

THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED PLAYERS OF VANCOUVER

by

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ABSTRACT

In 1959 the St. James United Church Drama Group was created by Gwen Crowe and Eileen Oliver. This group is now called The United Players of Vancouver; it resides at The Jericho Arts Centre. Over the span of nearly forty years there have been many changes. The group has altered its name three times and its main location twice; the membership transforming it from a small group of friends to a semi-professional company of some reputation. The purpose of this study is to document the history of this company and its development into an important, innovative part of Vancouver's community theatre.

Material for the thesis was obtained primarily through archival files kept by The United Players of Vancouver. Materials included handbills, programs, letters, minutes of meetings, membership lists and accounts. Personal interviews of people involved in the executive of the company along with newspaper clippings were important sources of information. There were some difficulties associated with researching the formative years of the company. The archival information is not available for the years 1959 to 1964 and many of the original members have died or moved away. The majority of information has therefore come from the recollections of Gwen Crowe, a founding member of the United Players.

This thesis covers the general history of the United Players of Vancouver, the role of this theatre within its community, and the possible future of the company as seen by its members, especially Andree Karas, Artistic Director for the last thirteen years.

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To the memory
of
Cathy Johnston

INTRODUCTION

The St. James United Church Drama Group, later known as The United Players of Vancouver, was formed in 1959 in the Dunbar/Southlands area of Vancouver. Its founders, Gwen Crowe and Eileen Oliver, both English emigrees from neighbouring towns, saw the group as a way of not only entertaining the community, but as a means to reach people who needed a positive outlet in their lives.

The company has survived until the present day through hard work and tenacity, struggling against financial hardships and location problems throughout its almost forty year history. The group has grown into a large community theatre with a reputation for producing not only good renditions of plays traditionally chosen by amateur dramatic societies, but daring to tackle plays seldom performed today.

Created in a time of great expansion and change in Vancouver, the United Players' initial success was partially a result of the scarcity of theatrical entertainment in the 1950's. In order to fully understand the reasons for the group's creation, its ability to continue until the present day, and the choices that the founders made, it is necessary to examine the sociological, cultural, and environmental conditions from which it emerged.

Vancouver in the 1950's

In the 1950's, Vancouver experienced an economic boom stemming from post-war optimism and massive public investment. Between 1951 and 1961 the population of Vancouver grew by 12%, while the surrounding metropolitan area increased by 87%.¹ European immigration was at an all-time high and large areas of the city underwent transformation under the influence of these cultural groups. The dramatic arts were an important part of life for many European people, especially those who came from England. The demand for such entertainment grew with the number of new immigrants.

This expansion started with the end of World War II, and for the first time in its history Vancouver outgrew the shape that had been originally planned in the century's first decade. This rapid expansion caused some racial tensions and newspapers printed stories of unpleasant incidents throughout the city. For example, in 1954 a black contestant was denied the use of the club house at a Vancouver golf club, causing intense debate on how people of all colours should be treated, especially in light of the forthcoming Empire Games.² The situation was not helped by the housing shortage that faced immigrants arriving in Vancouver. In 1957, 5 000 immigrants were airlifted to Vancouver without adequate planning as to where they would be housed.³ The race riots occurring in the United States, however, were avoided as a majority of Vancouverites worked towards racial tolerance.

¹ Bruce Macdonald, *Vancouver - A Visual History* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992), 52.

² Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1980), 147.

³ Ibid., 149.

Although war industries began to shut down in 1945, the economy prospered because of the continued demand for British Columbia's resources. Women who had been working in the factories during the war now turned their energies to working in the home and raising children. Small lumber mills and fish canneries either went out of business or merged with large companies created by large scale capital investment in the area. While many owners and management personnel prospered because of this investment, the workers seemed to lose ground leading to some of the most bitter strikes by labour unions to improve wages and working conditions.⁴ By July 1, 1957 workers became entitled to two weeks paid vacation with the exception of domestic servants, farm workers, surveyors and those employed in the professions. In 1959 the unions faced a setback when new labour laws were created to curb the power of the unions. Bill 43 made such policies as sympathy strikes, secondary boycotts, and information picketing illegal. While the economy of BC was improving, the working people had little time or money for entertainment. Any theatre that wanted to draw in a large audience had to be cheap as well as simple good fun.

The population had grown from 374 000 in 1941 to 562 000 by 1951, the majority of this growth occurring in the suburban areas, so that the central city's percentage of the population declined from 79 percent in 1941 to 48 percent in 1961.⁵ This was partly due to economic prosperity which led to more people being able to afford a private car. Areas which at first seemed distant farming communities, such as Richmond and Surrey, now became commuter suburbs. As people moved to the suburbs, the desire for entertainment

⁴ Anne Kloppenborg et al., editors, *Vancouver's First century - A City Album 1860 - 1960* (Vancouver: J.J.Douglas, 1977), 134.

⁵ Ibid.

and local community theatres in these areas increased. Bridges had to be built to accommodate this flow of traffic: the Oak Street Bridge in 1957, the Deas Island (Massey) Tunnel in 1959 and the new Second Narrows Bridge in 1960.

Trolley buses replaced streetcars and the first skyscrapers were built in the late 1950's, transforming the look of Vancouver forever. In 1957 zoning laws were changed to allow apartment towers in the West End, resulting in it becoming one of the most densely populated areas in Canada. For the first time, buildings of ten storeys or more started rising over English Bay. The old tenement houses that were once associated with cramped rooms and poor conditions were now replaced with steel and concrete apartment blocks of between three to six storeys.⁶ Vancouver's skyline rapidly changed with these new building laws and the appearance of the city evolved from a large town to a modern, metropolitan city.

The greatest cultural influence at this time was The United States, mostly because of television and its hold on the masses. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation simply could not offer the public the same highly polished entertainment produced by American stations.

In 1953 the CBC's local channel, CBUT was created partly to combat the ever-present American influence. The chief of CBC visited Vancouver for the opening, stating " It is extremely important for Canada to have a strong system ... it could make or break the national sense in the next generation."⁷ One of the station's first broadcasts brought

⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁷ Ibid., 145.

world attention to Vancouver with its coverage of the "Miracle Mile" at the British Empire games at Empire Stadium in 1954.

The fifties saw a number of changes which some people feared signalled a weakening in society's moral fibre. These innovations included the new phenomenon of shopping centres, a six-day shopping week, a downtown area with more neon than anywhere outside Shanghai, and Vancouver's first cocktail bar in the Sylvia Hotel. In order to combat the growing tendency for people to shop in the new suburban malls, Vancouver created the first "Downtown Day" on December 8, 1951. It was a dismal failure with fewer people than usual shopping downtown; stores were virtually deserted.⁸ It was not until 1960, however, that a 20-year Urban Re-development program began to address the problems of the downtown core by demolishing large areas of slums.⁹

The older generation's faith in the future was not helped by the first rock 'n roll concert performed by Bill Haley and the Comets at the Kerrisdale arena. A column in the *Sun* newspaper described the concert as the "ultimate in musical depravity" and suggested that the "cacophonous noise ... might cause permanent harm to not fully developed adolescent minds."¹⁰ Their predictions seemed to be coming true in September, 1957 when an Elvis Presley concert at the PNE had to be stopped due to the audience getting out of hand. Elvis was banned from performing at the PNE again. It was also at this time that the first street gangs became visible in the city. Hoodlums, as they were called, were mostly teenagers and young adults who committed vandalism and petty crime, often

⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁹ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰ Macdonald, 51.

taunting the police and passers-by. They were easily identified by their voluminous pants and crew cut or mohawk hairstyles. Many people found it comforting that their local church or theatre group continued to produce familiar plays seen many times before. The Agatha Christie mysteries were a welcome change to the often shocking books and plays coming out of the States.

The Korean War (1950-53), cold war, and fear of nuclear attack led to the building of backyard bomb shelters in Vancouver, the first one being built on a side lawn of a Shaughnessy Heights house in 1950. The shelter was big enough to hold four people but seemed to the owner to be more trouble than it was worth due to the publicity it aroused.¹¹ The city developed procedures for the rapid evacuation of the city. Air raid sirens were frequently tested, survival plans were delivered to every household and Mayor Thompson announced that all civic employees would be screened for Communist sympathies.

In politics, the new Social Credit premier, W.A.C. Bennett, saw British Columbia as the last economic frontier of North America and made his government's priority to develop transportation, power and industry.¹² New MPs in this decade included Arthur Laing, the leader of the BC Liberal Party, and Elmore Philpott, a columnist for the Vancouver Sun from 1943-61. In civic politics, Charles E. Thompson was mayor from 1949 to 1950, followed by F.J. Hume from 1951 to 1958, known as "Mr. Vancouver." Part of Hume's huge popularity during his four terms as mayor stemmed from the donation of his mayor's salary to charity; he worked for one dollar a year.

¹¹ Kloppenborg, 141.

¹² Macdonald, 52.

In the Dunbar and West Point Grey communities, the neighbourhood where the United Players began, the ethnic population was predominantly British and both areas have been described as quiet, well-ordered, middle-class communities.¹³ The census of 1971 shows that this ethnic mix has been slow to change, with residents of British origin at 71.4 % in Dunbar - Southlands and 70.7 % in West Point Grey.¹⁴ It is not surprising that the areas first dramatic group, The St. James United Church Drama Group, produced a number of British plays in its first few years.

The post-war baby boom hit Vancouver at this time with the need to educate the now school-aged children. A record six new high schools and a number of elementary schools and annexes were built. New community centres, one in the Dunbar area, were built to accommodate the increased demand for recreational facilities and activities.¹⁵ Peace and relative economic prosperity afforded people the luxury of entertainment on a scale not seen since before the Great Depression; a seemingly perfect situation in which theatre would flourish.

¹³ Ibid., 78.

¹⁴ Chuck Davis, *The Vancouver Book* (Vancouver: Evergreen Press, 1976), 455-56.

¹⁵ Macdonald, 50.

Theatre in Vancouver: 1910 to 1959

Between 1910 and 1930 Vancouver hosted many professional touring attractions, vaudeville shows and resident stock companies.¹⁶ Academics soon became dissatisfied with the lack of substance in these professionally produced plays. They responded by creating the Drama League of America and promoted new European drama.¹⁷ In Vancouver, Professor Frederic Wood started the University of British Columbia Players Club in 1915 and promptly produced some of the European avant garde plays. His love of the arts was passed on to his students in the English department. Many of these people became Vancouver's leading citizens and theatre advocates.

Community theatre was quietly thriving and in 1921 the Vancouver Little Theatre Association was begun by H. Beeman and S. Wellwood. Frederic Wood directed their first play and two of his students, Dorothy Somerset and Sidney Risk, followed his example and often directed for the Association over the next decade. Its high standards led the way for other community theatre groups; but as there was still a wealth of touring professional theatre, their efforts were not always noticed.¹⁸ Yet, they provided a valuable training ground for aspiring local professional actors and therefore helped to promote professional theatre in Vancouver.

¹⁶ Peter Frederick Guildford, *The Development of Professional Theatre in Vancouver*, (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1981), 2.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Most of the professional entertainment ended with The Great Depression of the 1930's when financial hardship made it impossible for the general population to afford the luxury of such entertainment and the expense of running the companies often led to bankruptcy. Also, since the advent of 'talkies' in 1927, there had been a constant struggle between the theatre companies and cinema for supremacy.¹⁹ As Hollywood made the fortunes of its stars, more actors of note were being seduced by its call. Audiences were now able to see famous stage actors such as George Arliss, Leslie Howard, Katherine Hepburn and Charles Laughton in their own town, even if it was on the big screen.²⁰

Amateur theatre now took centre stage and provided cheap entertainment on a shoestring budget. Community theatre groups were able to provide professional level theatre because of their experience in watching such entertainment for so many years while also benefiting from the sudden availability of professional actors. The suburbs now had their own community theatres with the creation of such companies as the Vagabonds of New Westminster (1937), the White Rock Players (1944), the West Vancouver Little Theatre Association (1946), the North Vancouver Community Players (1946), and the Burnaby Players (1948).²¹ Dorothy Somerset continued her association with VLTA while working as a faculty member at UBC. In 1937 she became head of the new Drama Division at the university where she stayed until 1964, during which time she had a great influence on community and professional theatre in Vancouver.²²

¹⁹ Glynn Wickham, *A History of the Theatre* (London: Phaidon, 1992), 226.

²⁰ Ibid., 227.

²¹ Davis, *Vancouver Book*, 455-56.

²² Guildford, 17.

Professional companies continued to attempt comebacks and even experienced some success, as in the case of Theatre Under the Stars, founded in 1940. This professional company produced musical theatre at the Malkin Bowl in Stanley Park, playing to large audiences during the summer months.²³ But even this company closed down in 1964 due to a number of different reasons, primarily escalating costs. There were attempts to create other new professional companies at this time such as Everyman Theatre, started by Sidney Risk in 1946. The group toured southern British Columbia before settling into a location at Queen Elizabeth Park. By 1948 the company's financial problems were insurmountable and Everyman Theatre was forced to close.

Between 1950 and 1954 there was a resurgence of professional theatre with the creation of Totem Theatre, Holiday Theatre for Children, and a revived Everyman Theatre. However, this was short-lived. Totem Theatre was created in 1951 by two young actors, Thor Arnglim and Stuart Baker, both of whom had experience in community theatre. Their company performed at Ambleside Park in West Vancouver. After their initial summer season they decided to produce theatre all year round and moved to Dunsmuir Street. During their second season they produced an astounding seventeen plays, including new material such as *No Exit* by Sartre and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. Their lease had expired by this time; being unable to renew it, they moved to Victoria where they were not as well-received and were forced to close for financial reasons.²⁴ They returned to Vancouver for one season in 1954.

²³ Richard Sutherland, *Theatre Under The Stars: The Hilker Years*, (M.A.thesis, University of British Columbia, 1993), ii.

²⁴ Ibid., 22-23.

Everyman theatre never recovered from the scandal created when their third season play, *Tobacco Road*, was closed when it was perceived to be obscene and immoral. Although the actors, director and theatre managers were eventually exonerated and the play reopened, the financial strain had proved too difficult to bear.²⁵

A children's company, Holiday Theatre, was the idea of Dorothy Somerset and Joy Coghill; it performed at the Frederic Wood Theatre on Saturdays and in schools during the week. The group travelled to schools in the province giving performances and workshops for students and teachers. The company survived until 1967.²⁶

In 1955 Sam Payne started Vanguard Productions in the Georgia Auditorium, producing plays between July and August. This venture had failed by 1957, partly due to the barn-like atmosphere of the auditorium.²⁷ Due to the forced closing of so many professional theatres between 1955 and 1958, amateur theatre became the main provider of theatrical entertainment. The Richmond Community Theatre was formed from the Sea Island Players and in 1958 Leo Byrne founded the Emerald Players in Vancouver. This company showcased Irish playwrights, doing four to five major productions a year and participating in the yearly Vancouver drama festival.²⁸

²⁵ Guildford, 21.

²⁶ Ibid., 24.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁸ Chuck Davis, *The Greater Vancouver Book: An Urban Encyclopaedia* (Surrey: Linkman, 1997), 419.

The Queen Elizabeth Theatre was opened in 1959 for the production of large scale performances. The four million dollar project grew out of a desire of the local theatre artists to create their own civic theatre, and to attract international companies to Vancouver. This, coupled with the first Vancouver International Festival of 1958, introduced Vancouverites to high calibre international music and dance.²⁹ This did not prevent the continued failure of professional companies, as seen by the closure of the Cambie Art Theatre led by Peter Statner in 1962.³⁰ It was not until 1964 that professional theatre truly started to achieve a firm base, however, when The Playhouse Theatre Company experienced a successful first season at the newly built Queen Elizabeth Playhouse.

In the late 1950's even movie theatres were forced to close down (five Vancouver venues in the space of a few years) due to the appeal of television.³¹ It was in this theatrical climate that amateur theatre companies thrived. Luring people out of their homes meant that the entertainment had to be cheap, close to home and provide a social setting where most people knew each other. Local community theatres provided just that at a time when professional theatre was sparse and centred downtown. One such company was the St. James United Church Drama Group, later known as The United Players of Vancouver, created by the women of the St. James United Church of Dunbar.

²⁹ Guildford, 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Macdonald, 52.

