



## Nina Schuessler: Still a Creative Force behind Harwich Junior Theatre

by Katie O'Sullivan

"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts..."

Had he written "one woman" instead of "one man," William Shakespeare could have been talking about Nina Schuessler.

In her thirty plus years at the Harwich Junior Theatre (HJT), Nina has played many parts and filled many roles. Actress, teacher, director, producer, house manager...you name it, Nina has done it. And done it well.

Thirteen years ago, she took on the role of full-time Artistic Director. "I've been here forever," Nina says with a wide smile. "I started with HJT in the late 1970s, going back and forth between Harwich and Boston."

Over the years, she has worn many hats at the theatre both on and off-stage. In 1996, the Board approached her about becoming Artistic Director not for one show but for HJT as a whole.

"HJT's mission is to bring the love of theatre to children, young people, and their families," Nina explains.

When people hear "junior" theatre, they mistakenly think "kids," but HJT is "really an intergenerational theatre experience. A good play is a good play," insists Nina.

For 58 years, the Harwich Junior Theatre has called Cape Cod its home and introduced thousands of children to the magic of the stage.

In 1951, Wheelock College drama teacher Betty Bobp came to Harwich with a vision of a community theatre and a dream of creating an organization that would provide opportunities to adults and children alike in every aspect of the theatrical experience.

"Betty Bobp's vision was based on the junior theatre movement, which came from England," Nina explains. "Intergenerational art and theatre is the most wholesome, real experience you can have in the theatre. Adults play adult roles and children play children's roles."

HJT has evolved from a small, seasonal venture to a full-time, year-round, vibrant and thriving center for education and performing arts.

Looking back on her years as Artistic Director, Nina is proud of many things. She can rattle off the names of many of her former students who have gone on to bigger things, some on stage, some behind the scenes, and even a few with careers on television.

She also points out the many, many HJT alumni who go on to use their theatre training in every day life and professions ranging from teaching to litigation.

get calls from other theatres for recommendations," she says, "but I also get requests to write letters of recommendation for former students who are Peace Corp volunteers, going to college, teaching in volunteer programs in Africa, South America and the Middle East. Our students do wonderful things."

"I'm proud of how the education program has grown," Nina says. "I'm proud of the quality people we've been able to attract to our program, and been able to keep. We have incredibly talented people doing lighting, sound, set design, costumes..." Nina smiles. "There are so many wonderful people that make this theatre work, and fantastic year-round student actors."



Cape Women magazine cover 2000



Nina Schuessler & Lisa Canto at HJT

Nine years ago, Nina appeared on the cover of Cape Women with colleague Lisa Canto, with a feature story about HJT. Lisa still works at HJT alongside Nina, directing, teaching and acting. "The people make HJT special," says Nina. "It's more than a theatre. It's like a family."

Like every business and organization, HJT has been hurt by the current economic downturn, but that hasn't stopped the theatre from continuing to offer classes for all ages and interest levels, and six performances this past summer.

According to their playbill, HJT puts on twelve shows a year, between the summer and winter theatre seasons, attended by audiences of 20,000, which includes school matinees attended by over 10,000 Cape Cod school children.

HJT also enrolls 600 students each year in classes and reaches even more through its educational outreach programs. Classes and ticket sales pay for 80% of the theatre's expenses, the rest covered by grants and sponsorships.

While she loves being the Artistic Director, Nina says the hardest part of her job is the business side. "Our box office is down about 30%," said Nina, "but I hear many other business owners saying the same thing.

We have a great Board of Directors, but in this economy we need all the help we can get." The theatre recently hired Kristen Stewart as Development Director to work on more business partnerships and finding sponsors for shows and activities. "We want to encourage local businesses to embrace community theatre," Nina said.

In July, HJT signed an agreement with the Town of Harwich to lease the town-owned former recreation building on Sisson Road. The theatre will keep its existing performance space, in the gorgeous two-centuries-old building on Division Street.

The Sisson Road space will be used for rehearsals, classes and other cultural events that will be open to the public. With the additional space, Nina hopes to be able to expand the classes and opportunities HJT offers.

"Some day I'll get back to acting," Nina says with a smile. "I still try to direct two shows a year, but I haven't acted in a while. When I'm on stage, all I want to think about is me and my performance, and I can't do that here. There's too much else to think about – the lights, the sound, the other actors, the box office..." her voice trails off, a wry smile on her face.

Too many roles to play.

Luckily, she plays them all very well.