

Village Playhouse centre of its own drama

By Tony Pearson

Last week's press release from Bancroft Summer Theatre has triggered enough storylines to make a play of its own. Despite talking to over half a dozen people from all aspects of the dispute, there isn't much that can be said definitively about what was done to whom. However, two central facts appear firm: there will be some theatre at the Bancroft Village Playhouse this summer; and, it won't be local, 'community' theatre.

Hospice North Hastings, which operates the Playhouse under lease from its owner, St. Paul's United Church, is bringing in a number of shows from out of town. The only play is *Two Across*, a romantic comedy centring around crossword puzzles. In addition, there are several one woman shows: *Suddenly Mommy*, *A MILF-Life Crisis*, and *Oneymoon*. As well, there will be improv comedy, a magician, and several musical evenings, including the Haliburton opera and a Carole King tribute.

What there will not be, are any locally mounted and locally performed plays. Black Fly Theatre, which has put on such productions as *Harvest* and *You're a good man, Charlie Brown*, has no play planned. The Bancroft Theatre Guild will stage its 24-hour theatre, and probably *Random Acts*, but not at the Playhouse.

Determining why this situation has developed after two decades of community theatre is not easy, but finances seem to be at the core. The community groups contend that they were blindsided by unexpected rental fee increases charged by Hospice, pricing them out of the building.

However, it isn't just a question of revenue; it's also the funds spent to repair the building. Without getting into excessive detail, the community theatre groups stress the role they played in bringing the Playhouse to life in the 1990s (it was then the United Church's education centre). On the other hand, Hospice, through its program director Heather Brough, notes the many needed repairs and refurbishing they have done in the year since they took over management - including renovated washrooms, and a rebuilt deck and upper balcony, as well as the electric signage.

A letter from the United Church board states that Hospice has repaired the building so that it meets fire, building, and electrical codes. As well, the United Church notes that its revenue from the Playhouse has greatly improved, even with the renovations.

Brough said that the community theatre groups were not attracting enough people to the theatre. She noted small houses last summer, especially for the *Charlie Brown* musical. 'A theatre needs full houses - a feeling of success,' she contended, and said that they had been studying the concept of 'capacity' - not overbooking or long runs, but having only a few events each month, all of which exude a 'lightness of spirit.'

She also believes marketing is central. 'Many local groups do a great job - the Merry Micks, the North Hastings Choir.'

There are remaining points of contention - for example, ownership of the lighting and sound systems, originally installed by the Theatre Guild.

Also, Black Fly Theatre has asked for another meeting with Hospice. At press time, there had been no reply. The Theatre Guild is not looking for further talks, but will make its own plans at its annual meeting later this month