CHAPTER ONE

THE OPENING ACT: 1958 TO 1959

Gwen and John Crowe came to Vancouver from England in 1957 at a time when immigration from Europe was reaching its peak. People living in England regularly saw posters in the local travel agent's window encouraging people to come and live in Canada, a prospect which appealed to many of them because of the adventure of travelling to such a distant country. The war had enabled many young people to visit countries they would never have seen in peace time. Young men who would not have ventured further than the local city were suddenly sent thousands of miles away, experiencing in the process cultures they had only read about in books. For many, the world had opened up and the idea of emigrating was no longer just an interesting dream. Any person from the Commonwealth had easy access to any other Commonwealth country. Approval for immigration was a mere formality as long as a person had enough money for basic necessities, and furthermore did not have a criminal record.³²

Gwen and John had a stronger impetus to emigrate than just the lure of travel posters: Gwen's childhood dreams. Her grandmother had stayed in England when her two brothers and one sister went to live in Canada. As a child, Gwen would often sit and listen to her grandmother read letters from her siblings, letters that were full of wonderful descriptions of life in Canada: magnificent scenery, untamed wilderness and the

³² Richard Lee, personal interview, 25 Oct. 1997.

friendliness of the people who shared such a huge domain. It became Gwen's dream to visit Canada, a dream which her father did not try to destroy but rather encouraged by having Gwen set up a Canada fund. Any spare money was put into the bank and slowly the fund grew until it was enough to pay for the trip to Canada.

It was not until twelve years later, when Gwen had been married to John for a year, that the balance reached the magic figure. By that time Gwen was resigned to the fact that the money was really needed for essential household items. At this time, John and Gwen were living in Leicester, a town located in central England. John was a sheet-metal worker, while Gwen worked at Reid (Leicester) Ltd where she designed and made clothes to order for people who could afford the luxury of such personal service. Their lives seemed set on a certain path but John knew about Gwen's dream and realized that she would never truly be happy until she had at least visited Canada. In 1955, with his encouragement, Gwen found herself en route to Vancouver to visit the family she had heard so much about as a child.³³

When Gwen came to visit her cousins living on East Broadway she soon found herself in the Dunbar region on a day trip to the beach. As a child, she had found the sea fascinating whenever she visited the coast and had often thought how wonderful it would be to live close to a beach. On returning to England she was shocked and delighted when John decided that he would like to experience life in Canada. Soon after, in 1957, the couple found themselves in a two room boarding house on Dunbar and 3rd for \$50 a month. John acquired a job working at an air-conditioning company and augmented his income with janitorial work. Gwen discovered that her talents as a dressmaker were not

³³ Gwen Crowe, personal interview, 24 Sept. 1997.

in demand in Vancouver. Vancouverites were simply not willing to spend money on clothes from a couturier when they could buy them ready-made for much less. A friend of Gwen's worked at the Commerce Bank downtown and suggested Gwen apply for a teller's job, a position which would have required extensive training in England. Canadian banks being less formal, Gwen was soon working as a teller, a job she was to keep for eighteen years.³⁴

Although the Dunbar region of Vancouver was predominantly British during the 1950's, the community was an interesting mix of people from different walks of life. Vancouver had a unique way of bringing together people of varied backgrounds onto a single street, living in houses which looked similar to each other. The middle class was broad; it included people from many different occupations. It was not uncommon to find a janitor living next to an accountant on one side and a shop keeper on the other. Class barriers were frowned upon and a person's occupation did not dictate where they lived to the same degree as they did in England.³⁵ The local church was also more than just a place of worship; it was where you made friends and enjoyed social gatherings. Gwen and John joined the United Church on 10th and Trutch, led by The Reverend Thomas Oliver, as a means of meeting friends and getting to know the community.

Tom and Eileen Oliver had come to St. James United Church in 1952 when they were both in their twenties. Tom's unique personality, a mixture of a happy-go-lucky attitude with a commanding and engaging presence, drew many new members to the church. His healthy sense of humour and willingness to try new ideas made him a well-

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Lee, personal interview, 25 Oct. 1997.

known figure in the community in a surprising short period of time. He made his parish rounds on a bicycle, a habit which appeared charmingly old-fashioned at a time when most people rode the bus or owned a car.³⁶

At that time the United Church Women (UCW) performed occasional plays for entertainment but had not seriously established a drama group. Tom and Eileen had experience in amateur acting with youth groups they had led in England and were amused at the royalty-free playlets chosen by the ladies. They felt, however, that if such time and energy was to continue to be spent on the productions, plays should be chosen on the basis of their meaning for the audience, not primarily to amuse the actors. With this in mind they contacted Samuel French (Canada) Limited for the purpose of paying the royalty rights for some longer and more well-known plays.

It was around 1953 to 1954 that the Olivers became involved in their first church drama production performed in the basement. One such production was *The Late Christopher Bean*, directed by the Olivers. Because the group was not an official company, they did not have a name and Tom simply announced during church services that a play would be performed in the basement. As in later years, the play would be performed for two or three nights only and the audience mostly consisted of churchgoers and relatives or friends of the cast.³⁷

Gwen and Eileen quickly discovered kindred spirits in each other when the Crowes joined the church. Gwen was originally from Leicester and Eileen came from Nottingham,

³⁶ Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997

³⁷ Thomas Oliver, Telephone interview, 23 Nov. 1997.

neighbouring towns in the Midlands of England with rich theatrical traditions. Indeed, Nottingham is the most important centre for theatre arts outside London and has two magnificent theatres, the Theatre Royal and the Playhouse. Both women shared a deeply rooted love of the theatre. Eileen and Tom wanted the group to be seen as a springboard into a new life for people in the area; a way for people to meet others with similar interests.³⁸

In England, church drama groups were common and were often the major entertainment of the rural areas in which they were developed. The ladies of the church were the most involved in this pastime and used the plays to raise money for good causes within the community. While it was not possible to involve the whole of the Dunbar region in the same way, at least the small community belonging to the Saint James United Church could be brought together through drama.

With backgrounds steeped in such dramatic tradition and some experience in acting, the expansion of the church drama group was a tailor-made project for Eileen and Gwen. As someone searching for ways to be accepted and involved in the community, the challenge greatly appealed to Gwen and she began devoting a large percentage of her time to recruiting members. It soon became evident that Gwen's personality was perfectly suited to such a venture. Gwen is a fun-loving person with a kindness that makes her instantly appealing. She loves being around people and gets great pleasure from helping others. Her enthusiasm for life is always evident, and this energy was put to good use in

³⁸ Shannon Guilbride, "Gwen Crowe Remembers: A History of the United Players of Vancouver, Part One, 1959 - 1969," United Players program for *Not Now Darling*, 1989.

recruiting members. With unity and friendship being the group's main objective, they soon found church members willing to spend time on the new venture.³⁹

John Crowe, however, was not one of these people; he had little interest in theatre. He had not even attended plays Gwen had been involved with in England and had not changed his opinion since moving to Canada.⁴⁰ John has a quiet, strong personality that perfectly complements Gwen's extroverted nature. He is not a person to be easily swayed, so Gwen did not force the issue with John. Instead, she carried on recruiting anyone with an interest in acting or backstage work.

In 1958 the first play chosen by The St. James United Church Drama Group, as they called themselves in that initial year, was *Beside The Seaside* by Leslie Sands. This seemed not only a manageable project but also an enjoyable one as it is a light comedy set in a boarding house in Blackpool, England. With so many of the cast members and audience having strong British ties it seemed certain that a British comedy would be a resounding success.

Beside The Seaside was also the play which introduced John Crowe to acting; an experience he could not forget and which left him wanting more. John was drawn into acting through a chance meeting and intensive persuasion. He regularly came to the church to pick up Gwen after rehearsal. While waiting for her one evening soon after the play began its rehearsal, the director, Milo Fougner, heard John talking to friends and was impressed by the richness of his voice. Milo had had trouble casting the role of Gwen's

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Crowe, personal interview, 24 Sept. 1997.

husband in the play and rushed over to ask John if he would consider playing the part. John's reaction was an immediate and definite: No! As time went on and the role had still not been cast John received an urgent phonecall from Milo trying to persuade him into joining the group. No amount of protest from John could dissuade Milo, not even the fact that John had never acted before and really was not interested in trying. Eventually, however, John reluctantly agreed to perform.⁴¹

Unfortunately, the experience of putting together the play almost sounded the death knell of the fledgling group. The director, Milo Fougner, was prone to fits of temper and the cast found itself constantly nervous, wondering what was going to be the spark that started a tirade. It was hard enough to attempt a full-length play with untrained actors without facing the problem of personality conflicts. The group began to lose what little confidence they had and rehearsals became a chore.

The final blow came two weeks before the play was due to open. Milo's wife Blanche had been acting as prompter, but the actors found her to be overzealous, not allowing them to find their words. When the cast asked Blanche to slow down, Milo lost his temper for the last time. He berated the actors for what he saw as their unfair treatment of his wife. After shouting at the group what he thought of them and their acting abilities, Milo stormed out of the building declaring he was not coming back.

It is much to the group's credit that they did not stop the production right there but instead continued to rehearse and perform the play on schedule. They were determined that all their hard work would not go to waste and eventually the production was

⁴¹ Ibid.

well-received by the audience.⁴² Understandably, original group members tend to underplay or repress this first venture, and articles written about the beginning of the company often do not mention *Beside The Seaside*. However unpleasant the experience, however, it remains part of the company's history.

After such an ordeal it took a lot of courage and drive to keep the group together and attempt another play in the Fall of 1959. *The Holly and the Ivy* was chosen as the next play, partially because it was controversial. The newly energized group decided that it did not want to just present plays that had been seen many times before and which were guaranteed crowd pleasers. This mandate was to remain in place throughout the forty years of the company's existence, causing occasional friction with the Church in the process.

The main characters of this play belong to a family led by their father, the pastor of a local village church in Norfolk, England. The play is set around the family celebrating Christmas in 1949-50, shortly after World War II has ended. The controversy of the play centres on the youngest daughter, Margaret, who falls in love with an American serviceman while living in London. During the affair she becomes pregnant. Her lover is killed in the war shortly afterwards, but as her mother becomes ill at this time, Margaret feels unable to tell anyone in the family about the pregnancy. The child remains a secret but tragically dies of meningitis when he is four. Margaret's response is to turn to alcohol for comfort. Alcoholism and unwed mothers were topics seldom discussed in the 1950's either on or off stage. Such conservatism was even more pronounced in a community

⁴² Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997

with such a high percentage of the population born and raised in Britain where the old codes of conduct were more strictly enforced.

The Holly and the Ivy is a well-written play and despite its topic, Tom Oliver agreed to play the part of the minister, a part for which he seemed extremely suited. Tom had gone grey at an early age and this, coupled with a deep, rich voice, allowed him to convincingly play the part of a much older man. The original group of actors and stage hands for that second major production included Ivor Morris as the director, Tom Oliver as Reverend Martin Gregory, Gwen Crowe as Jenny Martin, Paddy Stewart as Margaret, Bill Millin as the brother and Gwen Millin as backstage help.⁴³ Bill and Gwen Millin had been married by Tom Oliver and they had become friends. As soon as Tom discovered that Bill had been involved with community theatre in Kamloops, he asked Bill to join the new drama group. Bill and Gwen were to stay with the drama group for fourteen years, Bill acting in a majority of the plays and even becoming President for two years. The members were a diverse group of people who shared a love for theatre and lived in the neighbourhood. As word of mouth spread the news that a drama group was being formed, interested people from all walks of life were drawn to the meetings.

With positive energy and a feeling of family togetherness, the play took shape through the rehearsals. All was not to go well for Gwen Crowe, however, in her role as Jenny. Towards the end of rehearsal time Gwen became more and more tired and discovered that she was pregnant. She was having difficulty carrying the twin babies and was put under strict doctor's orders to stay off her feet. Gwen's role was a major one and she knew that if she left the play it would have to be cancelled. Throughout the day of the

⁴³ Crowe, personal interview, 24 Sept. 1997.

play's opening she lay in bed trying to gain strength. A camp bed had been set up back stage in the basement so she could lie down whenever she was not on stage, and it was with a great deal of trepidation that the actors performed for those two nights. To add to the strain, Tom Oliver tended to rearrange lines, dropping cues and making the other actors think on their feet. On one such occasion he forgot to say a section of lines that he felt were important to the play. At intermission he informed Gwen that he would be putting them into act II and told Gwen to respond accordingly. Increasing the distraction was the director, Ivor Morris, who sat behind a screen at the back of the basement. If he could not hear the actors he turned a flashlight on and off so that only the actors could see it. Tom called Ivor to the backstage area at the intermission and firmly told him that he was not helping the actors' concentration.

The audience, as is often the case, did not notice the mistakes or did not mind them and generally responded with enthusiasm. Not everyone who saw the play was pleased, however. There was a core group of parishioners who still held on to their strict codes of conduct. Not only were they very unhappy about the issues discussed in the play, they were horrified at a scene where the Reverend has a drink of whiskey with his son. Some actually believed the actors were drinking alcohol, while others realized it was just cold tea. Everyone, however, was appalled at the act of drinking or pretending to drink, alcohol in the church. They were certainly not slow in bringing their opinions to Tom's attention and it is believed that some members left the congregation as a result.⁴⁴ Many in the community were excited that such hard hitting and honest plays were presented in their neighbourhood and it was with great satisfaction that the group saw around seventy people squeeze into the basement on each of the two nights. This feeling

⁴⁴ Bill Millin, telephone interview, 8 Dec. 1997.

of success was to be tainted two weeks later when Gwen lost the twins she was carrying.⁴⁵

The main ingredient of The St. James United Church Drama Group in those first years was time: time to make the costumes, design and build the set, set up the church basement with chairs and lights and complete many other labour-intensive jobs that had to be accomplished before the first play could be performed. The auditorium which was later to become the home of the group until 1991 was not built until 1960. The first plays were therefore performed in the lower church hall, referred to as the basement. This location, in itself, created many problems as it was obviously not designed for the production of plays even though a stage had been erected. The stage extended the width of the room, about thirteen metres, with entrance doors on either side. It had a depth of about four metres and was reached by three steps, bringing the stage about a meter off the floor. The height of the room was about three meters. Small windows at the top of one wall were curtained to allow the room to be darkened but stage lights had not been installed because of the small size of the room. Audience members certainly got close to the actors and each other in such a confined area. The basement was used for other activities and could therefore not have any permanent sets or seating arrangements. Care needed to be taken that props and scenery were stored in such a way that they could not be inadvertently damaged by others.

Raising enough money to cover the expenses of the first plays was a problem that needed to be addressed straight away. As newly arrived immigrants, John and Gwen did not have a surplus of cash and it was obvious that the new recruits were in the same

⁴⁵ Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997.

situation. It was at this crucial beginning stage that the UCW stepped in with a vital contribution of money. At a time when the average hourly wage was a dollar⁴⁶, the ladies donated one hundred dollars to pre-pay the royalties for *Beside The Seaside* and *The Holly and the Ivy* and to provide basic necessities for costumes and sets. This was a generous and courageous act as there was no guarantee they would ever be repaid; not having offered such a production before, it was impossible to gauge what the community's reaction would be.

Money was, and still is, a central problem for any amateur theatre company. Paying the royalties has often been the greatest barrier to producing certain plays at the community level where income often only just exceeds costs. The designation of community theatre groups as charities has allowed the groups to receive tax deductions and apply for occasional casino nights. On such nights a percentage of a city casino's profit is donated to the charity. In 1959, however, the St. James United Church Drama Group was in its infancy and received no other outside help. Most of the costumes were sewn by Gwen who was able to once again use her expertise in the design and making of clothes. The men in the group, by now numbering ten, made the sets and everyone helped to turn the basement into a temporary theatre.

Having experienced both the difficulties and the success of producing two full-length plays in the basement of the church, the St. James United Church Drama Group felt it had a base from which to expand. Every mistake made was noted and discussed in order to avoid future occurrences and as more members joined, the group began to work together as a true team. Many friendships from this period lasted a lifetime and many of

⁴⁶ Lee, personal interview, 25 Oct. 1997.

the original members became like family to each other. Gwen, Eileen and Tom had succeeded in creating an organization that was to grow from a simple church basement group to a company that has stayed together for almost forty years and become one of the leading community groups in Greater Vancouver.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ST. JAMES YEARS: 1960 TO 1979

The St. James United Church Drama Group (The United Players): 1960 to 1969

Eileen and Tom Oliver were not destined to see the group they had started become an established theatre company. In 1960 they were transferred to West Vancouver's United Church, leaving behind a saddened, fledgling group of actors struggling to create a legitimate community theatre. A subsequent minister, Reverend Alastair McCleod, was a more austere man but he was still supportive of the drama group and encouraged them to carry on the work of community outreach. Future ministers, while appreciative of the money raised by the drama group, tended to see the group as outsiders using the church's space. This signalled the end of the closeknit relationship of church and drama group and saw the beginning of the group's independence.

It was in 1960 that an integral member of the St. James United Church Drama Group joined the team: Doreen Dick. Doreen had moved to Vancouver in the late 1950's from Kamloops where she had been involved in the Kamloops Little Theatre. Now in her thirties, she had experience in acting and directing, both under the leadership of a stern and meticulous director. Bill Millin had also started acting in Kamloops and knew Doreen and her ability. Bill knew that the drama group, while having an excess of enthusiasm, badly needed guidance to elevate their performances to a more professional level, a task at which he believed Doreen could excel.

