

The Heart of the Village

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I'm not sure how old I was, but 1962 landed some time during Junior High School, the year I spent a week at our Methodist summer retreat, Camp Tekoa. I was a scrawny little kid, afraid of bugs and snakes and the unknowns below the pristine surface of the lake. I didn't know how to row a boat, and I wasn't a great swimmer, but I've always been a survivor at heart and somehow overcame my apprehensions and had a good time. I even remember defying my usual fear of heights (OK, I was a neurotic kid!) and climbed atop a bunk in my cabin to place a quarter on an overhead beam. Several years later, when we brought my brother – a Cub Scout and no doubt heartier camper than I – for his summer getaway, I managed to check the beam above my previous bed for the quarter. No luck! Only a few carved names and dates marked the wood. Apparently, quarters come and go at summer camps, but the weathered siding and wood-burned cabin names remained the same, much like Flat Rock itself. Ancient pines and Hemlock trees interspersed with dogwoods and maples, and oaks. Tangles of vines wound around decaying fences along the roads. In those days Flat Rock boasted no sidewalks and very few businesses. My memory recalls a shaded road with only a ribbon of sky snaking between the distant treetops – the gateway to a secret forest once you had left the highway. Hard to believe that my camp experience inspired a life-long association with this place I now call home. Then and now I find myself almost startled by its sheer beauty. I'm no longer so afraid of creepy-crawly things (well spiders, maybe), and glory instead in the complexity of nature and the passage of four distinct seasons.

This winter's pristine snowscapes and early-blooming camellias yielded to gorgeous tulips, Bradford pear trees, and cherry blossoms. Head-high yellow forsythia pave the way for late spring's banks of azaleas and canopies of dogwoods, and with them an escape from the fireside to the freedom of loose clothing and a life fueled by sunshine, mountain breezes, and fresh air. Local apple orchards transition from blossoms to fruit, and crepe myrtles signal the steady progression into summer.

Nothing seems particularly hurried, and having lived for a time in New York City, I sometimes have to make myself remember what made me want to move here. Sure, I taught at the Universities of Florida and South Carolina, but those southern cities seemed hugely metropolitan compared to this mountain town. I probably would never have come back after Camp Tekoa had it not been for Flat Rock Playhouse, the State Theatre of North Carolina.

I work at the Playhouse, my apparent home away from home. Once I park there, it's an easy stroll to the heart of the Village. Morning finds a blend of residents starting their busy days as well as visitors embracing their opportunity for leisurely discovery. A team of bicyclists races by, heading down hill. I'm in awe of people who navigate these winding roads with skill, let alone on two wheels, and wish that I could join them as they

propel themselves into nature, living in the moment. We pass each other, strangers smiling and saying hello, as brick sidewalks lead us to shops, restaurants, and businesses just beginning to show signs of activity. Names of local families pass beneath my feet, brick pavers inscribed with Flat Rock founders' names – many who have made Flat Rock their long-time home or second home and have grown this small town into the charming village of today.

I did my first-year apprenticeship at the Playhouse in 1967, returned for a second-year, and was hooked. I continued to work here for eight more summers until I finished graduate school and moved to New York. But the enticement of the big city and the stability of university life somehow did not measure up to the inner peace found in a place that felt like home. I became the Resident Scene Designer in 1985 and returned each summer while teaching during the winters. Eventually, the sleepy summer-stock company achieved regional theatre status, and the season stretched from early spring through December. In 2000 I made the choice to move to Flat Rock fulltime. As the theatre grew in size and scope, I too made a transition. Ironically, I found myself most comfortable in peaceful environs punctuated by the sounds of a community that prefers its revelry in encapsulated form.

Walking gives you time to think and contemplate. With my hectic schedule, I've learned to value that private time. I just left the Flat Rock Village Bakery, having yielded to the temptation of their freshly made cinnamon rolls. My assistant prefers the scones, so I'm taking a few back to our office. Couples sit on the deck, sipping coffee or refreshing juices, but my mind is already contemplating the daily lunch special at nearby Dean's Deli (My life seems to operate on a schedule centered around eating!). Like those restaurants on soap operas where all the characters constantly encounter each other, Dean's is equally popular – a deli version of "Cheers" – great for lunch or for finishing a crossword puzzle over coffee.

The local Post Office is bustling. Most people in the Village have a PO box and find a moment to check out the local papers or visit with a friend while picking up mail. While I still do not know the mail clerk personally, we see each other frequently and always exchange pleasantries. A workman applies a coat of yellow paint to the railing around a new wheelchair ramp at the entrance. People step carefully around him, and a lady politely holds the door for several of us as we file out of the building, letters and parcels in hand. Despite the pressing schedule of a multi-tasking job, I feel thrust somehow into the quietly measured world of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.

