

Vancouver Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

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History of Theatre in Vancouver Speaker: Jerry Wasserman

Most Vancouver theatregoers are aware of the state of theatre within the period they attend but are perhaps not familiar with the changes that have taken place over the long run. With productions ranging from serious drama to frivolous entertainment, Vancouver theatre has always had a presence from the early days of the city's incorporation. During the pre-1912 years of unbridled civic optimism, theatres and opera houses — mainly for vaudeville — sprang up throughout the young city. For example, in 1908 the Pantages Theatre at 152 E. Hastings staged "Jeff" the Boxing Kangaroo as one of its first acts. Paralleling this was the ever present Shakespeare productions and plays of a more serious nature. A second Pantages Theatre opened in 1917 at 20 West Hastings gradually morphing into the Majestic, Beacon, and Odeon Hastings and, commensurate with the times, featured such notables as Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel, Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth. Additionally, theatres such as Savoy, Lyric, Orpheum, Empress, Alcazar, Royal drew

audiences to the old core of the city. In 1895, Mark Twain performed at the Vancouver Opera House as did the Ballet Russe in 1917. Sarah Bernhardt performed at the Orpheum in 1918.

er lights of Hollywood. Shakespeare productions were performed from the early days of the city and in the 1930s they reached the stage of Malkin Bowl in Stanley Park. For several years from 1940, Theatre Under the Stars (TUTS) carried Shakespeare productions.

With the construction of the Vancouver Playhouse in 1963, there emerged an explosion of Vancouver and BC-based original theatre starting with plays by Eric Nicol and George Ryga. Such creativity continues reflecting a growing confidence of time and place. Vancouver now boasts at least a dozen theatre spaces that continue to provide Vancouverites with both home-grown and imported drama and musical entertainment.

November's speaker Jerry Wasserman is an actor and author of several books on

Canadian theatre. Jerry Wasserman is currently professor of English and Theatre in the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of British Columbia.

Bruce M. Watson



A delightful 100-year-old cast photo of "Court by Girls" at the Orpheum, signed to Mr. Jim Pilling, Manager of the Vancouver Orpheum Theatres' Vaudeville Circuit. The photo is from the Daisy D'Avara collection. D'Avara and her husband Alfred T. Layne were performers at the Orpheum.

Photo: Apeda, New York, City of Vancouver Archives CVA 18-4

Actors have come and gone. Seattle-born Sadie Marks (Mary Livingston), itinerant British actor William Henry Pratt (Boris Karloff), and Peggy Middleton (Yvonne de Carlo) all left the city and its local theatre for the bright-

Next Meeting: 7:30 p.m., Thursday, November 28, 2013 at Museum of Vancouver

President's Notes

Last month I raised the question of what it means to say about Stanley Park, "it is us." I am still thinking about Stanley Park, this time about the Hollow Tree, an ancient red cedar on the west side of the park that because it was misshapen, survived being cut for cultural or commercial purposes. Its importance as an iconic site that has helped to define Vancouver — what artist Douglas Coupland calls "our pyramid" — cannot be underestimated. As public historian Meg Stanley states, "visiting the tree is one of the rituals of Stanley Park."

As early as the mid-1960s Vancouver Archivist Major Matthews argued that something must be done to save the Hollow Tree. After the windstorm of 2006 pushed the aging wonder to near collapse, concerned citizens came together to do something about it, forming themselves into the Hollow Tree Conservation Society. After first dissuading the Vancouver Park Board from cutting down the Hollow Tree, the Society — which includes the VHS's Bruce Macdonald — then organized a campaign of fundraising and volunteer labour to preserve it. The story, a superb example of community-based (or vernacular) historical activism, is recounted in YouTube and DVD presentations. Have a look.

