Metro Theatre celebrates its 500th show

Community theatre celebrates milestone with stage adaptation of Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility

By Mark Robins

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Jane Austen’s comedy of manners, Sense and Sensibility, comes to the Metro Theatre stage

Vancouver’s Metro Theatre has been putting on plays for fifty-four seasons. And while that is an impressive number in itself, this season the community theatre celebrates an even bigger milestone, with a production of *Sense and Sensibility* as its 500th show.

Founded in 1962 with a $5,000 grant from the City of Vancouver to turn the derelict movie house into a live theatre, the group's permanent home became a reality in 1964. The inaugural production that year was the drama *Dark Side of the Moon*, presented by White Rock Players, one of eleven amateur companies in the original theatre co-operative. And even while the original theatre collective did not survive, Metro Theatre continues to occupy the Southwest Marine Drive venue.

Joining Metro Theatre in 1968 was the company's current general manager, Les Erskine. A newbie to the world of theatre at the time, through his early involvement with Metro, Erskine went on to a forty-year career in television and film.

"However, I was never far from Metro's stage as I kept returning as a lighting designer every few years," says Erskine. "My roles at Metro have never been on-stage, at least not unless the lights are off."

Over the years Metro has seen the likes of Robert Clothier, Anthony Holland, Brent Carver and Ruth Nichol honing their crafts. For Erskine, it is the first of two aspects that makes this community theatre unique.

"Metro is important as a stepping stone for passionate theatre makers to gain experience and skills that may lead to a career in the arts, and for those that seek a creative outlet outside of a more traditional career," he says.

Having been part of Metro for nearly four decades now, Erskine has seen many changes over the years. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of those changes are of the technological kind.

"Not only onstage, with the technical aspects of lighting, sound, and effects but in the other necessary areas," he says citing such things as ticketing, communication, the rise of social media, and its online presence.

"This is particularly true with Metro that is reliant of volunteers that have real-life daytime jobs that may not be in any way connected with the same skills required of them on the stage."

"It is dedicated to millions of volunteer hours, onstage, backstage, and in the front of House, it has taken to produce 500 shows in Metro's fifty-four seasons" – les erskine on the choice of sense and sensibility as metro theatre's 500th show

Having weathered financial difficulties in the late 1970s, the company more recently found itself facing similar problems. With its 2012/2013 season in doubt, Erskine stepped into the role of general manager, taking a pragmatic and holistic approach.

"Everything is cyclical and we follow paths that may have worked well in the past, but in time the path must change to be more compatible with the changes in society, technology, demographics and economics," he says. "For Metro to survive it has to balance its original stated purpose of advancing the non-professional performing arts in the community, with financial realities of competing for income from patrons in a competitive theatre scene in Vancouver, and

finding other streams of revenue to balance the myriad of expenses that are required to keep the doors open."

Erskine's approach appears to be working. Just three seasons later, Metro finds itself on better financial footing, and now celebrates its 500th show with a stage adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense & Sensibility*.

"It is dedicated to millions of volunteer hours, onstage, backstage, and in the front of House, it has taken to produce 500 shows in Metro's fifty-four seasons," he says. "*Sense and Sensibility* has all the challenges of creative theatre and the artistic team onstage and backstage to make us proud."

***Sense and Sensibility* plays Metro Theatre (1370 SW Marine Drive, Vancouver) from October 29 through November 19. Visit http://metrotheatre.com for tickets and information.**

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