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Opinion | ‘Until then, goodbye’: Spectator theatre critic Gary Smith says farewell after 47-year run

From Judy Garland to Christopher Plummer to Caissie Levy, Smith reflects on memorable moments over the years.

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By Gary Smith Special to the Spectator

Gary Smith writes about theatre and dance for the Hamilton Spectator.

It started as a joke.

I was at loose ends. No plays to direct. My friend Lyle Slack, theatre critic for The Hamilton Spectator, asked me what I was planning to do to stay creative.

“Write theatre reviews,” I said, meaning it in jest.

“What a great idea,” he said.

A few days later, he called and asked me what I was doing that night. Nothing, I said.

“Yes, you are, you’re going to review ‘The Odd Couple’ at Theatre Burlington,” he said.

I thought he must be kidding. Two good friends of mine were playing Oscar and Felix, the leading roles.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I know you, if you don’t like it, you’ll have the guts to say so.”

That was it, the beginning — 47 years of writing theatre and dance reviews for The Spectator. I’ve loved every minute of it.

So why end the ride?

Because it’s time. At 83, sadly my health needs my attention more than my theatre passion.

And yes, it is a passion. And it’s one I won’t be able to let go.

What started it all

It began with the movies.

As a child, I lived with my grandmother, who kept a theatrical boarding house for carnival and circus people coming to town. She was my special angel. She let me walk to the fabulous old Palace and Capitol theatres on King Street to watch movies on Saturday mornings. I was seven. And yes, I was maybe a tad young to go to the movies all alone.

But the streets were safe as houses back then — and anyway, I was a pretty savvy kid.

I loved the films I saw, especially the musicals, and I would come home and play all the parts.



Gary Smith has been The Hamilton Spectator's theatre and dance critic for 47 years.

John Rennison/Spectator file photo

The first play I ever saw was “What Every Woman Knows” performed by The Players’ Guild. It starred Dorothy Foster, a brilliant local teacher and actress.

Amazingly, a million years later, I directed Foster in “The Lion in Winter” for that same Players’ Guild, and I also reviewed her performance as The Nurse in “Romeo and Juliet” for The Spectator. Boy, was I thrilled.

My mom and dad took me to see all the summer shows at Prudhomme’s Garden Centre Theatre in Vineland. I watched Tallulah Bankhead prowl the stage as if compelled by some inner fury. I fell in love with June Havoc desperately searching for romance in a sweet little play called “The Time of the Cuckoo,” and I marvelled at Dorothy Lamour, singing and dancing in “Du Barry Was A Lady,” just like she did on the movie screen.

But these weren’t images flickering on a screen — these were real people, right there in front of me. I was besotted.

Over the years, I’ve seen thousands of plays, good and bad ones. The theatre called to me and I just had to be part of it.

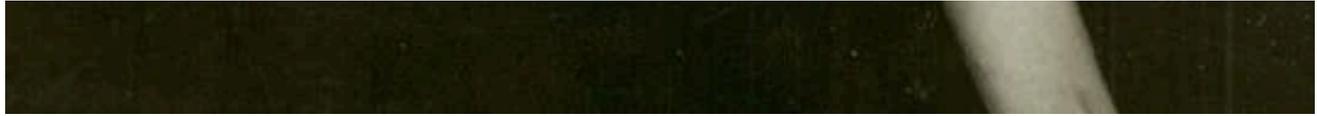
When I was 14, I joined The Hamilton Theatre Company, now HTI, and I learned from their stage directors, many from New York City. I soaked up everything like some teenage sponge.

And at HTI, everyone looked out for me, this crazy kid who was underfoot.

Eventually, I landed at The Players' Guild, where I directed 76 plays.

When that sadly ended, how lucky I was to find a truly creative home at The Spectator.





Judy Garland.

Spectator file photo

That's where I met people who helped me channel my passion into writing. And it's where I met you dear readers, people who love the theatre as much as I do.

I learned too, good critics don't pull punches. It's not useful to readers if you just gush. And that's who you write for, your readers.

By golly, giving it all up is painful. It means shucking off part of my identity. But if you're smart, you know when it's time to let go.

The best of the best

People often ask me what's the best show you've ever seen. That's hard to answer because they're all different. But I'll tell you the most powerful force I ever saw on stage was Judy Garland performing her brilliant Carnegie Hall Concert at the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto.

Sitting fourth row centre, I swear she sang only to me. That was her magic, wasn't it? This little woman with the great big voice who could break your heart.

Years later, in California, I watched her daughter Lorna Luft do the same thing. It must have been in the genes.

I'll also never forget Ethel Merman as Mama Rose in "Gypsy;" Katharine Hepburn in "Coco;" Sandy Dennis, Karen Black and Cher in "Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean;" and at Hamilton Place, the wonderful Mimi Hines caressing the lyric to "Don't Blame Me."

In local community theatres, there were incredibly talented performers too. I'll always remember Bill Wade in "Faith Healer," Tom Mackan in "The Night of the Iguana," Pat Haber and Willard Boudreau in "The Glass Menagerie" and everyone in "Kennedy's Children."

I've been lucky enough to watch Theatre Aquarius, our professional theatre company, grow from its early days when co-founder Peter Mandia, even though they were tough sells in this city, had the guts to program bold plays like "M. Butterfly" and "My Children! My Africa!"

And I sit in admiration of Mary Francis Moore, the present artistic director, who attempts to seduce audiences away from their comfort zone to see more than just trivial comedies and one-dimensional musicals.



Catherine Wreford as Diana in “Casey and Diana” at Theatre Aquarius.

