THE SPIRIT OF THE ROCK

FLAT ROCK PLAYHOUSE: THE RENAISSANCE YEARS

By

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Introduction

It Seems Like I Grew Up Here

Fascinating. Puzzling, perhaps. Sad at least. Throughout the years, too many people from Flat Rock or the surrounding area have never seen a play at Flat Rock Playhouse, The State Theatre of North Carolina. Even though some people considered live theatre elitist, expensive, or irrelevant in their lives, legions of theatre artists made the summer pilgrimage to "The Rock" to make art for what seemed to be an unknown audience. Tourists came from all over the country – even the world – to see productions that many people in the Flat Rock community never saw. But happily, community involvement is on the rise; much has changed.

Since 1985 when I began designing scenery at The Playhouse, the theatre has enjoyed phenomenal growth. In recent years, more people come here to produce better theatre for larger audiences for longer seasons. More children participate in more classes and productions and read and watch more plays than ever before. Closer ties with the public school system, a larger number of community volunteers, and greater involvement from a more active Board of Directors has created a stronger and more complex infrastructure than in the theatre's fifty-year history. More jobs, larger budgets, funds for better facilities, and grants for community outreach create a greater economic impact on Henderson County than ever before. None of this growth is accidental.

Roughly 60% of the people in the professional company and on permanent staff began their associations with the Playhouse as apprentices. I, for example, first came to

Flat Rock in 1967. The town was miniscule and the theatre produced ten shows in eleven weeks and then closed for the winter. The work was hard and the hours were grueling, but we loved it. Apprentices competed for opportunities to return for a second year. I was one of the lucky ones. After receiving a scholarship for a second year, I was hired to join the staff in my third summer. By my fourth season, I had become the Equity Stage Manager as well as the Scenic Artist. Staff numbers were small then, and we all sported multiple hats. But this arc of growth was all part of the plan. Robroy Farquhar, the founder of The Vagabond School of the Drama, Inc., believed in "growing his own." He readily admitted to surrounding himself with qualified people and giving them opportunities to do their best. Furthermore, he encouraged young people to work and learn while contributing to an artistic growth larger than their own. Thus, the Playhouse and its mission advanced.

Like many young people, I completed undergraduate school, worked in the field, pursued graduate study, and even ventured to The Big Apple before deciding exactly what I wanted to do. The time line is convoluted, and each person's journey is unique. But I worked at the Playhouse for ten years before making my way into the academic world of university teaching. As a professor, I learned as much as I taught. With Flat Rock never far from my thoughts, I happily returned in the summer of 1985 as the scenic designer. Robroy had died and with his son, Robin, as our leader, many of us who still are on staff helped move the Playhouse into a kind of renaissance.

Those of us who began as apprentices, like so many others joining our ranks in the last eighteen years, have indeed become part of a family. Whether our associations began

in childhood, during college, or later in life, we each find ourselves sharing the same events and passages which define the history of most families. Whether as children in Theatre for Young People or apprentices and interns; whether as staff members, actors, technicians and designers; whether launching a career, achieving success, or approaching the completion of a life's work – each of us has witnessed and shared love, pain, laughter, tears, birth, and death. In Thorton Wilder's *Our Town*, the Stage Manager describes this life process saying, "Once in a thousand times it's interesting." But in the rarified atmosphere of Flat Rock Playhouse, the statistics are far more optimistic. Besides the traditions of Freshman Mixers and Apprentice Graduations, Backstage Balls, Fourth-of-July celebrations, opening night parties, weekly Midnight Studios and Thanksgiving celebrations, we have witnessed dating, marriages, the miraculous birth of families, and the saddening losses of death. Be we children or adults, we have learned at our jobs life's lessons in an almost daily fashion. We have worked together, played together, and even eaten our meals together. Each of us has felt the joy of working in a common cause – educating, entertaining, enlightening. Moreover, we have worked with a sense of pride. All of us who have come to work at this place have discovered the pride we share in creating something positive for ourselves and for our world. We have moved the Playhouse from a small summer stock company to a two million dollar organization. Yet, somehow we have held onto the things that have distinguished us as familial and special.

We are the proverbial "village." We have planted our gardens, adopted our pets, raised our goldfish, and maintained our "homes," played volleyball, planned cookouts, and taken our stints at babysitting. As students, as teachers, as artists, as technicians, as

thinkers, as writers, as performers, and as business people, we have shared with each other our passions, our hopes, our goals, our praise, our criticism, and our forgiveness. Perhaps we are indeed Renaissance men and women with wide-ranging interests and accomplishments and with talents which encompass both the arts and sciences. Whatever our individual responsibilities, with each new joint endeavor we establish a greater presence in the theatre world. And with each unified success, we derive a sense of our individual strengths.