Our summer Apprentice & Intern Company has finally arrived. These twenty students come to work and learn in a professional context, but more than that, they bring new

energy to those of us who have been developing shows since the beginning of the new year. Having been an apprentice myself, I find this cycle particularly satisfying. Many of our fulltime staff apprenticed at the Playhouse and have returned to continue building the theatre and make Flat Rock their home. Because we're so invested, traditions are inevitable. The cool mountain nights provide perfect opportunities for fire pits with roasted hot dogs, s'mores, and impromptu sing-alongs. We have a Freshman Mixer where we play games to get to know the new faces and personalities. It sounds so simple, yet these are the moments where they will begin friendships that will last for the rest of their lives.

The theatre community is a village within the Village. In 1967, the Playhouse was a simple summer-stock company that produced eleven shows in twelve weeks. The property consisted of a barn-like theatre and the historic Lowndes house. As the curtain closed on the evening show, my fellow apprentices and I busily policed the theatre and property for coffee cups and used programs so that we could move on to our late-night showcase rehearsal. How easy it was then to stay awake late into the night! Now, with sixteen buildings, including a new education center, the season runs from March to December and operates out of three performing venues. Current apprentices no longer have to clean the grounds, but they still find themselves busily working or playing into the night. This village, more than a collection of buildings, is a place where work ethics, values, and friendships are forged – not for just apprentices, but for everyone.

After so many years, some of my best memories are of dinners with my dear friends, Bridget Bartlett, costume designer for 26 years, her son Dale and his partner Damian – both also on the Playhouse staff. Our favorite haunt is Season's Restaurant with its changing menu of fresh ingredients and wonderful wine list. Sharing is part of the evening, and we sometimes order a number of appetizers. But we always order one of each dessert! Sampling desserts on the patio after our meal with coffee and brandy in the night breeze caps the evening. The staff knows us as regulars and obliges our request for the last seating and a private table. This special treatment is part of the memory for me. There's no rushing to get through a meal so we can get back to rehearsal. There's no skimping on courses because we make every visit an occasion to remember. But mostly, I cherish the nights listening to stories, pontificating on current events, laughing at our week's observation of Playhouse events, and sharing the intimacy of those rare but wonderful silences.

During my first year of apprenticeship, we produced *Our Town*. My exposure to the play had been strictly as an exercise in high school English class. If you bothered to pay attention, you might remember the character of Emily saying something about butternut trees and clocks ticking, but that was about it. The gentleman who was to play the character of our "Stage Manager" was finishing a show somewhere else and wasn't there at the beginning of the technical rehearsal process. The actual stage

manager for the show was standing onstage, reading the lines for the absent “Stage Manager.” It was all pretty humdrum. I was running the light board (old, huge rheostats) backstage in the old theatre house, when as the wedding scene was taking place, from the back of the theatre came a resonant, musical voice. It was the voice of an old man, W.C. “Mutt” Burton, who was actually the age the character should be. He arrived on stage as the “Minister,” secure in his lines, speaking of the cycles and events in people’s lives, and finishing with that one last beautiful line: “Once in a thousand times, it’s interesting.” Suddenly, the entire play made sense. I realized the importance of age-appropriate casting as I watched this man with the gray thinning hair and wispy white eyebrows. But more than that, what the play said about life and love and death our passage through that process touched something deep inside. I’ll never forget the moment, the voice, or the influence of a remarkable man who became instrumental in my decision to become a scene designer.

Today I have a number of projects developing simultaneously. *Chicago* is currently on stage, and plans for *Hairspray* are nearing completion before the rehearsal begins. While many of our directors work here fulltime, the director of *Chicago*, for example, made her debut with us this season after garnering a Tony Award for her recent restaging of *Ragtime* on Broadway.

We began planning the production in February before casting had begun. Re-conceiving a musical so familiar to the public after two Broadway versions and a movie can be daunting, but I found the process exhilarating. We placed the action in 1929 at the beginning of the Depression and created a decaying vaudeville theatre in abstraction – dusty and colorless as the audience enters the theatre – with a montage of newspaper headlines overlaying crumbling plaster walls captured in patinated gold and bronzed moldings and chasing lights. A photograph of the old Chicago Theatre exterior provided the springboard for our interior façade.

As I stand in the back of the theatre watching a matinee, I reflect on all that led me to this point in my career. After a double major in English and Education from UNC-Chapel Hill and an MFA from UNC-Greensboro in Scene Design, I headed two university design programs and joined United Scenic Artists, the designers union in New York. I work constantly on the East Coast and seldom take time for a vacation. Although fond of the beach, I find myself content with a thriving 220-gallon salt-water reef aquarium. Unmarried and without children, I dote (far too much, my friends tease) on my little mutt, Annie. She accompanies me sometimes to tech rehearsals (seems to appreciate music), but greets me excitedly when left at the house. Home is quiet and comfortable compared to the theatre fully equipped with modern technology – computers, moving lights, a huge and complicated sound system, and built-in mechanical slipstages and turntables. So far removed from 1967! Finding myself even a small part of this growth has given my career specific purpose and value. I teach that you should leave a place better than you find it. Our apprenticeship is a process. I wonder which students or

which assistants will ultimately find themselves in my position, hardworking and successful without much concern for fame.

