

Mary Lou Routley

THE ROLE OF AUDIENCE

In 1968, the year I graduated from university, my older sister and I took a holiday to New York City. One of my best memories was seeing the Broadway musical, *Hello Dolly* starring Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway. After the curtain fell, Miss Bailey stepped out in front to talk to the audience. Just as she did so, the man at the end of our row vacated his seat. This did not go unnoticed by the star.

“What’s the top tonight?” she said (meaning top price) looking down at my sister and me in the front row. I think I stopped breathing right then. Someone behind us answered “Nine-ninety.”

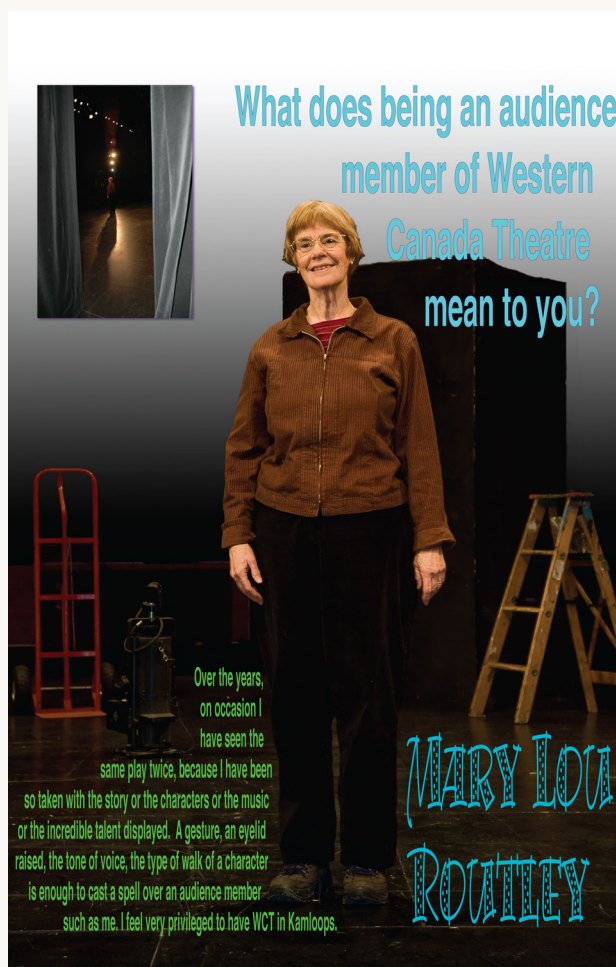
“Well, for that price I’d be glued to my seat” she quickly retorted, making everyone laugh. She went on to talk to the audience, but I don’t remember the rest. My head was in the clouds. That incident marked my habit of always trying to get seats close up when I go to see a play.

A few years after New York, my husband and I went to London and saw Alec Guinness in a play called *Habeas Corpus*. We still tell our friends that we could see the twinkle in his blue eyes.

Another time in New York we saw the musical *Pippin* and when Ben Vereen was singing “Simple Joys” he came downstage, and focused on me – well, for just a second or two.

I have always loved the theatre, and sitting as close to the stage as possible allows me to really see the actors’ facial expressions, note their gestures and walks, the raised eyebrows, and on occasion an actor and I have made eye-contact for a split second. Getting close to the stage makes me nostalgic for the times I got to be on the stage. I have fancied myself as an actor ever since I was young, even though you may never have heard of me.

I first acted in re-enactments and improvisations of cowboy movies my friend and I saw in the fifties in the one movie theatre in our small New Brunswick town. You remember those films with John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Richard Widmark. Coming out of the theatre with the plot and dialogue fresh in



our minds, we would aim for one of our backyards to do our “re-enactment.” I usually played one of the bank robbers riding into town with my sidekick, my friend Brian, both of us noisily clicking our tongues to simulate the horses. “What time does the bank open?” we’d say to an actor playing one of the townspeople. We still laugh about the one scene where Brian and I had a showdown with the lawmen. I pointed my pretend gun at the sheriff and her deputy and said proudly “You’re under arrest”. When the others stopped laughing, Brian whispered, “Mary Lou, you can’t say that. You’re the crook.”

My lawn acting progressed to roles in school plays. I once played a maid in one of those Samuel French mysteries that used to be popular. Having about four short lines, I decided to milk them for all they were worth, resulting in my co-players accusing me of upstaging them. I wasn’t really, but I had to be the best maid in the history of stage maids.

After high school I prepared for my biggest role, that of teacher. My stage was the area in front of the blackboard and from there I dispensed advice, facts, and my interpretation of the world. Some of my best teaching was done through drama: I once found a play about the parts of speech and each of the students played a part. It was rather cute and, incidentally, one of my students who played a noun eventually went on to become an actor and director.

I look on the most important roles of my life off stage, those of wife and then mother. In 1980 my husband and I moved to Kamloops, BC. Here we became yearly subscribers to the resident theatre company, Western Canada Theatre. Over the years we have seen well over one hundred plays and I would like to think I have become rather discerning as to their merit. I believe that dedicated play-goers have a definite role to play.

An invaluable part of this role is providing feedback to the theatre company. I have often written to the artistic director, David Ross, explaining why I liked or disliked a play. I try to be specific, mentioning the play itself as a written piece, the acting, the casting, the pacing, the sets, costumes, and so on. He has always been open to my evaluations and written a note back.

Another role for the audience is provided on opening night when we are invited to join the cast and crew in the lobby for refreshments. This occasion is always so exciting for me as I enjoy meeting the actors, and always have questions about the play and their roles. I also share my reactions to the play, asking questions: How did you learn that accent? What do you think the playwright was trying to teach us? What was the point of that letter in the second act? This dialogue between actor and play-goer gives me the sense I do indeed have a role to play in the process, and I feel gratified that the actors have often been interested in my point of view.

I also quiz the crew: How did you ever build that set? Was that real cement? It sure looked like it.



Great lighting. I loved Moira's suit in the second act. Was that designed just for this play? Where did you get those old suitcases? The more we see plays, the more we see the details involved in their mounting and the more we can come to appreciate the work involved.

It occurred to me recently that this dialogue that happens on opening night could happen on a much smaller scale each night of the play. After the final applause one or more of the actors could stay on the stage and talk to us, and answer any questions we might have: a Pearl Bailey kind of thing. That short rapport time would put a finishing touch to the production.

Thank you, Miss Bailey, for giving me that wonderful memory of you. That was forty years ago, and I am still sitting up close.