Doreen's first exposure to the group was as an audience member for *Here We Come Gathering* by Philip King and Anthony Armstrong. As one of the actors was saying his line, he accidentally dropped the sandwich he was holding over the edge of the stage. He immediately leapt down and retrieved the errant object, enjoying a good laugh in the process. Far from being amused, as was the rest of the audience, by the actor's reaction, Doreen was horrified at such a lack of professionalism. She could see the talent in the actors and knew that what they needed was help in bringing this talent to the forefront. From that moment she was hooked.⁴⁷

Doreen's directorial debut with the St. James United Church Drama Group was with *See How They Run* by Philip King. Doreen's dedication was one of the reasons the group flourished through the 1960's as she became the director and the driving force of the company. She had a commanding presence and no-nonsense approach and the members quickly respected her talent as a director. Doreen did not flinch from telling people the truth and the actors learned to accept both positive and negative comments on their performances. She had a sergeant-major quality about her; not because of her size but because of her ability to command attention. She would confidently stride around the stage area, her short hairstyle and pants confirming her no-nonsense approach to life.⁴⁸ It was typical of Doreen's style of directing to openly tell an actor exactly what was wrong with their performance, not sparing details to be kind. She would, however, put equal effort into congratulating good performances so that actors worked hard to gain her respect.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Doreen Dick, personal interview, Nov. 22 1997.

⁴⁸ Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997.

⁴⁹ Millin, telephone interview, 8 Dec. 1997.

Doreen was usually the member who found plays suitable for production although everyone was encouraged to read and submit plays for the group to peruse. Plays suggested by Doreen were read by the group and voted on, although their faith in her meant they usually decided in favour of her recommendation. The first plays attempted by the group were British. These plays suited the large percentage of audience members of British backgrounds; it was also what the majority of members knew and felt comfortable performing. Doreen introduced Canadian and American plays as the group expanded its knowledge of other authors. While the quality of acting may have varied, the performers certainly remember these plays with a great deal of affection.

During Doreen's tenure as director (1960 to 1977), other people occasionally directed plays, but it was Doreen who led the company in its quest for excellence.⁵⁰ It is much to her credit that Doreen spent so much time with the group. She had thought about leaving to join the West End Players which had been set up in the 1970's close to where she lived. She had also been offered money to direct with other companies; yet, when she occasionally tried other companies she always felt a sense of disappointment. The St. James United Church Drama Group felt like home to her and the sense of togetherness was hard to match.⁵¹

In these first years of the company, plays were generally chosen to provide enough acting parts or other responsibilities for every single member. Each role was assigned to the person who was most suited, while enthusiasm was another decisive ingredient. People were not turned away because of lack of acting experience. Everyone was

⁵⁰ Crowe, personal interview, 24 Sept. 1997.

⁵¹ Dick, personal interview, Nov. 22 1997.

welcomed in the spirit of a community organization. One member of the group was assigned as prompter, a tradition of early dramatic groups which is no longer used, and the first performances reflected the group's mandate that both the actors and audience have fun. The audience received these first productions with enormous enthusiasm and did not seem to mind the occasional unplanned event. An example of such an event was when Bill Millin's partial plate flew out of his mouth, was deftly caught by Joyce Byth and returned to Bill so that he could finish his lines.⁵²

There were two performances of each play and it was with great satisfaction that Eileen and Gwen witnessed full houses both nights with ticket prices at 75 cents each.⁵³ It seems that the majority of the audience came from the Dunbar and Point Grey communities. Many had an affiliation with the church, perhaps by knowing one of the actors or knowing a regular member of the church. Word of mouth often spread the news of a new play and posters throughout the community drew some people to the church.

Community service, however, remained the main focus of the St. James United Church Drama Group during its debut years. After repaying the UCW for their generous donation, the members decided to donate as much money as they could to the church building fund. The church administration had been raising money for some time to build an auditorium next to the church to be used for a variety of purposes. As the drama group was expected to move performances to this new venue, complete with stage, it seemed only fitting that they try to not only improve the stage area, but contribute to the fund.

⁵² Millin, telephone interview, 8 Dec. 1997.

⁵³ Guilbride, "Gwen Crowe Remembers."

Enough money was retained by the group treasurer to pay for royalties and sundry items needed for the performances.

Another invaluable service performed by the drama group was to enable people to expand their skills and perfect their creative talents. Many of the members were secretaries during the day, a job which rarely entailed the use of artistic skills. An accountant found himself building sets, a steel worker painting scenery, and a UBC researcher performing in front of an audience. The love of theatre brought these people together and showed them that they had abilities which had lain dormant since childhood or which had never surfaced at all. Doreen delighted in coaxing shy backstage workers onto the stage in a small role. It did not take long for the acting bug to strike, rendering the neophyte incapable of forgetting the experience. Many gained a confidence in themselves they never had before, enabling them to face personal and social problems with greater ease.⁵⁴

In 1962, a number of Lower Mainland community theatre companies decided, through many meetings and painstaking discussions, to form a co-operative theatre company to showcase plays by all the independent theatre groups involved. Under the name Metropolitan Theatre Co-operative, the first show opened in September 1962 at the Kitsilano Theatre on 4th Avenue.⁵⁵ St. James United Church Drama Group members were instrumental in the project taking shape. Gwen and John Crowe, Bill Millin, Doreen Dick and others put many hours into organizing the development of the co-operative: attending meetings, arranging the theatre space and liaising with the other drama groups.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Davis, *Greater Vancouver Book*, 419.

It was a labour of love, however, as the idea of community theatres sharing and working together meshed so completely with the group's vision of why community theatre was important. They also donated money to help pay for the rent and sundry items needed to set up the theatre space. Each member then paid a dollar to purchase a share in the co-operative and the companies were responsible for sharing the costs of running the theatre.⁵⁶

In September, 1963 the Metro Theatre, as it was now called, opened at a newly renovated theatre building at 1370 SW Marine drive in Marpole. From that location, the co-operative produced plays from about twelve Lower Mainland theatre companies until December 1965. The administration of such a venture was putting an unrealistic strain on all the companies involved, however. Not only were members responsible for producing their own season, they also had to participate in the running of the co-operative. All of this was happening while most members also had full-time jobs. The Metro executive therefore decided to operate as an independent company from January 1966 onwards, a company which has proven itself to be a permanent fixture of the Vancouver theatre scene.⁵⁷ The drama group continued to help Metro Theatre, especially in later years when it faced closure due to financial difficulty. Members contributed time to their fund-raising efforts and the group donated money from their profits.

During the first two years of the drama group, the name for the company became an important issue. The first name, the St. James United Church Drama Group, was too long and soon shortened to the St. James Drama Group. Problems arose, however, when

⁵⁶ United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 15 Jan. 1965.

⁵⁷ Davis, *Greater Vancouver Book*, 419.

audiences confused the group with the St. James Players Guild, a drama group performing at the St. James Anglican Church in downtown Vancouver. This group had been performing a number of years before the United Church group had been created, and it was understandably anxious for the new group to change its name as soon as possible. While wanting to break away from the derogatory term "church basement drama group", many members did not want to completely divorce themselves from the church that created them and continued to support their efforts.

After lengthy discussions, United Players (UP) became the new name for the group in 1963, a name signifying its tie with the church but which also stood for the deep bond that members felt for each other. Not all members were thrilled, some saying it sounded more like a football team, while others felt the name implied a greater association with the United Church than was desired.⁵⁸ It was not long before the name was accepted by all. In 1968 the words "of Vancouver" had to be added before it could be incorporated. Since that time the name has remained, despite occasional discussions about possible alternatives.

It is from 1965 onwards that the most detailed written records of the United Players are available. Meetings of the minutes document the main people involved in the group, plays produced, financial records and other interesting details of the running of the company. In 1965 the members of the executive and regular members included Joyce Byth as President, Doreen Dick as Director, Gwen Crowe as Treasurer, Muriel Sanders as secretary, Molly McClynn, John Hathaway, Margaret Hathaway, Bob Freedman, John Crowe, Neville Owen, Gwen Millin, Bill Millin, Pat Blain, Ian Blain, Heather Blain, Bruce

⁵⁸ Crowe, personal interview, 24 Sept. 1997.

and Beda Blain, Beryl Gough, Rex and Doreen Monk, Edrea Abercrombie, Rolf Hundvik, Myra Kelsey, Helen Hansen, and Arnold Sveistrup.⁵⁹ Gordon Dowson and Wilf Woods, the church caretaker, helped a great deal with backstage work and odd jobs, Gordon Dowson being very adept at scenery and stage managing while also being the father figure for the group. Others generously gave their free time to help gather props, sell tickets and do the small jobs for which more involved members did not have time. Such jobs included hanging curtains for the stage and the windows in the auditorium. Lights and sound equipment all had to be provided by the group, so that any outstanding profits from a play went to purchasing the needed items.

This enthusiastic group of amateurs certainly had a great deal of work ahead of them to adapt the auditorium for stage productions. One problem faced by the drama group was the poor acoustics of the building. As the auditorium was built primarily for the purpose of large group gatherings and to provide a space for athletic activities, no consideration had been paid to acoustical properties. The stage was built in a traditional school gymnasium fashion with the edge of the stage being level with the wall that acted as the proscenium arch. It was 6 metres wide and extended back 4 metres with an additional 2 metre wide wings. The stage was therefore more of a small hole in the south wall of the building about 1.5 metres off the floor. The result of such construction was that any actor not standing on the edge of the stage almost had to shout to be heard. The cavernous proportions of the backstage area muffled the sound and tended to distort the actors' voices. Other acoustical drawbacks to the auditorium included 15 metre high ceilings that tended to swallow the actors' words, and a ceiling fan for heating the building that could easily drown out the most vigorous of voices.

⁵⁹ United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 15 and 29 Jan. 1965.

Other groups such as Cubs, Scouts, choirs, and Canadian Girls in Training shared the hall and had weekly time slots. This necessitated the booking of performance nights well in advance. Sports activities such as gymnastics and ballet were also allotted time with the badminton club usually using the gym on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Thursday was commonly a performance night for the drama group, so it was often necessary to ask the badminton teachers to give up one of their nights, an awkward arrangement for all concerned.⁶⁰ Sharing the space with groups meant continually having to clear away sets, props and equipment while occasionally needing to remove unwanted items from the stage. The UCW held many rummage sales and it was a common sight for boxes full of old clothes to be scattered over the stage.

With so many others sharing the space it was not always easy to prevent equipment being tampered with and occasionally items being broken. In 1968 this came to a head when the group discovered dangerous tampering with the wiring for stage lights. Since 1966, on occasion, the stage crew would find wiring that had been cleanly cut with a knife. Although it was drawn to the attention of the church authorities, it continued to happen. In 1968, however, the wires had not only been cut, but a small lightweight lamp plug had been attached leaving exposed wires. An inexperienced stage crew member had plugged it in, blowing the fuse. The group was very concerned about the possibility of fire occurring and again informed the church, this time more forcefully.⁶¹ After that time the wiring, at least, was not touched again.

⁶⁰ Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997.

⁶¹ United Players, letter to the Committee of Stewards, St. James United Church, 22 Nov. 1968.

Due to the almost constant use of the auditorium it was difficult to find time to practice on the stage. When time was available, weather often dictated the amount of time they could stay in the building. During the winter months the group could not afford to heat the whole building on non-performance nights. The actors had only a small heater backstage which they used to warm themselves from time to time. The dress rehearsal and technical nights were especially long and cold. John Crowe was the first person to bring containers of hot soup for everyone on these occasions, a practice which became a group tradition. To combat the problem of availability and the uncomfortable conditions, rehearsals were often conducted in private homes. Cast members sometimes took turns holding the rehearsals at their homes, and for a number of years Arnold Sveistrup welcomed the cast into his hairdressing shop on Dunbar street. Arnold also generously volunteered this location for many of the executive meetings.⁶²

Even with all the problems the auditorium created, the group still benefited from performing there. The church basement had been very crowded and held a maximum of seventy-five people. The new auditorium could seat two hundred, a definite advantage for raising money. The stage, although poorly designed, was larger than that of the basement and included the luxury of wings. Here, actors waited for their entrances and some props could be stored. The basement arrangement had necessitated actors standing by the doors to hear their cues. The height of the stage also meant tall actors could perform without worrying about their heads hitting the ceiling. Proper stage lights could now be used, increasing the availability of stage effects. After a mezzanine was added to the auditorium, sound equipment also enhanced the stage effects. Such benefits greatly outweighed the disadvantages of the building.

⁶² Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997.

In 1965 UP joined The British Columbia Drama Association (BCDA), now called Theatre BC. Doreen and Muriel Sanders acted as the representatives for the group. In this capacity they not only represented UP, they also brought back important information on the festival procedures as well as discovering what other community theatres were doing. This information helped the group in planning future plays and also nurtured a sense of camaraderie among the community groups. Doreen had initially wanted the group to perform in a festival so that they would hear the criticism of unbiased judges. Until this time, the group had heard mostly praise from audience members, most of whom were relatives or friends of the cast. Doreen felt that they needed to hear comments on what they did not do well, to spur them on to better work.⁶³ It was therefore ironic that the first festival play should receive such accolades. *The Valiant* by Holworthy Hall and Robert Middlemass received four awards in their regional zone (Best Production; Best Director: Doreen Dick; Best Supporting Actor: John Crowe; Best Supporting Actress: Joyce Byth) and two top awards, Best Actor (Bill Millin) and Best Actress (Joyce Byth sharing with Iona Campagnolo), in the Provincial final. This was a remarkable feat for the relatively unknown group. UP were to perform in most of the BCDA festivals for many years to come, only stopping in the 1990's when the Artistic Director, Andree Karas, felt the venture had become too costly and time consuming for the benefits it bestowed.

By 1965 the finances of UP were on firm footing. No longer in need of the donation by the UCW, the group was able to spend money on improvements to the stage area, curtains, lights and sundries needed for various plays. Donations to the building fund continued with the group donating a significant amount of their profits to the church. The play *The Happiest Days Of Your Life* by John Dighton, for example, was performed on

⁶³ Dick, personal interview, 22 Nov. 1997.

three nights in December, 1965. Total attendance for the three nights was 433 with \$324 being raised through the ticket sales. Expenses for the play totalled \$106.40 leaving a balance of \$217.60. Of this amount \$100 was donated to the church.⁶⁴ By January 1966 roughly \$850 had been donated to the church by UP. As the drama group was not paying the church for rental of the auditorium, this amount of money generated from one play gave them financial independence. It also meant that the group could continue to expand its collection of costumes and props as well as pay the royalties for some of the more expensive plays. Money was also spent by the group and individual members on workshop fees. These workshops on such topics as acting, directing, and make-up, helped to give the members a broader picture of theatre arts and helped to polish performances.⁶⁵

As the group gained in confidence and became financially secure, their desire for complete independence from the church became stronger. Until early 1966 the UCW had shared the duty of selling tickets with members of the group. Advance sales of tickets were handled by the UCW while performance sales were handled by volunteer members of UP. This led to occasional confusion and a delay in the treasurer being able to total the receipts. At the meeting of the executive on March 30, 1966 it was decided that this was no longer a satisfactory situation and from that time onward only UP members sold tickets. In May, 1966, the group decided to suggest working with the UCW in serving coffee at performances with the aim of eventually taking over the concession from them. This final step led to complete independence from the past association of UP with the UCW. The split appears to have been an amicable one, however, as members of the UCW were also members of the UP. Certainly, no evidence has been found to the contrary.

⁶⁴ United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 20 Dec. 1965.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14 Jan. 1966.

It was in 1966 that the first of a series of tragic deaths hit the group. These deaths were to have a cumulative effect, lowering the morale of the members and leading to some resignations. Muriel Sanders had become President of UP for the 1965/66 year when she was in her 40's. In late February, 1966 she contracted flu and eventually had to go to hospital where she was expected to make a speedy recovery. It was with shock that the members were told of her death soon after her hospitalization. Nobody could believe that someone who had been so young and healthy could die from flu. The loss was felt deeply by the close-knit group and the every day business of the drama group was difficult to complete. Neville Owen, the vice-president, took over as President for that year, followed by John Crowe as President in 1967. The United Players decided to create a Muriel Sanders trophy to be given by the BCDA in memory of the dedication Muriel showed.⁶⁶

It was also in 1966 that Gordon Dowson, the father figure of the group died from complications after a heart attack he suffered during a rehearsal. The group was setting up for the evening's performance as a guest of the Maple Ridge Players. Gordon suffered a massive heart attack and those present rushed to help, attending him until the ambulance arrived. In the grand tradition of theatre the group performed that night, even though their nerves were rattled and everyone was very concerned for Gordon. Gordon died later in 1966, adding to the misery felt by the members of UP.⁶⁷

The membership grew and declined throughout the following years but the core group of enthusiasts remained. Gwen, John (who had by now become so involved with the group that he found himself President, actor, backstage hand, and scenery designer),

⁶⁶ Ibid., 30 March 1965.

⁶⁷ Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997.