Saying goodbye at the end of each season is a sad affair. Greeting each other again, a cause for celebration – a family reunion. It seems like we've grown up here.

ROBROY FARQUHAR – 1952

We stood on the staircase of a Greensboro, North Carolina hotel. The year was 1967, and it marked my first Southeastern Theatre Conference. We both seemed overwhelmed, but for very different reasons.

"Oh, Mr. Farquhar, excuse me. We haven't met. I'm Dennis Maulden, and I wrote you for information about your apprentice program…."

"Ah, yes, yes, wonderful to meet you. But tell me: Did I answer your letter?"

"Yes, you did."

"Oh, oh, thank goodness. Sometimes, you know, I get distracted and forget!"

I now remember the moment as such an innocent exchange – truly innocent – with each of us feeling vulnerable. Who knew that my life for the next ten years would be guided, at least in part, by a series of "moments" with Robbie? I was young, and he was busy. Our lives intersected on planes ranging from mundane to esoteric.

I refer to moments, knowing he could maneuver through stream-of-conscious monologues for hours. He never failed to bore and fascinate the young mind simultaneously. So many specifics – almost like sound or visual bites – distinguish him in my memory: Those mellifluous tones when he spoke; the way he pronounced *asphalt* (ash-felt); the lilting, midnight refrain I so hated, "Oh-ho, young Vagabonds should be in bed by now," as he swept his flashlight across the lot; the "Buy a Brick, Be a Brick" mantra as apprentices passed a clothesline for audience donations; his yearly newsletters, rife with "cat" puns; his white ink-stained shirt and black tie; his ability to disappear in town while talking to Main Street merchants; his stern reprimand as we cheered from the back of the audience the entrance of our Apprentice Director; his long-distance call to offer me my first job as an Equity stage manager; my panic when I first heard him having a diabetic attack, in need of orange juice; his friendly smile, a cheerful greeting to almost any stranger he encountered; his willingness to listen to all kinds of problems. Such a crazy patchwork of memories.

Robbie was a man I eminently respected. After all, he held together a theatre in the mountains of North Carolina and actually paid a staff and company to work there each summer for decades. He could be funny, witty, charming, bumbling, and even sarcastic. But my greatest memory is that he was dear. I wanted to do my best for him, not only to make him proud of me but also to make him happy. He seemed to have sacrificed in ways that I'm not sure I understood at that point in my life. I'm not certain what kind of father he was, or what kind of husband. I do know that even when his

marriage had failed, Leona worked faithfully by his side, helping to achieve their dream. I know that his son Robin gave up a music career to help his father in furthering his mission. Robbie surrounded himself with talented, enthusiastic people and trusted them. They – we – wanted to work for him. And he always seemed grateful to be sharing at least that singular part of himself with us – his dream.

In those early days, staff salaries were inordinately small, hardly what one could describe as competitive. But etched in my memory are those occasions when we sat on the back porch after a show, talking and laughing, when Robbie would join us for a drink and a moment's conversation – a break in his never-ending workday. "We've done quite better than expected this week," he would begin, "and I wanted to share with you a little of the success. Thank you so, so much for all your dedicated work." He passed me a small brown envelope containing some folded bills. "Now, we can only hope they're ready for a good mystery next week. We did this show some years ago, as you may know. It was… oh, what was her name? Delightful young actress, such a lovely presence on stage. Audiences loved her. Oh well, can't rely on my memory tonight, but at any rate, it was she who first thought of…."

I tucked my bonus into my pocket and leaned against the turned post of the porch to listen. Only on the Rock.

LEONA FRAKI FARQUHAR – 1952

Why do I always think of this woman – this woman who could be so strikingly beautiful at almost any time but especially ballroom dancing in a classic evening gown – garbed in practical jeans, sweatshirt, and rubber gloves while scrubbing floors and walls and bathrooms. On ladders and on the ground, she seemed to wash away the past and provide a clean slate, a new hope for a new season.

Leona always concerned herself with care and nurturing. Not content to feed people, she insisted on feeding them health food, vegetarian dishes and sprouts. She eschewed doctors and traditional medicines in favor of holistic remedies, reflexology, and shiatsu. Meditation, metaphysics, the paranormal, and Native American dances were simply normal facets of her life.

