



wandering the cosmos

column by Conrad Boyce

Looking in on Libbie

On a warm summer evening in Halifax almost 50 years ago, a beautiful young woman stood, microphone in hand, on the sidewalk outside the city's new professional theatre, the Neptune, ready to interview celebrities for the local CBC television station. In her other hand, she held a copy of the Neptune's opening night program, with meticulously researched and typed notes stapled to its pages. When the interviews began, no one was surprised at how thoroughly prepared she was; this woman had as great a reputation for her intelligence and insight, as for her stunning looks and grace.

Truth be told, Libbie Christensen was as much a local celebrity as many of the people she interviewed that night. Since she'd first come to Halifax a decade earlier with her sailor husband Paul, she'd demonstrated her ease in the spotlight by appearing in local theatre (shortly after high school in Montreal, she was Christopher Plummer's first leading lady) and starring as a singer with the Navy band. Then in 1960, she was taken on by the CBC, and was soon hosting her own talk show called *Look in On Libbie*. The station trusted her with assignments like the opening of Expo 67, and she became one of the country's foremost experts on the American space program. It was a glamorous life with which she was totally comfortable.

When she moved to Toronto shortly after Expo, she continued to appear with the CBC on panel shows like *Front Page Challenge*. She took a job with Eaton's in public relations, then shared her skills and insights as a teacher of P.R. at Humber College. One of her students, now living in Uxbridge, recalls Libbie as being somewhat intimidating, with her confident sense of style and her fierce intelligence. An amazing woman.

On a cold winter morning in 2013, another woman, in her mid-80s, sits in a wheelchair, staring vacantly out a picture window at the Westpark Longterm Care Centre in Toronto. At least she seems to be another woman. But this is Libbie. Diagnosed with Alzheimer's a decade ago, she has lost almost everything to that evil disease - her style, her intelligence, even the ability to talk or walk. If she has any memories left at all of her glory days in the 60s, she can no longer share them. And in turn, many of the youngest members of her family, her great-grandchildren, in whom she would take such joy, have no memories of her, because she can no longer take part in the cherished family gatherings which are such a major part of the life of the Christensen clan.

If there is anything left of the woman who stood outside the Neptune in July of 1963, it is the fire in her eyes. Every once in a while, they sparkle as in the past, perhaps with anger at the unfairness of what she's become, but maybe, just maybe, with a fleeting glimmer of pictures from a faraway life.

Libbie is my wife's mother. A few months ago, while sorting through some of Libbie's photos and memorabilia, Lisa came across that program from the Neptune's opening night, superbly preserved with all of her mother's notes still attached. It was a priceless flashback to the wonderful life that she had enjoyed as a young teenager, with her mother almost like a movie star in those early days of television. She prepared to give it an honoured place in Libbie's album.

Then we learned that a close friend of ours was to appear in the Neptune's 50th anniversary season, and Lisa resolved to take the program to Halifax, just in case the theatre would be interested in having it for its archives. So in late January we headed east, the program tucked safely in Lisa's carry-on luggage.

Our friend said she would introduce Lisa to one of the Neptune's bigwigs at the opening night party, so after the show (a rollicking version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*), we hovered in one of the theatre lounges, waiting to be told where to go for the party. To celebrate the anniversary, there were a few historical photos on the walls, ones which wrapped around the frame in the modern fashion. As she waited, leaning against the wall, Lisa turned to her right, and suddenly found herself face to face with her own mother, on the side of a photo from that night almost a half-century before. There was Libbie, microphone in her right hand, the opening program in her left. Lisa held the same program in her own left hand.

It was a breathtaking moment. Not only did it transport her back to a cherished time in her own life, it suddenly gave her an almost-forgotten glimpse of the vibrant woman that her mother used to be. I wouldn't have blamed her if she had put the program back in her purse, determined to keep it after all. But despite being shaken, she showed it to the Neptune's artistic director, and he said they would be delighted to have it.

What Lisa does have now is a copy of the photograph; the Neptune e-mailed it to her. And even though she is often angry at how unfair Alzheimer's is, to rob Libbie of what should have been her golden years, even though she finds it more and more difficult to recognize the woman at Westpark as her mother, the Neptune photo will be one more source of deep pride, in all the amazing things that Libbie achieved, blazing a trail for many other women to follow.

