

Walter Learning: A Brunswickan Interview

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Walter Learning, the recently appointed director of the Playhouse is easily one of the most exciting personalities to hit the Fredericton scene in the past year. At thirty he is the youngest man ever to hold that position and combines the vitality and enthusiasm of youth with a surprisingly wide range of experience.

He received both his Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees from UNB where he was active in the Drama Society as a producer, director, and actor; he was president of the Society in 1961-2. He furthered his studies at the Australian National University and is at present completing his PhD thesis: "National Law and the Problem of Political Obligation in Hooker and Hobbes".

Mr. Learning has served as a lecturer in the department of Philosophy at his native Newfoundland's Memorial University and at UNB. However the theatre has been his greatest love ("My right arm!") and the directing influence in his career. He has been a Governor and an Executive Officer of the Dominion Drama Festival.



In the summer of 1967 Learning served as director of Drama at the UNB summer session and moderator at the Dominion Drama Festival. Mr. Learning is the fourth director of the Playhouse in three years. If his past successes continue and his creative vigor prevails we hope he will last longer than his predecessors, and so does he.

The Brunswickan spoke with Mr. Learning about his successful Summer Session, his newly formed Theatre New Brunswick, and its first Winter Season:

Bruns: You recently announced formation of a company of players based at the Playhouse called Theatre New Brunswick. According to press releases the company will produce four plays the first of the year including "The Marriage-Go-Round", John Osborne's "Inadmissible Evidence"; the farce, "Boeing-Boeing"; and Tennessee William's "The Glass Menagerie". All four plays will open in Fredericton and then tour Woodstock, St. Stephen, Moncton, Saint John, and Newcastle. The first question is why the company and why the Winter Season?

Learning: It's a very simple why. I like to be living in a

place where there is lots of live theatre. We can't have lots of it in Fredericton by itself. It's impossible. Fredericton's too small. It's got to have other places to play. And so the logical answer is the Provincial Theatre. And this is the "why" and the "why now?" is that we managed to make a go of it this summer and so the powers that be, that pay the dollars, that pay the deficits



are willing to take a gamble on it this time.

Bruns: Does the folding of the Rothsay Playhouse have any implications on your plan for Provincial Theatre?

Learning: The Rothsay thing was not a New Brunswick operation, really. It was primarily a summer thing. It wasn't designed to be a Provincial Theatre. The kind of thing that can come out of a Provincial Theatre is that it's not beyond the realm of possibility that within a year or so we will have our own company doing its regular shows and going around doing the schools, elementary schools, high schools. And these are all off-shoots from this same thing.

Bruns: Who makes the bookings for the various performances, movies, etc., that appear at the Playhouse?

Learning: It's a pretty free and open thing but there are some constants. For example UNB has its goes with Red and Black, Winter Carnival - those things are pretty constant. And you can tell now that five years from now - you know - that it will be around there they're going to trundle down, and the beer will start coming in, that's pretty constant. But as far as the booking, that's a point that many people get confused about. Except for our own productions, like the Summer Season and the Winter Season that's coming up now, the place operates as a rental house. We have no power to sponsor things like the National Ballet, what we do is try to find people, organizations or groups, who will sponsor them. We try to bring them together.

For instance I brought the National Shakespeare Company with "Murder in the Cathedral" together with the Creative Arts Committee and they found that they had a product each wanted.

Bruns: How close do you work with UNB?

Learning: Well I'm directing a show for them right now, and I am a UNB graduate, and had been a member of the Drama Society for a number of

years. **Bruns:** So it's a personal thing -

Learning: In that respect it's a personal thing - yeah. It's a personal involvement. But there has been a big gap between the Playhouse and the University. What have you got there now? Nearly five thousand souls sitting up there on the hill? I mean, that's a tremendous talent pool and that's a tremendous audience potential, a reasonably informed audience one would hope. At least - we know - we've got a chance. And that kind of potential in a town of 25 or 30 thousand people, is a big hunk, a very big hunk.

Bruns: How would you react to the statement "The only sure way to fill the Playhouse is to feature a double bill consisting of the Renfro Valley Barn Dance and "Thunderball"."

Learning: We. I think its wrong. Because the only way to really, really, fill the Playhouse is to have a country and western band with religious overtones. That's the combination. Take a look at it in terms of economic, social and educational background.

