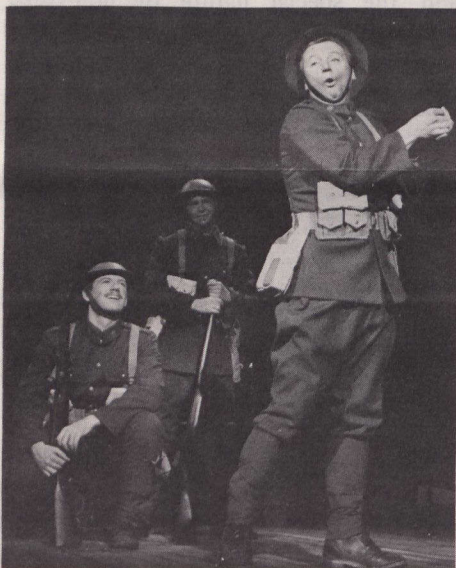


# News of the arts

## Old Dumbells never die — First World War trenches exchanged for Charlottetown stage

*The Legend of the Dumbells*, a nostalgic musical based on the First World War Canadian troop entertainers, had its *première* at the Charlottetown Festival in Prince Edward Island, and remains in performance all summer.

The original Dumbells were a company of singing soldiers recruited from the Canadian Army Third Division to entertain the troops after the Battle of Vimy Ridge. They took their name from the crossed-dumbbells of the Division's insignia, and a misspelling of their name on the first program stuck with the performers. The Dumbells were organized by Captain Merton Plunkett, a YMCA social director serving with the Canadian Forces, who was responsible for building up morale. The group performed their variety revues as close to the trenches as possible, setting up Plunkett's battered piano, donning makeshift costumes and using old tin cans for theatre lights. Among the favourite anecdotes of these early days is the story of Ross Hamilton, an ambulance driver from Pugwash, Nova Scotia who did female impersonations. Hamilton would enter an army mess in his finery, wait for all the men to rise, and then astonish them by booming out an order for beer.



Doug Chamberlain sings *The Photo of the Girl I Left Behind* in the Charlottetown Festival's musical *The Legend of the Dumbells* this summer. Chamberlain plays the role of Jack McLaren, with Scott Walker as Bill Redpath (left) and soldier Jim White (centre).



Captain Merton Plunkett, founder of *The Dumbells* troop entertainment show, poses with two of the "girls", Ross Hamilton (left) and A.G. Murray on stage some time during the First World War.

### Success in "civvy street"

Under Plunkett's direction, the Dumbells grew in size and experience. After the war they performed at the Coliseum in London, returning to Canada in 1919 to become an immediate success. They remained popular for nearly a decade, touring across Canada and the United States, including a three-month stint on Broadway in 1921.

The Charlottetown revival includes many of the First World War songs and skits that the Dumbells made famous and recalls the conditions under which the performances were presented to the battle-weary men. Charlottetown director Allan Lund gathered material about the Dumbells for over a period of five years. The script was written by George Salberston with music by John Fenwick, who arranged the score, drawing from over 200 songs in the Dumbells' shows. The last survivor of the original company, pianist/comedian Jack Ayers provided Lund with some of the original sheet music for songs like *Wild Wild Women* and *The Dumbell Rag*. Ayers died in May at age 83, but two members of the com-

pany who joined the Dumbells later in their career were present at the Charlottetown revival.

Both veterans were brought onstage to thunderous applause after the opening night. Speaking for his old colleague, Bill Redpath and himself, Jack Maclaren addressed the audience. "It was wonderful," he said, "to have the Dumbells revived after being in mothballs for 40 years. There are more than just Bill and I standing here tonight, there are the spirits of all those who played with us."

*The Legend of the Dumbells* is being performed at the Charlottetown Festival, along with *By George* a musical based on the life and work of George Gershwin, and with the Festival's 13-year-old hit *Anne of Green Gables*.



Brian McKay (above), who plays Captain Merton Plunkett, founder of the Dumbells, in the Charlottetown revival, bears a remarkable resemblance to his namesake.

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