

Energy For Theatre
Reflections from Judith Ceroli, Looking back from 2010.

I don't know very much about the beginnings of Women's Reader's Theatre....I was a latecomer. Bonnie Evans, Jennie Ash, Meredith Woodward were there at the beginning, I think. My sense is that it began as a feminist consciousness raising, support group. Back then I still liked men a lot, I had a male child and I wasn't yet enraged.

When I did join in, about 1974, it was after much urging, mostly from Meredith with whom I volunteered at the library that was set up in the little red Vallican school house. I finally agreed after I was assured that I wouldn't have to "act"....or even stand on a stage. I could just sit in a chair and read, which sounded safe.

There were maybe a dozen of us...Bonnie, Meredith, Sally Drake for awhile, Janie Battaglio (Pine), Cathy Marrion, Nancy Harris, Linda Grabler.....

The material we read was feminist, but not extremist enough to put me off. Bonnie will better remember the writers, the pieces we read.

We were having a fine time. I was having a wonderful time. With big guns like Sally and Bonnie I was far from the star of the show, but I began to think about presentation, even lighting! We did a performance in Salmon Arm, something arranged with a women's group there and Nancy Harris and I spent the afternoon rigging some kind of lighting so we'd look good on the platform they had arranged in their community hall.

On that trip we were billeted in different homes of the women of the group and I began what is still a deep friendship with Barbie Yeomans who now lives in New Denver.

There began to be a split in the group between some who were more focused on the politics of the material and some who were more interested in the performance value of what we were doing. I

was strongly on the performance side, ready to get a bus and go on the road.

Out of that Meredith, Cathy and I began working on a piece called "Calm Down Mother".....the name of the writer is lost in my memory. It was a short piece for three women with several small skits. And I don't remember what they were....any of it. I do remember that we began working on it with Brian Marrion, Cathy's husband, who had some real theatre background and directed our efforts. We were very interested in "contact improv", a physical movement exercise for more than one person involving taking weight and giving weight....we were incorporating this into our performance piece.

Including Brian into the mix brought about our final split with Women's Reader's Theatre. Brian just didn't make the cut.

It also was the planting of the seed out of which grew Theatre Energy.

We took Calm Down Mother as far and wide as we could manage on our thin dime. We included Celeste Crowley - now Celestina - who made improvised music for us...and I faintly recall another woman and her husband who travelled with us but in what capacity I forget. Perhaps musicians, perhaps cooks and day care helpers. Perhaps someone's lovers, or all of the above.....it was that era.

We entered and performed at the Zone Festival of Theatre BC in Terrace.....the annual gathering of BC's non-professional theatre groups for fun and competition. We were not entered as competitors but as an invited performance. We knocked them out of their seats...three voluptuous women, braless in leotards and tights doing several characters each and touching each other, moving over and under each other on the floor with our contact improv. Well! Meredith won an award for her acting.....and continued with that quality of work into a career in Vancouver. I won a relationship with one of the adjudicators....a relationship that

continued for many years. And so we sowed the seeds of our futures.

Many people in the Valley had, for years, done some theatre either with the Nelson Community Theatre group who were very active and did good quality productions. Or with theatre put on by the David Thomson University Center, also very well produced shows. Or with plays produced by Slocan Valley folk like *The Real Inspector Hound*, *The Doll's House*.....there was a lot of energy for theatre in the early '70's

My first involvement, besides Women's Readers Theatre, was when my son Michael, then about 7 or 8 had a role in *The Doll's House*. I began just driving him to rehearsals, then pitched in where I saw a task and ended up busy. Nancy Harris, who directed the production, called me the stage manager. Others in that production were Linda Grabler, Erin and Ananda Harris, Tissy Carpendale, Marcia Braundy, Brian Bailey and Fred Eisen. Was this the show that Wendy Paoni made the set for? A huge web of knotted and tied rope. Or perhaps that was for "The Tempest" a DTUC production.

Others involved in productions were Brian Marrion, Joel Harris, Denton Coates, Hank Hastings, Karen Haddigan, Rod Padmos, Margie (Teth) Bruyere, Tel Schreiber. Ron Woodward always did promotion photos and he and Dan Armstrong did programs, Bob Inwood designed posters, even my sister, Debbie who did props.....who am I forgetting?