But one of the things that you forget: I was in Newcastle last week selling them on the Winter Season and I got the usual bit that this was a country and western place. At the turn of the century Saint Stephen, Woodstock, Saint John, Fredericton, Moncton, Newcastle, were all part of the American touring circuit and the British touring circuit. When they came over, they use to come over on the boats, get off at Halifax, and they'd spend three or four months touring this province, with everything from Gilbert and Sullivan to the latest in modern stage. And these towns



can't be too lightly dismissed, I mean Oscar Wilde spent a night in jail here. He played down at the Old Opera House here in Fredericton. These guys did the whole circuits. So there was a background at one time. There was a continuing bit, and this is the important thing. If you come with your big special event, piece of drama, once a year, that doesn't develop a habit. If you have something which is there all the time, every six weeks, this crazy group comes to town and does their little bit and leaves again. If you've got that over a period of a couple of years you develop a habit, and it really doesn't

become something like 'we'll just go out this one night to this one play'. This is the kind of thing we've got to re-establish here because there hasn't really been an opportunity since the touring company stopped just before the thirties - there hasn't been an opportunity for any community to develop a habit of going. And I think it'll change.

Bruns: And you think that your Winter tour will be this?

Learning: I think that it'll be a start. **Bruns:** How would you react to this one: The Playhouse audience is composed of two segments - the Fredericton pseudo-socialites and the UNB pseudo-intellectuals. The former react; "wasn't that just beautiful" or "very thought provoking, that" while the latter invariably call the play an



abomination and suggest that another eruption has probably struck Westminster's "sheltered corner".

Learning: Well, first of all I wish that we did have a few UNB pseudo-intellectuals down here. The percentage of our audiences from UNB has been less than 1 per cent of the audience, over a long haul. This is what I was talking about earlier, that whole bit about the student potential not being tapped. UNB students have just not come down and the faculty are worse offenders. Faculty are absolutely the worst offenders. The department of Geology is the only department on our mailing list. If the cultural philistines of the faculty would come down it would be a help. Students? Well open rooms has put an end to that. Gone are the days when the cleaning lady would find an empty whiskey bottle and a pair of panties under the seat.

Bruns: You'd like to see more empty whiskey bottles and a -

Learning: Panties under the seats. At least it would show that there was something going on in the Playhouse. Now as far as the audience here in town is concerned, the character of the audience is changed - there is no doubt about this. There is a very valid point to be made in this whole thing. If you don't make people comfortable, no matter what their background, if they come and feel ill at ease - then you've lost them. And I think that this is one of the most important things - to try and make them as comfortable as possible.

But you've got to be careful because things like "Waiting

for Godot" had no, absolutely no popular success except with the people that you are talking about now. Ionesco was the same thing. The initial success was always with the so-called ill-cultured and uneducated. These are the people who really went for this, because they didn't have a whole bloody set of pre-conditioned bits of looking at any particular thing.

Bruns: How do you see the Playhouse and the Winter tour in relation to UNB? What do you see it doing for UNB and what do you see UNB doing for it?

Learning: It would have been virtually impossible for me to have done "Inadmissible Evidence" if there wasn't UNB and the UNB Drama Society to draw upon because we're doing that production in cooperation with the University. And here's one of the things I was talking about - about choosing the right time and the right place and the right way to say something. If you just come out with a big hullaballo about "Inadmissible Evidence" and just kick it in, it just kicks people right between the legs and there's a whole nasty big concern.

The UNB Drama Society out of the last eighteen entries into the regional festival has won fourteen. As far as the Dominion Festival is concerned it is the only group in Canada that has been invited more than twice, it has been invited four times. So it has a relatively solid reputation as far as its festival production is concerned. And it's got some pretty good talent around. It's not an organization which goes around choosing plays which cause trouble. UNB can do "Inadmissible Evidence" in this community and it can do it in Woodstock, St. Stephen,

Moncton, Newcastle because it has a reputation, it is expected to do it. And so here's an opportunity for me as the Director of the Playhouse to incorporate this into our programme and give something we couldn't do otherwise. We couldn't just walk out and bang in "Inadmissible Evidence" in this community. But in association with the University of New Brunswick Drama Society we can do it. And we can use Alvin Shaw as the director and the reputation that he has around here. So this is tremendous from our point of view. What does it give UNB? Well it's going to be their festival entry. It gives them an opportunity to play the show a substantial number of times more before they come to the festival than they would have without the tour. I hope that it'll give them an opportunity to work in a pretty tight sort of setup because they'll have a couple of pros working with them. And I think that the whole association will be better for both.

Bruns: Do you have any questions you'd like to ask us?

Learning: I'd like to ask you guys to tell me how the hell do I get four and one-half per cent of your five thousand souls down at the Playhouse this winter? Tell me how I can get the students down here?