

Janis Barlow recognized by American organization for her work in conserving history theatres

Theatre preserver

LORI LITTLETON STANDARD STAFF
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Janis Barlow had a typically Canadian moment while accepting her Ellie, a prestigious award from the League of Historic American Theatres.

"Obviously, I was very pleased and shocked and humbled by it, frankly. As a Canadian, we're not conditioned to stand out in a crowd," the St. Catharines native said. "I had a typical Canadian reaction. I felt guilty, humble and embarrassed."

Barlow, who attended Oakridge School and Sir Winston Churchill, was presented with the 2008 award for outstanding individual contribution at the league's 32nd annual conference in Atlanta last month.

Sitting in the living room of her south St. Catharines home, Barlow said the award is a reflection of many people's work.

"I think it's evidence that a lot of people working in the field are supportive of what I say," she said. "Working, visible symbols of art and history are important to a community. It's important to a community's identity, community's sense of self and prosperity. If you have a historic fabric in your community that's unique and special, you should preserve it and find a way to reuse it.... It's a green thing to do. It also becomes a great source of pride and memory when important symbols are cared for."

The daughter of Hartley and Muriel Barlow, Janis became involved with the former Press Theatre and Niagara Youth Theatre as a teen. Her brother, David, is in the movie and television industry and recently worked on the CBC's *The Border* as a producer and writer. Her sister, Penny, lives in Calgary and is married to St. Catharines native Alan White.

After graduating from Churchill,

Barlow attended Guelph University in the mid-1970s to study theatre and sociology, and performed with the now-defunct Road Show Theatre, a professional summer theatre company. She then set her sights on Toronto.

"Someone gave me the advice to do the hardest thing first, and so, for me, I decided to go into theatre administration," she said. "I moved to Toronto because I knew if I wanted to have a theatre career, I would have to be in Toronto."

She worked as director of marketing and development for Theatre Plus.

During this time, there was talk of restoring the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatres.

"I remember the Toronto Star did a photo essay on the Ghost Theatre and I found the photos thoroughly intriguing," she said.

The Winter Garden Theatre, which sits atop the Elgin, closed in 1928 and sat untouched for decades. The complex is one of just a handful of double-decker theatres built at the turn of the 20th century.

In 1982, Barlow, who by then was theatre officer with the Ministry of Culture, began working on the restoration of the Winter Garden as a consultant. In 1985, she became project manager.

Working on the project taught Barlow something she has taken with her on other projects.

"You have to be careful about falling in love ... with historical buildings," she said. "Form should follow function and you have to be clear about that. You don't develop a building for the building's sake. You have to design for the activity."

The Winter Garden reopened in 1989, and the following year, Barlow, who had taken architecture night courses at George Brown College and Ryerson during the '80s to become qualified as an architectural technologist, resumed working as a consultant. However, in 1992, she returned to the Winter Garden to conduct an operational review.

"After that experience, I was invited to help with other projects, mainly in the U. S.," said Barlow, who had become associated with the League of Historic American Theatres and began attending their conferences in 1986.

Barlow, 54, operates Toronto-based Janis A. Barlow & Associates, which offers arts management, executive searches, feasibility studies, not-for-profit governance, strategic planning and theatre rehabilitation services. She has worked on projects all over North America -- in Massachusetts, Philadelphia, Winnipeg and San Antonio -- and internationally.

Locally, she has worked with Shaw Festival, Niagara Artists' Centre, Theatre Beyond Words and Carousel Players, whose board she also sits on.

Carousel Players' artistic director Pablo Felices Luna said Barlow is a "fantastic advocate of the arts." Her company was involved in Carousel's search for an artistic director, and she recently helped the theatre group prepare a presentation to St. Catharines city council.

"If you talk to anyone in the St. Catharines arts community, they will gush over all the work she does," he said. "She is so kind and open and ... has had an impact with every company she has worked with."

Candice Turner-Smith worked closely with Barlow last fall during the Niagara Symphony's operational review.

"Her efforts were unbelievably heroic to make sure we were on the right path," said the symphony's interim executive director. "She's an incredibly gifted person and a talent to the community."

Of all the projects Barlow has been involved with, one of her favourites is the Majestic Theatre renovation in Gettysburg, Penn., a small borough of just 9,000 people in Adams County, which consists of apple growers. She worked with town officials for seven years on everything from conception to staffing. In the end, the theatre won the 2007 Pennsylvania Historic Preservation Award.

"You would think, well, Gettysburg, it's a slam dunk. There are 1.5 million visitors annually. But they go to the battlefield, and many of those who come into town are re-enactors," she said.

"You have to be careful about making assumptions."

Barlow said when looking at restoring a historic theatre or landmark, it's not just about preserving the past, "but making an authentic identity in the world of Wal-Mart."

"When you leave the downtown area, this is anywhere U. S. A. To maintain a distinct component that makes us a unique place to live you have to preserve some of the historical fabric," she said.

Right now, St. Catharines is grappling with several historical preservation/redevelopment scenarios, including the proposed Port Dalhousie tower and the former Canada Hair Cloth building in the downtown.

"When dealing with an iconic, historic building, you have to first decide if it's worth saving," Barlow said. "Then you have to think how it could be done. Then, you need to consider the demand for these kinds of uses and what the impact would be."

Barlow said she believes the Canada Hair Cloth building, which could potentially house Brock University's fine and performing arts department, must be saved and used in some capacity.

"I think it would be a point of pride for the people of this city. Whether it's classrooms, a studio (or) condos, some aspect of the building needs to be carefully restored and open for public use," she said.

And the Hair Cloth building, like all potential renovation projects, must be handled with smart, careful and planned deliberateness.

"Well-planned, well understood performing arts centres make a huge difference in the cultural psyche of a community and the morale of the community," she said. "They are terrific gathering places for the community. We've certainly seen communities go from being can't-do communities to being can-do communities. These kinds of centres breathe new life into communities, but they do need to be well planned."

League of American Theatres Outstanding Individual Contribution Award

Understanding that historic theatres are preserved and sustained through the remarkable efforts and generosity of individuals, this award is designed to recognize such accomplishments in the field of historic theatres. This award recognizes outstanding individual contribution to the preservation, restoration or management of historic theatres while establishing recognizable standards of excellent behaviour for others in the field to emulate. An individual receiving this award will have consistently demonstrated vision, dedication, selflessness, and excellence through his or her contribution to the field of historic theatres. -- League of American Theatres