Bill Millin, Doreen Dick and the others previously mentioned had been joined by Mavis Cattle, Beryl Gough, Lynda Putnam, Doreen Leslie, Anita Todd, Bill Boon, and June Scott. Other people came and went with each new production and core members occasionally left due to work pressures or the need to relocate. These new members brought with them fresh ideas and enthusiasm along with a knowledge of plays that would suit UP. Doreen Dick undertook the co-ordination of two separate one acts performed on the same night in late 1966. This proved to be a rewarding if difficult undertaking. With available auditorium time being so limited, it was hard for both groups to get adequate rehearsal time and the co-ordination of such an effort was too great a task for the group at that time.⁶⁸ Such learning experiences enriched the group while showing them their limitations.

February 1967 saw the first chancel drama performed by the group with a production of *And He Came To His Father* by Erna Kruckemeyer. Chancel dramas are short playlets on a religious topic performed in the church during a Sunday service. They were to become a regular feature of UP's repertoire in the following years, the last such play being performed in 1989.

1968 was an important year for the United Players. It was in this year that they became incorporated as a society and non-profit organization, giving them not only a feeling of legitimacy, but also a tax break. The words "of Vancouver" had to be added to their name before they could be incorporated. They could now give receipts for donations, allowing the donor to claim tax deductions under charitable donations. This greatly improved the financial situation of the group and elevated their position in the

⁶⁸ United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 16 Dec. 1966.

community from church basement amateur drama group to incorporated society. Logos with the new name were created and proudly displayed on correspondence and play leaflets.

Doreen was more determined than ever to elevate the standard of the performances. So much, in fact, that she refused to allow a play to be performed if it did not meet these standards. *Dial M For Murder* by Frederick Knott had been in rehearsal for some time in 1968 but faced many problems from the beginning. Poor attendance at rehearsals, the preoccupation of the actors with personal matters and a general apathy had led to poor quality in the production. Doreen warned the cast that she was not willing to present such a poor rendition of the famous play, but her words were not enough to galvanize the group. Perhaps they did not believe she would stop the play so close to opening time. However, this is exactly what she did. This was what the group needed to bring them out of their malaise and in the future, when Doreen threatened cancellation, they knew she meant it.⁶⁹

By 1969 there were between twelve and fourteen members regularly attending executive meetings. John Crowe, once so reluctant to participate, became more and more involved in all aspects of the theatre. His work on sets was invaluable. This responsibility, often coupled with a role in the play, kept John working at an incredible pace.⁷⁰ Doreen kept pressure on the group to better their performances and she wrote detailed and honest director's reports. In particular she criticised the technical crew who did not attend rehearsals and therefore found themselves unfamiliar with the play at dress

⁶⁹ Dick, personal interview, 22 Nov. 1997.

⁷⁰ United Players, Director's Report (Doreen Dick), 16 Dec. 1969.

rehearsal. This constantly proved to be a problem spot for the drama group as many of these people had busy schedules. In order to attract new people to the group, especially men, UP decided to become known through newspaper attention. They put notices of upcoming meetings in the Leisure sections of the Sun and Province newspapers. Auditions were publicized in the Callboard section of these papers.

At ticket prices of \$1.25, large audiences were bringing in pleasing profits. 1969 ticket sales had increased to \$675 from the 1968 total of \$489. This allowed UP to donate \$250 to the church building fund and \$50 to Metro Theatre. The increase in audience numbers was partly due to more advertising. Anita Putnam devoted much of her time to contacting as many newspapers and radio stations as possible to publicize the plays. Posters and church announcements continued to draw the local crowds.

The end of 1969 saw UP again reach out to the community. Members of the group volunteered to organize the Sunday School children in the performance of a Christmas play. Joyce Byth, the current President, suggested performing a play for the Public Health Nurses and the Crisis Centre. The play *Quiet Cries* dealt with the theme of suicide. It was narrated by Doreen Dick and acted out by members of the drama group.

The United Players: 1970-79

The 1970's was not a time of radical change for the United Players. They continued to use the St. James auditorium for their productions. New members joined and left the group with each new production while the everyday problems of running the company were tackled by the core group. People who joined and stayed to become executive members included Cynthia Shannon, Win Foster, Wendy Ratcliffe, and Althea Tornquist. Even with the new members, a lethargy developed that almost led to the group's demise. Other theatre companies, too, were struggling to deal with financial difficulties and a lack of interest. This general malaise began to hit UP. Doreen Dick, in her Director's Report for 1970, discussed the problem with her usual frankness:

This has been a disappointing season for all of us as a well-planned programme fell apart at the seams. . . . I was particularly disappointed that we were unable to enter the BCDA Festival this year. The main problem is, of course, lack of members - and particularly this year where we lost regular members who were unable to take part in any way due to their work - or night school, etc. I don't know what the answer is - I only know that it is a terrible struggle endeavouring to perform anything . . . and I wonder if there is any purpose in continuing the struggle.⁷¹

This feeling was also expressed by the president, Joyce Byth, in her report for the 1969/70 season. In this report she asked members to consider where UP was heading and to do some soul-searching to see if they cared enough to work for the group's survival.

United Players faced the same problems as other amateur groups in the 1970's: lack of money. Attendance numbers were decreasing due to more theatre and

⁷¹ Ibid., Dec. 1970.

entertainment options becoming available. With the decrease in ticket sales, money was short, so less could be spent on publicity. This meant fewer people heard about the productions creating a greater decrease in ticket sales. Raising ticket prices to \$1.75 for adults and \$1 for children offset the rising costs of production but did not increase profits. The vicious circle was made worse as the number of church members decreased steadily throughout this period. Yearly income could also not be increased by producing more plays. At this time UP was producing two one-act plays and two three-act plays a season which used the maximum amount of auditorium time they could be allotted.

Audience members still appeared to enjoy the performances, forgiving the occasional sign that these were not professional productions. Doreen needed to constantly emphasize the need to project the voice and speak clearly because of the many acoustical difficulties of the auditorium. These difficulties were noted by Jack Richards, Editor of the Arts Section of the Sun newspaper and formerly their drama critic, who had come to a performance of *Portrait in Black* by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts. Although the play was not reviewed by the newspaper, Mr. Richards had a long conversation with Doreen after the performance in which he highlighted the good and bad points of the production.⁷² The audience was more willing to criticise the choice of play and this gave Doreen a clear picture of which plays would draw crowds. At this time British comedies and mysteries were the most popular plays and it was this type that was chosen on a regular basis.

It was in 1971 that the first of four deaths occurred which were to profoundly affect the United Players. Margaret Hathaway had been very involved in the running of

⁷² Ibid.

the group, along with her husband, John, since at least 1965. She contributed much time to the group, helping to organize events, selling tickets and attending executive meetings. Margaret helped backstage and occasionally handled publicity for the productions. She had been going blind for a few years before her death and it was her illness that prompted the group into giving benefit performances for the CNIB. During these benefit evenings, all proceeds went towards the society. One such performance of *Portrait in Black* in 1970 raised \$93.⁷³ The front row of seats was reserved for blind people and their dogs. These people were later invited backstage to feel the costumes and props. Margaret also inspired some of the members who volunteered to read books onto tape for the blind. Her death in 1971, at the age of thirty-nine, was felt by everyone in the group.

Margaret's death led to a feeling of apathy which increased to the point where Doreen Dick felt something drastic needed to be done. In September 1972 she submitted her resignation as Director and vice-president of UP. She stated that she needed a complete break from theatre, as she felt it had dominated too much of her life. She also felt that she had become stale in her approach to productions and needed at least a year of no theatre work before she could return. She indicated that she would probably return within a year or two. Doreen had indicated before that she was restless and in the need of a break but this did not help to soften the blow. In May, before she resigned, the idea of offering outside directors a token fee had been discussed. It was decided that \$100 would be offered to encourage directors to work with UP.⁷⁴ They had not made a serious effort to establish a network of directors, however. The members were not willing or did not

⁷³ United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 5 June 1970.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 16 May 1972.

feel able to direct a major production themselves. The group was therefore forced to cancel the proposed November production.

1972 was to end on an even worse note, however. Molly McClynn had been with the group since the early days of its creation. She had worked for the group as its vice-president, publicist, backstage helper, and was currently the secretary. She regularly attended the executive meetings and contributed a great deal to the discussions. Molly worked across the street from Gwen Crowe and they had lunch together every Wednesday. One Wednesday near Christmas Gwen was too busy to have lunch with Molly and cancelled their lunch engagement. There was a great deal of commotion near the bank that afternoon and Gwen wondered what the problem was. She later learned that Molly had suffered a cerebral haemorrhage while walking across the road and was rushed to hospital. Molly died the next day at the age of forty-nine.⁷⁵ Once again an integral member of the United Players had died young.

Molly's death had a devastating effect on the group's morale. However, the executive was determined to continue productions and Frank Gurry undertook the direction of *The Marriage-Go-Round* by Leslie Stevens as the first production of 1973. The arrival of Nora Coates was also a boost for the group's morale as she brought with her the enthusiasm and energy so badly needed. Nora has been involved with the group on some level ever since, trying her hand at many jobs. She has acted, worked backstage, attended executive meetings, worked as treasurer, and lent her furniture for productions. Her poodle, Muffin, even appeared on stage in *Diary Of A Scoundrel* by Alexander

⁷⁵ Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997.

Ostrovsky.⁷⁶ Nora's sense of community spirit perfectly complemented that of the group and her arrival helped to ease the loss of Margaret and Molly.

By July, 1973, Doreen Dick was once again attending the executive meetings and planning her next production. Theatre was so much in her blood that a year had proved adequate as a rest period and in November she directed *Night Must Fall* by Emlyn Williams. Doreen was determined, however, not to return as the only director for UP. She insisted on other directors sharing the load so that the group did not become dependent on her again. The members were thrilled to have Doreen directing, even if it was for only one play a year.

Difficulties always seemed to be just around the corner at United Players. In September of 1973 the Committee of Stewards responsible for overseeing the church property raised a concern about the wiring for the stage lights. The wiring was intended to be temporary, but the time and money needed to replace it never seemed to be available. The Stewards were concerned that the wiring could cause a fire and the matter was referred to the church insurance company. Inspection confirmed that it was indeed a fire hazard and should a fire occur due to the wiring, the church would not be covered. Immediate replacement was required with all wiring to meet the requirements of the City of Vancouver electrical code.⁷⁷ Once again the members needed to scramble together the money for such an undertaking. By November, with the help of Gerry Amos, the new lighting had been installed and the Fall production was able to go ahead.

⁷⁶ Shannon Guilbride, "An Interview With Nora Coates: A History of the United Players of Vancouver, Part Two, 1969 - 1979," United Players program for *Jitters*, 1989.

⁷⁷ Josh M. Haqq to the President of United Players, 18 Sept. 1973. United Players correspondence, 1 June 1968 to 22 May 1974.

At the end of 1973 the United Players invited Paddy English, a BCDA community theatre consultant, to give a workshop at St. James. The discussions and questions which arose from the workshop focused attention on the state of the group. UP was forced to look inwards and analyse their strengths and weaknesses. For the first time their location at the church was examined and the possibility of moving was discussed. A letter to Paddy English from the UP secretary, Cynthia Shannon, outlined details of the group's situation. In 1973 audiences had started to decrease in size with approximately 110 people attending per night for a three night run. The group was still not paying monthly rent at this time, instead donating whatever profits were available after attending to the needs of the group. While donations usually represented a large percentage of the profits, this arrangement allowed flexibility when emergencies, such as the need to rewire the lights, arose. Financial realities in 1974 prohibited the rental of other facilities where a fixed amount of rent was required unless the rent was a nominal fee. Also a new theatre space would have to be already set up for play productions as the group would not have the surplus cash needed to renovate.⁷⁸ Therefore the executive concluded that relocation was not feasible at this time.

Despite financial difficulties and space limitations UP continued to flourish artistically. The executive had become more daring in their choice of plays throughout this period. They tested the audience's response to such plays as *The American Dream* by Edward Albee and *The Militants* by Norman Holland. Reactions to these plays varied greatly but the general response was one of interest. This encouraged the group to

⁷⁸ C. Shannon to Paddy English, 6 Jan. 1974. United Players correspondence, 1 June 1968 to 22 May 1974.

experiment with the use of a Greek chorus in the 1975 chancel drama *Circle Beyond Fear* by Darius Leander Swan.

United Players was now becoming known as a group willing to try new ideas. As they often received awards at the drama festivals, they developed a reputation for producing good theatre. This reputation helped to attract guest artists. In 1975, Leon Pownall was introduced to UP by the consultant for Theatre BC who knew the group was looking for new directors. Leon, a well-known actor and director in Toronto and Stratford, had moved to BC hoping to break into the theatre scene here. He directed *Diary Of A Scoundrel* by Alexander Ostrovsky for UP in 1975 and eventually joined the Vancouver Playhouse.⁷⁹ Another guest artist was John Crawford who directed *Never Too Late* by Sumner Arthur Long for the 1976 BCDA festival. Crawford later went on to work for the CBC.

More tragedy occurred in the second half of the decade with two more untimely deaths. Bob Freeman had been one of the early members of the group who frequently worked on the executive. In 1975 he was killed by a hit and run driver at the age of forty-six. In 1977 Joyce Byth died of Hodgkins disease. Joyce had been an integral member of the group as an actor and executive member. She had taken on the responsibility of president of the group for the 1964/65 season and was vice-president for the 1969/70 season. Joyce was enthusiastic about the BCDA and was often the UP representative at their meetings.

⁷⁹Guilbride, "An Interview With Nora Coates".

1977 was also the year in which Doreen Dick directed her last play for the United Players. After her return from semi-retirement, Doreen felt she could no longer spend so much of her spare time directing plays. The death of her close friends had further demoralised her and she felt the time had come to permanently retire. The melodrama *Love Rides The Rails* by Morland Cary was her final play. Bea Hicks, John Crowe and Claire Rivers filled the void created by her departure. Between the three directors the group managed to produce five plays in 1978 and 1979, three of which were presented as festival entries. The decade ended on a fine note with one of these festival plays, *Never No Lament*, written and directed by Claire Rivers. At the local and provincial levels the play won a total of five awards, including Best Director and Best Original Canadian Play. The group also found strength in the leadership of Leo Levy who became president in 1979. Leo had the ability to inspire people and the members rallied around him. His powerful personality and energy had the group facing the new decade with renewed enthusiasm.

CHAPTER THREE

ST. JAMES AND ANDREE KARAS: 1980-89

After the retirement of Doreen Dick, the group no longer had a resident director. Although Bea Hicks and John Crowe had done an admirable job directing, they never intended to take Doreen's place. UP had been searching for directors to join the group, even if only on an occasional basis, advertising their need in the local newspapers. A one hundred dollar guest fee was offered as an enticement.

Dan Tohill had joined United Players in the fall of 1979 when he was hired to direct *Good Night, Mrs. Puffin* by Arthur Lovegrove. Dan had worked in theatre for twenty years as an actor, lighting and set designer, stunt performer, director, and teacher. He directed plays for Metro Theatre and later became the Assistant Director for the CBC series *Beachcomber* filmed in Gibsons. Dan was so impressed by the energy of UP that he decided to stay as its resident director. He had also met and fallen in love with one of the members of the group, Alison Broomfield, whom he married in 1983.

With Dan as director and Leo as president the group began to regain its strength. Core members such as Gwen and John Crowe, and Bea Hicks were able to leave the running of the company to others and renew their interest in other areas of play production. This respite enabled them to avoid the burn-out which had hit Doreen. One area in which the members gladly participated was fund-raising. Money was needed for royalty payments and production costs which seemed to grow at an alarming rate. Dan's

desire to produce new and more professional looking plays required expensive changes in scenery and costumes. Fund-raising was made fun and interesting with the creation of an hour-long variety show called *Pzazz-parella Springs*. This involved guest performers and regular members performing sketches, telling jokes, and singing songs. Leo became known for his one-liners, while Dan told funny anecdotes.⁸⁰

However, this happy state was not to last for long as Leo Levy died in January 1982 while still UP president. Once again the group found itself demoralized and thinking about disbanding. It was Dan who stepped into the breach and became president of UP for that year. He immediately set about increasing the size of the company which had again shrunk to a core group of around eight people. Before this time Dan had chosen casts from the original members. He now reached out to the community to attract new people to the group. He deliberately chose plays with large casts so that the productions could involve many people who would hopefully want to continue their association with UP.

Larger productions further increased costs and the money needed to fund these productions was raised through the variety show and garage sales, the first of which was held in the Kerrisdale Arena in 1982.⁸¹ Dan had stopped receiving money for directing and this saving was put towards production costs. As usual, UP made what could not be bought and many people helped to make sets and costumes. John Crowe continued to be the person in charge of set design and construction, Garth and Nora Coates painted the

⁸⁰ Shannon Guilbride, "History of the United Players of Vancouver (Part Three): Interviews with Dan Tohill and Andree Karas," United Players program for *Come Back To The 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, 1989.

