband were among the creators of the two earliest plays. Overall, the plays deal in their

subject matter with love, family values, intrigue, mysterious occurrences, murder, good and evil, illness, and growing up with its peer pressure and emphasis on sex and conforming. These plays range from adaptations of classics, to English pantomime, comedy, tragedy, and musical, which can range from simple to complex in their staging. They can call for multiple role-playing.

When we had rendered the texts as clean and complete as possible, during the past summer, we sent them back to their teacher-directors for answers to questions, necessary corrections, revisions, additional comments, and other information that they cared to provide. Receiving these texts triggered some teacher-directors to submit essays to us that will provide guidelines to help new teachers and their groups understand their plays, to remount or adapt those plays to new situations or geographically different locations, and indeed to write their own plays or help their students to create theatre collectively. We hope this project will allow the teachers and students who have created these amazing works of theatre to take pride in their accomplishments. We also hope it will lead to an increase in Newfoundland and Labrador content in sub-regional, regional, and provincial theatre festivals. We hope too that it will lead ultimately to the writing of more creative theatre texts in the province.

Lois, Ruth and I are grateful to the Department of Education, which has supported this project; and the teacher-directors and other playwrights who gave us permission to use their material, and assisted us generously in preparing the text. The project was ably assisted by Erin Murphy and Stephanie Short, senior English students who were supported by MUCEP grants (Memorial Undergraduate Career Experience Program) for periods in 2003 and 2004.

In Newfoundland, in addition to our thirty-year history of plays by the Mummers Troupe, CODCO, and Sheila's Brush, we have a flourishing theatre in new local play production in St. John's with the longstanding RCA Theatre operating out of the LSPU Hall and the year-round, prolific Artistic Fraud, and other companies. Around the island, new plays, written by prominent and new playwrights, are performed in well-established summer festivals such as Rising Tide Theatre's Festival in the Bight in Trinity, the Stephenville Festival, and the Theatre Newfoundland and Labrador (TNL) Festival in Cow Head. In addition, new summer festivals come on stream annually whose function is to stage new plays of relevance to the host community.

In Labrador too for the past 29 years, the Creative Arts Festival, founded in 1975 by Tim Borlase and Noreen Heighton, has provided a venue in Goose Bay to showcase performing and visual arts among students in a non-competitive festival. The chief aims of the festival are to ensure communication among Labradorians and their involvement in the life of the region. Influenced by teachers, students and the numerous artists which the festival brings to Labrador each November, more than 360 extant plays have been collectively created and performed by three generations from as many as sixteen communities in Labrador. The now more than 3,176 students and 362 teachers who have collectively created plays about life in their communities represent close to 15% of the population. It is necessary that a suitable theatre space in Goose

Bay (the original venue was lost with the demolition of Goose High in 2003, which forced a much diminished festival last year), be constructed. We hope that our project will help to feed, at an early stage, the future development of our next generation of playwrights, actors, directors and other theatre professionals throughout Newfoundland and Labrador.

Helen Peters  
November, 2004

### Resource Material

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