

The Shark Tank: A Special Place

By Art Sharkey

In 1987, I was in my sixth year of teaching English at Thetford Academy, Vermont's oldest high school. Then and today the school is both a junior and senior high with grades from 7th through 12th. In addition to English classes, I functioned as the AV media coordinator, moderator of the school's yearbook, *Tacadian*, and faculty advisor to the school's monthly newspaper, *TA News & Views*. I also had directed several drama productions since coming to TA in 1981. I have always enjoyed working with students in the field of drama since I began teaching in the early 1960s.

My love for drama and musical productions goes back to my early teen years. Many Broadway hits had their tryouts in Philadelphia, where I lived, before heading to New York. I saw a lot of those tryouts. Once a success, excerpts of these hits would often be shown on TV for everyone to cherish. That medium also presented fantastic comedy skits on shows like *Jackie Gleason*, *I Love Lucy*, *Red Skelton*, *Milton Berle's Comedy Hour*, and *The Show of Shows featuring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coco*. I loved those short skits too, and often swiped and imitated them at campfires and local amateur shows. I had a lead in my senior high school farce, *See How They Run*, then directed several dramas while in college. So much for my drama background. Now, back to 1987.

The drama facilities at Thetford Academy then were very limited, with only one large stage at the far end of the school's gymnasium. Seats to view any stage presentation there were simply metal folding chairs placed in front of it. The stage did have a proscenium and velvet curtains which opened and closed downstage and several rows of overhanging stage lights, but no fancy sound system. Two podiums with microphones attached could be set up for a speaker to address a full house audience. Chorus and band concerts took place there, as well as the yearly Founders' Day class skits, the senior class play and musical play productions. Preparation for the drama events were afterschool activities, not in-class credit courses like instrumental music and chorus classes. Occasionally, dramas attempted to use microphones clipped to actors' costumes to enhance the sound but it always seemed a hit or miss chancy attempt.

Less than a block from TA and on the same Academy Road was the Thetford Eclipse Grange which had been converted and made into The Parish Players Theater in 1971. Performances there, many with community actors, were well-received and within a few years, the Parish Players became a well-established drama site for the entire Upper Connecticut Valley with review of their shows in the *Valley News* and the *Bradford Journal Opinion* newspapers. But that theater, too, had its drawbacks. It was heated solely by wood-burning stoves and had only indoor outhouses. To even practice there in cold weather demanded someone arrive an hour or two early and light the stoves. Yet because of its smaller size and ability to seat as many as 120 spectators, the voices of the actors in multiple venues was easily heard by all. And since the Parish Player audiences were allowed to use TA's parking lots nearby to park their vehicles, the Parish Players started to permit certain TA drama productions to take place at their theater.

This was the break I latched onto when I began directing senior class plays, one act plays for the VT State Drama festival and our drama entries for Woodstock High's yearly Shakespeare Festival. The setup worked wonderfully for years...until 1995. That year the Parish Players Board of Directors and Thetford town officials, for safety reasons, ordered the closing of the grange theater for a complete

renovation. This forced me and TA to seek another location for our drama productions. Where to look? The only space on the academy campus I deemed large enough to be used as a temporary theater practice space was the decrepit agriculture shop—a cinder block garage, actually, behind and connected to the science building. It housed farming equipment, animals occasionally, and some vehicles. Its floor was cement, with two walls containing long windows six feet up from its floor. A huge overhead sliding garage door made up the west wall of the space. Two noisy overhead heaters kept the place warm when occupied with ag students. Only one ag course per day was taught there. The program had few students then because the vocational school at Oxbow High in Bradford, VT had a much better program and was preferred by most of our TA kids interested in agriculture.

Because our drama productions over the past few years were prized by our faculty, students, and the Head of School, we were given permission to use that ag space as a black box theater until the Parish Players Theater completed its renovations. Where to begin? No school budget money was available to us, but, as luck would have it, we were made aware of grants locally that might get us started. One was offered by the Coop Food Store in Hanover and had to do with Senior Citizen activities. Another was a performing arts mini grant. To make a long story short, we applied to both and were awarded them. How? When asked to make a presentation of our grant fund proposal we sent a group of ninth grade drama students to do so (the cast of the play, *The Musicians of Bremen*). No other applicant had young students make their pitch. It worked. Our vivacious, articulate students wowed the grant committees and we acquired \$2,000 to get started on our black box theater in the former ag shop. And, not long after, we learned that Dartmouth College was getting new theater curtains for one of the Hop's stages. Because I had volunteered the previous year for some backstage tech projects there, I was acquainted with the Hop tech staff. So, I got in touch, told them our dilemma, and asked if there was any chance we could make use of their old curtains. They gladly gave them to us. What luck! Then a group of TA drama parents, headed by Julie Eaton, who had upholstery experience, took on the project and curtains were made for our new theater space. My, Adam, studying to become an architect, designed the apparatus on which to hang them and the above grants allowed us to purchase the rods needed to install them. Publicity from receiving the grants and curtains and enthusiasm from our dram kids got more parents to then volunteer their time and experience in building movable stage block boxes and a neat tech booth. Others painted the space and helped install a heating system to replace the noisy one along one wall. Our space was up and running within three months and one of our first productions that year, *Postponing the Heat Death of the Universe*, won the VT State 1998 One Act Drama Championship.

We used that neat new area as our black box theater for the next twelve years. And when the Head of School discussed with my wife at a Board of Trustees' meeting the idea of naming the space. The Arthur P. Sharkey, Jr. Theater, my wife suggested I might like naming it "THE SHARK TANK" instead. And that's what they called it. 'Twas my favorite place, ever, to remember.

*Aside: On August 9, 2009, the American reality television series called Shark Tank premiered on ABC, years after TA's theater got its name.