⁸¹ Ibid.

scenery while Althea Rowe (nee Tornquist) painted backdrops to add perspective, and Gwen Crowe continued to lend her expertise to costume design.⁸²

New ways to attract an audience were constantly discussed. In November, 1982 the group performed the melodrama *Pure As The Driven Snow* by Paul Loomis. The production involved the audience which provided the boos and hisses for the villain and cheers for the hero. Sound effects were performed in full view of the audience on the stage. Reg Rowe played the piano in the front while others banged gongs for thunder and cracked sheets of aluminum for lighting.⁸³ The audience responded with enthusiasm and the production was a financial success.

Money again became a focus of attention in 1982 when for the first time, the United Church mentioned the need for a more structured payment. In a letter to Althea Tornquist dated December 14, 1982, L.R. Singleton, chairman of the Accommodations Committee of the church, thanked UP for their donation of \$400. He also stated:

Recommendations for the future would include an immediate scheduling of events planned for the coming year and also a formal agreement stipulating what financial arrangements that United Players can comfortably put in place.⁸⁴

The United Church had never before requested a formal financial arrangement; it was satisfied with the donations UP always made after a performance. The church itself

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ L.R. Singleton to Althea Tornquist, 14 Dec. 1982. United Players, Minutes of the Meetings of the Executive Committee and correspondence, December 1968 to June 1984.

was facing financial problems as the number of its members decreased steadily. Donations to the church had decreased proportionally while the cost of maintaining the buildings rose. The annual report of the St. James United Church for 1970 showed that this decline had begun in the 1960's. Between 1967 and 1970 the membership decreased from 704 to 603, while the total money raised by the church declined from \$48 481 to \$40 159.⁸⁵ By 1983 the church needed the regular money brought in by groups using the auditorium and could no longer accept the flexibility of payment it had once offered. UP responded with a suggestion that the group pay a rent of \$50 a month with 25% of net ticket income donated to the church.⁸⁶ The response was that it should be 25% of the gross income of the play along with a \$50 monthly rental fee. While still a reasonable arrangement, this required the group to carefully budget its money. Plays needed to be chosen that would draw the maximum audience while maintaining the group's desire to experiment. If too much money was spent producing the play the profit would be greatly reduced while the amount of money owed to the church remained fixed.

UP's first production under the new financial arrangement was a great success. *A Tomb With A View* by Norman Robbins is a comedy-thriller that was chosen for its appeal to an audience that had already shown preference for such plays. Income from ticket sales totalled \$1 553.00 while expenses totalled \$641.42 leaving a net income of \$903.58. The church received 25% of the gross ticket sales which equalled a rounded up figure of \$400 along with two months' rent of \$100. This left UP with just over \$400 in profit from the

⁸⁵ St. James United Church Annual Report, 1970, 22.

⁸⁶ Althea Tornquist to L.R. Singleton, 13 Jan. 1983. United Players, Minutes of the Meetings of the Executive Committee and correspondence, December 1968 to June 1984.

play.⁸⁷ Such figures meant that the bank balance in December 1983 was a huge \$1300 compared to only \$80 in 1980.⁸⁸ The large attendance figure of 447 and subsequent profit for this play was partly due to an increase of performance nights from the average three to five. This proved to the UP executive and the church that the extra performance nights were indeed worth scheduling whenever possible. The number of performances steadily increased from this time until the present schedule of fifteen performances and a dress rehearsal.

A Tomb With A View was also the play that introduced John Harris to UP. John was brought into the group by Gwen Crowe with whom he worked. He played the part of Marcus Tomb and from that time on was hooked on acting and UP in particular. John has since worked for the group as actor, treasurer, secretary, backstage worker, fund raiser, set designer, and set constructor.⁸⁹ He has put many hours into UP and remains one of its most dependable members, always ready to help in the production of plays. It seems fitting that John's performance in his first play was watched by first time audience member Andree Karas, future Artistic Director of UP.

Andree Karas was born in Shanghai, China in 1942. Her father was a carpet merchant and her mother an actress and opera singer. Her mother performed in China and Japan, acting in some Japanese movies. Andree's mother also performed across Europe, so that Andree was surrounded by theatre from an early age. Andree loved all aspects of theatre and eagerly participated in highschool productions, even winning some acting

⁸⁷ United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 8 April 1983.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 29 Dec. 1983.

⁸⁹ John Harris, personal interview, 27 Sept. 1997.

awards. Her love of acting led her to join the West Vancouver Theatre Guild in 1961 of which her brother was a member. She stayed with the group for four years, acting in a variety of plays. After Andree's marriage to George Karas her available time for theatrical pursuits was reduced and George was not keen on Andree spending so much of her spare time with the theatre company. When Andree became pregnant it was decided that she should retire from acting in order to raise her family.⁹⁰

Andree's love of theatre did not die through the years but her energies were concentrated on her children and husband. By the time Andree saw her first United Players' play *A Tomb With A View*, her love of theatre had resurfaced and she found herself longing to tread the boards once again. Now that the children were grown, Andree's reasons for not joining a company were gone and knowing Alison Tohill gave her an added incentive to join UP. A third reason for joining the company was that Andree felt she might have some expertise to offer the company as an actress and backstage helper.⁹¹ Her first acting experience with UP was as Thelma Harris in *After Magritte*, a one act comedy by Tom Stoppard. Nobody, especially Andree, had any idea just how important she was to become to the company.

On first meeting Andree Karas, I was struck by her air of confidence. Although professing to be quite shy, she never exhibits this quality, seeming to bask in the attention she receives from UP members and the audience. She has a powerful personality that radiates warmth and humour, and an ability to make people feel welcome whether as part of the team or as an audience member.

⁹⁰ Andree Karas, personal interview, 20 Sept. 1997.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Andree's passion for UP and theatre as a whole is very obvious and she can talk for hours about various aspects of the two. Her incredible energy, almost to the point of hyperactivity, is wonderful to watch and inspires those around her. Andree refuses to allow personality conflicts to negatively affect a show and her attention to detail means she is often at rehearsals even if she is not directing the play. Any director who works for UP must accept this involvement as part of Andree's determination that "The play is the thing." When the need has arisen, Andree has fired directors and actors who have not met UP standards. When pushed, she tells people what she thinks and if she is not always tactful, you can be sure that what is said is meant to help the actor and the play.

While it is true that she is in charge, nobody who knows Andree fails to see her openness to suggestion and willingness to compromise. If it appears that conflicts do not affect her, this is certainly not true. Over the years she has learned to stay in control of her outward emotions even if she is inwardly upset. This has allowed her position as Artistic Director to develop over the years to the point where she chooses the plays and directors for the season and carries a heavy load of responsibility.

The 1983 season also saw UP receive critical acclaim with an original play by J.P. Slater called *Within*. The play was first produced for the BCDA festival in April of that year and starred John Crowe as the Prosecutor and Chris Wilson as Paul. Dan Tohill directed this one act drama which focuses on the deathbed trial of conscience of an unscrupulous financier (Paul). At the Vancouver Zone Festival the play won the Best Supporting Actor award for John Crowe, a special award for Original Script, and Dan Tohill received a special mention for his directing. The play was chosen to go to the Belfry Theatre in Victoria to be a workshop piece at Festival '83. It was also the first UP production to be filmed for cable TV channel 10. J.P. Slater stayed with UP for a short

time, helping with make-up and publicity for *Within* and acting in a *The Curious Savage* by John Patrick in 1984.

While UP members were thrilled with the success of the play and the publicity it generated, there was also concern for John Crowe. John had previously suffered a stroke and although he recovered well, Gwen was especially worried by the emotional outbursts his role entailed. John was supposed to take things easy and not over exert himself, yet here he was performing angry outbursts in his role as Prosecutor. While very proud of his achievements, it was with relief that she saw him give the final performance on September 10.

The success of *Within* gave UP the confidence to raise ticket prices, although this was not popular with all members of the executive. Reg Rowe did not think the comfort of the auditorium, nor its poor acoustical qualities, were worth an increase in prices. Nora Coates objected to the increase on the grounds that UP was created to give the community entertainment, not to make money.⁹² However, it was decided that the increase was necessary and the new prices became \$4.00 for adults, \$3.50 for seniors and students, and groups of ten people cost \$3.00 per person. However, the audience numbers did not improve as hoped and the final production of the season, *The Curious Savage* by John Patrick, had a maximum audience of 64 people a night. It was decided to arrange only 100 chairs each night so that the auditorium did not look empty with such low numbers.

⁹² United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 10 June 1983.

Once again publicity and fund-raising became a major focus for the executive.⁹³ At the meeting of the executive on December 19 it was suggested that Andree become a member of the executive as a member-at-large, Kim Singbeil, wished to resign. As Andree had good ideas for future business sponsors and publicity, it seemed to everyone that she would be a good replacement for Kim. Andree became a member-at-large on December 29, 1983.

The end of 1983 also saw another discussion on how UP fit into the St. James Church community. Members of the executive wanted to know if the church viewed UP as part of the church or as a separate entity. After the creation of UP, in which the minister and his wife played an important part, the church committee had not involved themselves in the drama group to the same extent. Over the years fewer of the drama group's members regularly attended the church, thereby severing another link. It seemed, therefore, that the church saw UP as an independent group simply using the facilities. A feeling of insecurity was generated knowing that the church could ask the group to leave at any time. This nervousness was exacerbated when John Harris completed a breakdown of money spent on rent and the number of hours they used the auditorium. On average the group was paying \$4.20 an hour for the space but at an earlier church committee meeting it had been suggested that the auditorium be rented for \$20 an hour. To minimize their impact and perhaps cement their position, it was suggested by some members of the executive that they try to use less desirable space, such as the daycare or nursery for rehearsals, whenever possible. The main trouble with this arrangement was that the daycare needed to be carefully returned to its original state after each rehearsal which was a time consuming process.

⁹³ Ibid., 19 Dec. 1983.

1984, considered by the executive to be the group's twenty-fifth year, brought mixed blessings to UP. Andree had dedicated a great deal of time and energy to organizing a fashion show as a means of raising money and gaining publicity. The event was held in the St. James auditorium on March 30 and was a resounding success. For a \$10 entrance fee the audience was treated to a traditional fashion show with UP members modelling clothes on a specially built runway. Local designers and popular stores such as Dunn's Tailors spotlighted their clothes, most of which could be bought after the show. Refreshments were served and an excerpt from the upcoming production of *Double In Diamonds* by Fred Carmichael was performed. This successful event highlighted Andree's organizational skills and energy, made a profit of \$721, and created a relationship with the local business community which was to flourish in the future.

The publicity generated by the fashion show helped to increase audience attendance for *Double In Diamonds*. It was well received by the community, especially as it provided simultaneous hand signing for the deaf at one performance, something which had first occurred in the 1970's. This was so successful that signing was repeated in later plays.⁹⁴

The festival play for that year was *Letting Go* by Claire Rivers. This proved to be the last play Dan directed; it was a fitting farewell triumph. Claire Rivers had written the one-act with Gwen Crowe in mind for the role of Amy Belshaw; it had been performed in Penticton in 1982 where it won an award for best original play.⁹⁵ It went on to receive many positive reviews and earned Gwen a Best Supporting Actress award at the

⁹⁴ Guilbride, "History of the United Players (Part Three)."

⁹⁵ Crowe, telephone interview, 6 Dec. 1997.

Vancouver Zone Festival. While not winning in the Best Play category, the positive response led to UP performing the play again in September in what was called *Celebrations*. In honour of their twenty-fifth year UP staged three one-act plays on the same evenings: *Letting Go* by Claire Rivers, *Between Mouthfuls* and *Gosforth's Fete* by Alan Ayckbourn. *Gosforth's Fete* was also notable for its first time director, Andree Karas.

Dan informed the executive at the May 10 meeting that he would be unable to continue as president because of the pressures of his work. Dan was travelling back and forth to Gibsons for work on the *Beachcombers* series and felt he could not give UP the time required for such a position. He had raised concerns about the need for more directors at previous meetings, feeling that the responsibility and time commitment was too great for one person. Dan's spare time had been consumed by his roles as president of UP and director for the majority of plays. As his professional work intensified, he found it more and more difficult to find time for the drama group.

Dan had put a great deal of effort into expanding the scope of UP. He had stepped into the breach at a time of small membership and low morale. In the five years he was with the company he energized the group and set them back on a path of discovery. His dynamic presence was sorely missed, but he left behind a much stronger group than he had joined. Alison remained an active member of the group as an actress, backstage help and executive member.

June 1984 also saw the departure of long time lighting designer Rolly Kingston. The need for new lights, a dimmer system, a new lighting board, a portable lighting booth, and new lighting designs had first been discussed in executive meeting as far back as

September, 1983. Rolly did not attend these meetings and was not in agreement with the plans when they were brought to his attention. At the December 19 meeting it was decided to hold a technical meeting about the installation of a dimmer board obtained by John Crowe. The meeting included John Harris, John Crowe, and Dan Tohill. It was his exclusion from meetings such as these that infuriated Rolly. He felt that as these were technical, not executive, meetings, he had a right to be present. After all, Rolly had been in charge of lighting for ten years and had also been instrumental in recent rewiring of the electrical system. He resigned from UP in June, leaving no doubt as to his feelings of anger and resentment. Much of the equipment belonged to him and his departure with his lights left UP with only four lights and no dimmer board which he took as payment for his past work.⁹⁶ It was a regrettable end to Rolly's association with the group which left members with feelings of guilt. Scott MacDonald undertook the task of buying new lights at a cost of about \$500. A dimmer board was borrowed from the Maple Ridge Players and the group was soon back on track.

June 1984 was also the month that Andree Karas became president of UP. At the June 15 Annual General Meeting, the group was aware that a new president was needed. After John Crowe and John Harris declined the nomination, Andree was nominated by John Harris and accepted the position. Deanna Osvirk became vice president, John Harris became secretary, Nora Coates took the responsibility of treasurer and Gwen Coates was nominated as honorary life member of the executive. With Andree as leader of the group, UP was to continue its move towards semi-professional status begun by Dan Tohill.

⁹⁶ United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 17 June 1984.

One of Andree's first accomplishments was the introduction of professionally made handbills and programs. Until this time the programs had mostly been typed and copied by members of UP. While these were adequate, the new programs were polished, professional looking and generated much needed revenue in the form of advertisements. Local businesses paid to have their names and slogans printed in the programs or were included because of donations. Pictures and biographies of cast members were included along with a synopsis of the play. The money needed to have the programs and handbills printed was raised by the advertisements and by such fund-raising activities as garage sales, mostly under the leadership of Nora Coates. While seemingly a small change, the printed programs set UP on the road to attaining a more professional look and feel.

1984 ended on a high note with the presentation of Alan Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular*. In this three act comedy three different kitchen scenes were needed. A local business donated one complete set and a second set was also donated. The third set however became a problem as nobody else came forward to help. Finally, the director, Chris Wilson, Andree, and John Harris managed to scavenge a kitchen set from a back alley where it had been dumped. Now that the three sets were obtained the crew had the seemingly impossible task of dismantling and moving them onto the stage. After much practice they cut their time down to twelve minutes during the intermissions at the end of acts I and II. While exhausting work, it proved to themselves that they could solve difficult technical difficulties. This opened up a wealth of plays which in the past had seemed too difficult to stage.

The program for *Absurd Person Singular* also, for the first time, presented a picture of Andree and a message from the president. This was to become a regular feature of all programs and coincided with Andree's decision to introduce plays with a minute long

welcome and announcement of future plays. Andree had been told by someone in the theatre community that as president it was important that she become known by name and sight in order to promote UP at various functions.⁹⁷ Andree saw the logic in this and immediately set to work. During her introduction of the play she would remind the audience of the availability of season tickets for those who regularly attended at a cost of \$10.50 for seniors and students, and \$12.00 for adults. She helped sell refreshments during intermission and was usually present after the show to chat to audience members and gather feedback. Andree became, and remains today, a tireless promoter for UP, gradually becoming synonymous with the company.

1985 was a year of firsts for UP. *Centenarian Rhyme* by Alexis Bernier, directed by Beth Coleman, was the first play partly performed on the floor of the auditorium. John Harris designed the set with graded levels, something he had been wanting to try since first working in the auditorium. He also created risers for the audience who, until this time, had been seated on the auditorium floor. This previous arrangement, while simple to set up, did not allow all audience members to have a clear view of the stage. It also did not allow plays to be performed at floor level, further limiting an already restricted venue (UP had occasionally been reprimanded by the church wardens for changing the stage area for a production). This put the actors within a few feet of the audience, creating a much more intimate feeling than normally possible in the cavernous auditorium.

Sound reflection from the walls had also been a problem for years. As part of the overall experiment of this production, John Harris hung acoustic curtains surrounding the

⁹⁷ Karas, personal interview, 20 Sept. 1997.

audience space to counteract this. It was quite successful and was later incorporated into the theatre at Jericho.