The challenge comes from understanding what conserving the Hollow Tree, now set on a concrete base and helped by a steel spine, tells us about nature in Stanley Park. The Hollow Tree Society defines it as a landmark of significant "local and natural cultural value." Its "local" significance is beyond question, but what about the "natural?" For Meg Stanley the Hollow Tree merited preservation not as a tree but as an historical symbol. Other supporters, however, use the language of nature, characterizing it as a "tree." Green Party supporter Stuart Mackinnon offered a very different view, arguing against preservation. "Hollow Trees should rest, lie down and decompose as nature intended," he argued. "Let it die with dignity," as a tree like any other tree that dies, decomposes, and comes back as "part of the forest again."

Preserved tree? Historical symbol? Misguided response to nature? What do you think?

Bob McDonald, President

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A New Way of Seeing the City

Imagine being able to see photos of buildings or streets in Vancouver's past on your smartphone while you're at that same location. "Vancouver in Time" does exactly that. It is a smartphone application in which users are able to access historical images and information from wherever they are, cleverly integrating contemporary photos with archival images contrasting "then and now." An update under the direction of VHS member and urban historian John Atkin, with the cooperation of the Vancouver Historical Society (VHS), the Vancouver Heritage Foundation (VHF), and Simon Fraser University (SFU), will integrate the VHF's "Places That Matter" information and greatly expand the application's usefulness. The VHS is asking for donations for this project, anticipated to be completed before Summer 2014. Our goal is to raise \$5,000, and we are already half-way there! If you would like to contribute, please send your cheque, payable to Vancouver Historical Society, to the VHS post office box: P.O. Box 3071 Vancouver, BC V6B 3X6, or drop it off at a monthly meeting.

Become Our Tour Coordinator

The Society organizes members-only walking tours throughout the year, and is seeking a volunteer to assist in coordinating these trips. There is generally a tour in autumn, spring, July, and August. This is an excellent opportunity to contribute to an important program of the Society and meet other members of the historical community. Duties involve brainstorming tour possibilities, contacting potential tour leaders or organizations to negotiate details, writing promotional material and follow-up material for the newsletter, tracking participants as they sign up, and generally ensuring the process runs smoothly. The time commitment is minimal, perhaps all combined 2-3 hours every few months, not including the tour itself. If you are organized, like talking to people, and interested in all aspects of Vancouver history, this is for you! Contact the info-line for further information if you're interested!

Welcome New Members

Lorena & Renato Battistel

Paula Dunford

Dr. Ronald A. Javitch

Wilma Laninga

Judith Thomson



A City Icon Opens 75 Years Ago

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one R.F. Hearn (holding ticket No. 2) from West Vancouver crossing southbound and a 75-year-old Mary Sutton of Vancouver (with ticket No. 1) who crossed northbound. Hearn actually started at 8:50 before the opening. The retiree mentioned the morning's snow and cold as a reason to be allowed to go. A sympathetic gateman allowed Hearn to cross a few minutes early.

The first motorist to cross was a C.H. Chamberlain of North Vancouver from the north side when the bridge opened to vehicular traffic on Monday, November 14th. Although the bridge had been open to traffic for over six months by then, the official opening would be on May 26th, 1939 with King George VI and Queen Elizabeth presiding over the ceremonies.

While the bridge opened with two lanes, it soon became a three-lane bridge with the centre lane being used for passing in either direction. Remember, there were no lane control lights at the time but also much less traffic. A toll was collected for crossing.

As had been forecast, the new bridge quickly increased the pace of development on the North Shore and soon became an important part of the transportation network of Greater Vancouver. In 1963, the Provincial Government bought the bridge for its original cost and eliminated the tolls. The overhead lane control lights were installed around this time to allow for changing the direction of the middle lane.

In 1986 on the occasion of Vancouver's centenary, the Guinness family paid for the installation of decorative lighting outlining the bridge, an idea suggested by Provincial cabinet minister Grace McCarthy. The lights have since been replaced with more efficient light emitting diodes (LEDs).