Dahlia Katz photo

Recent Aquarius productions like “Casey and Diana” and “The Master Plan” ask audiences to think and feel. And like her predecessor Ron Ulrich, Moore doesn’t abandon them for convivial little shows that sell tickets but have little depth.

These days too, there’s a burgeoning indie theatre in this city, pushing the envelope with so many pop-up and ongoing groups doing terrific productions, such as Kitchen Sink’s daring “True West” and Rook’s Theatre’s “Mary’s Wedding.”

And let’s not forget the community theatres, making culture accessible at affordable prices.

I miss the once-busy Hamilton Place (now FirstOntario Concert Hall) that brought so many world-class theatre and dance companies to the city.



Karen Kain and Frank Augustyn.

Handout

Our own National Ballet of Canada appeared there, and Hamilton-born stars Karen Kain and Frank Augustyn shone. And visitors like the Bolshoi Ballet and Ballet Nacional de Cuba presented world-class dance entertainment in that theatre.

Memorable moments

When I meet readers, they always ask me about memories. And yes, I have quite a few.

They aren't about plays. They're about people I know and love and have worked with over the years. They are moments that define for me the joy of having known, loved and celebrated the art form.



Pictured in this file photo from a “Nutcracker Nation” book signing and panel discussion: from left, Margaret Mehuys, artistic director and choreographer with Ballet Ovest de Montreal; Jennifer Fisher, award-winning author of “Nutcracker Nation”; prima ballerina Evelyn Hart and Gary Smith.

Kaz Novak/Spectator file photo

When Evelyn Hart, the stunning ballerina from the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, told me she was giving her final performance, I begged her to do “The Dying Swan,” a gorgeous solo that requires great acting talent as well as physical technique.

“Oh Gary,” she said. “I don’t think I can.”

In London, Ont., a few weeks later, Hart touched me deeply. For her very last dance, she found the soul of “The Dying Swan.”

Sitting in a front-row seat, I held my breath, not because I feared she’d fail, but because I could barely watch her genius without tears rolling down my cheeks.

At the end of the piece, she walked slowly forward and lifted me out of my seat and kissed me. I thought I would die.

Then, I heard two ladies directly behind me speaking. “Who do you think that is?” one said, nodding at me. “Oh,” said the other, “It must be her old grandfather.”



Pictured in this file photo: from left, Jo Skilton, Maureen Dwyer, Caissie Levy (in red) and Kitty Varley who starred in The Players' Guild's production of "If We Are Women."

Barry Gray/Spectator file photo

Watching my friend [Caissie Levy](#), the Hamilton actress I directed in “If We Are Women” at The Players’ Guild, as she brought down a thrilled New York audience singing “Back to Before,” from the musical “Ragtime,” I realized what a connection there is between theatre in Hamilton and the main stem of Broadway. When Levy peered out at the rows of seats, and found me sitting there in the dark, she blew me a kiss. I was moved — moved because she knew where her roots were and I knew too that no matter how far her star took her, she would remember our time working together in the Hammer.

And there were unforgettable moments with two great stars.

Christopher Plummer was known to be crusty.

He had a bit of a reputation. I was told by his publicist not to ask about the film “The Sound of Music,” or our interview would be over.

I waited until the very last moment. He had been so kind, so generous with his time. He dismissed the publicist who tried to limit our time together. She said she’d be back in 10 minutes.

“Don’t bother,” he said. “Gary and I may be here all day. We’ll let you know when we’re finished.”

And yes, I asked the big question, and Plummer’s face went red.

“You know, I’ve always been a little snobbish about “The Sound of Music,”” he said. “But just lately, I’ve realized something important. That film is what made me a star, not all the Shakespearean roles I’ve ever played. Please tell your readers that, won’t you?”

Then there was the beautiful Diahann Carroll. She had a reputation for being a difficult interview. The publicist who took me to her dressing room shook his head. “Good luck, honey,” he said. “If she doesn’t like you, you’re out of there in two minutes.”

Carroll was between matinee and evening performances during pretty tense previews. A stylist was tugging at her hair. A designer was wafting a costume in her face. The poor woman was begging for a cup of tea. She looked tired.

Before I left Hamilton, my editor told me I must ask the big question: What was a Black actress doing playing Norma Desmond, a white film star, in “Sunset Boulevard”? Remember, this was 30 years ago.

I knew Carroll was an activist and suffered little rudeness from anyone.

I waited until the last minute of our lengthy chat to ask.

“My editor told me I had to ask you this,” I said. “I’m sorry if it’s a rude question.”

Carroll sat silent and stone-faced for several minutes.

“That’s not a rude question,” she said. “It’s a very good one. And here’s the answer: if I’m any good, it won’t matter. And if I’m not, it will matter big time.”

Of course, Carroll was the best damned Norma ever.

I’ll miss moments like that. And I’ll miss you too, dear readers. I’ll miss the outraged phone calls when I hated some play you loved. And I’ll miss the lovely emails when you happened to agree with something I said.

I probably won’t see you in the paper again, but I hope I’ll meet you in some theatre somewhere, sometime. If you see me sitting across an aisle with my husband Will, without my usual pen and paper in hand, please come over and say hello. I’d like that.

Until then, goodbye.



Gary Smith in his tux with a “shoe clip” that famous dancer Ginger Rogers gave him.

John Rennison/Spectator file photo



Gary Smith, pictured in a file photo, with some of his dance memorabilia.

Ted Brellisford/Spectator file photo



Gary Smith.

Lynne Jamieson photo



Mike Shara in “The Master Plan” at Theatre Aquarius.

Dahlia Katz photo

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