Centenarian Rhyme focused on the lives of a typical Canadian family; it had not been presented in Western Canada before and received favourable reviews.⁹⁸ Dan Tohill also offered his help to design the lighting along with Scott MacDonald. By this time a total of \$2400 had been spent updating the system and Dan's help was very much appreciated. The casting for the show was accomplished through open auditions advertised in the local papers. This was the first time such a call for actors had been attempted and it brought a number of new members to the group.

This was also the year in which the Vancouver Fringe Festival was created. UP was asked to present a play and performed *An Actor's Nightmare* by Christopher Durang, directed by Andree. This one act comedy had been the BCDA festival entry in April; it had received good audience feedback. In addition, the play received the Best Supporting Actress Award for Li-Anne Kreeft and Gwen Crowe won an award for Best Costumes. The play went on to receive more praise from the Fringe Festival audience and was a good fund-raiser. The experience gained from staging a play in another new venue was also valuable, encouraging the group to participate in the festival in the future.

The year ended with a joint production of *Babes In The Magic Wood* by David Wood. This musical pantomime was presented at Metro Theatre and was performed in conjunction with Theatre Delta and Metro Theatre. UP had not attempted such a joint production before and everyone involved agreed that it was a valuable learning experience.

⁹⁸ Len Eichel, Refreshing Alternative to "Professionalism," Vancouver Peak, 7 March 1985, p. 12.

The UP executive had always prided itself on community spirit and its willingness to help others. This gave the group an opportunity to work closely with other members of the amateur theatre community and show their worth. UP executive members involved included Gwen Crowe as costume mistress, John Harris as lighting technician and set constructor, and Andree as assistant director. Other members were involved in selling tickets, front of house and other such duties.

In November and December of 1986 Andree and two other members of the executive attended three meetings of the BCDA concerning the Vancouver Zone Festival for the following year. As only a few of the groups sent representatives they were unable to achieve a quorum and the executive could not be elected. Although two members of the West End Players volunteered to attempt the organization of the festival, the lack of attendance frustrated the UP executive. It was decided that they would not renew their BCDA membership for 1987, instead concentrating their attention on the Fringe Festival which they had not entered in 1986 due to a lack of time for rehearsal. The time and money needed for such a venture was now available due to their reluctant one year withdrawal from the BCDA.⁹⁹

By this time Gwen Crowe had begun to spend more time with the BCDA and was less involved with UP. While still a member of the executive and someone who could be counted on in a pinch, Gwen's time was taken up with other projects. Her health had also not been good. The subsequent operations meant that Gwen had to reduce her activities and at least try to rest more. She felt that it was time for others to take over the reins of management and lead the group in a new direction. The company Gwen had founded and

⁹⁹ United Players, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee, 9 Jan. 1986.

kept alive for so long was beginning to change. While understanding the need to evolve, Gwen still felt a twinge of regret as the company's old executive gradually retired and new members took over. The small, familiar drama group was changing into a more business-like venture with a larger membership. As many of the plays chosen were modern dramas, costumes were often the actors' own clothes, relieving Gwen of the responsibility. Gwen's main contribution to UP at this time became her willingness to raise funds and help backstage.

In 1987 Kevin Nimmo, joined UP. A quiet, unassuming person, Kevin was asked to join as technical director, set designer, and builder. His many talents in the technical area of theatre production soon became apparent and his willingness to work in new areas made him a valuable asset to the company. Kevin is the type of person all theatre companies long for and need: hardworking, creative, generous, easy to work with, and able to think of solutions in emergency situations. *Rehearsal For Murder* by D.D. Brooke was his first production as set designer and builder, followed by *The Great Wall Of China* by Max Frisch. Throughout the years to come Kevin would take on the responsibilities of set construction, set design, sound and lighting designer, and technical director. Kevin even tried his hand at stage managing.

Kevin and Andree soon developed a rapport best described as a mother/son relationship. Over the years their squabbles have been an accepted part of working together. Andree occasionally becomes frustrated with the amount of time Kevin takes to do a job as Andree always wants something accomplished immediately. Kevin complains about Andree's badgering and constant nagging to get things done. However, underneath this bickering is a deep affection for each other and respect for each others talent. The personalities complement each other well: Andree needs Kevin's artistic and technical

expertise, while Kevin needs reminders to keep him on track. It is a joy to watch these two people work together, even if they pretend that the other drives them to distraction.

Darren Hales and Chris Reinhart joined UP in 1988, bringing with them more artistic and technical expertise. Darren had worked on lighting for the production of *Babes In The Magic Wood* at Metro and joined UP as lighting designer for *The Great Wall Of China* by Max Frisch. Scott MacDonald had taken over for Rolly Kingston in 1984 and worked as lighting designer until March 1985. After this time until Darren joined UP, the lighting was designed by different members and guest technicians. Darren's arrival meant that the company now had a talented designer who took over not only the lighting design for plays, but also carried the responsibility of maintenance and the acquisition of new lights and gels. Darren remained as resident lighting designer and occasional technical director until April, 1991. He was the lighting and sound designer for *Blithe Spirit* by Noel Coward in 1992, ending his association with UP in the same year after designing the lighting, sound and staging for *Agnes of God* by John Pielmeier. Darren left UP at this time to pursue professional work with the American Musical Theatre Company.

Chris Reinhart's first assignment with the company was working as set designer for the production of *The Second Time Around* by Henry Denker. Chris had been working in Vancouver as a semi-professional set designer and agreed to work with UP for an honorarium. Chris had met Andree's daughter at McGee highschool where he had designed a set for a play in which she was acting. Although he had originally seen this kind of work as a hobby, he had found himself in demand for his artistic talents. The set designs were certainly remarkable and needed the talent of Kevin Nimmo to bring them to

realization. Chris worked with UP until 1991, his last play being *Steel Magnolias* by Robert Harling.

Kevin was becoming more and more an integral part of the company throughout this time. By the end of 1988 he had designed and built a new sound and lighting booth in the backstage mezzanine. Equipment could finally be kept securely locked away; this became a necessity with so much new and expensive equipment around. Kevin also built fourteen new risers for the audience which could be easily taken apart and stored while not in use. The portability of the flats was important as they needed to be out of the way when plays were not being performed.

1989 was to be the last year UP performed at the St. James auditorium. As the United Church found itself in greater financial difficulty, the need for a fixed auditorium rental agreement increased. The church needed to set a rent that was more comparable to other buildings of the same size and so it began looking for full-time clients. The UP executive was aware of the situation and began discussing what they could afford as a fixed monthly rent. The long history of the company with the United Church led to the belief that while changes were necessary, the church would eventually come to an arrangement with them. This complacency was to help end their thirty-one year history at St. James.

The 1989 season had already been set and was to consist of four full length plays, a BCDA festival play, and a Fringe play. Business continued as usual while their future rested in the hands of the church committee. Ironically, the finances of the company were soon to be greatly increased by their first allocation of a casino night. Until 1997, casinos had to share part of their profits with a non-profit organization. On applying to be

considered as such an organization, UP was notified of its eligibility. The group needed to supply five volunteers who could work for an eight hour shift until the early hours of the morning. The non-profit organization is usually assigned two consecutive nights and receives fifty percent of the gross receipts. In April, 1989, UP was therefore amazed and delighted to receive \$14, 500.00. In two nights the company had made more money than they could raise in a year. Once again, most of this money went to improving the lighting system.

With money being raised in this manner, the executive decided to talk to the church and offer a rental agreement. When Andree approached the committee, however, they had already been offered a higher bid by the Phoenix Gymnastics Club. The church accepted the gymnastic club's offer and UP found themselves without a home. As the new lease did not begin until January, 1990, the executive had a few months in which to find a new location for their theatre. It was a daunting task for a group with the specific needs of a theatre company but without the means to pay regular theatre space rental. Everyone joined in the search while still determined to produce the final plays at St. James.

The BCDA festival play for that year was an original piece by UP member Leonard Gribble called *Mrs. Schlepenheimer's Revenge*. It won a Certificate Of Merit and the adjudicator's recommendation that a second act be written that would complete the story. Following this success was *Come Back To The Five And Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, a comedy by Ed Graczyk. This was followed by a musical comedy, *Personals*, by David Crane, and the Fringe Festival production of *Big X, Little Y*. This play was a first time collaboration with Theatre Terrific, a theatre company for physically handicapped actors under the direction of Sue Lister. This company worked out of the

Jericho gym which was owned by the Parks Board and run by the West Point Grey Community Centre.

The final play performed at St. James was *The Mumberley Inheritance* by Warren Graves. Originally scheduled just for September and October, the play was such a hit with audiences that it was also performed in December. The last performance concluded on December 23, 1989. A new home had not yet been found and their thirty year association with the St. James United Church was over. The task of cleaning up thirty years of theatrical accoutrements was huge and many hours were spent moving boxes of costumes, props and other sundries. The lighting system so painstakingly installed was removed. Nora and Garth Coates volunteered their basement for the storage of props, costumes and sound equipment. It was with great sadness that the members of United Players left the St. James auditorium for the last time.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE JERICHO YEARS: 1990-98

The new decade began without a home base for the United Players. This was not going to stop the group performing; after thirty years of facing a variety of crises, this was just one more problem to overcome. The first performance of 1990 was *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot, held in March at Knox United Church in Vancouver. The play was directed by new UP member Ken Scott and included a large cast of regular and new members. The location created a number of lighting and sound problems for the production team which were overcome after much discussion and experimentation. This valuable experience was to be used in future productions at Christ Church Cathedral and St. Andrew's Wesley Church.

June saw a production of *Play It Again Sam* by Woody Allen performed in association with Kitsilano Secondary School. The play, performed at the school, was the first full-length play UP produced in association with a school. The idea had originated with Ken Scott who, as a drama teacher at Kitsilano Secondary, saw a chance for his students to learn from hands-on experience. The cast of the play were members of UP, while most of the crew were students in the grade 11/12 drama program. Darren Hales acted as Technical director and Kevin Nimmo was in charge of set construction. Everyone concerned with the production agreed that it was a wonderful learning experience for students and adults.

Meanwhile, the search for a permanent location had continued. Soon after the June production of *Play It Again Sam*, a location on Dunbar Street was seen as a potential candidate. A store at 3482 Dunbar had become vacant and, with extensive renovation, could be turned into a theatre. The main problem with the renovation was its cost: at least \$150 000 was needed. For a company with a bank account rarely exceeding \$3000, this was a huge amount of money to raise. Undaunted, the executive set about organizing as many fund-raising events as possible, including a Dickens Tea, garage sales, bake sales and dances.

While fund-raising began in earnest, UP performed *Murder in the Cathedral*, this time at Christ Church Cathedral during the month of July. The executive of UP hated to be idle and rehearsals then began for the Fringe Festival in early September. As the space on Dunbar was not yet ready, rehearsals were held in people's homes and *Something For The Fringe* by John Abbott was presented from September 6th to 9th at the Underground on Broadway, Vancouver. Plans were also made for the first production at the new venue which was to be called The UP Art Centre. This production was to be *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde. It was hoped that such a popular play would attract large audiences, thereby helping to make the new location known within the community.

The UP Art Centre was never to emerge, however. Minor work had begun on renovations and the space had been used for rehearsals for the upcoming play. Unfortunately, City Hall parking regulations stipulated that nine parking spaces be available for the building. Only two parking spaces were designated, so the local merchants were asked if they would mind giving UP the additional spaces. While the merchants agreed, the property owners of the buildings refused to allow this, perhaps

worried about a negative impact on revenue for the shops. The requirement could not be met and UP was once again forced to remove equipment and find a new location.

It was Andree who proposed using the Jericho gym for their February production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In surveying the local area for possible theatre spaces, she had noticed that the gym had a stage. Although not immediately impressed by the location, fearing that it was too far from a major road and hard to find, the production was almost ready so there seemed to be no other choice. The gym is run by the West Point Grey Community Centre and they agreed to rent the space to UP for the February production.

The production confirmed that the new locale was indeed a very suitable one. The group, after all, was used to performing in a large building not originally designed for theatre use. The gym also filled a number of requirements the group had for a permanent location. It was a large, adaptable space able to accommodate an audience of at least one hundred people while giving flexibility for staging productions both on the stage or on the floor. Andree also wanted the location to be a community cultural centre dedicated to various aspects of the arts such as drama, music, and fine arts. The Jericho gym was being used for many activities sponsored by the community centre and was therefore known at least by those people who frequented it.¹⁰⁰ It soon became apparent that this was the location they had been searching for, and discussions began with the community centre for permanent, shared residence of the gym.

¹⁰⁰ Sebastian Fagarde, "United Players is on the Move," *Playboard*, Feb. 1991, 18.

While these discussions were taking place, the group continued its work of producing plays. *Whisper Into My Good Ear* by William Hanley was performed at Metro Theatre as UP's entry in the BCDA Festival on April 4, winning an award for scene development. This was followed on April 12 by a three week run of *Godspell* at Christ Church Cathedral, directed by Adam Con with Denis Simpson as co-director and choreographer. The Fringe Festival was also entered by UP with their production of *The Beaux' Stratagem* by George Farquhar. All three productions were met with audience acclaim, proving to the group that they could perform in the most difficult of situations.

In the summer of 1991, Gwen Crowe received the Eric Hamber award for "outstanding contribution to community theatre". This was presented by Theatre BC for the many years Gwen had devoted to different areas of theatre work. It stood for her achievements in acting, costume design, backstage work, fund-raising, and promotion. It recognized that Gwen had worked hard to promote community spirit within the different theatre companies. This was a proud moment for both Gwen and UP, the company she had founded thirty years before.

By September, 1991, negotiations were complete and UP became the resident theatre of the West Point Grey Community Centre, performing at the Jericho gym. Rent was \$1000 a month, a large increase from their days at the United Church auditorium but still less than the rent charged for other buildings of comparable size. The group was able to perform on Thursday through Sunday and had access to the gym for rehearsals on those days. Various other groups shared the gym, including a gun club and fencing club. Theatre Terrific had an office in the building and the community centre used the gym for activities throughout the year.

That first year at Jericho was to be exhausting but very productive. While rehearsals for their first resident theatre production of *Steel Magnolias* by Robert Harding were underway, many alterations to the building had to take place. The community centre was willing to allow these structural changes to be made as long as they did not damage the building or interfere with the other groups using the space. The gym is very similar in dimensions to the St. James auditorium, having a high ceiling and windows at the top of the two side walls. The stage, however, was far more suitable, extending almost the entire width of the south wall. This stage did not need major alterations and its roughly seven meter width and five meter depth was a nice improvement on the auditorium's stage. A two meter extension was made that could be dismantled according to the needs of each play. There were no curtains on the stage so scene changes were made either in full view of the audience or with stage lights turned off.

To enclose the seating area and dampen the sound, curtains were hung along the sides of the gym, as at St. James, and a back curtain separated the audience from the front of house. This curtain is on a pulley system so that it can be raised at intermission and does not hinder the use of the gym by other groups. Costumes were hung on racks backstage. These racks were attached to a pulley system so they could be pulled up and out of the way when not in use. The risers and seats were used in the same way as in the St. James auditorium. Set up for Thursday night's performance, they were left in place until Sunday night when cast and crew helped to dismantle them for storage until the following week. After the bottom of the stage area was cleaned out, this was used to store the risers, while chairs were stacked along the walls.

The mezzanine, complete with a projection booth was already present but had to be adapted for use as a sound booth. Kevin Nimmo was instrumental in designing and

altering the room, enlarging the small window facing the stage so that the light and sound technicians could monitor the play in progress. A raised platform within the room also had to be built so that the technicians could sit in front of the window surrounded by the necessary sound and lighting equipment. Rafters already installed in the gym were perfect as supports for the lights and, once again, Kevin designed and helped to install the new lighting system. It is both an amazing and scary sight to see Kevin rapidly walking along planks of wood high up in the ceiling and leaning over the rafters to adjust lights. Other space on the mezzanine was originally to be used as a green room and lounge but it was later changed into space for costumes and an office.

An important addition to the gym was a new power line installed to ensure safety. Twice during the run of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the power had failed, plunging the gym into darkness. The new line was capable of running all the equipment without difficulty. Another expensive addition was the conversion of a janitor's room into a handicapped washroom which also was to serve as the ladies washroom. A changing room needed to be built backstage and a set designed and built. The washroom and changing room were paid for with funds raised through the Parks Board, the West Point Grey Community Centre, and BC21 (the Lotteries charitable fund).

Steel Magnolias was so well received that sixty-one season tickets were sold by November and the group was besieged by questions about future productions. The next play chosen was the Agatha Christie thriller, *Black Coffee*, which always drew large audiences and therefore helped to spread the word about the gym's location. Especially appreciated was the idea of giving every audience member a "who-done-it" ballot with their tickets. These were collected at the second intermission and a tally was displayed on a chalkboard by the door. Audience members enjoyed seeing the results.

