

(1,252 words)

Amateur Excellence

Earlier this year, we came home from an amateur performance of an old Broadway musical. The excellent show and quality of the accompanying orchestra left us with something of a glow. The whole affair was staged by talented people from Pembroke, Deep River, and surrounding places of the Ottawa Valley. We had a good feeling and were thoroughly satisfied with our night out.

It led me to wondering what is it about good amateur shows that satisfy you so much and leave you with such a warm sense of well-being.

To put things in perspective, we've been to some dozen shows in the theaters in Ottawa, Toronto, London (UK), and New York. We go to these places expecting the best and a lot of the time we are very pleased.

But we expect the best. When we get it, an easy position is to think, “Hey! These guys are pros. They are being paid to do what they do. They should be the best”.

And it’s true that the production quality is often amazing. Slick scene changes, stage lighting just right, well timed and executed entrances and exits, great pacing of the story line with a soaring arc to the finish, music played professionally, and, of course, known star performers. All this and heavy-duty marketing.

So, what does the amateur have? How can an amateur compete against huge investments of money, well-schooled and trained actors, experienced directors, producers, stage crews, and a host of skilled workers whose livelihood depends on success?

Well, the answer is that local amateurs have one incredible asset: audience engagement.

We in the audience do not just hope for their success, we long for it. Please, please, let them succeed. We know you, we have been to school with you, we have played hockey or tennis, or softball with you. We know your parents. When you do succeed, at any level, we get excited and we wish you more success. Now that is audience engagement.

Let me step back more than a few years to the early days of a local theatre group in Deep River known as the Players. I am thinking of the 50's and 60's. At that time the local group occupied half of an old war-time building that, incidentally, had been used to house prisoners-of-war. I'm told that if you know where to look you can find some of their names carved into the woodwork. In Deep River it is known as Hill House.

It is now the Woodworking Club and currently they are busy tearing down the old bar-room to make space for more wood projects. All vestiges of the theatre group are gone; they have found other accommodations.

I mention the bar because it was an essential money-maker for the Players when they put on shows on the Hill House stage. Often, performers sat with the audience waiting to be called for their act. Audience engagement!

The comedy skits were only scripted in part. Often there was some leeway for improvisation. To the delight of the audience this sometimes resulted in chaos. Like when the characters Miss Piggy and Aunt Jemima were on stage, with both characters played by men for comedic effect. Aunt Jemima started to behave off-script with enthusiasm. Miss Piggy said, “You have been into the “Southern Comfort”. Aunt Jemima, who was dressed in a well-padded costume, replied at once, “That’s right, honey. The more southern you go, the more comfortable I is”.

After an ad lib like that it was some time before the audience stopped laughing and the actors got back to the script.

The Players soon left the small skits behind and started to develop one-hour musicals such as “Snow White Turned Blue” and “My Fair Employer”. The latter had songs like “I’ve Grown Accustomed to this Place” and “The

Brains We Train go Mainly down the Drain”. The local employer wisely ignored the sentiment.

In the spirit of audience engagement, Prince Charming in Snow White was played by Tarzan who made his entrance from behind curtains on a rope that was suspended over the audience.

Tarzan’s wife was in the front row. Tarzan rescued the Princess with a kiss and a tenderly spoken name, “Princess”.

She woke and said his name, “Tarzan”. The lights began to dim and only the Tarzan/Princess names were spoken, getting more and more passionate.

Finally, the lights went out completely.

Knowing that Tarzan’s wife was in the audience, the script called for the sound of a smacked face while the princess cried out in protest, “Eric!”.

The audience burst into uncontrolled laughter and the show was stopped for minutes. That’s audience engagement.

These shows were always complete 'sell-outs' and the funds raised helped pay for royalties for the bigger shows that were performed in the Community hall which was beside the present bowling alley. Later the hall was demolished, and a new sloping-floor auditorium was built to accommodate an increasing desire for excellence.

Up and down the valley the big shows were often a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, or perhaps a locally written performance. These shows were very suitable for amateur production for various reasons. The royalties were affordable, the music was available for piano, the script generally involved the entire cast and called for singing duets, quartettes, and full chorus.

This was a recipe for audience engagement through family support and attendance.

However, despite this formula for success, the valley towns were moving away from railway or lumber town ambiance and there was a growing desire

for ‘modern’ shows such as Broadway musicals and situation comedies.

And the theatre groups up-and-down the valley responded.

There was one requirement that challenged the amateur. The new musicals depended heavily on ‘star’ talent. Think of how the “Phantom of the Opera” would be without a superb soprano and tenor.

However, the theatres within the valley were becoming more and more aware of each other and their strengths. And it became common to pool their talent. For example, pit orchestras increasingly used players from many parts of the valley and likewise, performers could be ‘borrowed’.

Back-in-the-day, the accompaniment was only piano. But then entertainment competition was a one-channel TV with questionable quality of picture. Live shows, corny or not, in the presence of a bar were gobbled up and made money.

Fast forward to today, and we have to say that the shows put on by the amateur groups of the Ottawa Valley, groups such as Stone Fence Theatre

and Streetlight Theatre Company, or the Deep River Players are produced to a high standard.

Today there is intense competition from such things as multi-channel television, internet streaming, DVD's, computer generated action. And with this competition comes an increasingly sophisticated audience, who despite their requirement for excellence, continue to want inclusion and engagement.

From my perspective, the theatre groups have risen to the occasion and routinely fill the local theatre halls with enthusiastic people. Excellent pit orchestras with players from all parts of the valley give a tremendous lift to the musicals that are now staged. Modern microphone technology allows voices to project, lighting is subtler with better controls. Production crews, from the Director and Producer through the Costume designers, and all the stage crews and, very important, all workers in direct contact with the audience know their job and do it well.

These young guns of today's amateur performers have brought energy and passion to the stage and that together with audience engagement will always win the day.

