

RECLAIMING THE REVUE

VANCOUVER'S ARTS CLUB REVIVES A GRANVILLE ISLAND THEATRE TO STAGE NEW WORKS

| BY KIMBERLEY FEHR

Bill Millerd and Ann Mortifee at the opening of the Granville Island Stage in 1979, which was partly funded by Vancouver Foundation.

OTHELLO, WAITING FOR GODOT, and *Death of a Salesman* are all classics of Western theatre. It's easy to forget that before they were considered great, they were nothing more than a spark of inspiration in a playwright's imagination.

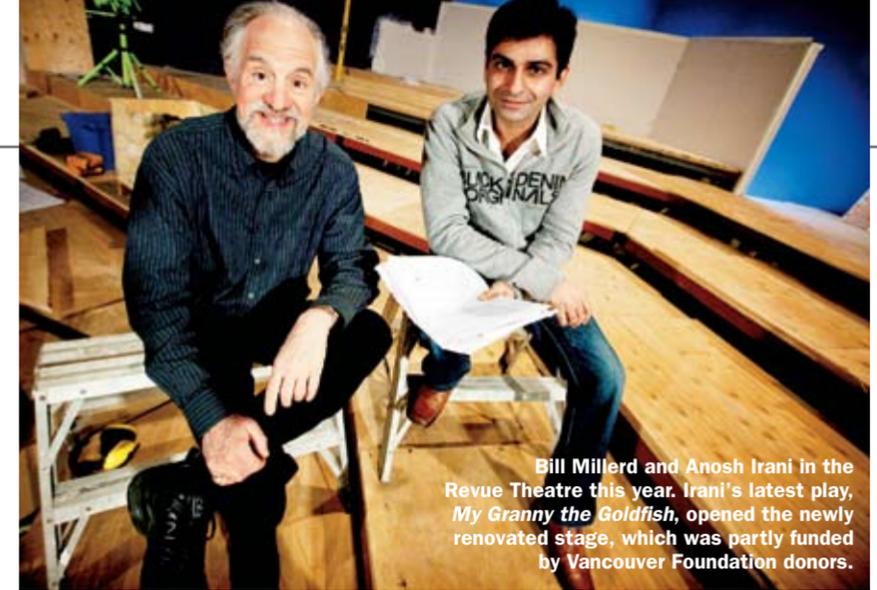
It's only because someone took a chance – and took these ideas from the notebook to the spotlight – that these great works had the opportunity to meet their audience, and to entertain, challenge and enlighten the way only live theatre can.

“You have to have people writing for your audience in the day in which you're living, dealing with issues that we all deal with on a day-to-day basis,” says Bill Millerd, artistic managing director at the Arts Club Theatre Company. “Producing [an already-written work] is useful, but it's equally important, if not more important, to have your contemporary playwrights, who live . . . and experience the same things you do.”

Tall and bristled with a trim, grey beard, Millerd is one of few people about whom it's not a cliché to say he has a twinkle in his brown eyes. Maybe that's because he has been immersed in the Arts Club Theatre Company for 35 years, which gives him the honour of being the longest-serving theatre director in Canada. Under his vision, the Arts Club has given life to 70 new Canadian productions, and Millerd himself has directed over 100 plays.

His office is crammed but organized, the walls plastered with posters that span decades of theatre life. Inside his filing cabinet, and outside too, are stacks of hopeful manuscripts. Maybe a few more of them will meet their audience, now that Millerd has realized his long-standing dream to reclaim Granville Island's Revue Theatre.

When the 600-seat Stanley Theatre opened 12 years ago, there was one too many theatres for the Arts Club to sustain. They also had the Granville Island Stage, a 440-seater, and across the lane, the smaller 200-seat Revue Theatre, which they decided to lease to Vancouver TheatreSports. Even



Bill Millerd and Anosh Irani in the Revue Theatre this year. Irani's latest play, *My Granny the Goldfish*, opened the newly renovated stage, which was partly funded by Vancouver Foundation donors.

then, in the back of his mind, Millerd hoped one day he'd get the Revue back.

That day has come. Vancouver Foundation donors gave \$100,000 to help reclaim the Revue Theatre, and revamp it for the rigours of small plays.

“I think Vancouver Foundation always makes a difference,” says Millerd. “But in this case it's a critical difference. Sometimes if you don't get a grant, you figure out how to do the project without it. But this was of such a scope that receiving that grant allowed the project to proceed. Without the grant it would not have.”

A third venue opens up a world of possibilities for the Arts Club. With only 200 seats, there's less risk involved in staging a play: the Revue allows the company to take chances – to showcase new work, bring new plays to light – even do something radical.

Says local playwright Lucia Frangione, “It's really exciting for that venue to be turned back into theatre space. Some of my favourite shows have been in that theatre, so it's great to claim it again. There's a really friendly feel to it down there, a cabaret feel. It's intimate.”

The new theatre opened April 15, 2010 with *My Granny the Goldfish*, which came with the tagline, “Because blood is thicker than whiskey,” from playwright Anosh Irani. The play is about Nico, a young Indian student in Vancouver who is hospitalized. His grandmother comes from Bombay to care for him, armed with nothing more than a whiskey bottle.

Without fancy sets or lavish visuals, the Revue is a smaller theatre good for, in Millerd's words, “Plays that people really have to sit and listen to. It's a more intimate setting where the words become

very important.”

Since 1973, Vancouver Foundation donors have given approximately \$450,000 to the Arts Club. In 1979, the Foundation played what Millerd calls an “instrumental role” in launching the Granville Island Stage with a \$50,000 grant, which was a lot of money back then.

Millerd says, “Vancouver Foundation is so important because the money comes in at the beginning of the production process where it's really critical to get support.”

Funding from Vancouver Foundation donors has helped get several new plays off the ground; donors provided \$30,000 in 2003 for *The Matka King*, also by Anosh Irani, and \$20,000 in 2008 for *Poster Boys*.

“*The Matka King* was the first play that Anosh Irani had written,” says Millerd. From *The Matka King*, Irani received commissions from theatres in Ottawa and Toronto. “Having one of his plays on stage was tremendous for him, and since then he's gone on to write a couple more plays, one of which we did last season. He's working on his third novel. When we started working with him he was right out of UBC. Now, he's an established writer and an ideal choice to open our new theatre.”

That's what comes from taking chances on new works, and new theatres. New writers find their way, new plays see the light of day and, maybe, new classics are born. **VF**

For more information about the Arts Club Theatre Company, visit www.artclub.com or call 604-687-1644. To support the Arts Club, contact Kim Macphee at Vancouver Foundation at 604-688-2204.