



The History of the Picket Players



It started with a strike. You remember those things. We used to have them. We used to use them as a way of getting a fair deal for ourselves and education. We were so much older then.

It started with the strike of '83. It was winter. It was a cold, cold winter. We always seemed to strike in winter. Why can't we strike in July? It would be much better time for such an activity. *Ma grève c'est pas une grève, c'est l'hiver hostile!*

Je me souviens, 8:30 mornings on the picket lines at John Abbott or at John Au boutte as we called ourselves then. Hundreds of us out on the line at Abbott in Ste-Anne-de-Boonies. We'd walk back and forth showing our picket signs to the pines, oaks and Ginkgo trees, stomping our feet to keep them from freezing and smoking our cigarettes. Ahh cigarettes and weak coffee. Ah! the syndical life of '83.

After an hour or so, we would go to the Ceilidh to warm up and schmooze-listen to and spread the latest non-negotiating rumours, and in typical academic fashion analyze, contextualize and deconstruct the meaning of this and the price of cheese. Then go out and go around again.

I was not, and still am not, a great fan of the great white outdoors. The dislike of freezing my picket off, made me look for a way to get off picket duty. On the second or third day, I was sitting around chatting with Stan Asher, who later became my musical collaborator and who despite his sideline business of giving walking tours of famous Montreal writers' neighbourhood (Wilensky's, Schwartzes, The Bagel Factory, etc.) was also no great fan of winter wonderlands. Must be something about Montreal Jewish immigrant blood being thinner than the Stewart cafeteria's chicken soup.

I don't know who came up with the idea, one of us did, of putting on some sketches to entertain ourselves and fellow teachers. So began the beginning of the Picket Players. The first performance was not really a play but a cabaret of skits and songs. I remember convincing Stan Mallough and Jon Torrell to help us, figuring that the Theatre Department should be involved. We also had Dennis Anson and Rod Hayward singing a few satirical and folk songs. It wasn't great but it was fun and it kept me inside preparing the show. And the couple of hundred people appreciated the diversion from boredom and endless entrails readings of FNEEQ bulletins.

Our skits consisted of satire of the government, the administration, some of our colleagues who crossed the picket lines and FNEEQ. Don't forget, we belonged/belong to a union which advocated the abolition of English schools.

Our first humble effort was warmly received. Our colleagues enjoyed our barbs, our bad puns and the kind of atmosphere it created. They asked for more. I sensed that we had something. I sensed that I might have found a way to contribute to our solidarity without having to go outside too much.

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People began to look forward to our Friday afternoon presentations. We were the warm-up act to the union updates. We had grown to a full company consisting of Larry Weller, Ed Palumbo, Murray Napier, Rod Smith, Bert Young, Stan Asher, Leslie O'Dell and Chris Lester. I wrote the script, "Play-it-Again Stan" wrote the words and music to the songs, Larry cracked up, Bert screwed up the lines, Ed added the commentaries and Murray directed; as much as anyone could direct a bunch of (Kosher and non-kosher) hams.

Our finest moment came with our production of "Blackmail is Forever." It was a full-scale production with costumes, props and even a pre-show commercial for JACFA T-shirts.

"Blackmail is Forever" had a hardboiled detective format. Teach FNEEQ was a PI. (Public Instructor) who was hired by Quality Education, a singer in her uncle Jake Parizeau's night club, The Marble Toilet. She was being blackmailed for accepting an offer she couldn't refuse. The doorman at the club was "Fingers" Charron. The play was timely satire with timely references.

What started out as avoidance and fun became, for me, an educational and a creative way of contributing to the struggle against illegal laws, and unjust and unjustifiable behaviour by those elected by us to govern for us. It made me realize that there must be a real role for art in the union movement. In fact, I believe that more than ever: "There is a need for the recognition of the arts, in its broadest sense, as being an essential part of both the foundation and means for implementation of all efforts to achieve genuine and sustainable improvement."¹

If there is something that social struggles must make room for, it is art. It must consider the contribution of artists (high and low) as an essential part of the struggle. In the

years since the Picket Players' activities, I have travelled to countries and met with people who are in much more dire straits regarding their fights for justice and human rights and have seen that they put a high value on the contribution of their artists. In turn, artists have a responsibility to engage in that struggle. And in many places where injustice rules, often the artists, educators, intellectuals and students are the ones who the people look to. And artists not only speak up and out but they also get the "audience" doing it. They engage them, make them active. After all, if we don't do it for ourselves, we'll get it done to us.

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