Weekly, the two-stoplight town is packed with families dropping off and collecting campers from the area's dozens of summer camps. The local hotels, B & B's, and lodges harken the charm of that 1962 small town my family first visited but today compete with the finest of lodging, restaurant, and event facilities. Family reunions and weddings are weekly occasions during the season. By midday every week from spring through fall, the sidewalks are crowded. I began to realize the impact of tourism in this area by parking cars as an apprentice. Cars and busses bring visitors to the Playhouse. The parking lot regularly fills with license plates representing states from all over the country.

When I first visited Flat Rock, Carl Sandburg still lived in his house on the mountain, writing and raising goats along with his wife. During my first year at the Playhouse, he died and we offered one memorial performance of *The World of Carl Sandburg*. Now, each week, campers come to the National Historic Site to see the Apprentice Company perform *World* and Carl Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories*, a tradition that recently has achieved a kind of boarding-camp cult status. And after the show there are trails to hike, Sandburg's house to tour, and goats to visit. If you have the energy, a trip to the top of Big Glassy Mountain provides breathtaking vistas.

As much as camping is a tradition in this area, seeing plays has become one. In my first years, the kids on the property were all college-age. Now, nearly 700 pre-K through high school students populate the YouTheatre Education Center. This thriving program calls upon Playhouse staff to nurture and teach in ways not typically found in the average regional theatre. After all these years, we take great pride in the real standouts who have progressed from camps to classes to YouTheatre shows and sometimes, to roles in professional productions. I can no longer count on two hands the number of kids who have left here and found success in their theatre careers, ranging from film and television to Broadway.

But Flat Rock is now more than a small village with a theatre. I pass The Wrinkled Egg, originally Peace's Grocery (c. 1890), the community's only general store until the 1980's. In my apprentice days, we would walk to this little wooden store and kid in moments of stress that we were "going to Peace's." Its new incarnation, fronted by rocking chairs and animal sculptures, provides camp care packages, unique art, and gifts. This white clapboard structure quickly yields to Little Rainbow Row. Named for its bright array of

colors, this charming row of cottages is home to a number of locally owned and operated shops.

But the heart of the Village of Flat Rock is the central gathering place. It incorporated in 1995 and the Village Office, opposite the Playhouse campus, is located in the Postmaster Jones Cottage (c. 1845). The volunteer fire department sits just next door. The first Saturday of June serves as a reminder of how the community embraces its small-town style. The Mayor and Village Council host the Ice Cream Social where hundreds of residents flock to the grounds to share a scoop of ice cream, relax in the sun and enjoy performances by local school bands, musicians, and choral groups.

Village gatherings frequently result from practical activities. Having grown up in rural North Carolina where we tended a garden each summer and ate the freshest of vegetables, I get excited by the opportunity to have the food without the day-to-day tedium of weeding. (My parents and many farmers, however, seem to disagree!) Each Thursday afternoon, a tailgate market offering a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, baked goods, meats from local farmers, seafood from the coast, canned goods, jellies, and preserves. From suntanned kids on the back of a truck, willing to give you a special deal on tomatoes, to a server from my favorite downtown restaurant who happens to work for a food co-op, the market is a place where I always feel welcome and comfortable.

Summers can get hot, but as the sun sets, the air cools down and creates the perfect environment for evening concerts. It's fun to bring a lawn chair and gather behind Little Rainbow Row to listen, socialize, and enjoy picnic dinners from Hubba Hubba Smokehouse or the pizza oven at the Bakery, both serving good food and conversation. Craftsmanship is evident even in the metal sculpture of a rooster on the roof. Every Southerner has a favorite barbeque, and while it's not my hometown pit-cooked barbeque, the smokehouse pork with its vinegar-based sauce is a close second, and with collard greens (my favorite), it's nearly perfect!

Times have changed since I first came to the Rock. What used to be an insular haven by default, free of television and encroaching world events since no one ever bothered to bring a TV to the Playhouse in the summer, can now be so only by choice. For me, after more than a forty-year relationship, the Rock represents a history – a significant part of my personal autobiography. And when friends travel here for a visit, they each can discover whatever they need to make themselves feel relaxed or entertained. For visitors who want camps, waterfalls, good food and shopping, theatre and music, or peaceful walks and meditation, the Village of Flat Rock can provide a step forward or a step backward in time. Either direction's good for the soul.

