

Vancouver International Children's Festival 25th Anniversary

EVERYBODY HAS A STORY TO TELL...

The Early Days of the Vancouver International Children's Festival

Everybody has their own story to tell about the beginnings of the Vancouver International Children's Festival (VICF). In 1976 the city hosted Habitat, a UN conference on housing and the environment, out of which emerged both the VICF and Vancouver Folk Music Festival (VFMF) in 1978. This story is told in the voices of those who were there in those exciting, and challenging, early days. This is a story of many firsts, and legacies – many of which made this city a city of festivals. This is the leading edge.

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BEGINNINGS

Liz Gorrie, having recently stepped down from Victoria's Kaleidoscope Theatre recalls, "The idea started in Victoria – but Victoria being Victoria it didn't go anywhere. I never knew how Ernie knew about it. He called me one day and said, "I hear you have this idea. I'm coming over this weekend. I wanna talk."

Ernie is Ernie Fladell, then working for the City Planning office in Vancouver, as was Frannie Fitzgibbon. Ernie had been charged with Habitat for the city and it was such a success, it left a surplus. That seed money became the VICF and VFMF.

Back to Liz: "The thought behind it was that there was some pretty amazing theatre for young audiences going on around Canada but all in school gymnasiums. So politically we needed a big push to make it effective. The idea was to make it into an annual festival. The other was to create a showcase for Canadian theatre for young audiences. Which was really interesting. Ernie and I got into a little bit of an argument – not too big – he said, the first year we should just keep it to a national festival. I said, no no no – the whole point was Canadian work had to be seen with, particularly, European which had how many years a lot longer tradition. Unless we moved into the international, it wouldn't really be making that political statement."

The first festival was entirely a theatre festival for young audiences.

Ernie: "The British gave us lots of help. They sent companies over and paid for them – cargoes, and fares."

Frannie: "England was one of the pioneer countries in the theatre and education movement. And those casts have quite a few members, and sets. And if you want to put a spotlight on that in the festival – I guess Ernie got us started on that – it really puts a focus on them, and you can't do that without the British Council and Canada Council and sponsors cooperating. From

day one we wanted the festival to be based on excellence – the best you can find in that field being done for young audiences."

It still took organizers and arts administrators a while to bring the Canada Council over. Before the 80s, arts for young audiences was under-funded. Elizabeth Ball, then of Carousel Theatre in Vancouver remembers the difference between the European and North American funding landscape. "It's cultural. It didn't have the philanthropy. It wasn't just children's theatre that wasn't recognized; it was any theatre. It's just happened that youth theatre was the least funded, because of course the people are short; it only requires half as much money – I used to think that was the theory they were working on. The Canada Council presumed we'd do a production for half as much money. "

Liz adds, "... and we could only charge half as much for our ticket price. It doesn't make any sense. So that was the idea, and an international festival. As far as I'm concerned, the idea worked."

They found an ally at Canada Council, Linda Gaboriau, who they remember introduced them to Irene Watts, who did some research to discover what else was happening in theatre for young audiences. On the west coast there was Kaleidoscope in Victoria, and in Vancouver there was Carousel, Coad Puppets, Axis Mime, and Green Thumb. Chris Wootten, who took over the festival in the second year remembers, "There were excellent companies in Quebec, and pockets in the Maritimes." Colin Gorrie notes that Mermaid had already started. Irene introduced them to Japan's wonderful Theatre Kazenoko, almost an institution with the festival. But not all international groups worked out so gloriously.

Colin Gorrie remembers, "I got a call one day from the touring office of the Canada Council. A Russian children's opera company was playing Halifax. Now, you're

talking late 70s here, so you're talking cold war. Suddenly we had this offer from the Canada Council that they would bring this Russian children's opera company. We thought – oh, fantastic!" Liz adds, "plus Natalia had such a reputation – the queen of theatre for young audiences in Russia!"



Dance of the Dolls, Moscow Children's Music Theatre

Dennis Foon, then artistic director of Green Thumb: "The czarina, who repressed all the creative work – if you wanted to get a Russian company, you had to take her company, who would put you to sleep instantly. We later found out there were these great companies in Russia, doing cutting edge work, but you never got to see them, they were off in Siberia or someplace."



Natalia Sats

Colin continues, "We didn't know this, so we assumed this was a gift from heaven, and of course it was the first show that was sold out, because everyone wanted to go and see it; it was terrible, run down at the edges, it was boring."

"But it was "exotic", adds Chris Wootten. Dennis: "It took a while to figure out, every eastern European country worked the same way – it was only after going to ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People) meetings that I found this out – the old party line guys got to do all the international touring, and they were the old guard. None of the vital companies were able to get a leg up; nobody knew they existed. They were out in the boonies and not allowed to do anything." Colin: "The cast was in their 40s and 50s and 60s." Liz: "Natalia was in her 80s for heavens sake."

Elizabeth remembers that the weather was always good in those early years. "What happened?" Liz adds, "I can remember it being part of the event, because everything that was outside worked so beautifully; and there were endless amounts of parties with artists, but it was really exciting." "And the final night cruise," adds Wootten.