With increasing traffic and components needing replacement, the bridge deck and other parts were rebuilt during 2000 and 2001 while maintaining its original appearance. This was a major engineering feat as a suspension bridge's deck is an integral part of the structure balancing the forces of tension and compression. It was the first time a suspension bridge's deck had been completely replaced. And it was all done while the bridge remained open outside of construction hours.

To learn more about the Lions Gate Bridge, look for a copy of Lilia D'Acres and Donald Luxton's book *Lions Gate* published in 1999 by Talon Books.

Upcoming Speakers

The VHS invites everyone (including non-members) to attend our monthly talks. The talks are free and are held at the Museum of Vancouver, 1100 Chestnut Street (close to Vanier Park) at 7:30 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of every month except June, July, August, December).

Thursday, Jan. 23, 2014

Suspect Properties: Liquidation of Japanese-Canadian Property during WWII

Speaker: Jordon Stanger-Ross

When people of Japanese origins were uprooted from B.C.'s west coast in 1942, they were assured Canada's Custodian of Enemy Property would "protect and preserve" their homes and farms for the duration of the war. By the spring of 1943, the government was selling all Japanese property. What had changed? Were the assurances of 1942 deliberate lies? Was it an attempt by racist British Columbians to rid the province of the Japanese, once and for all?

Thursday, Feb. 27, 2014

Empire of Ice: History of the Pacific Coast Hockey Association, 1911-1926

Speaker: Craig Bowsby

Vancouver's first and (so far) only Stanley Cup was won by the Millionaires of the Pacific Coast Hockey Association in 1915. The league was founded by the Patrick brothers, who went on to build an indoor hockey rink in Vancouver and to modernize many aspects of the game. Learn more about this fascinating but short-lived period of Vancouver hockey glory.

Thursday, March. 27, 2014

Images of Vancouver Through Time

Speaker: Jason Vanderhill

Vancouver became a city when the age of photography was already well established. The city's very earliest and historic moments have been captured on film. Join Jason Vanderhill, an internet promoter of Vancouver, to watch a presentation featuring a variety of images which reflect the complexity of the city through the years.

A Future City Icon Opens 75 Years Ago

by Jim McGraw

After years of passionate arguments for and against, two plebiscites in six years, long negotiations with the Federal Government, and a year and a half of construction, the new \$5.8 million (approximately \$94 million today) First Narrows or Lions Gate Bridge was finally opened to traffic on November 14th, 1938 — 75 years ago.

Until the bridge opened, the only way to get to the North Shore by motor vehicle was by driving over the original Second Narrows Bridge, which was a low level combination road and rail bridge opened in 1925. Otherwise there were ferries for pedestrians.

Many in the young city felt a new crossing at the First Narrows was needed so the north shore of Burrard Inlet could be developed. Others argued a bridge would impede ship traffic at the narrows. Still others were concerned that a roadway would now be built through Stanley Park, which was already a much-loved feature of Vancouver.

A plebiscite to build a bridge was put to Vancouverites in the still heady days of 1927, the same year that heralded

the opening of the Orpheum Theatre and the Hotel Georgia. The idea was turned down.

Much had changed by 1933 when a second bridge plebiscite was put to the people. By then, the effects of the



A 1938 construction photo looking north to the still under construction Stanley Park Drive overpass and Lions Gate Bridge beyond it. The overpass would be rebuilt along with the bridge in 2000-2001.

Photo: James Crookall (photographer) City of Vancouver Archives CVA 260-881

worldwide Great Depression that began in 1929 were being very much felt in Vancouver. With the possibility of work for the unemployed and other economic activity in the bridge's construction, this time Vancouverites agreed with proponents of the bridge.

With financing from the Guinness brewing family in Ireland, construction work on the bridge

began in March of 1937.

On a Saturday morning at 9:00, November 12th, the bridge was opened to pedestrians. People were given tickets to cross. According to research by popular historian, the late Chuck Davis, the first non-dignitaries to cross were

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Vancouver Historical Society Executive Board: 2013 - 2014 (Elected May 23, 2013)

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