

Port Theatre celebrates 10 years

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By The Daily News (Nanaimo)

On Sept. 16, 1998 something -- only a few who dared to dream would happen -- took place.

Then-B.C. premier Glen Clark, former Prime Minister Paul Martin, and Nanaimo Mayor Gary Korpan, joined by then-Coun. Ron Cantelon cut the ribbon launching the fulfillment of a dream to many in Nanaimo and Central Vancouver Island.

It was the opening of Nanaimo's Port Theatre and the culmination of the dream of hundreds of volunteers and members of the Nanaimo and District Harbourfront Centre Society, said Sandra Thomson, who is now the theatre's director of programming and development.

At that time, she was the Harbourfront Centre Society's development officer.

She started working for the society in 1990 and she was able to build on the momentum created by those who had been pushing for a performing arts theatre for many years, Thomson said.

"The society actually formed before I got here in 1989. It was formed by the city who selected 18 members to sit on the board of directors, including two city councillors," she said.

Bill Holdom and Margaret Strongitharm were council's first two representatives on the Nanaimo and District Harbourfront Centre Society's board.

Thomson said that without Strongitharm's backing the Port Theatre may not have been built.

"We call her the founding mother because she was the person on council who insisted on a feasibility study to see if Nanaimo could support a performing arts venue."

The Port Theatre has exceeded expectations, said Nanaimo MLA Ron Cantelon, who became Nanaimo and District Harbourfront Centre Society president in 1995.

"It certainly has been the catalyst to broaden downtown to be a cultural arts centre," Cantelon said. "It has helped attract a number of arts organizations to Nanaimo like the Crimson Coast Dance Society."

Cantelon said that without a venue like the Port Theatre, "there's no way Nanaimo would have been recognized as one of Canada's cultural capital cities.

"It has been an unmitigated success. It holds 200 events a year and that's more than any theatre in Vancouver," Cantelon said. When asked about the \$100,000 annual subsidy the theatre receives from city taxpayers, Cantelon said the society is developing a foundation to raise money to "eventually" cover that.

"It's a city building and the society has added at least \$100,000 a year every year to capital improvements," Cantelon said, pointing out that society fundraising secured a grand piano and carpeting for the theatre.

"The operating subsidy the city gives the theatre is just a third of the operating costs of the theatre," he said.

He's most proud of the fact that the society has stuck to its initial mandate and been a community

resource for performances for the likes of the Kirkwood Academy, Harbourfront Dance Centre and hosts university and high school graduation ceremonies.

Nanaimo blues guitarist David Gogo has performed at the Port Theatre a number of times, including the CBC production of Evolution of the Blues.

"It has provided a wonderful venue for local musicians and it gives people an opportunity to see big stars right in their own back yard," Gogo said.

"I had the chance to see the Neville Brothers at the Port a couple of weeks back and I'm so glad the Port was there for them. There was no way I would have travelled to Vancouver and paid for the hotel and everything else to watch them because of the cost."

Gogo said he enjoys performing at the Port because it has "fantastic acoustics."

Thomson said many of the people who perform at the Port are struck by how intimate the theatre is and the acoustics of the room.

Dame Cleo Laine and other performers often comment to the crowd at her concert what a "nice feel they get on the stage from the audience," said Thomson.

"It's a very intimate setting and that's what architect Terry Williams wanted: A feeling of intimacy and great acoustics."

The very first show at The Port Theatre after the ribbon cutting was 'The Hard Hat Concert' for all of the construction workers who built the theatre and their families. It featured Valdy and Gary Fjellgaard.

More than a million paying customers later, Saturday's 10 Anniversary Gala will feature a variety of local and nationally-recognized musicians.

Tickets for the gala cost \$34 for the general public, \$30 for society members and \$17 for students. Call the Port Theatre ticket centre at 250-754-8550 for more information.

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TALENT LINEUP AT 10TH ANNIVERSARY GALA

The Port Theatre's 10th anniversary gala will display the talents of :

Aisslinn Nosky (violin)

Rachel Capon (cello)

Jillian Vanstone and Richard Landry (principal dancers of the National Ballet of Canada)

Katy Bowen-Roberts (vocalist and actress)

Chalium Poppy (classical vocalist)

Christine Jensen (saxophone)

Bryan Stovel (bass), Bill Costin (drums)

David Gogo (guitar)

Holly Bright (contemporary dancer)

Joelle Rabu (singer/actress)

James Mark (violin), local singing group A Cappella Plus Singers.

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