Liz: "That was the other thing, because theatre for young audience people was so

isolated – the idea of bringing artists together, and to have that whole week of communication!”

Chris: “My recollection was second year, Ernie wanted to do it again, but he wanted management in Vancouver so he asked me to get involved, and I was quite afraid because they’d [the Gorries] done such a good job, I didn’t want to be compared, and that was why I decided to diversify it. It was strictly a theatre festival the first year, so the second year we introduced music and dance. And it was just at that time that there was a similar development in music. I had Raffi, but to get him I had to promise him an adult show at the VECC to get him to do a children’s show – at that time he was still halfway. The CBC introduced me to him. That was very exciting to discover. He had recorded, but no [distribution].”

Colin: “I was involved in the Manitoba centennial in 1976 and we had Raffi, and that was the first time I met Raffi. For some reason we put him in the children’s tent, and that was the first time he actually tried it. Mitch Podolak was doing the programming. That’s where we got the idea of the hyperbolic tents. And they [Warner’s] made so much money when they did the festival, that they moved their whole operations out here.”

TAKING IT OUTSIDE

The first thing the Children’s Festival did differently was to stage it outdoors. Most other children’s theatre festivals, of which there were some precedents in Europe, were presented in indoor venues. The fact that we were in a place where it became mild enough before the end of the school year to do such a thing is part of that decision. But it had other features which both made the festival more magical but also far more challenging.

Our 25-year veteran, Ian Pratt, remembers, “The first day of set up for the first children’s festival was on a long weekend. We had agreed to meet at the site at 9:00am. And I was driving down the street in front of the Maritime Museum, looking to see the truck with the tents. What I met was the contractor in his car, who said he had forgotten it was a long weekend, and he couldn’t get a truck. He was able to get on the phone and call a friend who was still in bed, who would, for whatever special price, arrange to truck the tents in. The first one arrived that afternoon. It was very rudimentary. We had no idea of what we needed other than people and tools. Bob will tell you about not having telephones available.”

Bob Eberle is still Production Manager, having begun around the third year. “When I started there was no communication. It’s a big park. I used to take my bike. But then, I’d leave it somewhere and lose it.”

Don Griffiths recalls, “It started out in the front of the park, but the neighbours didn’t really like the intrusion, so we pushed it to the back.”

Ian: “We had the outdoor stage, for casual performances, and it was two 4x8 platforms about a foot high, we an 8’ sq. plywood wall behind it, and we had a battery-powered amplifier and a car battery – one mic, of course.

“They used to run in lighting for us – for the dressing rooms, just little canopies, really. One year Hydro came in and erected poles next to each tent – a big disruption. Later on we had generators. It would be ferociously noisy, so we built little igloos out of sandbags around them. That worked quite well for sound, but if you covered them too well, they’d overheat and quit.”

Don: “No one had done this before – no one had done it in a park. The Winnipeg Folk Festival was the inspiration – but it wasn’t a theatrical event. It all had to be invented.”

The tents came from Warner Shelter, first in Winnipeg. Colin Gorrie had worked with them at the Winnipeg Folk Festival, especially the swayback large hyperbolic tents. The tech crew tried one out by setting it up on the PNE grounds. Eventually, Warner moved to Vancouver.

Ian: "We did actually tour them one year, but one blew down in Edmonton due to wind – the modern ones are way, way better."

Don: "The early tents were very light of frame and we did have the apex of one crack off. We had Ian work with Warner's. It's not just danger – it's the noise of the wind."

No one can tell you tales of wind, rain and whatever else the heavens will deliver like the tech crew. The two years that everyone can't forget are 1981, when due to a civic strike, they had to move operations to Jericho Park, and 1986, when mid-festival, they had to move to the Playhouse.

Bob Eberle: "I think 1986 was the most memorable year. It was Expo year. And because of Expo we had to go early. In April. So it rained every day of the setup, the run, and the strike. We had Cirque du Soleil that year, a challenge. We had this massive windstorm that almost flattened the site. All the small tents came down. We had to shut down the music tent.

"We got people out of bed. Norman Young of Civic Theatres got us into the Playhouse. We had busses lined up. We only lost one performance, I believe. Bussed them back. We had tents upside down in the creek. The Cirque du Soleil tent was okay as it was tucked away. We're in a kite-flying park, you know. We recognize that."

Dolly Hopkins won't forget 1986: "That's when my stuff blew away, the tent blew away! I had all my stuff stored in the last tent, and the newspaper ran an ad to help locate my stuff."

Charlotte slipped in before the storm, but was drowned nevertheless, "I performed that year on the outdoor stage (by the pond), all muddy around it. So I put everyone ON the stage. I sang "Singing in the Rain", "I'm Ready for the Puddles", "Listening to the Water". The kids come so full of energy regardless. "

"They had to tech in Raffi, Sharon Lois & Bram and Fred Penner in the QE," remembers Paul Hooson, performing as Cirque Alexander, "while they bussed all the kids over there, and they had no lunches. And while they did that we held that whole audience – I tell you – it was an hour and a half! I'm a silent clown and my Keystone Kop was a talking clown. After about 3/4 of an hour we were hoping – when are they opening the house? When it was over we collapsed! The kids depended on us, for distraction. We were glad to see the end of that day. We were tired. That's one of the hardest things I've ever done – you get overexposed so quickly! There were 1400 kids in there. We were all in the lobby; teachers were trying to control them. The Kop was great – she'd keep them in separate groups, blow the whistle – no, you go over there, and I'll be with you in a minute! So bossy. Half of the parents didn't know where their kids were."



