

Stage Whispers

A conversation with Sandy Harper

BY SUSY BUCHANAN

For nearly 20 years Cyrano's Theatre Company has been producing plays in Downtown Anchorage. And although talented actors, directors and crew have a lot to do with the Theatre's success and longevity, the driving force between this scrappy little playhouse is Sandy Harper, 73. Harper and her late husband Jerry were our town's celebrity thespians, and although Jerry was more often found on stage, it was Sandy's determined marketing strategy that kept the theater in the papers and the seats full. Here, Sandy talks with the *Press* about her beginnings, her thoughts on theater in Anchorage and life in general, and her all-encompassing love for Jerry. Never one to miss a chance to plug her events, she would also like you to remember there's a benefit for Cyrano's on June 6 at the Discovery Theater beginning at 7:30 p.m. It will be a cabaret-style evening with celebrity appearances, posters and props for sale, and the grand reveal of the 2015 season.

Tell us a little about your background and how your interest in theater developed?

I was raised in a small town in Illinois. I've always been attracted to the theater, I don't know why. I did win second prize in a talent show when I was five. I sang a song. Today my daughter encourages me to lip sync at any public event.

Everybody wants to be a movie star, I guess. I went to the movies twice a week as a

child. When I was an adult realized parents just wanted to get rid of me.

I did go to a theater camp for teenagers in North Carolina, and I was going to Boston University where they had a terrific theater department. One of my professors was in charge of a neighborhood playhouse in New York, so I didn't finish college and went to New York. I did summer stock in Estes Park, Colorado. Then I went to California.

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Sandy Harper is the driving force behind Cyrano's Theatre Company in downtown Anchorage.

PHOTO BY SUSY BUCHANAN

How did you and Jerry meet?

Jerry and I met in Los Angeles at a Halloween party in 1962. I was dressed as a Fellini movie. I wore a slip and sunglasses and did a lotta talking with my hands, like an Italian. We hit it off. He made me laugh. He was lots of fun. Jerry was a man of incredible integrity. I was friends with Rachel Rosenthal, who was involved in cutting edge theater, and Jerry and I both became members of that company. We performed a different fairy tale every week and I was a professional princess!

You inherited this building, which was built in 1915, from Jerry's stepfather, Zack Loussac. What made you decide to open a theater here?

Tony Knowles was mayor then and was doing a lot of urban renewal. The theater was actually a liquor store then. Tony wanted to clean up Fourth Avenue and courted us to rehab the building, so we borrowed a million plus dollars to do that. One of the reasons the bank gave us the money was that our anchor tenant was the police department. They moved out when the economy tanked in the mid-'80s. Jerry was a gifted actor and director and said lets have a theater. Cyrano's was opened in late 1987 as a bookstore and cinema, kind of a cultural mini mall. In 1995 Barnes and Noble and Borders bookstore moved into Anchorage and we couldn't compete, so gradually our total focus became the theater.

How have things changed in the theater world over the years?

There are fewer theaters now, although I'm hoping Out North will resurrect, but Anchorage has always had a very strong theater community. We keep trying to have a theater company alliance, but it never quite sustains itself. I'd like to see an alliance and where everyone chips in, and with support online. We would need a paid coordinator for that.

Perseverance Theatre now offers an Anchorage season. Do you see them as competition?

The more good theater the better! People need to get in the habit of going to the theater. Our work is on par with theirs, but they have a million-dollar budget and we've done it on a shoestring,

through passion and guerilla marketing, which is something I am very good. Like when we did *Our Town*. There is a famous photo of the *Our Town* banner over Fourth Avenue when it was performed in 1964, so I made a replica and we erected our own *Our Town* banner. On opening nights we give the proceeds to another non-profit whose mission is aligned with what the play is about. They cater the event and do advanced buzz for us. They want people to come because they get all the money. With *A Wrinkle in Time* the library had a poster contest and we partnered with the Girl Scouts to help get young girls interested in science. The Scouts all got theater badges and we had all the Girl Scout cookies you can imagine!

I am envious of Perseverance's budget and how savvy they are at getting funding outside of Alaska. This is not an equity town; yet still people give there all as if they were working for a lot of money. Money isn't why theater people do theater. It is nice to be financially rewarded, but I would rather be doing what I'm doing; it's stimulating and I wake up every morning happy.

What do you do for fun?

This is my fun! What it does for me is it makes me feel ultra alive. Everything else is grist for the mill.

You and Jerry were always so close, almost like one person.

How have you been since he's been gone?

Jerry passed on April 8, 2005, at 5:30. His celebration of life was at the Wendy Williamson Auditorium, and there were almost 1,000 people. At my condo he's in his grandmother's teapot. I was such a lucky person to have had a person of Jerry's caliber and quality in my life and I miss him every day and wish he were still here. That life is finite is not an abstraction to me. And I'm hoping I am making Jerry happy. I really see my job as stewardship for Jerry's legacy and keeping the quality standards where he had them.

What's something people don't know about you?

I was the researcher for the book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* by Marilyn Ferguson. The book was about full brain access and applying consciousness research and social transformation. It popularized the idea that society and individuals were experiencing a paradigm shift. The subtitle of the book was "Our Past Is Not Our Potential."

How do you feel about aging?

I am 73 but just like actors you kind of want to be perceived as timeless for professional reasons. My favorite response has always been somewhere between menopause and death! My mother always added five years to her age so people would marvel about how great she looked, and I'm beginning to think that might be a good strategy! Margaret Mead said we all freeze frame inside at 23.

Where do you see yourself and Cyrano's in 10 years?

You'll probably see me back in the wings with an oxygen tank! But we are starting to think about a succession plan, and hope to be able to hire somebody to be artistic director. That will be exciting to have that sustainability. That person would need to be passionate, connected and gifted in the field.

Where do your ideas come from?

Who knows really? It is a mystery. I think that you can have an open mind and invite creativity, such as by taking walks. And it's helpful not be constantly tethered to technology. It's also good to know what you're good at, your aces, and delegate what you are not, and to appreciate collaboration and the power of synergy. Also I am pro-paradox and don't mind process and ambiguity!

What advice would you give your 20-year-old self?

Have the courage to do what you want to do and know that things are possible. When you are 20 you don't realize what you can accomplish and you are very insecure. I'm probably insecure now. That's a gift I hope to give to my grandchildren so they don't have to have a big intermission between who they are and doing the thing that gives them joy. When you are that 20-year-old self you really don't have the reminder of how important it is to make the wisest choices possible every day, and that life zooms by much too quickly.