

PHOENIX

AT 50

A scene from the 2007 Phoenix production of Wind in the Willows, production design by Mary Kerr. PHOTO: TIM MATHESON

UVic's acclaimed theatre department celebrates 50 years of innovation, on stage and off

by John Threlfall

It's no exaggeration to say that Victoria is well known for its diverse and dynamic theatre community. With 60 local theatre companies and national acclaim regularly lauded upon the likes of the Belfry, Pacific Opera Victoria and Intrepid Theatre, Victoria has earned its reputation as one of Canada's cultural capitals.

Much of that credit belongs to the University of Victoria's Department of Theatre. Peek behind the curtain of almost any production in town and you're bound to find a theatre graduate.

For 50 years, the theatre department and Phoenix Theatre—its public performance wing—have helped shape the development of local and national theatre by producing celebrated alumni and innovative productions.

The department's international exchanges, applied theatre, and theatre education programs are renowned for affecting social change and transforming the way theatre itself is taught.

Growing from a volunteer-built, 80-seat theatre into Canada's leading comprehensive theatre program, the Phoenix is now one of the best educational theatre facilities in the country. Three stages and extensive backstage

facilities—including set construction and wardrobe shops—let students create almost any environment imaginable.

Whether they're mounting modern classics or performing Shakespeare, students are at the heart of every award-winning production—not only acting, but also designing sets and costumes, operating the lighting and sound, and handling front-of-house and audience services.

This hands-on approach to learning balances practical skills with traditional academic courses and has set the tone for the kind of dynamic programs now common across campus.

"Our success begins with a deep passion for theatre shared by faculty, staff, students and audiences—past and present," says department chair Allana Lindgren. "Many of our alumni become theatre professionals, while others apply the skills they've honed to a wide range of careers. All are united by their creativity and intellectual dexterity."

Many alumni have learned these skills with internationally known design professor Mary Kerr. Her work is so respected that she's the only set and costume designer ever to be named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and many of her designs are included in the two-

volume World Scenography collection which she uses as textbooks in her classes.

"Many people don't think of theatre design as art," she says. "While I am a costume and set designer, I try to approach stage design as kinetic sculpture."

Kerr is committed to changing the way design is taught. Her hope is to move beyond the conventional "short-order cook" approach where designers may simply fill out the director's "menu" of separate set, costume and lighting ideas. In a new course, students are paired up in designer/director teams to develop a more cohesive approach to a play.

"The idea is to have a unified vision, to build an imagistic bridge between the playwright's text and the director's ideas of it," she says.

Creative and academic innovations like these will assure the theatre department's place in the spotlight over the next 50 years, as the next generation of alumni make their impact on the ever-evolving world of theatre.

"The people who started our department were fearless in their vision and commitment, and that 'can do' attitude has never left," says Lindgren. "Our students roll up their sleeves and work together to create amazing productions."

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EDGEWISE

The Phoenix Theatre building has three distinct theatre spaces—a traditional 208-seat theatre and a 194-seat "thrust" theatre-in-the-round, both used for mainstage productions; and an 80-seat "black box" studio used for classes and experimental productions.

The three Phoenix stages are supported by an expansive backstage area that includes dressing rooms; prop storage; scenery, lighting and movement workshops; studios and classrooms. The costume area stores over 15,000 wardrobe pieces, from hats and undergarments to period clothing and less traditional costumes.

Theatre graduates practise across Canada and the world as directors, actors, playwrights, designers (set, costumes and lighting), technical directors, production managers, scenery carpenters, artistic directors, cultural administrators and more.

The department's 50th anniversary continues this spring with two more Phoenix productions: the British emancipation story, *Gut Girls* (Feb. 9–18); and professor Linda Hardy's West Coast adaptation of the Russian satire, *The Inspector* (March 9–18). Info: www.phoenixtheatres.ca

At UVic's Ideafest 2017, watch for the Human Library Project (March 11) where you can speak one-on-one with up to 20 "human books" to learn more about Phoenix history, alumni impact and Victoria's theatre community. Info: finearts.uvic.ca/theatre/50th/humanlibrary/

Meet Mary Kerr at bit.ly/uvic-kerr