Paul Hooson/Cirque Alexander

Bob: "Also that year we did a trip to Vernon. We had it down and up again in one week, receiving it in Vernon where the weather was beautiful. And all this stuff coming out of the truck, dripping with water and mud and goop. And Don was charged with bringing this stuff down.

"In Vernon – it was a co-production – they're supposed to provide a crew. We're travelling with 10, usually we have a crew of 50, 60 people. They have one guy on a tractor with a bucket loader – he was terrific. He was our crew. Joan Carson, our transportation coordinator, and all-round smart person, came up with the most inspired solution. We had the big music tent to put up with a thousand seats. She phoned the local penitentiary, and talked them into sending out their inmates for a couple of days to do a work party. And off these guys came, complete with guards and guns. And they worked incredibly hard. So I whipped into town and bought cartons of cigarettes. Got permission from the guard, and as each of these guys got on the bus, gave them a carton and said thanks. They were thrilled to be out."

Bob noted that one of the hardest things to explain to artists is that, with an outdoor festival, you may have to simplify the technical part of a show. Laughed Paul Hooson, "And they have no idea what it's suddenly going to sound like when it starts to rain in the middle of their show. We toured those tents to Alberta – we had caterpillars all over the tent. In the night they had fallen out of the trees, and in the daytime it warmed up. We were walking all over the stage, squishing caterpillars all under our feet. Kids and audiences going eeeeeoooo! They toured the show in 1980 – a celebration in Alberta. At the end of the run in Edson, they presented us with acrylic cupcakes with a caterpillar embalmed in it and a hole drilled through for a keychain.

"I only did a stage show once. It was meant to be in a school gym. I had a tape I ran off a car battery, as well as an AC adapter. The

Festival electrician said, oh yeah, plug it in there, and my stereo went poof! Fried! He looked in total dismay. He rushed back and checked the box and they had wired it 220. So he went personally – we had our show in like 2, 3 hours – he went running around town and bought the exact same ghetto blaster – I had a foot pedal to start and stop it."

But back at Vanier Park, Bob remembers watching the Cirque du Soleil semi trailer truck which has to receive their large tent. "And they only could take it by putting the truck right underneath the tent, and then it collapsed right on to the truck. So across this incredibly soggy park it has to come, which is all clay, which has shifted into watery quicksand. We built a huge plywood road, and the driver very carefully drove the truck on this road, to the middle of the park. They dropped this huge tent on it – then, the driver, instead of backing up, drove forward, off the plywood. Sunk the entire truck into the quagmire, every wheel, every axle. It took 2 or 3 of these huge tow trucks, and they dragged it sideways across the park, and it cost us about \$5000 to fix the park."

Don remembers, "The other crazy weather year was the year we had the civic strike, '81, and we had to move to Jericho Park. Hit the bad luck on the weather. The place was a bog. Had to lay pathways. Everyone complaining about the weather. Final performance – it's like May 24 – is almost finishing. And it starts to hail. And it hails so strong that we told the audience not to leave, because the kids could get hurt. And there was also lightening. We got them all back inside, and Raffi came out and sang for another half hour until things settled down."

Ernie: "The year that the civic strike was on, we went to strike headquarters to convince them [to let us hold the festival]. The civic workers were pretty fine, but the parks guys were nuts. Frannie and Lorenz and I – I was working for the CBC at the time – we'd get in the car every morning and go looking for

sites. The closest thing we found was UBC. My job was to stave off the press, Lorenz' (Von Fersen) job was to let us know where we might do it, and Frannie's job was to get the festival okayed. And she did. I was off to Ottawa or something. A CUPE guy made a speech on our behalf. They had 60,000 tickets sold and no way to give them back. That was the closest we came to having the festival wreck. "



Ernie and Frannie, mid-80s

Ian remembers the final performance of the Australian Fruit Flies that year, who had a beautiful old cane pole and canvas tent. "There had been some concerns about the tent, as long as the winds didn't get above whatever... and they did. Now we're concerned about the tent blowing down, with a full audience. And at the top, a girl on a Spanish Web doing an amazing act. And around the light beams you could see the hail and the storm raging. And finally the engineer said, I'm sorry, we're going to have to stop the show. We're just going to have to leave the tent. Well, you can imagine what happens – they get to the entrance and see what we're asking them to walk into and refuse! We shoved them out to what was the performer's lounge."

Imagine being one of the roving artists on the site in the midst of this. Here's Dolly

Hopkins, of Gumboot Lollipop fame: "I was out roving – and I got caught in the hailstorm, crossing – I didn't quite know what to do. Trying to figure out where everyone was going. So I came to a tent – they had shut the flaps. I'm banging on it – let me in, please! No, we can't open the flaps."

