

# THE STAGE PROJECT

TOM HALFORD, DR DENYSE LYNDE, DR ROB ORMSBY, AND COLLEEN QUIGLEY

“The STAGE Project started as a job, but really became a pastime. The hours I spent pouring over archives initially, and the subsequent interviews, opened me to entire generations of our province’s rich performing arts history. Rick Mercer was certainly a high point, as I began to understand the [Newfoundland] ‘renaissance’ – but no less fascinating were those with Patrick Byrne and Sandy Morris; each adding a greater image of the past 50-plus years of performing arts here.”

— Scott Heffernan, STAGE student interviewer

“One of the best things we ever did was archive our stuff. We discovered our own material through the archives.”

— Andy Jones, CODCO member

## Introduction

In 2010, Colleen Quigley, Manuscripts Librarian (Performing Arts Collection) at Memorial’s Archives and Special Collections in the Queen Elizabeth II Library, approached Dr Denyse Lynde of the university’s Department of English to restart the STAGE project. STAGE, suspended in 2003, had hired students to interview theatre practitioners in Newfoundland and Labrador about their careers, and placed the transcripts and recordings, along with memorabilia that they collected from participants, with Archives and Special Collections. Lynde asked Dr Rob Ormsby, a colleague in the department who has an interest in Canadian theatre, to join the resuscitation effort, and the three of them received funding from Memorial’s Undergraduate Career Experience Program (MUCEP) in the summer of 2011.

## Stage One

The project had its origins in a three-sided relationship among the University’s library, the English Department, and the theatre community. In 1992, when Gail Weir, Performing Arts Archivist, was collecting documentation related to the performing arts in the province for the library’s archives, Lynde organized a conference on Newfoundland and Labrador theatre, funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). There, Andy Jones delivered a paper, published in 1993 as part of *Newfoundland Theatre Research: Proceedings*, enumerating the dozens of Newfoundland and Labrador plays that had never been published. In the same proceedings, Weir’s article outlined the Library’s collection policy that had guided the serious collection of theatre memorabilia since 1982. In the wake of this, Lynde recognized the pressing need to collect and preserve the province’s theatrical heritage,

so she and Weir borrowed recording equipment from the Folklore Department. They then hired students to interview theatre practitioners and to gather material of archival interest. A successful application for a three-year SSHRC Standard Research Grant (1994-1997) allowed interviewers to undertake on-site retrieval of archival material and for Lynde to continue researching.

### Stage Two

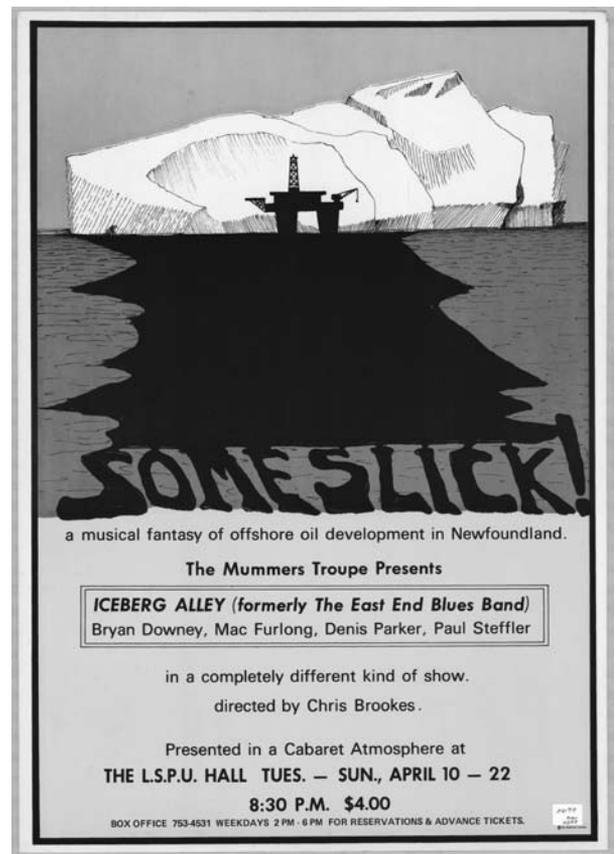
Although the first phase of the project gathered plenty of material for the archives, both in terms of physical documents and the interviews, Lynde and Weir realized that STAGE needed to move further afield; it needed to get beyond the Avalon Peninsula. To achieve this, they applied for and received a second SSHRC grant (1998-2000) to hire students who travelled home to L'Anse Au Loup and Marystown and Twillingate, and conducted interviews with theatre artists living there. Through this, students were able to find interviewees who could express the power of community theatre in developing a complex and multifaceted Newfoundland and Labrador identity. As Rick Boland, actor, writer, and active contributor to STAGE said in his interview, regarding the Mummings Troupe's efforts to provide cultural agency to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians:

the Mummings were interested in social theatre and in the idea that theatre can affect change, that [it] can act as a catalyst for community change ... people obtained a sense of pride or a sense of who they are, which is perhaps the most important thing.