Not only did she work hard but also she had an incredible work ethic. She took care of Playhouse business and ran her own health food store as well. She felt an obligation to stay busy and be productive. I can't remember her ever appearing defeated or sounding pessimistic. If one plan failed, she was always ready to try another. Leona simply refused to give up.

It seemed so easy back then to be skeptical. For many people, life never turns out as planned. If one couldn't understand her world and how she operated in it, the easiest thing to do was to quietly snicker. But early on, she proved to me the strength of her powers. During the seventies, I had bought a pair of sandals made in India. My feet became inflamed and swollen, covered with a rash that refused to stop itching. My doctor, believing that I had poison ivy, prescribed a series of strong pills – cortisone, I think – to be taken daily in diminishing doses. Nothing seemed to help. This condition continued for two weeks, getting progressively worse. I was nearly out of my mind, scratching feverishly and straining to concentrate. Finally, I had reached a crazed state one night before a show. Leona came running backstage to help me and pointed out that I was wearing Indian sandals that had been cured in cow dung. I had had an allergic reaction and needed to stop wearing them immediately. After swabbing my feet in a lotion of golden seal, she placed me on a strict regimen of vinegar and honey. The next day, after allowing the vinegar to eliminate the toxins from my bloodstream, she massaged my blistered feet, releasing the poison. This description sounds awful, I realize, but it's necessary to understand. After weeks of prolonged agony, within two days of Leona's care, I was totally well. I became a believer.

We could never keep up. Johanna Erlenbach succeeded, perhaps, better than most. As soon as Leona had led all of us into one phase of healthy living, she would be off on a different tangent – always reading and studying and theorizing. Most of us felt content simply to eat a little better and take vitamins or to chase colds with Echinacea and

zinc. Some apprentices endured the occasional fast or the intense heat of a sauna. But people came from miles away to seek her out for consultations. Finally, she needed to hire more people to help with her thriving business.

In many ways, her success distanced her somewhat from this theatre she had helped to found. Although the Playhouse continued to flourish, she saw her friends there less and less on a daily basis. Many of the people whom she had known so well no longer worked at Flat Rock Playhouse, and the new employees understood little of her and her incredible strength. Those of us who remembered and who loved her, however, observed with sadness the toll taken by hearing and memory loss, and the toll of physical ailments that seem inevitably to accompany advanced age. She, who had built her own concession stand and planted trees and moved rocks and kept a roof over a theatre, would stand in the midst of these things and become disoriented – not sure where she was or to whom she was speaking.

One day toward the end of her time here on earth, I went to Leona's stand for a glass of her honey lemonade. I complained of a bad cold and sore throat to her brother, Roy, who had moved here to assist her. Leona had been placing some cups under a counter but turned to me with absolute clarity and said, "Dennis, if you really want that to help your throat, you need to heat it a little. And try getting more sleep. You never get enough rest." She heard me; she knew me; she cared for me. Our bond seemed blessedly intact.

W. C. "MUTT" BURTON – 1952

The tiny backstage corner was dark and filled with a large, antiquated set of dimmers, an old Wallensak tape recorder, an amp, and several crew people – apprentices mostly. Holding onto a dimmer handle, I searched the script for my next light cue. In that 1967 season, the first technical rehearsal of *Our Town* had arrived and Mutt Burton, cast as the Stage Manager, had yet to arrive. He was finishing a job at another theatre, but had played this role, apparently, numerous times and could step in quickly. We had reached the Act II Wedding Scene, and the play's real stage manager filled in, passively intoning Mutt's lines. He seemed about as interesting as my high school peers in American Lit class. All these years, and Thorton Wilder still sounded dull.

Then suddenly, from the back of the house, a voice interrupted: An unmistakable lilt, a voice I would never forget. It spoke with truth and power Wilder's lines of life and love and family, of birth and death, of generations. As the voice drew closer and arrived onstage, it proclaimed, "Once in a thousand times it's interesting."

That magical moment launched my understanding of playscripts as something alive and meaningful. The man who spoke those words was in his prime: An actor/journalist/photographer, a man of letters. Thereafter, W.C. "Mutt" Burton grew to wield great influence on my life and on the lives of many others. He taught us many things, regaled us with stories, and, always my advocate, guided me into graduate school so that I could study with European designer Andreas Nomikos, a life-changing event for me.