"Dolly has gumboots. She was prepared for it," laughs Paul Hooson, known as Cirque Alexander, who had finished performing and was at the Fruit Fly Circus show.

"It was like really, really wet, everyone slopping around all week in the mud, and it was miserable; the Fruit Flies were an incredible success. They were kids who could do unbelievable stuff – all real circus, one tent, one ring – it was magic. At the end of the week, they brought these kids in from BC Children's' Hospital – they brought them in on stretcher beds, wheelchairs, crutches. It was the last performance. The Fruit Flies were the big thing that year. At Jericho, you're really close to the weather. And this storm came in – hailstorm and really high winds, and with a tent that big you really have to be concerned to how the tent reacts to wind. The girl was up on the web – a single rope all velvet covered – absolutely beautiful. She was maybe 14 – doing this fantastic, slow moving thing on this rope. And it started to hail. All the techies were going 'do we pull the show? What happens?' and because of the way the hail was coming down it was refracting through the hole in the tent where the tent pole went up, you had lights in the tent, and the lights were catching it. And she was upside down, looking at this hail. The rope could be slippery. The way the ice was criss-crossing into the tent through the tent hole, the audience hadn't been hailed on yet, and she was dry. After that they had to pull the show. We had an electrical storm. We had guy wires. They pulled the plug right after she came down off the web. They hustled all the kids out like crazy, covered in plastic sheets, over to their transport. Everyone's pitching in to get these kids across the lawn.

"The moment everybody's off site, it clears up! It's completely dry for the strike. All the kids and ambulances had gone, and it was beautiful."

Ernie: "I remember when that festival ended there was a gorgeous rainbow."

Frannie: "I felt we'd been through something of biblical proportions."

Frannie: "The Fruit Flies were so great – and they were scalping Raffi tickets."

Ernie: "Everybody used to get their performer passes. The [Fruit Flies] saw those big line-ups outside the tents, and started making a few bucks on the side selling their tickets."

Frannie: "That was a great project – they had to keep their grades up in school in order to stay in the circus, and work really hard."

Bob also remembers that they were taking the Australians then to Vancouver Island in a convoy with several vehicles [to Horseshoe Bay]. "We get a phone call – half the vehicles are on their way to Gibsons, and half are on their way to Nanaimo. You get these moments."

Don also remembers the one year it didn't rain. "I remember Coad Canada – they were doing a very sensitive little show – required a blackout." They created a blackout tent, but it was so hot, no one could stand it!

Bob: "That was also the year we lost the forklift in the pond. ... Well, we knew where it was. The driver had stopped the forklift momentarily, and failed to put on the emergency brake, which is required. And had gone off to move some material. And we could see it from across the other side of the park. It was just like a Keystone Kops movie with the driver chasing behind and this big forklift lumbering down this little hill, eventually dropping itself face first into the pond – another tow truck. We've supported tow trucks over the years."

Don: "We did lose a forklift back in the mud across the road at Vanier. That was Chris

Snitch. They asked him to take a generator in this wasteland. He was very gung ho. He would do anything. It was a very big generator. And he got out in the middle of this vacant lot. It was so funny. We ran out and took photographs before we tried to get him out."

Bob: "Crew members have sometimes been more entertaining than the entertainers. In his interview we asked, can you drive a forklift. He realized that this was important and said yes, but he hadn't been on one in his life. But he figured it out."

A lot of the set-up of the festival site has to do with finding optimal positions for the tents and driving in the pegs. One year someone noticed a very flat spot on the site. Don remembers, "We used manual labour in the old days. One level place on site is on top of the archives. One year we decided to put a tent up there. We get the layout done. Then this fellow goes up and starts pounding the pegs in. And a guy comes up and asks, 'Who's in charge here'. He says, 'I am.' 'Well, you gotta stop pounding these stakes. They're going right through the seal in the top of the building, and you're about to destroy the archives!'"

Bob Eberle figures the crews are now at 550 alumni, average 3 years each. Ian notes that what makes our crews distinctive is that we use theatre people, including students (Bob, Ian and Don are with the UBC theatre department). "They have some kind of understanding about the objective. The performance is what it's all about. And we've always – knowing that we had such huge limitations [working outdoors] – set them up with a stage manager, a house manager. We tell them that their job is to support the performer. Pass on their requests. Stage managers who can make some kind of assessment. That's why people come back."

Bob continues, "Even as far as the same people who are picking them up at the airport are the same people who were

putting up the stage that morning. They can ask the questions right then and there. The people in our business understand working towards a goal, and that it's a temporary event.

"We hire theatre students primarily, and we hire 50% women and 50% men, and it works really well. Males and females equally do the labour. Some of the women have become really good at pounding pegs. And the champion I think, of all, is Lorraine West. 5 foot nothing, and 100 and a few pounds, quite a small build. And she is our champion peg pounder. And the supervisor of the large structures who comes up from the States with it is always large and muscular from head to toe. They look at our crew and sneer. We just ignore it. Our crew is always game for a good time. I remember this one year, this big fella who was very downgrading about our crew. They were all very experienced. They knew almost as much about it as he did. So they egged this fellow on and said, 'Let's have a competition. We'll put one of our crew up against you.' He said, 'No problem.' They said, 'Lorraine? David and Goliath.' This guy howls. No problem. Now these stakes are about a meter. So they each take their sledgehammer: on your mark, get set, go, and Lorraine wins. Well, the level of respect really changed. He came up for a number of years on this job, because he couldn't believe it.