It was also around this time that Andree changed her title from President to Artistic Director. Through the years she had been President of UP, Andree's role in the company had continued to expand. No longer just the person who chaired executive meetings, Andree's vision for the future was leading the group. She chose the plays for the season, hired the directors and kept the company running smoothly. With so many roles to fulfil, the term President did not seem to suffice. At first, Andree simply added Artistic Director in front of President and continued to write The President's Message for the programs. The title of President was later dropped and she became simply the Artistic Director of UP.

The 1992 production of *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw was produced in association with The Conservatory, a professional acting company. The production received a good review from the Vancouver Courier critic, Alison Appelbe who remarked on the excellent lighting and rustic charm of the gym.¹⁰¹ Such publicity was a great boon to the group and sell-out performances not only helped the finances of UP, they ensured interest in the following play, *Boiler Room Suite* by Rex Deverell.

Ticket prices at this time were \$8.00 for adults, \$6.00 for seniors and students, and UP members were charged half price. Anyone performing with UP became a member and was expected to pay a \$15.00 fee. This fee was later reduced to \$1.00 but members paid full price for tickets. This entitled them to a year's subscription to the newsletter and the reduced ticket rate. Casinos continued to be the main source of revenue, paying the rent for the year, but many fund-raising events provided extra money for the many items needed for the new venue. Low attendance figures on Sundays were counteracted by an

¹⁰¹ Alison Appelbe, "Off-beat venues host upbeat work," *Vancouver Courier*, 29 Jan. 1992, sec. Centre Stage, 22.

offer made to the youth hostel next door to the gym. Anyone staying at the hostel could see the production on an admission-by-donation basis which helped to fill the seats while promoting the theatre. This relationship with the hostel has remained, with some minor changes, since this time.

The festival play for 1992 was *Children of the Wolf* by John Peacock. More publicity and acclaim arose from this production as UP won three top awards: Best Play, Best Actor (Jan Jackson), and Best Actress (Nancy Bell). Mischa Neumann also received an honorable mention for her performance.

During this first year at the gym, UP was also deeply involved with all aspects of community theatre, including liaising with other theatre companies. 1992 was the year the Community Theatre Coalition was created with UP as one of its founding members. This coalition (CTC) was formed by a group of actors who wanted to give recognition to outstanding performances by fellow actors and theatre companies in the same form as the Jessies and Tonys. During the year, starting in the 1992/93 season, ten nominators representing each of the ten community theatres involved, watch each group's mainstage performances and make nominations for Best Production, Best Director, Best Actor and Actress, Best Supporting Actor and Actress, Best Set Design, Best Costume Design, Best Lighting Design, and Best Poster. Each group chooses which plays the coalition will see and five people are nominated in each category.

UP certainly did well at the first CTC awards night. Out of a total of fifty nominations in ten categories, UP received twelve, winning awards in four categories for *Agnes Of God*: Best Production, Best Director (Dale Kelly), Best Actress (Colleen

Bignell), and Best Lighting Design (Darren Hales). This success was to be followed by similar successes in years to come, making UP the company to beat.

By 1993 many of the original members of UP were no longer associated with the company. Open auditions and the occasional use of professional actors decreased the number of roles available for any one person in a season. Gwen and John Crowe still helped with fund-raising events and were always willing to help out in any emergency. They attended general meetings and were often present at the various functions. A new core group had emerged, some who had been with UP for a few years, who took over the various executive positions and gave much of their time to producing the plays. Such members included Cheryl Burrows, Helen Bunyan, Vera Gammert, Jan Cramsie, Cathy Johnston, Brenda Hildebrandt, Brenda Jefferson, Ken Westdorp, Judith Barkley-White, and Kelly Marshall. John Harris remained a vital part of the group, as did Kevin Nimmo.

One wish of the group that Andree worked hard for at this time was the conversion of the gym into an arts centre. Discussions were held with the Community Centre and Parks Board with the hope of dedicating the gym building to purely artistic pursuits. The title Jericho Gym was confusing to a fledgling audience trying to locate the theatre and made the company sound more amateurish than they really were. The group also requested that the nights be changed to Wednesday through Saturday in order to eliminate the poorly attended Sunday show. By September the gym had been renamed to the Jericho Arts Centre with a new sign proclaiming it to be the home of UP. The group was never able to change the nights, however, due to scheduling difficulties.

1993 was also the last time UP entered a play in the Theatre BC festival. *Agnes of God* by John Pielmeier was a resounding success, winning Best Production, Best Director

(Dale Kelly), Best Actress (Colleen Bignall), and Best Technical. The play had been produced in November 1992 as one of the year's mainstage productions and its overwhelming audience support had led the group to enter it in the festival. The decision not to enter future festivals came from what Andree saw as a large expenditure of money for little return. While appreciating the awards, the group simply could not afford to produce plays at a financial loss with the monthly rent at \$1000. This was the end of a long association with Theatre BC (formerly BCDA), a sad day for Gwen Crowe who had worked so closely with the organization for so many years. Both John's and Gwen's hard work was acknowledged by Theatre BC when they were the first recipients of a special "Outstanding Dedication" award for their contribution to community theatre.

UP was to gain more good publicity with *Bordertown Cafe* by Kelly Rebar. This Canadian drama was very well-received by critics and audience alike, Alison Appelbe of The Vancouver Courier proclaiming, "Players' teamwork produces winner."¹⁰² The following play, *La Bete* by David Hirson, was not as appealing to the audiences, but it also received high praise from Alison Appelbe. This was the first time the play had been performed in BC. Written in the style of Moliere, it is set in seventeenth century France and uses rhyming couplets, a difficult task for the actors to master as it makes extreme precision necessary. The director, Nicholas Harrison, also insisted on a raked stage, a first for UP and a technical challenge.

La Bete was also the first play for which Sandi McDonald designed the costumes. Sandi, a talented artist and designer, joined UP and, for the first time since Gwen Crowe's work in the early years, designed and made costumes from scratch. Both *La Bete* and

¹⁰² Appelbe, "Players' teamwork produces winner," *Vancouver Courier*, 8 Dec. 1993, 29.

Bordertown Cafe were nominated for the 1994 CTC awards and once again, UP won in six out of ten categories, five for *Bordertown Cafe* and one for *La Bete*: Best Production (Bordertown Cafe), Best Director (K. Ramona Orr), Best Actress (Deborah McKay), Best Set Design (John Taylor), Best Set Decoration (Linda Richards and Deborah Augey), and Best Supporting Actor (John Harris).

The summer of 1994, usually a hiatus time for UP, saw the production of *Saint Joan* by George Bernard Shaw at St. Andrew's Wesley Church in Vancouver. Open auditions drew large numbers of professional and amateur actors wanting the experience of acting in such a classic play (thirty-three women auditioned for the part of St. Joan). As with *Murder In The Cathedral*, the difficulties of performing in a cavernous building had to be dealt with and everyone concerned learnt a great deal about the production techniques needed. Lighting was especially difficult as only twenty-five lights could be hung in the church. Kevin Nimmo therefore had the very difficult and frustrating task of adequately illuminating such a vast area. On one occasion, Andree had to stop the show half way through as only two of the lights could be made to work and the increasing darkness outside made seeing the actors impossible. As luck would have it, this was the night two newspaper reviewers had come to see the show. Although receiving mixed reviews, it still proved that UP could produce a very complex play in a venue unsuited for such productions. Confidence gained from this venture was to help bring about a change in UP's season in the future.

At the Art Centre, problems associated with the building also needed to be dealt with. The room behind the stage was badly needed as a green room, a daunting project due to the amount of material thrown into the space over the years. John Harris, Tom Kavadias, and David Young, all members of UP, shouldered the responsibility and many

hours of hard labour went into the renovation. Again, BC21, the Community Centre, and the Parks Board shared the cost of this renovation, which came to a total of \$24 000.

The 1994/95 season for UP showed the change that Andree had been considering for some time. While always attempting to vary the season as much as possible, she had not attempted to produce the classics, feeling that the actors and directors were not quite up to the task. As more professional and semi-professional actors began to audition at UP, she changed her mind. It was becoming increasingly difficult to find professional work in Vancouver, and so many actors and directors were turning to amateur theatre companies to give them needed practice. University theatre students were also anxious to use their skills and talented people within the theatre community were auditioning for UP. Andree felt that the time had come to attempt not only such favourites as Dickens plays, but to also present the Greek plays that were now so seldom produced. Each season was to have a Greek play, along with such classics as a play by Chekhov or Moliere.

The 1994/95 season therefore consisted of *Night of the Iguana* by Tennessee Williams, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, *Crimes Of The Heart* by Beth Henley, *The Mystery Of Irma Vep* by Charles Ludlum, and *Trojan Women* by Euripides. Such a season certainly showed that UP was not content to produce only financially rewarding plays, and it enhanced UP's reputation as an innovative company.

The experiment was a resounding success. Not only did *Trojan Women* raise more than \$4000 in ticket sales; the play also received seven nominations at the CTC awards. Reviewers were impressed that UP had attempted such a difficult play and were generally

complimentary, as seen in the Vancouver Courier article, "Dazzling 'Helen' drives difficult play: Courageous company tackles 2,400-year-old work."¹⁰³

Canadian content has become increasingly important to UP and in the summer of 1995 the group helped to produce two Canadian plays presented by Novus Theatre: *Under The Skin* by Betty Lambert, and *Inspector Sly's Second-To-Last Case* by Kico Gonzalez-Risso. The 1995/96 season consisted of *A Woman Of No Importance* by Oscar Wilde, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov, *And A Nightingale Sang* by C.P. Taylor, and *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes. *Lysistrata* was a slight departure from the usual UP production as it contained coarse language and suggestive scenes. This was clearly stated in the flyers, however, so that audience members were aware of the content beforehand. In August, 1996, Nicholas Harrison won the CTC award for Best Director for *A Woman Of No Importance*.

The financial success of *Lysistrata* confirmed Andree's philosophy: do not cater to what you think the audience wants. If the play and the acting are good, the audience will come, no matter what the topic of the play. This philosophy has meant that there is not one set audience for UP. While there are usually between fifty to one hundred season ticket holders, the rest of the audience comes from all over the Lower Mainland, drawn by a specific play, actor, or director. The Greek tragedies are especially popular with theatre students who can finally watch the type of plays they have only been able to read. Whenever Andree produced plays guaranteed to bring in large audiences at other playhouses, the attendance at UP was only average. The insistence on producing well-

¹⁰³ Jo Ledingham, "Dazzling 'Helen' drives difficult play," *Vancouver Courier*, 11 June 1995, sec. Theatre, 31.

written modern plays and classics has attracted good directors and actors which have enhanced UP's reputation.

In keeping with UP's community spirit, crew for productions in 1995 and onwards consisted of students from local highschools. Grade eleven and twelve students are given credit for their work program by acting as technicians, backstage crew, and front of house assistants. In the process, they learn skills in these areas that could possibly get them work in the future. This has introduced many young people to the world of theatre while allowing core members to concentrate on the more complicated aspects of producing a play. Both UP members and the students have stated their satisfaction with such an arrangement, one in which everyone benefits.

Throughout this time the Community Centre and UP had discussed the use of the building. The number of different groups using the building had decreased and by September 1996; it mostly consisted of art classes. Andree had continued to recruit professional theatre people to give drama workshops, and classes on acting and directing became a regular part of the building's use. UP received a percentage of the money raised through these courses which helped to pay that month's rent. One of the art classes needed a large space, but as there were no longer groups using the building as a gym, the whole building no longer needed to be cleared. This meant that on Sunday nights the risers need only to be partially dismantled and pushed to the side with the chairs remaining in place on top. This was a welcome break from the tedious task of storing all the equipment; it helped to give the group the feeling that it was their building.

Improvements to the building and equipment continued with the purchase of one hundred fifty comfortable, padded chairs from an auction in Richmond at a cost of \$17 a

chair. Money was recuperated by having people sponsor a chair for a cost of \$25. This involved having a small plaque with the person's name put onto the back of the chair. Other ways of raising money included selling the dress rehearsal of a play to a group for \$200. This gave the cast the benefit of an audience reaction prior to opening night. Sunday night performances could be seen by youth hostel patrons for \$2.00 a ticket rather than the regular price of \$10.00 for adults and \$8.00 for seniors and students.

The 1996/97 season was a critical success with UP winning four CTC awards: *Learned Ladies* won three awards for Best Costumes (Sandi McDonald), Best Set Design (Attila Clemann), and Best Sound (Attila Clemann); while *Hotel Sorrento* won an award for Best Lighting Design (Philip Schulze). Other difficult play produced in that season were *Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov, *Great Expectations* by Dickens, and *Helen* by Euripides.

The 1997/98 season has perhaps been UP's most ambitious to date. Andree does not consider UP to be an amateur group, preferring the title, "semi-professional", and she certainly chose plays that stretched the group's resources to the extreme. The season began with a production of the Japanese play *Rashomon* by Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Andree herself directed the play which had an all Asian cast.

This was followed by Jane Austen's *Pride And Prejudice*. Having only recently been televised, the challenge for the director, Joan Bryans, was to not allow the popular BBC version to overly influence the stage production. *Another Part Of The House* by Migdalia Cruz, directed by a UBC graduate student, Roberto Garcia, was another difficult drama to produce. This was followed by Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, and *Electra* by Sophocles. This interesting and challenging season led to a record twenty-two CTC

nominations: nine nominations each, including Best Play, for *Rashomon* and *An Ideal Husband*, and two nominations each for *Another Part Of The House* and *Electra*.

1998 was a very sad time for UP. A beloved member, Cathy Johnston, died of cancer while still in her fifties. Cathy had been with UP for ten years and had become an important part of the executive. She had been an actress, producer, publicist, front of house coordinator, and, when she died, vice-president of the company. It was hard to believe that her happy, smiling face would no longer be seen around the theatre. With her jolly personality and wonderful way of dealing with people, she had often helped upset actors and frustrated crew. Cathy could always be counted on to raise a smile and everyone was affected by her tragic death at such a young age.

As always, the members of UP have overcome grief by concentrating on the tasks at hand. Certainly, the future for UP is bright. Andree and the core members have worked hard to make the company known to the public and within the theatre community. Andree has no intention of stepping down as Artistic Director until she finds someone willing and capable of taking over such heavy responsibility. Until that time, she will continue to focus her energy on bringing the standards of productions up to those of the professional theatres in Vancouver. Her goal is to have the art centre under the control of UP, to occasionally rent it out to other companies and to increase the number of professional theatre workshops offered at the building. In doing so, UP and its location would be known by more people. Andree would soon like to retire from her job with the Vancouver School Board, after which she intends to spend even more time promoting the United Players of Vancouver.

EPILOGUE

From its beginnings in 1958, the St. James United Church Drama Group, later known as the United Players of Vancouver, has struggled to survive difficulties that forced other amateur groups to disband. The deaths of a number of core members while still at a young age threatened the morale of the group throughout its almost forty year history. Financial worries, the need to change venues, and periodic declines in membership almost forced the group to quit, but in the end, perseverance and determination kept the group together.

The aim of the group, other than to provide cheap, quality entertainment, was to help the community. In the early years this was achieved by donating a large portion of the profits to the United Church, performing at hospitals and retirement homes, and bringing people into the group who needed a positive outlet in their lives. Some performances were signed for the deaf, while others included a day when blind audience members could go backstage to meet the actors and feel the costumes. The profit from some performances were donated to the CNIB.

After the group was forced to leave St. James United Church auditorium, finally finding a home at the Jericho Arts Centre, high rent costs made such generosity difficult. The community spirit remained, however, and UP now helps highschool students complete their requirements for the work experience program by training them in

backstage work. UP continues to provide quality entertainment while giving many students, amateurs, and professionals the chance to hone their theatre skills.

UP, under the guidance of Andree Karas, has taken a bold new path, performing plays seldom seen on stage today. Its production of classic Greek plays has not only enhanced the reputation of the company, it has proven that such plays are financially viable. The typical UP season may now include a Greek comedy, a Chekhov drama, a Dickens classic, and two modern plays from different countries.

United Players has certainly proved its ability to withstand hardship. Its future looks very bright as its reputation increases to grow and more people become aware of the location at Jericho. The only plays not yet produced at UP are those of Shakespeare. Andree once joked that she would not try to produce one of his plays until Christopher Gaze, the force behind "Bard on the Beach", agreed to direct. With Andree's energy and determination, that prospect no longer seems impossible.

