



BRUNO SCHLUMBERGER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Peggy Henderson says the Aylmer Community Theatre Company 'has just captured the imagination of the community.'

Bringing English theatre to a Quebec town

Peggy Henderson is the heart and soul of a tiny theatre company in Aylmer

BY PATRICK LANGSTON

Peggy Henderson doesn't know where her certainty comes from.

Less than three years ago, she decided an English community theatre company in primarily francophone Aylmer would fly. Since then, Aylmer Community Theatre Company shows have sold out almost every night, even turning away eager ticket-seekers at last season's murder mystery. So important has the company become to the community that Henderson recently won the Regional Association of West Quebecers' Arts & Culture award for her work with ACT Company.

"What is it about theatre people?" she asks. "We think we can just pull open a curtain, and people will come."

Apparently, they're right. At least in Aylmer.

That's a different picture from Ottawa, where the long-established Ottawa Little Theatre has seen ticket sales erode, and even professional companies have been struggling with some abysmal turnouts. It's true that ACT Company's three-night runs are relatively short, but then Aylmer's anglophone population, about 16,000, is tiny compared to Ottawa's.

Despite her insistence that it's been a group effort, the success of ACT Company can be clearly traced to Henderson. Along with initiating the

company, she's been a co-producer ("you're responsible for everything, from sets and programs to food for the actors") and a performer. Even a short telephone interview tells you that this is one upbeat, hard-working theatre-lover.

Her theatre history goes back about 30 years. Shortly after moving to Aylmer, Henderson co-founded Theatre Horizons, which operated for about ten years. She withdrew when her children were born, though she soon found herself teaching a very popular noon-hour school drama program.

Then, a few years ago, she began hearing Aylmer residents say they longed for another theatre group in their community.

So early in 2006, she and her husband Rick Henderson — whom she'd "roped into" working with Theatre Horizons — made some phone calls.

"We made a big pot of stew, bought bread and copious amounts of wine, and by the end of the night we had a theatre company. Then we picked a play (Robin Hawdon's hilarious *Perfect Wedding*, now at Ottawa Little Theatre) and we had ourselves a winner. We filled the theatre for three nights."

Nor was there a problem casting the show: ACT Company ran out of room for all the people who turned up for the first audition.

Sheila Stafford didn't appear for that audition but she did at a subsequent one for Neil Simon's comedy *Rumors*. At 80, she'd never been on the stage before and was there just to observe the audition process. The director convinced her to try out for the part of Cookie, the eccentric celebrity cook. "I read it," says Stafford, "and thought, 'Oh, this isn't too difficult. It even sounds like me.'" She landed the role, had a blast and, about to turn 83, has just joined the newly formed board of directors as executive producer.

Because of the restructuring, ACT Company has skipped a fall production this year, opting instead for a Broadway cabaret event in February and a full show, still unnamed, in the spring (see www.actcompany.ca for details).

Both will be held in the company's usual venue, the full-scale theatre at the Symmes Junior/D'Arcy McGee High School in the Aylmer sector of Gatineau. ACT Company donates half its gate (an affordable \$10 a ticket) to the theatre, and members of the school basketball team and band sell refreshments at intermission.

Other community members have rallied behind ACT Company. A local real estate agent, for example, donates \$100 to the company if a homeowner mentions the group to potential buyers.

ACT Company "has just captured the imagination of the community," says Henderson, a full-time employee at the Royal Ottawa Golf Club. "If it became part of the fabric of Aylmer, I would be a happy woman."