"We make our living providing technical support, and all the trappings and at the same time we know that most of the best theatrical moments don't require that. The rapport doesn't necessarily need all the technical stuff. What we've done is, we have replaced that with atmosphere. We've replaced the dark, isolated environment with an atmosphere where the audience comes in already primed and ready for a theatrical experience. They are pumped and piqued – all the ambient sounds, the boats and traffic, just add to it. We're always in that dilemma of convincing them it will work. Few cities

have copied our outdoor style. Most are indoors – Seattle Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary – they don't have the festival atmosphere which is a part of our success."

Don: "We've introduced over a million and a half children to the festival experience. It's nice to have on our crew people who grew up coming to the festival. It's important to me to think that we're helping children envision a better world. We can imagine something that's better than the politics of the day, or some of the realities of the economy. We can be beautiful people. We can look after one another."

ANIMATING THE SITE

"The Children's Festival developed the audience to understand and appreciate roving onsite performers," explains Dolly Hopkins, aka Gumbo Lollipop.

Paul Hooson, aka Cirque Alexander continues, "You rove at fairs, but in terms of the interactive... the Kids' Festival set the opportunities, and it's a really nice site, with all the grass, and they give you a perfect opportunity to interact one on one. That's why Expo had street performers, because the Children's Festival acclimatized people to understand what this was and also, in a really gentle way, brought back street performers in a way that wouldn't be busking and passing the hat, but put them in a situation where they were giving it away – just **animating the site**. It was so revolutionary. They really gave it legitimacy.

"Such great energy, the playworkers, the face painting. You didn't see face painting before the kids' fest.



May Henderson, photo

Dolly recalls, "Colin and Liz [Gorrie] had hired me as Gumboot Lollipop. I told them I wanted to perform, but I wanted to bring along this face painting concept. Colin said, "face painting?" He said, "Do you think people will be interested?" I said the kids will love it. I've been painting my nieces and nephews faces since I was 12 years old – they would come to our place and say, Auntie Dolly, will you paint our faces?! I said, this is going to work! It was a BIG number. When we finished the Kids' Festival, I got calls from across Canada." Dolly claims another first: "I was the first artist who brought on a wagon, with a ghetto blaster with a cordless lavalier – and after that everyone was WOW!"

Paul: "There were no kids' festivals. I started doing this about '74, '75. By the time I figured out I was a children's entertainer and a clown, I was living in Nova Scotia. I had started in Toronto, and had a pretty good idea what was going on. So I was in NS, and about '77, '78 I started hearing about the Kids Festival. And when I moved here and went to the festival, that was the first time I'd heard about face painting, and they were lined up around the block for it. And those line-ups have never ever diminished. You see kids walking away from the festival with their faces painted, and carrying stuff from Imagination Market.... Imagination market! It was fantasy!"

"There's so many stories of stuff like that coming out of the kids' fest. Was it the site? a moment of a second baby boom? enlightened city? a place with good weather when school was still in session? I think it was just the people – a bunch of people just bumped into each other at a perfect time – it did set the standard. I consider it to be a world event.

"Where the festival is now, the Diggers used to feed people for free. This was the first place I knew where you could put your hat down on the street and get money – I played a pennywhistle in the street; that's where I first came across that idea. I think that site is pretty magical. My dad was born there, in a house on Kits Point in the 20s. You could hang on 4th Avenue where it was all happening, but when you were hungry and needed to calm out, you could go down to Vanier Point. It's like a hallowed ground. It's a really rich heritage – it certainly lived up to its first name."

Another early performer at the Festival was Al Simmons. Al started his entertaining life in a Manitoba band called Cornstalk with another guy named Fred Penner. But their goofiness wasn't selling too well in the bars. He took a year off and a friend built him this wooden jukebox contraption – 6 feet high, 4 x 4. You'd put a quarter down a tube, bells would ring like a pinball, Al's hand would reach out and catch it, and the customer would select one of 12 songs, which Al would perform. His favourite was "Look Out". "I'd just open the door and look out." Al first heard about the festival when he saw a guy in a Winnipeg theatre wearing the first annual VICF t-shirt. He couldn't believe there would be a festival for children. Then, he got a phone call from Chris Wootten who had seen a postcard of Al's human jukebox. Al was so excited to be invited to the festival, he quoted his fee without factoring in his transportation and cargo costs.



Al Simmons

Al remembers doing his Jukebox Man on site, and his wife there, 8-1/2 months pregnant, organizing the crowd, herding them into a tidy queue. One day Raffi, in pre-superstar days, was watching the act. Raffi said he wanted to record one of Al's songs. Al resisted – he wanted to record it first. It was years later that Al caved in and Raffi recorded "Something in My Shoe", supporting him and his family for at least a couple of years.

