

The Alumnae Theatre—A History in Three Acts

(working title)

INTRODUCTION

The Alumnae Theatre is proposing to create a history that will tell its story from its origins in 1919 to 1999. It is today an active, semi-professional producing theatre, offering a season of plays at its theatre on Berkeley Street in Toronto. It envisages a book of 200-250 pages (at most), including a goodly number of illustrations from the archives and a chronological list of productions. The book will tell the story of the Alumnae over 80 years, linking that story to developments in theatre in the city and province. It will not be simply an anecdotal collection but a narrative, making use, however, of anecdotes to enliven the record and convey the personality of the changing group of members and associates.

The book will include "case studies" of particular productions that can highlight the Alumnae's aims and achievements. Those achievements have prompted a growing number of calls to record this history, and do it while members with long time connections are still with us. It is anticipated that the book would appeal to all the women who have been members of the Alumnae, to the many people who have played in or assisted with the productions, to the numbers who have supported them and their work, as audience or friends, to women's groups and to those interested at several levels in the development of theatre in this city and this province.

PROSPECTUS

THE ALUMNAE THEATRE A History 1919-1999

In 2001 the Alumnae Theatre is a performing place (a main stage and studio) in a heritage building on Berkeley Street in Toronto, and an amateur company of women members (performing on stage and backstage) who manage it. In 1919 it was a small group of women interested in theatre who formed the Dramatic Club of the University College Alumnae Association, University of Toronto. This history will recount how over 80 years that small group developed into a company presenting a regular series of plays in its own theatre, a company which has made a significant contribution to drama in Toronto. The story is interesting in its own right, with many good tales of people and performances, but it is valuable also because of its close connections with the development of Canadian theatre as that theatre grew to take possession finally of its own stages. This is a story of evolution - evolution in the interests and aspirations of the Alumnae, evolution in Canadian theatre itself and the interaction of the two over the years.

The original Alumnae of the 20's and 30's were women in the professions or wives to whom their university life had meant much. They were readers; they went to touring plays at the Royal Alexandra and saw theatre in London and New York. They built connections with the little

theatre of Hart House and they had many links with the Arts and Letters Club. From such connections were recruited the men who played in their productions. They offered one production a year in the University's Hart House Theatre. To finance this, they themselves sold tickets and sponsored Theatre Nights, a necessity that had an influence on repertoire.

These productions were good, often British, plays but in a lighter mode, presented with taste and integrity. More challenging for the Alumnae, as for kindred amateur groups, were the regional and Dominion Drama Festivals which enabled sights to be set higher. With the outbreak of war the possibilities of public performances were largely gone, but the members did not give up their absorption with theatre - they read plays, produced one-acters from time to time and went into troop shows. In the immediate post-war the pre-war pattern was resumed: meetings and rehearsals in members' homes, a major production in Hart House, sets built in friends' garages, costumes stored in a member's attic.

In the immediate post-war Toronto still had no professional theatre of its own. But that was to change. A sign of the times was Robert Gill's appointment at Hart House to give opportunities for student actors, many of whom would become professionals at home. The New Play Society and the Crest Theatre opened. The greatest advance was the Stratford Festival in 1953 - after it, standards of performance and presentation were firmly raised. Was there still room for an amateur company? The Alumnae thought so. They had broadened their membership to include graduates of any post-secondary institution and they had kept their desire for interesting repertoire active. Now a special role emerged.

Herbert Whittaker, drama critic and director, had come to Toronto from Montreal. Using the drama festivals as opportunity, he led the Alumnae into producing Shaw's "In Good King Charles' Golden Days" (1951), followed by T. S. Eliot's "Family Reunion", and Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya". These plays and this director attracted actors such as John Colicos, Richard Easton, David Gardner, Ron Hartman and Ted Follows who were hoping to be a part of the professional theatre but who could not expect to receive major roles such as these classic plays afforded. The Alumnae offered them these opportunities. In turn, its own sights had been raised substantially.

In 1956 the Alumnae won the Dominion Drama Festival and a small cash prize with its production of Patricia Joudry's "Teach Me How to Cry" directed by Leon Major. Emboldened by this success they broke out of the pattern of small efforts and a main Hart House show. They rented in succession their own "coach house" spaces on Huntley Street, Bedford Road above a garage and Cecil Street in a former synagogue; here, free from the constant need to sell tickets to fill a large house, in a smaller playing space they could offer the kind of repertoire that would be challenging and unlikely to be seen in the professional theatre. They could also provide opportunities for their own prospective directors, with longer runs assist the development of actors, and keep backstage activities in-house at last.

Symbolic of this new mandate was "Waiting for Godot". Directed by Pamela Terry, it was the first production of Becket in Canada. It was a legendary occasion. There followed a procession of classics directed by members or guests, including plays of the Restoration and 18th and 19th centuries as well as the works of very modern playwrights - notably Ionesco (the first time in

Canada), Becket and Pinter. Pinter's "The Caretaker" directed by Herbert Whittaker was a landmark. Like "Godot", it had an all male cast, including Michael Polley, but this company of women who managed everything in the running of their "coach houses" (helped by male associates in building sets) wanted to present these new and different plays. Canadian James Reaney's "The Killdeer", directed by Pamela Terry found its first audience in the Bedford Road space and went on to the Dominion Drama Festival in Vancouver.

The Alumnae lost their third home, the old synagogue, to expropriation of the site by Ontario Hydro. The remuneration enabled them, after much complex and interesting negotiations with the city (helped by John Sewell), to take over management in 1972 of a firehall on Berkeley Street which with architect Ron Thom's designs was made into the Alumnae Theatre of today. Meanwhile there had been several hiatuses as the company changed playing spaces. Temporary stages, however, allowed them to continue experiments with repertoire (Becket and Genet, for example) and in a hall on Maplewood Avenue they began to develop a genre that would become important - readings or semi-dramatised scripts created by members from authors such as Laurie Lee, Neruda, Yeats, Emily Carr, Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill and Alice Munro. These offerings anticipated similar fare in the professional theatre.

The Berkeley Street theatre was a joy to possess. It was also a challenge for the women who managed it. A large budget had to be met. Rentals were necessary. How would younger members aiming to be professionals be accommodated? And now the question of repertoire for the theatre's two stages loomed large. There were many more professional theatres in Toronto such as the St Lawrence Centre and some of these were making theatrical experiments, notably Tarragon, Factory and Passe Muraille. Where would the Alumnae now find a mandate and an audience? The answer has been not to resort to light popular fare, but to hold to tradition, to seek out the plays worth doing that are not being presented by the professionals or that have not been seen by 1990's audiences and should be. And so Pam Gems, Caryl Churchill, Havel, Tiff Findley and Carol Shields joined the roster. The great innovation in recent years has been "New Ideas" now a rite of spring in the studio space, which over 3 weeks offers short dramatic material not yet produced- it is a public showcase for writers, actors and directors and it is a success.

The history of this company is a history of people, of playing spaces, of plays. It is a history of women who have acted, produced, been backstage crew, run the box office and managed the finances. It is a history of friends - friends in theatre. Few groups have lasted this long and the history will try to explore why. The narrative will tell a story both lively and serious. It will record successes but also setbacks. It will make use of anecdote and reminiscence to give the personal touches such a narrative needs. There will be spotlights on productions that represent key moments in the Alumnae's story. That story will be, finally, a contribution to the history of theatre in Canada.

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