

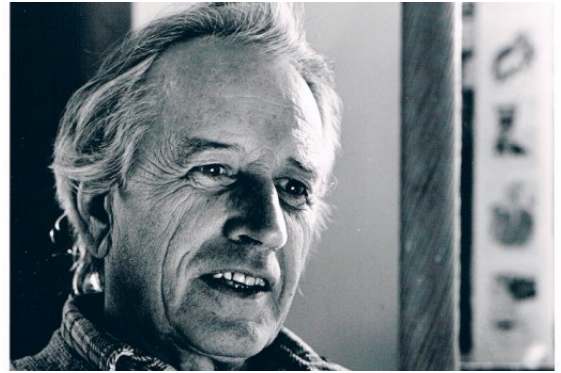
Happy Birthday Ben Tone! Local actor and mentor turns 90, recalls growth of Bozeman's art community

by Anika Hanisch

[Bozeman Magazine](#)

April 2011

[Final Published Text](#)



The roads were rough and audiences slim when Ben Tone set out with a few friends to begin a remote Montana theatre group in 1949. A founding member of the Virginia City Players (VCP), Tone performed with the group and helped transform the town's livery stable into a theatre. For several years, at the end of their summer theatre season in town, the acting company would hit the road, bringing live theatre to rural communities.

Phone lines were sketchy or non-existent. So, Tone had the promotions director drive ahead on their route to negotiate contracts in person. When the actors arrived a few days later, they knew they had a contract if posters were tacked up around town.

A self-described small town boy from Oregon, Tone jumped at the chance when he heard about the opportunity in Virginia City. He laughs now, recalling those days. "I remember playing to audiences of sixteen," he says. The group survived on room and board. "We were young; we didn't need a lot of money, just enough to survive," he says. "You really felt like you had accomplished something when you built theatre from scratch."

Every time the group toured, they returned to Bozeman. They performed in the Ellen Theatre, and Tone quickly got to know people in town and on the Montana State University campus. Along with his wife Nina—a Ruby Valley schoolteacher who met Tone when she was sewing costumes for the VCP—Tone spent years piecing together a living through VCP summer theatre, winter productions in Seattle or New York, one-man shows, and part-time teaching at MSU.

Vicky Smith, an actor who worked with Tone for four seasons in Virginia City, remembers those days. "He and Nina had some real tough times because there wasn't much work, and they were having children," Smith shared. "Ben was very close to the local people, and (they) took care of each other. It was just wonderful the openness and kindness."

In 1962, on the cusp of leaving Bozeman, Tone was offered a full-time teaching position in MSU's theatre department. Soon, he also had summer work at The Loft Theatre (in what locals know as the red barn by Café Zydeco on Main Street). Finally, Tone didn't feel like he might be forced to leave Bozeman to find work. He took the building-from-scratch experience he had in Virginia City and applied it whole-heartedly to growing the tiny theatre community in Bozeman.

Tone quickly got to know other creatives: artists Robert (Bobby) and Gennie DeWeese; Ken and Mary (Tada) Bryson in the literature department; and pianist Charles Payne. "They were the kind of people where you become friends immediately," Tone said of the DeWeeses. "You didn't make appointments to see them; you'd drop in." When he and Nina moved into the house where he still lives today, they began hosting workday lunches for their friends. One block from campus, their home became a hub of artistic community.

The art community in town was growing too. "The DeWeese's had a studio on Main; everyone gathered there for years," says Tone. He describes them as laid-back people who were friends with all kinds. "They had such a grasp of humanity. It was a privilege to know them."

John Hosking, a former student and now close friend of Tone's, recalled his visits with Tone and his colleagues. It was encouraging for him to be around such heart-warming people who believed in art. "There was joy in it all, an openness to be creative no matter how silly it was," said Hosking. "Bill Stockton and Bobby DeWeese used to do competitions, who could draw the fastest. And Bobby would make art out of anything. There was a sense that art is everywhere and in everything."