Of course, he can't forget the Fabulous Festival series CBC television did. The first year, CBC provided the writers. Ernie suggested, "We could save tons of money if we wrote it ourselves." So Ernie would draft it, and Al would punch it up, but often would end up crossing out all but one word of Ernie's script. The TV series made Al a bigger star. He remembers being saved by another woman, the CBC's wardrobe person. "I was standing in my porta-tub, up around my waist with my legs out the bottom, ready to shoot – and I was being mobbed! How fast can you run with a bathtub around you? And Mary stood, and in her best grouchy grandmother voice, full of evil, declared, 'You will stand back!!!' while the rest of the techs and floor director and camera crew just stood around, of no help."

Al's favourite memory was being accepted as classy enough. "Marjorie Maclean called, and I told her, I've got a stage show!, and she said, Oh, certainly. I was just blown away, to be accepted on par, a momentous moment."

"I love the theatre component," says Paul Hooson. "I've seen some amazing stuff over the years. My background was theatre. I came from a mime background into children's theatre clown, NS, and into BC. To get people to allow that clowns could be theatre was an uphill battle. 'You're entertainment, not theatre. You do birthday parties and twist balloons, don't you?' Jozef Van Den Berg! Within 6 years of becoming a clown I saw these – Compagnie Boleslav Polivka – an anti-nuclear show by a clown. Gale LaJoye, vaudeville nouveau – people from San Francisco. Lots of great stuff. Phillipe Petit – the tightrope walker [the guy who walked between WTC] – Fred Garbo. But we all ended up meeting at Expo, too. Today – you go anywhere else – Vancouver always has the best onsite. I've worked the Street performers festival in Edmonton – but Vancouver started it. People doing animation. It entered everybody's consciousness that if you want a festival atmosphere, that's what you have to do."

One performer many remember is tightrope walker extraordinaire, Philippe Petit. Frannie: "He was cloistered in his hotel room while he was here, and all of us wanted to find out, who is this guy? Who does all these fantastic walks? I didn't see him for a couple of days. I thought he was a bit of a recluse, but turns out he was working on a book. Coincidentally, the Portuguese group was having a very bad time because all their cargo was locked in a warehouse in France, and we were opening the next day, and it was a Sunday. It turned out that Philippe Petit overheard this story, and got on the phone to his father who was a big muckamuck at Air France, who sent somebody down to unlock the warehouse. So I thought, yeah, Phillipe Petit, he's a

really great guy! He did this for his fellow performers.

"Another time, Chris Wootten came up to me and said – Philippe wants to get up on the roof of the Museum – just kinda look it over. He's thinking like maybe – wouldn't it be great to do a walk from the top of the roof to the Burrard Bridge or something? Could you help by standing here when the guards take their rounds in the evening? I asked, but what should I do if I guard comes? Philippe says, 'you'll know what to do'. ... It's dark. Everybody's working, getting ready for the next day, and sure enough this guard comes making his round. So I stood so he'd have to [face away from the building] to talk to me. And "Lovely evening", just nonsense. And to this day, I'm not sure if I saw him climbing around the roof, or if it's something I hallucinated. And some time went by, and I feel this little tap on my shoulder, like, it's over. Bye! to the guard, see ya!"

MEETING THE WORLD

Dolly Hopkins: "From my point of view, what happened to me as an artist, is I was able to enrich my skills, by working locally, meeting other local artists, enriching my performer base with other people, being able to play off them, learn from them, discover who I was and what I was offering them – so it was a win-win situation. Locally based, working with other artists, honing your craft, working with live, young people on a mobile basis where they were coming and going all the time. And an all-day situation. You were one of those items that filled out the whole part – you were not less-than."

From the very first year, the theatre component particularly has established a legacy, all because Liz insisted it be an international festival.

Dennis: "That's the really interesting thing about the connections that people make. I believe Ludus North West Dance had a big

impact on David Diamond; when he was beginning his kind of work in political theatre. He went to work with them, or hung out with them. There were a lot of things like that. When we did a collaboration with Grips Theatre – it was Chris who made that happen. We'd done Juve for him the second year. He was travelling in Europe. "

Chris: "We went to Berlin. We saw this incredible operation. Only the Germans can do it – where they had this theatre going, 3 or 4 shows a day – for young audiences, for teenagers – with lots of money. They had done some works something like Juve. So we put them together. We had to get money. We did the Goethe Institute in Toronto in order to get their money. It was clear that this was a good direction to go in, so this was when we connected with the Edmonton and Harbourfront festivals. So I had a national tour to offer a foreign government. It looks like an easy idea now."

Dennis: "It showed the wonderful segue between the marketing thing and the artistic thing. For us that was Chris' agenda on one hand, but for me, in terms of my development, it was huge. I went to Berlin, I met this phenomenal group of people, running this Company, arguably one of the most important companies for young people in the world..."

Chris: "....unlike the Russians."