By the mid-eighties, Mutt had faded, it seemed, into a shadow of the vital and intelligent man I had previously known. His absence relegated actors to fond memories of strike-night poker games – fellowship, scotch, and cigars – and endless stories, laced with his acerbic wit. Although he had lived to see the Playhouse experience a renaissance, performing in the musical *1776,* it soon became clear that Mutt could no longer actively share in our journey. But I can never forget the talent, wisdom, and humor with which he helped pave the way.

HELEN "CASEY" BRAGDON – 1960

I would see her arrive each evening in her modest, beige station wagon. Khaki corduroy legs emerged first, followed by arms reaching into the stretched pockets of an old sweater, pockets sagging with treats for a dog who blissfully assumed the role of "Shadow." Never failing to smile and offer a simple greeting, she made her way backstage, ready to begin another night of magic.

Helen "Casey" Bragdon (These people from my past so often had nicknames.) would enter the dressing room and shut the door. Half an hour later, she would emerge – dresses, furs, wigs, and hats – transformed into one character or another, a miraculous puzzle person who would spend an evening delighting audiences and then return the puzzle pieces to a shelf. Few people knew that this actress who brought so much pleasure to many audiences in the mountains of North Carolina had been trained at the Moscow Arts Theatre. Those pretensions made little difference to her, however. Each night, after unassuming good-byes, the sweatered figure bid farewell to "Shadow" and slipped quietly home.

I knew she loved art an collected rare books. She introduced me to art galleries in Asheville and gave me gifts of old books on stagecraft and design as well as a first-edition of Robert Edmond Jones' *The Dramatic Imagination.* But she gave me a greater gift as well.

Casey, always a gifted actress, endeared herself to everyone with whom she worked. She took time to know each of us and made us feel special. For years, she played Eliza Gant in our annual production of *Look Homeward, Angel.* I so identified with Thomas Wolfe and his story that I wanted desperately to play Eugene – even auditioned one season for the part. Of course, I never got the role, though I painted the set, built the Angel, and stage managed the show for years. Both the novel and the play remain significant in my life, but even more does one of Casey's simple gestures. Each night before making her entrance as Eliza, she came to me at my stage manager's desk – Aaron Copeland's "Appalachian Spring" in the background – hugged me, and whispered in my ear, "You're my own, private Eugene." Through the years I gave her sketches and wrote her poems as gifts, but never felt that any of these expressed just how much the child inside me treasured that thoughtful whisper.

BRIDGET BARTLETT – 1986

"Passion to do the best at that point in time. The passion to enjoy. The passion to create, It should apply to everything – painting your living room or teaching a child. If you have a passion, it will show through." Bridget Bartlett

"Friendships here are often based on memories. At Flat Rock, friendships are made and then become bonds in your soul. I seldom see Johanna at all, but I cherish our talks, her friendliness, her intelligence, enthusiasm, and laughter. Our friendships are like our work: All our energy goes into making sets or costumes and lights; actors rehearse and we each grow within the overall project. You give all the love and nurturing that you possess to this one project and then it goes away. It isn't sad; we let it go, but we hold onto the memories and the growth we've achieved during the process. So, in the same way, although we sometimes don't see each other, we still remain friends."

With her mind always at work I watch her fingers smooth the fabric as she peers over her glasses to adjust a seam. She cuts flawlessly without drawing a line and rhapsodizes over the line of a dress, the elegance of a period, the hand of a fine wool.

In my mind I see her contemplating – so many thoughts, so many details, so little time. And she grasps at time for fear of wasting a moment, but never on someone else's schedule. Her process is her own – a secret world unfolding on stage as colors and movement delight and inform. Bridget, always an actor's best friend, brings life to written characters who might otherwise appear flat and without dimension.

Like so many Flat Rock women, she possesses amazing strength of will. No theatrician worth his salt is without an opinion, and sometimes, it seems there can never be enough soapboxes. Bridget feels things intensely and wields influence. She has viewed the world through the eyes of wife and mother, polio survivor, artist, craftsman, child, teacher, opponent and friend. Each of these eyes shares a voice, and she speaks with these voices – alone or in chorus – knowing how and knowing when.

I've known Bridget nearly twenty years. That first peering of her eyes between the porch floor and railing soon unified the top knot of gray hair and ubiquitous "necklace" of measuring tape and straight pins. Short legs in navy blue tights peeked from under a long-sleeved flannel shirt as they made the first of many climbs up the stone steps to the back porch. Our friendship seemed cemented almost from the beginning. My porch, her shop, and the paths between have witnessed countless stories, editorials, and confessions. And sometimes, the most intimate of silences.