Hosking, who was majoring in architecture in 1970, originally got involved in campus theatre productions to meet people. He was shocked when, upon his first audition, Tone cast him as Macbeth. Tone smiles when asked about that choice. "He read the part very well; he started to read and immediately he was in character," he said.

Many other students, like Hosking, came to the theatre department out of curiosity and a desire to help. Electronics majors worked on lighting; agriculture students found their chance to be on stage; and then there was the home economics major who auditioned for that same production of Macbeth. Rhonda Smith (no relation to Vicki Smith) had been sewing costumes as part of a work study position that seemed relevant to her degree.

On her way to work on sewing projects, Smith would pass by classrooms where students were rehearsing. Drawn to the camaraderie and creativity, she auditioned and got the part of Lady Macduff. "I just remember being anxiety-ridden," Smith said. "It was the first time I'd laid awake at night worried about an acting role!"

Ben supported all his student actors regardless of their majors, mentoring them one-on-one whenever needed. Within the next two years, both Hosking and Smith would wind up dropping their previous majors and switching to theatre. They were entering the department in the middle of its hey day.

The core group of artists and instructors were also beginning to create more of a connection between town and campus. "We think of Bozeman as such an artsy town. It wasn't always like that," said Rhonda Smith. "It was a cow town and an ag college. If you were a student, you didn't mix with the townies much." The new art community changed that. "They would do theatre downtown. They started to combine the town and campus."

Hosking added, "What people love about Bozeman is this very homey crossover between these creative modern artists and family and outdoors." He credits Tone and his friends with building bridges between the art world and the local community, making that 'crossover' possible. "When Ben wasn't doing vaudeville, he was doing Krapp's Last Tape and The End Game. He did Scrooge, and he did very abstract theatre too," Hosking said.

Whatever the performance, people were completely taken with watching Tone on stage. "He has these wonderful hands, and he used his eyes," said Vicki Smith. Recalling her times on stage with him, she added, "Many actors learn their lines and do their own thing. With Ben, you work with. You pay attention, you listen."

Rhonda Smith was always impressed with Tone's appearances in the role of Drosselmeyer in The Nutcracker. "He moves beautifully. He's got this elegance," she said. Tone has often used a turn-of-the-century acting style. Smith explained, "When you're doing multiple characters and different accents... It has to be so clean and clear so audiences can tell the difference between your characters."

Both Smith and Hosking had no idea how much they'd be putting that Delsarte acting style to use in the future. Each went on for further education and acting opportunities all over the nation. One year, when Hosking returned to Virginia City for a summer, he was notified of an opportunity to start a touring theatre group based out of Western Montana College. The VCP had long since quit touring. But, Hosking remembered all of Tone's touring stories. He also remembered his classmate, Rhonda, and knew she'd be the perfect co-founder.

Tired of big cities, Smith immediately agreed, and the Vigilante Theatre Company was founded in 1981. Hosking and Smith embarked on the adventure of bringing live theatre to rural communities, often performing in towns with no other exposure to theatre. After two years, the Vigilantes moved their base to Bozeman, ultimately settling into their current office at the Emerson in 1991 when Hosking helped establish the historic building as an art center.

Having carried the torch of touring theatre for thirty years themselves, it's fitting that Hosking and Smith are hosting Tone's 90th birthday party – a big open-to-the-public event on April 18th at the Ellen Theatre in Bozeman.

Meanwhile, Tone is keeping busy. "I read aloud to myself a lot; I keep my diction going. It's the same thing I used to do as an actor; keep exercising the mouth." Every week, he plays tennis and goes bowling, and he camps near Hyalite Reservoir each summer. In recent years, Tone's also taken more time for his woodworking. "All this... is mine,"

Tone says gesturing around the room to bookshelves and chairs. "It's a great pleasure. I take my time." Pointing to the mahogany coffee table, he added, "I like to work with hard wood; the harder the wood, the longer it lasts."

A lasting legacy indeed.

Anika Hanisch is a freelance writer and memoir ghostwriter in Bozeman. She is working on a compilation of historic narratives regarding the local art community.