Dennis: "... unlike the Russians we met. But Grips was really important. Their plays were being produced all over the world, on every continent – India South America. And they came out of student cabaret in the 60s and decided to do children's theatre as a way of reaching out, politically, and they had a very specific way of working, which is cabaret style. I adapted one of their shows, and had this wonderful cast: Morris Panych, Wendy Noel. Wolfgang Kolneder directed the piece, embraced by Canadian theatre artists *Trummi Kaput*. The connection was deeper than just the Green Thumb connection – it went to Tamahnous Theatre, to Toronto,

Montreal. All kinds of collaborations occurred. And it happened with a lot of other companies, too.”

“That’s got to be one of the best stories,” decides Chris, “in terms of artistic collaboration.”

Frannie remembers seeing Theatre Kazenoko’s *Treasure Pick* in Japan. “It was so long, and so complicated, and so full of text in a foreign language. It had everything going against it... and it was wonderful. Sekiya, the Director, his contribution to the festival creatively over the years! He made it so simple.”

She and Ernie remember Mr. Miyamoto, an impresario and producer.

Ernie: “We took him to the festival site. He said Ernie-san, what happens when it rains? I said, Miyamoto-san, we get wet. He fell down laughing.”

Frannie: “They had a big affect on groups. That’s it, when you bring people in from all over the world and the effect they had on each other - that’s a marvellous thing when you look back on it. It’s still happening of course. I remember that as being a really important aspect to the whole thing. And then you’d see somebody’s work a year or two later, and you could see the direct thread that time that they spent with that other company from another country, what it sparked in them.”

Ernie: “Miyamoto invited me to Japan. ...I think they had it worked out. The three companies that I saw were all Sekiya-directed companies. Kazenoko, Musubiza, Himawari. These companies were sensational. We get to this meeting, and there’s an interpreter. So which company do you like?, they asked. I’m thinking that I’d like to bring all three companies. And we did do that. “

Frannie: “I did think you had flipped your lid, to bring all three.”

Ernie: “That connection was really sensational.”



Theatre Kazenoko

Liz: “What happened for Kaleidoscope was the connection with Kazenoko, because I had no idea who this company was, and then I saw them and, oh my god, they’re very close to working with imagery. It was through the first year, seeing that work, then starting to develop a connection. It was Ernie, eventually, close to 10 years later, he wanted to bring them back again. A year before, he put Yukio Sekiya, the director, and me together to come up with something, and the next year we did *Games of the World* – Mr. Sekiya’s work with Kazenoko develops from games, the idea of working games, and the imagery and the discipline – it’s very convoluted. He starts there and ends up with what he does. The company of actors had to learn games from all around the world, and they were the animators of stuff happening on the site. But then through that, I went to Japan and spent time with Mr. Sekiya, and we started to talk about ideas, and out of that came a piece based on Pacific Rim myth, because we could both work with myth. Then he came over, and he directed the company in a new piece he was basically creating off the top of his head based on the myths we had decided upon, and then the company went and toured Japan 4 months. Being able to

develop these kinds of connections. That was really what it was all about.”

All because Liz insisted to Ernie that it would be international!

Elizabeth Ball: “It ended up like a showcase, too, because teachers from all over the Province, and down in the States would come up, and opened up the market for the local players who would be seen by people producing in Seattle and down the coast, and be invited to come down, so – not intentionally – it ended up being a showcase for the local companies’ work as well.”

Colin: “There was a period in the mid-80s where it began to become a conflict. And then somebody came up with the idea – well, wait, maybe we should be investing money into you [theatre companies] so you can create new work to present at the festival and then you tour it. That was important.”

Chris claims responsibility for that strategy. “It was important for every reason, not the least of which was political. We couldn’t have all you guys cutting into the Children’s Festival. The other thing is I was going to look for talent in the States and I was going to these showcases – there was a showcase down in Milwaukee. And the work was all awful. So I would tell the people – you should see, there are some wonderful companies in Canada. So they started coming up and finding our work, that lead to opportunities in the States, because our work has always been way advanced over the Americans.”

Liz: “Content was often very borderline to Americans. I remember a showcase in Alabama we took a piece called *Clowns*, looking at a little darker edge, and a number of people thought it was beautiful but they wouldn’t be able to bring it into their schools. Performers and directors would ask, ‘can you actually do that in schools in Canada? I think it inspired a lot of companies to look at that.’”

Elizabeth: “They were astounded. Shows like *Goodbye Marianne* by Irene Watts – dealing with the holocaust, shows dealing with bulimia, no, they were just stunned that you could actually do them. Eventually we ended up doing tours in the States but at first it was shocking to them because before that everything was kids in bunny suits. Basically animal shows.”

Dennis: “There are a lot of communities in the States that object to the material. In ’75, ’76 I wanted to start dealing with plays that were more challenging. The question was how to do it. So I found out about this idea: study guides. In 1975 I found a template for a study guide from some obscure company in the States. When they started to complain about *Shadowdance* – this is vile, the anti-christ – I go, I know, but look at the vocabulary list – these words the children are learning, and the concepts – they’re not at all what you think – it’s challenging for the children and teachers, and it’s not really offensive, actually. Learn these words, then it’s okay. That became – it was like separating church from state – like separating education from theatre and a wonderful ploy.

