



Ben Tone

~ 2 ~

Bozeman, Montana

Ben quickly got to know 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. You didn’t make appointments to see them; you’d drop in,” Ben says of the DeWeeses. When he and Nina moved into the home that he still lives in today, a block from campus, they began hosting workday lunches for this growing artist community.

“It depended on schedules, who was there, when they came,” shares John Hosking, a former student and now close friend of Ben. “They talked about Irish literature and politics and art. It was very encouraging to see these heart warming people who were incredibly creative and believed in art as much as I did.”

These lunch groups were such a regular occurrence, Ben and Nina provided cloth napkins for each friend. Everyone had their own, and playful disputes might break out if someone

tried to use the wrong one. “You can still go to Ben’s house and he’ll say ‘That’s Bobby’s napkin,’” John shares. The group truly became family to each other.

The friends attended each other’s art openings and went to Ben’s summer performances in Virginia City. They also went on annual camping trips, often staking out three campsites together up at Hyalite Reservoir. “Those camping trips were epic,” says John who heard the stories afterwards. “There were probably twenty people when they brought all their kids.”

John adds, “There was joy in it all, an openness to be creative no matter how silly it was. Bill Stockton and Bobby DeWeese used to do competitions, who could draw the fastest. Bobby would make art out of anything. There was a sense that art is everywhere and in everything.”

Originally majoring in architecture in 1970, John had gotten involved in campus theatre productions just to meet people. He was shocked when, upon his first audition, Ben cast him as *Macbeth*. Ben smiles when asked about that choice. “He read the part very well; he started to read and immediately he was in character. I’ve never had any doubts about John.”

Ben found the architecture student to be a versatile actor and cast him in diverse roles. “That’s what talent is about; it’s an ability of the mind to go into the patterns that are (in the script), to imitate the actions of a person,” Ben reflects. “I have that too. I start to read... and I get into the rhythms and patterns immediately. I have it, and I can see it in other people.”

Connecting with Ben, and getting to know Ben’s contemporaries, John received plenty of mentorship and support. “They made me feel that I could be an artist,” he says. When John later co-founded a theatre company, he drew on inspiration from Ben and the DeWeeses and the Brysons. He marveled that he could actually start a theatre company based in rural Montana, but Ben’s group of artist friends had

pioneered the way. “No one had to tell me it was possible,” he says. They simply lived the possibility, showing it by example.

Many other students, like John, came to the growing theatre department out of curiosity and a desire to help. Engineering and electronics majors helped with lighting; agriculture students auditioned hoping for a chance to be on stage; and then there was the home economics major who auditioned for that same production of *Macbeth*. Rhonda Smith had been sewing costumes as part of a work study position that seemed relevant to her degree.

One of her earliest memories of Ben is regarding his involvement in a small faculty-led event supporting the small minority of artists and pro-peace students. At the time, it was fairly understood that Missoula was the “arts school” and Bozeman was the “agricultural college.” Rhonda had heard the stories about verbal hazing and cowboys kidnapping hippies and cutting their hair. Finally, several professors decided to create an event to address the issue.

“We would call it guerilla theatre today,” Rhonda says. “But we didn’t really have a word for it then.” Students of all walks gathered for the event, which had been advertised on posters around campus. They were both shocked and entertained as art, music, and theatre professors came in and performed “The Short-Haired and the Long-Haired Should be Friends” to the tune of “The Farmer and the Cowman Should be Friends” from the musical *Oklahoma*.

Rhonda was baffled — “These were my professors!” — but intrigued too.

Later, one night after staying up sewing costumes in the basement room that theatre majors called “The Dungeon,” Rhonda walked upstairs and heard singing coming from the scene shop. It was Ben. He had a boom box on and, for the sheer joy of it, was teaching himself all the words to the arias of *Carmen*. “I thought, this guy is so wonderfully eccentric,”

Rhonda recalls. She grew more and more interested in the artistic life through her work study tasks.

On her way to complete a sewing project, Rhonda would pass by classrooms where students were rehearsing. Drawn to the camaraderie and creativity, she auditioned for *Macbeth* and got the part of Lady MacDuff. “I just remember being anxiety-ridden,” Rhonda says. “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, Rhonda would wind up dropping her previous major and switching to theatre. On Ben’s recommendation, both she and John would also get hands-on experience in Virginia City.

John had been burning the candle at both ends during the school year, double-majoring in architecture and theatre. He rehearsed in the evenings and worked on architecture projects into the night. Sometimes he simply didn’t sleep. After a summer in Virginia City, where he stayed in those same actors’ housing trailers and got to know many of the locals who were friends with Ben, the decision was clear. “I realized if I could do something for sixteen hours a day for a whole summer and still like it; maybe that’s what I should be doing.” The following school year he dropped his architecture major and focused solely on theatre.

It was this burgeoning interest of the student body, regardless of degree programs, that spurred the growth and eventual hey day of MSU’s theatre department. The art community in town was growing too. “The DeWeeses had a studio on Main; everyone gathered there for years,” said Tone. “They were such laid back people and had so many friends, all kinds of people.” Later when they got a place up Cottonwood Canyon, they had similar gatherings there.

The core group of artist educators helped strengthen the

connection between town and campus. “We think of Bozeman as such an artsy town. It wasn’t always like that,” Rhonda says. “If you were a student, you didn’t mix with the townies much.” Then the artists came. “They would do theatre downtown. They started to combine the town and campus.” Bridges formed between the art world, the campus, and the local community.



“What people love about Bozeman is this very homey crossover between these creative modern artists and family and outdoors,” John says. He credits Ben and his colleagues with taking risks that made 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.”



