



VICTORIA HIGH SCHOOL Alumni News

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NINETY CANDLES FOR TOMMY MAYNE

by Denis Johnston (VHS '67)

How you remember him depends on when you were there. In the 1930s, he was a little guy who played some small parts in Miss Cameron's plays. In the '40s, he was one of Vic High's new wave of young teachers hired to cope with a post-war enrollment boom. In the '50s, he was undisputed king of the auditorium, where he directed many plays and musicals to great acclaim and overflow houses. In the '60s, he was a popular head of the Social Studies department, a punning scholar who also played patient stepfather to the sometimes naughty Calamity Players. In the '70s, he was one of the main forces behind the Vic High Centennial, not only producing but also playing the lead role in the sold-out historical pageant staged at the Memorial Arena. His stage persona lasted longer than the production, morphing into the popular character "Old Vic," a lively enthusiast who personified the traditions, pride and spirit of the school. No role could have suited him better.

On December 12, 2008, Tommy Mayne celebrated his 90th birthday at his new apartment in Berwick House, a well-appointed retirement residence in Saanich. Although I've known Tommy for some 43 years, it seemed a good time to sit down and learn more about him.

Tommy was born in the Fernwood area and grew up in Fairfield. He remembers attending Sir James Douglas School, sometimes walking up Moss Street hill to attend manual training classes at Boys Central School. (Girls Central next door occupied the former Victoria High School building, a famously awkward structure designed by the celebrated Francis Rattenbury.) Then of course he went on to Vic High, graduating in 1935.

Work was hard to find in the middle of the Great Depression, but teenage Tommy was good at school. He took two years at Victoria College, then housed in Craigdarroch Castle, followed by a year at the Provincial Normal School, now the Lansdowne Campus of Camosun College. The next step to a BC teaching certificate was two years teaching experience, which Tom was determined to obtain no matter where it took him.



Tommy (second row, far left) in *The Ivory Door*, 1935



Tommy and the Thespians, 1954

First it took him to the tiny settlement of Savory, on the Yellowhead Highway about 100 miles west of Prince George. At age 19, Tommy was master of a one-room



Tommy and the cast of *My Last Duchess*, 1956

school with eight Ukrainian students from grades 1-8, and he boarded with an older man in a log cabin. The diet was very limited, the well-water was sulfurous, and a sympathetic school inspector could see that Tommy's health was suffering as a result. The next year brought some positive changes.

He was sent to teach at White Lake, a Finnish farming community about 30 miles north of Salmon Arm off what is now the Trans-Canada Highway. There were 10 students this time, including one doing her senior matriculation via correspondence courses. Although Tom still had to walk a mile to school in time to light the stove, there was plenty of good food and fresh milk, and he could listen to Foster Hewitt's legendary hockey broadcasts on a neighbour's radio on Saturday nights. For a young man raised in the city, it was a tenuous lifeline to the civilization in which he'd been raised.

Tommy knew he'd rather teach older kids. So with his hard-earned teaching certificate in hand, he went back to school to get more qualifications – this time to UBC, where he studied English and History. He remembers trying out for the UBC Players Club at the old Auditorium, auditioning for BC theatre legends Freddie Wood (VHS 1902-03; VHS teacher 1910-1914) and Dorothy Somerset. Like most young men during the Second World War, Tommy wanted to join Canada's

armed forces, but he was rejected on medical grounds. His contribution to the war effort was destined to be in teaching.

When he emerged from UBC with his B.A., Tommy was hired at Trail-Tadanac High School in Trail, a mining town that was booming due to wartime industry. Starting teachers don't get their choice of assignments: young Mr. Mayne found himself teaching mostly junior-high science, and even one P.E. class! But his father's health was a worry; and after three years in Trail, Tommy was able to land a job at his alma mater. Long-time Vic High principal Harry Smith met him outside the staff room. "You won't get the best classes to start with," he admitted. Then came the good news: "Miss Cameron wants to give up her drama class. How would you like to take it on?" This was music to Tommy's ears!

For his first production, he selected a recent play that was already a classic: *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. Although it was a great success, Tommy never got to see the production – as opening night approached, his dad took ill and died, and Miss Cameron shepherded the production through dress rehearsals to closing night.

Production after production followed: *Lost Horizon* (1948), *Pride and Prejudice* (1949), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1950), *Sense and Sensibility* (1951), *Our Town* again (1952), *The Robe* (1955) and *Lust for Life* (1958). Casts



Calamity Players, 1967, with author Denis Johnston sitting on Tommy's knee

featured such exceptional talents as Bill Hosie and Sylvia Mobey (later Mrs. Hosie) and technical whiz-kinds such as Jack Trueman. In the 1950s, with the emergence of strong choir and orchestra programs under Norma Douglas and Dorothy Evans, Tommy began producing and directing musicals too, including *Rose of the Danube* (1953), *Chonita* (1954) and *Song of Norway* (1959). At the same time, Tommy was active at Langham Court Theatre, where he was later honoured with a Life Membership.

In 1962, new principal G.A.V. Thompson offered Tommy another new opportunity – to be head of Vic High's Social Studies department. But they agreed he couldn't do this and drama too. So Tommy gave up his role in the auditorium to new arrival Bert Farr, though he continued to sponsor Calamity Players, the school's popular skit club.

"I am very thankful for being allowed to teach in such a great school," says the still-enthusiastic Tommy Mayne, "and proud of being a teacher, among others



Tommy's Calamity Players, 1972

who have done so much to encourage young people. There was great rapport between Vic High students and teachers, especially in the late '40s through the '60s." Of his long and distinguished career, he comments: "Having a sense of humour helps to overcome many obstacles. And I'm lucky to have had such good health,

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missing only a few days in 33 years.

“I also feel very fortunate to have directed those plays at Vic High and to look after all the details related to drama. Former students remind me that I used drama to teach history too, playing the emperor Napoleon or a poor soldier in the trenches – I had forgotten doing that, but they remember.”

When pressed for highlights of his career, Tommy includes three historical pageants performed at the Memorial Arena:

- the 1958 BC Centennial Show staged by ten schools, for which he was *uber*-director, traveling from school to school to touch up each scene.
- the 1967 Canadian Centennial show, for which he directed Vic High’s contribution, a “roaring ’20s” scene.
- the 1976 Vic High Centennial Show, for which he not only served as producer and co-writer, but also played the leading role. As this character, “Old Vic,” who personified the spirit of Vic High, Tommy also gave the school’s graduation address the next year; I know of no other teacher who has been thus honoured while still on staff.

Also among his career highlights, Tommy recalls his first Vic High production, *Our Town* (1947), and his last, *Song of Norway*. A curious link to these productions was Victor Mitchell, who as a student played the lead in *Our Town*, and as a young teacher directed *Song of Norway* with Tommy as producer. Vic Mitchell said that acting in *Our Town* changed his life; he later went on to become chair of the drama department at the University of Calgary.

Finally, Tommy lists as a highlight the honour of having an auditorium seat dedicated to him by the Alumni Association at the Homecoming in June 2008. Perhaps it’s not polite to correct your teacher, but excuse me Mr. Mayne, the honour is ours.

Photo research by Jill Wallace (VHS '66)



Tommy honoured at his Retirement Dinner with wife Betty and Principal, Dunc Lorimer, 1978



Tommy with Denis Johnston at class of '67 reunion, June 2009