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APPENDIX A

PRODUCTIONS: 1959-97

St. James United Church

Year	Date	Author	Title	Director
1958	March	Leslie Sands	<i>Beside the Seaside</i>	Milo Fougner
1959	October	Wynyard Browne	<i>The Holly and the Ivy</i>	Ivor Morris
1960	Spring	Philip King and Anthony Armstrong	<i>Here We Come Gathering</i>	Paddy Stewart
	Fall	Philip King	<i>See How They Run</i>	Doreen Dick
1961	Spring	Philip King (also performed at Mission Highschool)	<i>Pools Paradise</i>	"
1962	Fall	Patrick Hamilton	<i>Angel Street</i>	"
1964	Spring	Curt Goetz	<i>Hocus Pocus</i>	"
	Fall	D.E. Stevenson	<i>House On The Cliff</i>	"
1965	March & June 2-5	Holworthy Hall & Robert Middlemass	<i>The Valiant</i> (festival)	"
	Dec. 9-11	John Dighton	<i>The Happiest Days of Your Life</i>	"
1966	March	Frank Vosper	<i>Love From A Stranger</i>	"
	Mar. 25	Elda Cadogan	<i>The Invisible Worm</i> (festival)	"
	November	Lucille Fletcher Franca Rame	<i>Sorry, Wrong Number</i> <i>Rise and Shine</i>	"
1967	February	Erna Kruckemeyer	<i>And He Came To His Father (chancel drama)</i>	"

	April	Norma Johnston	<i>Glory In The Flower</i> (festival)	"
	Nov. 30, Dec. 1,2	Fred Carmichael	<i>Exit The Body</i>	"
1968	April	P.W. Turner	<i>Cantata For Derelicts</i> (chancel drama) (also performed at Queens Ave. United Church, New Westminster)	"
	Nov. 14-16	Frederick Knott	<i>Write Me A Murder</i>	"
1969	Mar. 13-15	Neil Simon	<i>Barefoot In The Park</i>	"
1970	March	Neil Simon	<i>Come Blow Your Horn</i>	"
	March	Tad Mosel	<i>Impromptu</i> (festival play)	David Mills
	Fall	Ivan Goff & Ben Roberts	<i>Portrait in Black</i>	Doreen Dick
1971	Spring		<i>The Small Private World</i> <i>of Michael Marston</i>	John Crowe
	November	Edward Albee	<i>The American Dream</i>	Doreen Dick
1972	February	Noel Coward	<i>Blithe Spirit</i>	"
	March	N. F. Simpson	<i>We're Due In Eastbourne</i> <i>In Ten Minutes</i> (festival)	"
1973	Mar. 22-24	Leslie Stevens	<i>The Marriage Go-Round</i>	Frank Gurry
	May	Robert W. Anderson	<i>I'm Herbert</i> (festival)	Eleanor Heath
	November	Emlyn Williams	<i>Night Must Fall</i>	Doreen Dick
1974	May 10	Thornton Wilder	<i>Queens Of France</i>	Lorne Dupuis
	November	Norman Holland	<i>The Militants</i>	Doreen Dick
1975	Apr. 6	Darius Leander Swan (performed April 13 at Sunnyside United Church, April 27 at St. Andrew Wesley Church, and June 6 at Canadian Memorial Church)	<i>Circle Beyond Fear</i> (chancel drama)	"
	Nov. 21, 22, 27, 28, 29	Alexander Ostrovsky	<i>Diary Of A Scoundrel</i>	Leon Pownall
1976	Apr. 8-10	Sumner Arthur Long	<i>Never Too Late</i>	John Crawford

	Apr. 13	Verne Powers	<i>High Window</i> (festival)	John Crowe
1977	Mar. 3,4, 5,10,11,12	Morland Cary	<i>Love Rides The Rails</i>	Doreen Dick
1978	Apr. 27	Moritz Jagendorf	<i>The Farce Of The Worthy Master Pierre Patelin</i> (festival)	Bea Hicks
	September	Marcelle Maurette Moritz Jagendorf (also performed at Deep Cove Stage Theatre)	<i>Recognition Scene from Anastasia The Farce of the Worthy Master Pierre Patelin</i>	Bea Hicks
	Dec. 7-9	Edward Percy	<i>Ladies In Retirement</i>	John Crowe
1979	Apr. 25	Claire Rivers John Mortimer	<i>Never No Lament Mill Hill</i> (festival)	Claire Rivers John Crowe
	May 4	Claire Rivers John Mortimer Joan Mason Hurley	<i>Never No Lament Mill Hill Passacaglia</i>	Claire Rivers John Crowe Judy Crowhurst
	June 5	Claire Rivers	<i>Never No Lament</i> (festival finals)	Claire Rivers
	Fall	Arthur Lovegrove	<i>Good Night, Mrs. Puffin</i>	Dan Tohill
1980	Apr. 10-12	Dan Tohill et al.	<i>Spring Revue</i>	"
1982	Nov. 11-13	Paul Loomis	<i>Pure As The Driven Snow</i>	Dan Tohill & Stephen Archibald
1983	Mar. 3,4,5, 11.12	Norman Robbins	<i>A Tomb With A View</i>	Dan Tohill
	Apr. 29	J.P. Slater	<i>Within</i> (festival)	Dan Tohill
	May 31, June 1	J.P. Slater	<i>Within</i> (festival finals)	Dan Tohill
	Sept. 7-10	J.P. Slater David Henry Wilson Tom Stoppard	<i>Within On Stage Mr. Smith After Magritte</i>	Dan Tohill J.P. Slater Chris Wilson
	Dec. 1-3, 8-10	John Patrick	<i>The Curious Savage</i>	Dan Tohill

1984	Mar.	Fred Carmichael	<i>Double In Diamonds</i>	Dan Tohill
	Apr. 22	Claire Rivers	<i>Letting Go</i> (festival)	Dan Tohill
	June 24	James Brock	<i>A Sound From Heaven</i> (chancel drama)	John Crowe
	Sept. 19-22	Claire Rivers	<i>Letting Go</i>	Dan & Alison Tohill
		Alan Ayckbourn Alan Ayckbourn	<i>Between Mouthfuls</i> <i>Gosforth's Fete</i>	Beth Coleman Andree Karas
	Nov. 29-30, Dec. 1, 6-8	Alan Ayckbourn	<i>Absurd Person Singular</i>	Chris Wilson
1985	Mar. 1-2, 6-9	Alexis Bernier	<i>Centenarian Rhyme</i>	Beth Coleman
	Apr. 4	James Brock	<i>The Last Days</i> (chancel drama)	John Crowe
	Apr. 10	Christopher Durang	<i>An Actor's Nightmare</i> (festival)	Andree Karas
	Apr. 28	Norman Holland	<i>The Second Easter</i> (chancel drama)	John Crowe
	Sept. 14-15, 21-22	Christopher Durang	<i>An Actor's Nightmare</i> (Fringe Festival)	Andree Karas
	Sept. 26-28 Oct. 3-5	Tennessee Williams	<i>Period Of Adjustment</i>	Dennis Kristos
	Dec. 13-28	David Woods (at Metro Theatre as joint production with Metro and Theatre Delta)	<i>Babes In The Magic Wood</i>	Matthew Walker
1986	Jan. 23-25, 30-31, Feb. 1	Arnold Ridley	<i>Ghost Train</i>	Denis Comey
	Mar. 27	Ruth Ruggels	<i>The Cross</i> (chancel drama)	John Crowe
	Apr. 2	Anne Chislett	<i>The Tomorrow Box</i> (festival)	Sue Lister
	Apr. 24-26, May 1-3	Anne Chislett	<i>The Tomorrow Box</i>	Sue Lister
	Sept. 26-27, Oct. 2-4, 9-11	Marion Andre & Martin Brobstein	<i>The Invented Lover</i>	Beth Coleman

1987	Jan. 30-31, Feb. 5-7, 12-14	Bob Fisher & Arthur Marx	<i>The Impossible Years</i>	Johnny Duncan
	Apr. 16	Jim Hillson	<i>Feast Of Passover</i> (chancel drama)	Margaret Fotty
	Apr. 24-25, 30, May 1-2, 7-9	Reginald Rose	<i>Twelve Angry Women</i>	Andree Karas
	Sept. 14-17, 19, 20	John Abbott	<i>Here, Today . . .</i> (Fringe Festival)	Keith Gordey
	Sept. 25-26, Oct. 1-3, 8-10	D.D. Brooke	<i>Rehearsal For Murder</i>	Paul Kloegman
1988	Jan. 29-30, Feb. 4-6, 11-13	Max Frisch	<i>The Great Wall Of China</i>	Dermot Hennelly
	May 27-28, June 2-4, 9-11	Henry Denker	<i>The Second Time Around</i>	Peggy Keene
	Sept. 11-14, 18	Jan Steen	<i>Crystal Balls</i> (Fringe Festival)	Andree Karas
	Oct. 28-29, Nov. 3-5, 10-12	Ray Cooney & John Chapman	<i>Not Now Darling</i>	Johnny Duncan
1989	Jan. 27-28, Feb. 2-4, 9-11	David French	<i>Jitters</i>	Kevin Murawsky
	Mar. 30	Leonard Gribble	<i>Mrs. Schlepenheimer's Revenge</i> (festival)	Barry Grant
	May 26-27, June 1-3, 8-10	Ed Graczyk	<i>Come Back To The Five And Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean</i>	Bev Siver
	Aug. 24-26, 31 Sept. 1, 2, 7-9	David Crane et al.	<i>Personals</i>	Beth Coleman & Adam Con
	Sept.	Elinore Siminovitch (in association with Theatre Terrific for the Fringe Festival)	<i>Big X, Little Y</i>	
	Sept. 28-30, Oct. 5-7, 12-14, Dec. 16-17, 21-23	Warren Graves	<i>The Mumberley Inheritance</i>	Peggy Keene

End of association with St. James United Church

1990	Mar. 8-10, 15-17, 22-24	T.S. Eliot (performed at Knox United Church, Vancouver)	<i>Murder in the Cathedral</i>	Ken Scott
	June 1, 5-8, 12-15	Woody Allen (in association with Kitsilano Secondary School and performed at the school)	<i>Play It Again Sam</i>	John McLaren
	July 10-14, 17-21, 24-27	T.S. Eliot (performed at Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver)	<i>Murder in the Cathedral</i>	Ken Scott
	Sept. 6-9, 12,13	John Abbott	<i>Something For The Fringe</i> (Fringe Festival)	
1991	Feb. 8-9, 13-16,20-23, 27, Mar. 2	Oscar Wilde (performed at Jericho Gym)	<i>The Importance Of Being Earnest</i>	Denis Comey
	Apr. 4	William Hanley	<i>Whisper Into My Good Ear</i> (festival)	Marcel Maillard
	Apr. 12- May 4	John-Michael Tebalak & Stephen Schwartz (performed at Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver)	<i>Godspell</i>	Adam Con
	Sept. 10-15	George Farquhar	<i>The Beaux' Stratagem</i> (Fringe Festival)	Jan Steen

Jericho Arts Centre

All plays run Thursday through Sunday unless otherwise stated

	Sept. 14-Oct. 6	Robert Harling	<i>Steel Magnolias</i>	Scott Wheeler
	Nov. 22-Dec. 5	Agatha Christie	<i>Black Coffee</i>	Dale Kelly
1992	Jan. 31-Feb. 23	George Bernard Shaw (produced in association with The Conservatory)	<i>Pygmalion</i>	Lee Van Paassen
	Apr. 3-26	Rex Deverell	<i>Boiler Room Suite</i>	Beth Coleman
	Apr. 8	John Peacock	<i>Children of the Wolf</i> (festival)	Joe Mongey
	June 12-July 5	A.R. Gurney Jr.	<i>The Dining Room</i>	John MacLaren
	Sept. 18-Oct.11	Noel Coward	<i>Blithe Spirit</i>	Andree Karas
	Nov. 20-Dec. 13	John Pielmeier	<i>Agnes of God</i>	Dale Kelly
1993	Feb. 19-Mar. 13	Neil Simon	<i>Barefoot in the Park</i>	Johnny Duncan

	Apr. 13	John Pielmeier	<i>Agnes of God</i> (festival)	Dale Kelly
	Apr. 2 - 25	John Murrell	<i>Waiting For The Parade</i>	Andree Karas
	June 11-July 4	Richard Harris	<i>Stepping Out</i>	Shane Vahey
	Sept. 10-Oct. 3	Ivan Menchell	<i>The Cemetery Club</i>	Nicholas Harrison & Gary Folka
	Nov. 26-Dec. 19	Kelly Rebar	<i>Bordertown Cafe</i>	K. Ramona Orr
1994	Jan. 28-Feb. 20	Davis Hirson	<i>La Bete</i>	Nicholas Harrison
	Apr. 1-24	N.J. Crisp	<i>Dangerous Obsession</i>	Len Gribble
	June 3-26	Michel Tremblay	<i>Les Belles Soeurs</i>	Sandra Ferens
	July 20 - Aug. 13	George Bernard Shaw (Wed - Sat. at St. Andrew's Wesley Church)	<i>St. Joan</i>	Ken Scott
	Sept. 9-Oct. 1	Tennessee Williams	<i>Night of the Iguana</i>	Andree Karas & Kim Seary
	Nov. 18 - Dec. 11	Marie Haldane & Wendi Pope	<i>Little Women</i>	Wendi Pope
1995	Feb. 3-26	Beth Henley	<i>Crimes Of The Heart</i>	Kim Seary
	Mar. 31 - Apr. 23	Charles Ludlum	<i>The Mystery Of Irma Vep</i>	Drew McCreadie
	June 2-25	Euripides	<i>Trojan Women</i>	Andree Karas
	Sept. 8-Oct. 1	Oscar Wilde	<i>A Woman Of No Importance</i>	Nicholas Harrison
	Nov. 17- Dec. 10	Frances Hodgson Burnett	<i>The Secret Garden</i>	Larry Davis
1996	Feb. 2-25	Anton Chekhov	<i>The Three Sisters</i>	Andree Karas
	Mar. 29 - Apr. 21	C.P. Taylor	<i>And A Nightingale Sang</i>	Sue Lister
	May 31 - June 23	Aristophanes	<i>Lysistrata</i>	Ken Scott
	Sept. 13 - Oct. 6	Anton Chekhov	<i>Uncle Vanya</i>	Dmitri Boudrine

	Nov. 15-Dec. 8	Charles Dickens	<i>Great Expectations</i>	Donna Kelly
1997	Feb. 7-Mar. 2	Hannie Rayson	<i>Hotel Sorrento</i>	Attila Clemann
	Apr. 4-Apr. 27	Moliere	<i>The Learned Ladies</i>	David. C. Jones
	June 6-29	Euripides	<i>Helen</i>	C.W. Marshall
	Sept. 12-Oct. 5	Ryunosuke Akutagawa	<i>Rashomon</i>	Andree Karas
	Nov. 14-Dec. 7	Jane Austen	<i>Pride And Prejudice</i>	Joan Bryans
1998	Feb. 6-Mar. 1	Migdalia Cruz	<i>Another Part Of The House</i>	Roberto Garcia
	Apr. 3-26	Oscar Wilde	<i>An Ideal Husband</i>	Denis Comey
	June 5-28	Sophocles	<i>Electra</i>	David C. Jones

APPENDIX B: CHRONOLOGY

- | | |
|------|---|
| 1954 | Tom and Eileen Oliver direct <i>The Late Christopher Bean</i> at the St. James United Church |
| 1957 | John and Gwen Crowe arrive in Vancouver and become members of the St. James United Church |
| 1958 | The St. James United Church Drama Group is founded by Eileen and Gwen. <i>Beside The Seaside</i> produced in church basement |
| 1959 | <i>The Holly and the Ivy</i> - considered to be first production |
| 1960 | Drama group moves into newly built auditorium

Doreen Dick joins as director |
| 1962 | Drama group helps in creation of Metropolitan Theatre Co-operative |
| 1963 | Name changed to The United Players |
| 1965 | UP joins British Columbia Drama Association (Theatre BC)

First Festival play (<i>The Valiant</i>) wins four top awards |
| 1966 | President, Muriel Sanders, dies |
| 1967 | First chancel drama performed |
| 1968 | Incorporated as The United Players of Vancouver

Doreen cancels <i>Dial M For Murder</i> due to poor standard |
| 1972 | Doreen Dick resigns as director |
| 1973 | Doreen Dick returns for occasional directing |

- 1977 Joyce Byth dies
Doreen Dick directs last play for UP
- 1979 Dan Tohill directs first play for UP
- 1982 President Leo Levy dies, Dan becomes President
- 1983 UP pays first fixed rent for auditorium
John Harris and Andree Karas join UP
- 1984 Dan Tohill leaves UP
Andree Karas becomes President
- 1985 Risers for audience built for *Centenarian Rhyme*; first set built on different levels
- 1986 BCDA membership terminated
- 1987 Kevin Nimmo joins UP
- 1989 First casino night allocation
- 1990 Rent building at 3482 Dunbar
- 1991 *Importance of Being Earnest* presented at Jericho gym
Gwen Crowe receives Eric Hamber award for "outstanding contribution to community theatre."
Become resident theatre company of Jericho gym
- 1992 Involved in creation of Community Theatre Coalition
- 1993 Jericho gym renamed Jericho Arts Centre
- 1994 *St. Joan* performed at St. Andrew's Wesley Church
- 1995 First Greek play, *Trojan Women* by Euripides, performed
- 1998 Vice-President, Cathy Johnston, dies