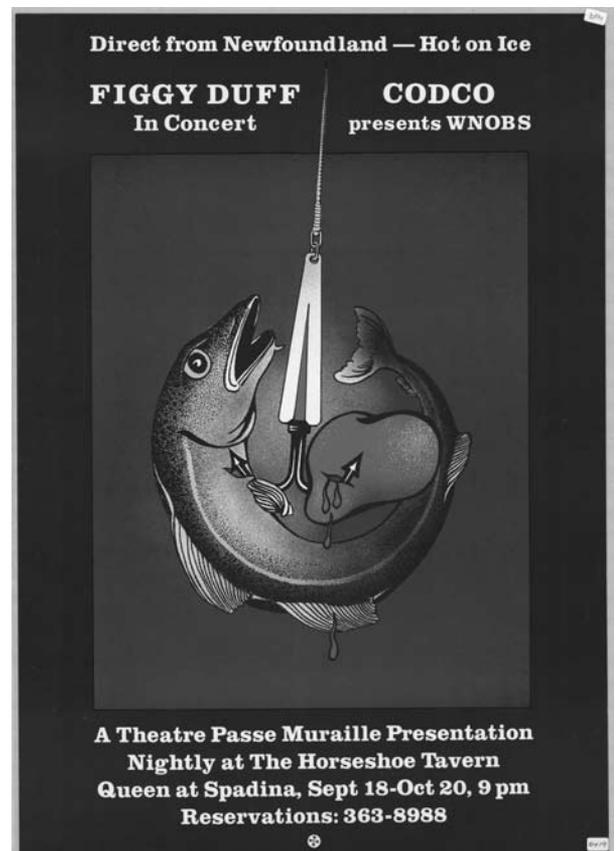
Due to funding restraints, the interviews conducted during the most recent incarnation of STAGE have been in the St John's area. By the end of the second phase, 65 students had interviewed 275 people. Renowned figures like Rick Mercer, Jillian Keiley, and John Holmes, to name only a few, had given their time and opened their personal archives (scrapbooks, clippings, programs, etc).

### Stage Three

Inspired by The Theatre Museum of Canada's *Legend Library*, a series of interviews with Canadian theatre practitioners posted on the Museum's website, the



Mummings Troupe *Some Slick* designed by Warren Brownridge.



CODCO's *Hot on Ice* designed by Derek Caines.



three project leaders hoped to acquire a video camera to make the archive even more robust. They had also realized that the project would require a manager, preferably a graduate student who would gain significant training in the process of helping run STAGE. When Lynde, Quigley, and Ormsby received a \$14,000 grant from the Leslie Harris Centre's Applied Research Fund (with \$6,000 in matching funding from Memorial's School of Graduate Studies) in 2012, they were able to do both. Tom Halford, a PhD student in the Department of English, joined the team, and STAGE has continued to collect archival material, update its artist biographies, and, most importantly, film the interviews.

Students who work for STAGE learn a variety of skills including how to research their interviewee at the library, how to conduct a video interview, and how to transcribe the information they have gathered. This experience connects them to their community and fosters a sense of agency in relation to provincial history.

"Working on the STAGE Project means that I can be part of a process that brings the history of performing arts in Newfoundland to life," said Antionette Fekete. And the new skills they acquire can be used well after their time at university.

STAGE is a rare project that combines extensive community engagement with work training and the vital storage of data. Interviewees have made more than 100 contributions to the growing Performing Arts Collection (PAC) at Archives and Special Collections, including scrapbooks, scripts, photographs, playbills and programs, reviews, letters, and props, as well as recordings of performances and rehearsals relating to such groups and associations as Artistic Fraud, Corner Brook Playmakers, CODCO, Labrador Creative Arts Festival, Resource Centre for the Arts, and the Mummings Troupe. As of July 2013, 74 MUCEP students have completed and transcribed approximately 300 interviews, 11 of them on video.

With this new video component, STAGE has begun posting clips from the most recent interviews on YouTube and on Facebook to reach a global online community of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Even people within the province, these sites make the work of STAGE far more accessible and interactive. Simply by searching "StageProjectMUN" on YouTube or by liking STAGE Project on Facebook, viewers can watch Krystin Pellerin of *Republic of Doyle* talk about how she got her start in acting, or they can listen to award-winning author Edward Riche discuss the golden age of Employment Insurance for actors living in St John's. These online efforts are only the beginning of the project's attempt to implement new ways of gathering and communicating such information.

At present, STAGE requires stable, long-term funding to maintain the project manager position and, now that it has found its feet once more, again expand beyond the Avalon. Before much more time passes, Lynde, Quigley, and Ormsby hope to be able to send students out across Newfoundland and Labrador to assemble the stories that are a vital part of the whole province's cultural history. **NQ**

**"Working on the STAGE Project means that I can be part of a process that brings the history of performing arts in Newfoundland to life."**