Barbara Bradshaw had mentioned to Robin a fellow Floridian, costume designer Bridget Bartlett. Robin pursued her for two or three years, but at the time, she worked for Burt Reynolds and could earn from one show what she would make in a season at the Playhouse. Furthermore, her husband Bill was dying, and she wanted to be at home in the summers. Several years following Bill's death, Robin called again, and it seemed the time was right. She arrived finally, ready to confront the unknown. That was the summer of 1986.

"It was interesting," she recalls. "I'd find myself crying sometimes at 3:00 in the morning in a panic. We did so many shows so fast, and because I was new, I'd not had much time to look through storage or even begin to clean it up. Janelle Cochran (an actress/director) would come in and help. She remembered things that we had or that had been used before and would be able to locate them up in that dark storage place. It was a time of "run, run, run," working fast to do a show a week, and always with much energy and excitement.

"I would say to myself, 'Why do I keep coming back?' I mean, the salary was low and there were grueling hours. The lodgings were totally different from today. There

was no air conditioning and they were ugly but clean. The front of my dresser was propped up on a 2" x 4" piece of wood," she laughs. "My first thought was 'Oh my gosh,' but I reminded myself it was clean, and that helped."

One of the easiest things at the Playhouse is to find a family, but one of the hardest things is to find your place in it. Bridget remembers that Johanna Erlenbach was always polite and nice, even at the beginning. Then she started staying late after a show and chatting. After that, Bridget would travel up to the porch and chat with me. My door was always open, and we were always ready to visit. We were younger then and could talk late into the night. In no time at all, we became close friends. She also worked with the props crew and became friends while helping them sew curtains or upholster. Bruce, on the other hand, seemed quiet at first, but after a long while and many early morning rendezvous at the coffee machine, they too grew quite close.

"I bonded with a few people. Robin would come down in that first season and talk, check on me, and see how I was doing. It was then that I became very fond of him. I got along with everybody here – with everybody. It was a smaller group in those days, of course, so you could give everyone more personal attention. None of the young people had married yet, and we all lived on the lot together. I remember listening to the myths and legends about those people who had worked here before and what they had meant to the place. I had to decide how I felt about it all and how I fit in. By the end of the summer, I respected everyone's integrity, enthusiasm, and creativity.

"Every season it became more exciting to return. Each year I anticipated going to see my 'family' again. We helped each other become better at our jobs. We helped apprentices become better people. That has been a joy – watching them change, and watching them get caught up in change, in being better."

It pleases her that we can still be as silly and laugh as much as we did twenty years ago. We both take joy in the awkwardness, and youth, and excitement of the growing we witness each summer. I love and respect Bridget because she believes we have a very big job – an intangible, unspoken job at Flat Rock Playhouse – to nurture and teach high standards. "When the apprentices go away, they have a passion. They don't want to do sloppy theatre – no 9-5 mindsets. We have to make sure that those who follow us have the same thoughts, just as Leona had a passion and passed it on to us. Leona loved things to be clean and neat. The setting for creative arts should be an artistic setting."

Talking to Bridget sometimes leaves me speechless (She would laugh, no doubt, and disagree, noting that I'm never without something to say!) I grow fascinated by her intellect, by the incredible wealth of information she brings to her life and work. Not content merely to know, she insists on the importance of using her knowledge. "I think

sometimes," she reflects. "What else would I have done for a living? I didn't finish college, but I've certainly encouraged anyone who comes through here to broaden themselves with an education. I would love to have pursued sociological anthropology. I find the human race so fascinating and yet, I often find it so disappointing. When I see hatred and prejudice, I say, 'Why couldn't we have done it better?' But when I get a little depressed, I say you have to be vocal. You have to try to change things. I will be vocal 'till the day I die.

"I truly see my life as one with a mission – a personal one, an inward one. What do I want people to think of me? In the last four or five years, I thought of my mother and listened to eulogies for Leona and others who have died. When my husband started to pass away, I thought 'there's more to it.' I worked hard to make his death a positive experience for the children, but he was already a positive person. He did it himself. As years went on, I believe he was the pre-training for my mission now. He gave that to me. I was down, depressed, frustrated, but I thought a lot. I tried to make everything a positive. Everyone is important and they live forever as who they were, for what they've done. Immortality is there from the beginning. You build it as you go and then you're remembered. It may be good or it may be bad, but people can talk about you daily – forever." She takes a drag off her cigarette and pours water over a wilting flower. And my dear Bridget wonders why I laugh dismissively when she laments, self-effacingly, that she can't draw what she builds.