“Theatrically much of the work in Europe was to us way cutting edge – in terms of what we would do, in terms of darkness, in terms of sexuality you would see on stage – of what we could bring into schools. One of the things that was interesting about *Feeling Yes Feeling No* – we brought it to a festival conference in England in ’79, everybody was like – backing off – all the Marxist British companies were completely flipped by it. They thought it was just weird. They thought we were courageous, but they didn’t get it, didn’t know why would you do something like that? Didn’t understand the politic of it, which was where it lived. Totally political. It’s hilarious because now it’s been made into a series of videos for the NFB – it’s their biggest seller. They sold it to every school in Belgium. Suddenly now they’re willing to look at those issues.

Finding this talent all over the world was the job of several people throughout the years, including Norma Graham, Frannie Fitzgibbon and Marjorie Maclean.



Marjorie and Frannie

In the Festival's tenth anniversary year the most exotic premiere came from the Fujian province of China, an area known for its puppetry. Marjorie Maclean had learned of the tradition, and began corresponding with the appropriate embassies and consulates. A trip was arranged for Marjorie and Frannie to go to see performances in Shanghai, Beijing, and the Fujian Province.

They landed in a larger city to travel by car to the town of Zhang Zhou. Frannie continues the tale: "Now, we're in this TORRENTIAL rainfall. Out the windows of this SPEEDING van you could see people on bicycles LASHED against the wind with diagonal streaks across the landscape and this RED, RED earth – clay, the most beautiful colour imaginable, a brick colour – and in fact they have several brick factories in this countryside – LIME green, luscious vegetation, torrents of red water running in rivulets, SPEEDING through this countryside – and thinking, "Where the HELL are we?!"

They did arrive in Zhang Zhou to official greetings from the cultural bureaus of three levels of government, the requisite banquet,

and rooms at a quaint and lovely colonial-looking hotel. The journey to the performance took them through narrow streets, maybe six feet wide. Frannie clearly recalls, "After Beijing and Shanghai – MAMMOTH cities and their HUGE tombs and grand architecture – here I am in the evening with this little band of people working our way through the inner streets of the old town. It's hot, and I'm looking into doorways – just FABULOUS scenes in them. Shutters are all open and people are living and relaxing in their homes."

They reached a small auditorium with tables set up with tea, but no audience – just the officials and the two foreigners. Frannie's disappointment at the absence of a crowd soon disappeared when the performance began. These are glove puppets, not marionettes, about a foot high. The presentation was intimate but the elaborately detailed puppets with intricate movements tell big stories.

The day after the performance they met with the company and decided that it would be feasible to transport the company and their cargo, and that the stories could be understood with a brief printed synopsis.

WHAT'S IT ALL MEAN?

Dolly Hopkins: "It succeeded because there was a lot of hands-on, ground-level, interaction. People interacted with the artists. There was lots spread around the site. The tents, and the hands-on activities and performers. That's what Public Dreams formatted itself on since the early days – giving people a chance not just to be spectators but to be participants as well. That's the rule of success: Allow people to take ownership of the event, feel like it's theirs, too and they will return and feel like they got more from it."

Charlotte Diamond, previously a schoolteacher, first came to the festival as a volunteer usher, around 1983 and '84. "I have a very strong memory of sitting on the

aisle during a very moving performance of Green Thumb Theatre's production of Colin Thomas' *One Thousand Cranes* – bawling my eyes out in the aisles. I was so impressed by the quality of the festival, not only for children, and young adults, but also parents. No matter what the age is marked for a show, I'll go see it. As performers we try to capture the cross-cultural and cross-generational. I was always drawn to the theatrical and international. It influences my work. The bar is very high – but it shows a dedication to really high production values. This is where it started for me - acknowledging the value of children's music and theatre, and getting them started with quality work."

Paul Hooson: "The accessibility of it – every kid goes home with face paint and a hat; affordability had a lot to do with it – just the fact that kids didn't get bored; it was safe, it was fun, it opened their eyes to so much culture – dance, music, clowns, theatre – if you could only go to one show, you still saw a whole bunch of that, and your kids had a good time."



Ray Wallis, Wendy Noel, "One Thousand Cranes" – photo David Cooper

Charlotte: "The big thrill is to wander around the site and have the kids come up and start impromptu conversations – for me it's really important, and comes from years of teaching. You don't get that in other indoor festivals."

Al: "The best thing about the festival? The audiences! And the best part for me – hanging out with my performing buddies. You never get that when you're each on the road. It's like a big convention."

Dolly: "It was the people we got a chance to work with. The people who conceptualized the idea, let's put it on – Ernie, Frannie, Marjorie, Norma, Bob, Ian ..."

Bob Eberle: "We make our living providing technical support, and all the trappings, and at the same time we know that some of the best, most of the best theatrical moments don't require that – the rapport doesn't necessarily need all the technical stuff. What we've done is, we have replaced that with atmosphere – we've replaced the dark isolated environment with an atmosphere where the audience comes in already primed and ready for a theatrical experience. They are pumped and piqued – all the ambient sounds, the boats and traffic, just add to it. We're always in that dilemma of convincing [visiting performers] it will work. Few cities have copied our outdoor style – most are indoors – Seattle, Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary – don't have the festival atmosphere which is a part of our success."