However cruel Alzheimer's might be, it will never have the power to take that pride away.



the barris beat

column by Ted Barris

A stitch in time...

I saw my mother do it. I saw my grandmother do it even more. It wasn't something my grandfather ever did. And I never saw my father do it. Although, after he died in 2004, we did find some of my father's military papers from the Second World War when he served a sergeant in the army medical corps. And those papers suggested he knew how to do it. On his Honorable Discharge papers when he left the U.S. Army in December 1945, his attestation revealed that he *had* done it.

"Civilian occupation," the discharge papers revealed, "Sewing machine operator."

So, no, my father wasn't actually much of a sewing expert the way my mother and grandmother were, but he would certainly have known his way around needles and thread far better than most. Why? Well, over the years, as I have come to know the various occupations of both my maternal and paternal families - after they immigrated from Greece in the early years of the 20th century - I've learned among other things they took up sewing in the fur business. That is, they sewed the fur pelts into coats that became the prize possessions of a generation of coat buyers that had no qualms about wearing coats made of mink, fox or lamb skin.

I've also learned over the years that both my mother's mother and my father's mother were among the most sought after, piecemeal seamstresses in the New York City fur business in the 1930s. In fact, I discovered that Yiayia, my mother's mother, often faced the wrath of union bosses for taking piecemeal work home with her after hours. So, the story goes, my father and his siblings were destined to follow in their mother's footsteps.

But Dad probably allowed his hands to operate just one sewing machine when he decided very quickly that he felt more comfortable sitting at a typewriter. And he became a reporter. Still, I can't help thinking that even his passing skill as a sewing machine operator may have served him well as a medic overseas where he constantly had to suture soldiers' wounds closed. But my father was a doer not a watcher.

"The work only gets done when the seat of the pants are applied to the seat of the chair," he always said, which applied more to writing than to sewing (but I guess the pants wouldn't work either if someone didn't mend the holes and tears in them too).

All of which does not explain why my sewing abilities leave a great deal to be desired. I mean I do remember when I was a Boy Scout I had to sew my various merit badges - for volunteering, birding, camping, climbing, good citizenship, etc. - onto my khaki shirt, but often in desperation I turned to my mother or grandmother to help finish the job. In later years, when my mother and grandmother weren't around, I've learned to sew buttons back onto my shirts and repair holes in my hockey gloves and pants, but only as patch-up jobs.

My closest encounter with true sewing stars occurred back in 2010. That's when I ventured into the quilting world of my friend Sue Carmichael at her Quilters Cupboard shop in town. She had launched a 30-hour quilting marathon to raise awareness and funds for several cancer-fighting charities. When I visited her shop in the middle of its quilting madness, I had no idea what kind of world I was stepping into. First, there was the intimidation of the quilts themselves - some simple but elegant, others ornate and dazzling, but all showing the expertise of their brilliant creators. Yes, the quilters themselves seemed even more imposing because they could stitch and talk and stitch and laugh and stitch and teach the less skilled, all without batting an eye. However, within seconds of my first visit three years ago, even women carrying sharp objects were no longer a threat.

Further to that point, this past week I made the audacious suggestion to members of my oldtimers hockey team - the Uxbridge Oilies Hockey Club - that maybe we should illustrate just how diverse our talents, how keen our enthusiasm for community effort, and how liberated our sense of men's and women's work by helping Sue out with this year's marathon. As you can see from the photograph on the front page of the *Cosmos* this week, the results were far less intimidating than any of my stick-wielding, slap-shooting, and occasionally beer-drinking buddies ever expected. Thanks to the Quilters Cupboard gang, a bunch of hockey players joining the fun and fundraising seemed as natural as ever. And that, Sue and the gals at the shop reminded us, is what quilting is all about.

I think even the U.S. Army bureaucrats who honourably discharged my father, the former "sewing machine operator," would be proud.

For other Barris Beat columns go to www.tedbarris.com

Best Selection of Keurig and Tassimo Coffees and Teas!



Starting at
Only
\$6.99



We also have the best
selection and prices of
Tassimo & Keurig Coffee
Makers in town
guaranteed!



We will Price Match any competitor!

CANADIAN TIRE UXBRIDGE - SERVICE: 852-9857 - STORE: 852-3315