In the summer of 1976 some of us organized a series of theatre and writing workshops, held in old Riverside Hall in Slocan Park and up at the New Family place in Winlaw. Ronnie Gilbert, (working with the Open Theatre Company in New York led by Joseph Chaikin) taught writing and the rest of the classes were taught by different members of Tamahnous, a theatre company in Vancouver doing exciting, experimental theatre.

At the end of that summer we began to talk of forming a theatre company because there was so much energy for theatre....or

“theatre energy”. After all the talking, people coming and going, we ended up with a group of 8 committed souls: Brian Marrion, Cathie Marrion, Meredith Woodward, Ronnie Gilbert, Nancy Harris, Hank Hastings, Buzz Bense (ex of Tamahnous) and myself.

The first thing we did, of course, was write a grant. Those were the days when money was easily available....a good idea, someone who could type it onto the form, someone who could add up numbers and bob’s your uncle.

We didn’t need much money to start - did we even get a wage? We hired or cajoled Joel Harris to help us with the production and started “playing” in Riverside Hall, where, for awhile, Brian and Cathie also lived. We brought in ideas, improved, used contact improv, went home at night and wrote. Buzz was brilliant at staging and the physicality of theatre. Ronnie was the heart and soul of acting value - always pushing us to find the essence of the material. The essential gesture that would tell the story.

We made a play about our own lives, our coming to the Valley from different urban centers, from the United States. How we learned to live in the country, earn a living, build a community, keep a marriage together, and raise our children. “Renderings”. It was innovative, and warm with heart and humour. And we were in love with each other - an eight person love affair.

So we wrote a bigger grant, paid ourselves a wage, hired a business manager, Mary Lynn Burke, and made another play. “Voices”. We interviewed people and did research and made a play about the other people who had moved here: the English remittance men who came here to “grow apples and grow rich” and were thinned by World War I, the Japanese who were interned here during World War II, the Doukhobors who came here seeking “toil and the peaceful life”, the trappers and boatmen who plied the rivers from Nakusp to the whirlpool at The Dalles, the hippies who struggled to form a community. We had costumes, not just combinations of our own clothes. We bought lights and made plywood lighting stands and platforms, wooden boxes and bought yards of fabric.

We toured both of these shows as far as we could afford to go and then made a shorter version of Voices which we toured to schools for several years to come.

Meanwhile we grew in every way. We realized that we could no longer just “do theatre”...we needed to become a business that made theatre. We divided the responsibilities into “portfolios”...at first each taking the one where the skills and interest were strongest, but later, shuffling them so that each of us expanded our skills. We worked by consensus, meeting often and long, talking, talking... always redefining who we were, who we wanted to be, what we wanted to do. It was still an 8 person love affair.

We made more shows: “Muck Millie Virgil” about the phenomenon of open marriage. “Power Play” about the Columbia River Treaty and water with a disco back beat. That was when the romance hit break-up. Ronnie had gone off to New York to work with Joe Chaikin again...Buzz was directing alone. Things got crunchy, as they will in a deadline, opening curtain at 8:00 business and stuff started hitting the fan. In every direction. We were there when the curtain went up and maybe the cracks didn’t show. But we were deeply hurting. Damaged.

People left. One after another for this reason or that. Finally the only ones left were Meredith, Cathie and myself. We decided to do a show called “The Girls Will Be Out in a Minute”. About women.

Cathie had done some sessions at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, and there she’d met a brilliant and eccentric theatre person, Linda Putnam. However it happened, Linda came and directed us. (I think the angels sent her). The first thing Linda pointed out to us was that we had lots of solo pieces, (I had a piece on buying a motorcycle and another on playing a mandolin; Cathie had a piece on Mattie Gunterman, a photographer of the 1800’s.; Meredith was working on a stand up comic, emcee character). But we had no ensemble pieces. In fact, we rarely looked at each other. Oooops

We really were damaged. That show was as much about therapy as it was about theatre and that was Linda Putnam's magic. We ended up with a good show and restored friendships. Through her connections with us, Linda ended up teaching theatre at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. She created a following of teachers and practitioners of her method, including Kate Weise, who nearly a decade later would come to the Kootenays to direct one of Theatre Energy's last shows, "Malefica"

From 1976 to 1993 Theatre Energy produced some very good theatre, brought a lot of greatly talented people into the Kootenays and left a legacy of performers producing great stuff on stages and galleries in Nelson and probably all over BC.