Continuing to nurture theatre both on campus and in town, Ben helped with improvements at the Loft Theatre, updating the seating and physical arrangements. And he got his students involved there. Rhonda ran lights at a Loft production of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. “I had maybe five light cues the whole performance,” she says. “But watching adults act, seeing really heavy theatre, it was such an education.”

John had similar opportunities at the Loft. “It was the tiniest little fire trap of a theatre,” he recalls. But it was a chance to participate in an active community theatre. And

most importantly, for both John and Rhonda, they got to watch Ben act.

Many of Ben's colleagues and former students recall being completely taken with watching him on stage. "He has these wonderful hands, and he used his eyes; to this day he's known for these things," Vicki says. Recalling her times on stage with him, she adds, "Many actors learn their lines and do their own thing. With Ben, you work *with*. You pay attention, you listen to the other person. That way, if someone loses their line or something, you know what to do."

Remembering Ben's regular appearances in the role of the magician Drosselmeyer in Bozeman's annual production of *The Nutcracker*, Rhonda shares that she has always been impressed with Ben's stage presence. "He moves beautifully. He's got this elegance about him, his movement, his expression... that's why I love to watch him on stage. He is classic, perfect for that role."



Ben and Harry - Virginia City

Because of his classic training, his work in Virginia City, and his one-man shows, Ben has always used a more turn-of-the-century acting style. "When you're doing multiple characters and different accents, it's broader than your naturalistic theatre," Rhonda explains. "It has to be so clean and clear so audiences can tell the difference between your characters."

She and Hosking learned this Delsarte style from Ben and from Judy Feree, a director and good friend of Ben's in Virginia City. Judy would wind up closely mentoring Rhonda, the way Ben was mentoring John.

At the time, the two protégés had no idea just how much they'd be putting Ben and Judy's acting training to use in the future. After graduation, both students went on for masters education in Detroit and traveled, getting acting gigs and opportunities all over the nation. They never forgot Montana though, and returned often to act in Virginia City and to visit friends.

During one VCP summer, John was notified of an opportunity to start a touring theatre group based out of Western Montana College in Dillon. The VCP had long since quit the touring portion of their productions. But John remembered all of Ben's stories about the Players' touring days. He also remembered his classmate, Rhonda, and knew she'd be the perfect co-founder for the group.

Tired of living in cities and eager to return to her home state, Rhonda immediately agreed, and the Vigilante Theatre Company was founded in 1981. Rhonda laughs remembering how, shortly after graduation from MSU, she'd had a sobering conversation with a close friend.

"What the hell will I do with an acting degree?" she'd asked. Rhonda's friend replied calmly, "Oh, you'll be like my other friends and go off and start your own theatre."

Rhonda's reply at the time was a brusque, "Yeah, right."

The Vigilante Theatre Company eventually moved to Bozeman, at first as artists in residence at MSU. When John helped during the process of establishing the Emerson as an art center, the Vigilantes moved their office to their current location in that historic building.

Resonating with Ben's early touring experiences, John and Rhonda have made a life of bringing the unique joy of live theatre to rural communities in the Pacific Northwest. Many of the towns they perform in have very limited exposure to theatre.

Their original scripts are all written by regional playwrights. "That's what I love, what keeps me interested in this business: Playing to the people," Rhonda says. "We're doing stories about people who live where we live."



Rhonda and John (and Mr. Z)

Recently, the Vigilantes drove to Shelby to do a performance of *Radio Montana* by Bozeman playwright Greg Owens. A spring blizzard rolled in, and the actors barely made it into town; the interstate closed behind them. The humor was not lost on the audience; this particular show takes place in a radio station while a snowstorm rages outside and prevents one character from going home. The script also

wrestles with the struggles that small town radio stations face. That hit close to home for this particular audience. "Their radio station had just been sold two years prior," Rhonda says. "It was too weird."

Doing touring shows that typically involve only two to four actors, means each performer often plays multiple characters. So, John and Rhonda constantly draw from Ben and Judy's training in these small cast performances. Throughout the formation and growth of the Vigilante Theatre Company, Ben has continued to help in other ways too. Ben has always enjoyed an extensive woodworking hobby, and this was often helpful when it came to unusual theatrical props. "He became known as Clever Tone," Rhonda says. "If we needed a prop or special piece of furniture, or a table that folded up a certain way, John would go to Clever Tone, and he'd make it up in his basement."

The moniker was inspired also by Ben's constant exhortation when teaching: *Be clever!* "It meant, don't be boring. From lighting to stage construction to characterization—find ways to make it interesting or unique, exciting," John explains. "He always used to say to me, play to the highest intellect in the crowd; don't talk down."

Thirty years after founding the Vigilante Theatre Company, John regards Ben not only as a professional mentor and teacher, but also a very dear friend. The two men play tennis twice a week and bowl with the league on Monday nights. They reserve a campsite near Hyalite Reservoir every summer—a tradition descending from those big campouts with the DeWeeses.

Meanwhile, Ben, who retired from teaching in 1983, keeps busy on his own too. During the growing season, he's often outside working in his flower and vegetable gardens. He loves to read as well—especially Mark Twain. "That is a way of keeping the artistic mind alive, visualizing the book. I read

aloud to myself a lot; I keep my diction going," he says. "It's the same thing I used to do as an actor, keep exercising the mouth."

Ben has given more time to his woodworking too. "All this woodwork is mine," he says pointing to a coffee table, bookshelves, and chairs. "It's a great pleasure. I take my time; I'm never in a hurry. I redid the whole kitchen." Regarding the mahogany coffee table, he adds, "I like to work with hard wood; the harder the wood, the longer it lasts."

A lasting legacy indeed.



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Bozeman freelance writer Anika Hanisch ghostwrites memoir and non-fiction along with regularly publishing her own work in regional and national magazines. She also teaches writing through local workshops and private coaching.

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