

Hap Haberman Memorial Memories

by Jim Haberman

On May 27, 2018 exactly one week after the 100th anniversary of Hap Haberman's birth (as Doc Lee would've insisted on phrasing it), well over 100 of family, friends, BHP alumni and new company members gathered at the wonderful Playhouse to memorialize our "Most HAP-py Fella" with a truly delightful 100th birthday celebration that Hap himself missed attending by only a few months. The sweet warm memories of the event will surely last a lifetime.

Following months of planning and preparation, what a great joy it was to drive into that deeply beloved BHP campus on a beautiful Sunday, only a day or two after the first wave of 2018 company members had arrived. Center stage tables were already set in place, and decorating was well underway. Photo and memorabilia displays of Hap's life were lovingly assembled, both onstage and at the front marquee. Clever centerpieces adorned with a signature Hap pipe and photos graced each table. Even some pretty impressive lighting effects had been expertly set up by the tech staff!

Of course, no happy hour party that's all about Hap would have been complete without a handsomely-stocked bar, which on this occasion featured his own favorite libation, scotch and soda, as well a couple of Ellie's specials, martinis and cosmos (not to be confused with that other Cosmos just up the highway). A splendid array of tasty wines amply rounded out the generous offerings. And we believe there may have been some less potent drinks available too, but those managed somehow to completely escape notice.

The food was abundant and thoroughly delicious, starting with tableside peanut-butter filled cracker bites, a longtime staple of Hap's personal pantry, as well as mixed nuts (no, the edibles, not the guests) and salsa with chips. The main course consisted of several scrumptious 5-foot gourmet subs, with an eye-popping array of highly tempting desserts after. O decadent lemon bars, we won't soon forget you!

Festivities kicked off with a warm welcome from BHP Executive Director Linda Anderson, then the public premiere of a compelling 30-minute biographical video tribute titled "A Century (well, almost) of Hap," created and beautifully narrated by Daamen Krall, from words and visuals supplied by Hap's kids. Announcements from BHP Artistic Director Dan Workman followed, and then some fond and funny reminiscences from Hap's dear longtime pal Ron Reed, like Hap a former BHP director/actor and his favorite fellow sports enthusiast.

The program reached an emotional peak with Jason Reuter's reading of Graham Thatcher's vivid memories of Hap (and Ellie), largely centered on Graham's first year at the Playhouse back in 1963. Beautifully delivered by Jason (deftly performing pretty nearly a "cold read"!) and lovingly transcribed and emailed to us in the nick of time by Anna Marie, Graham's words were characteristically colorful, funny and heartfelt. How deeply tragic it was to lose this great fellow and even greater friend just a few short days after dictating that wonderful tribute, and how profoundly missed he is!

The evening wouldn't have been complete without a final sentimental toast to Hap, which led to lots of free-form chatter, continuing right where it had left off when the program began. As most of us re-connected further with dear old friends, the current BHP company quietly launched its first "set strike" of the season, and before long the stage was nearly as bare as it

had been the day before. We often forget just how quickly efficient a talented and experienced theatre crew is at making all the stage magic vanish in a flash, then reappear almost as fast soon after in a completely new scheme!

And so as we all said our teary farewells, with some staying awhile to wander the ever-evocative BHP grounds, it was clear that our large and dedicated crew of Hap enthusiasts had succeeded in putting it all off terrifically well. In fact, to us at the center of it, the whole affair came off better than we'd ever hoped and expected. Even the one uncontrollable threat looming over the big event -- a gloomy prediction for a raging thunderstorm that evening -- ended up showing decent enough manners to withhold its fury until all assembled were safely back home.

There are literally too many people to thank for such a fabulous day that meant so much to those of us nearest to Hap. Some are obvious – Linda for coordinating the planning committee and so graciously hosting us at that already-busy time; Mark Meersman for bestowing sponsorship of the event by the BHP Alumni Association; Meredith McEnroe Meersman for overseeing and devising the perfect menu with the BHP chefs, pitching in on the desserts (Collier too!), and making those delightful table decorations; Marnie and Mike Gould for so generously supplying their superb wines for the party; Peggy Lindt, Hap's brilliantly talented artist niece who designed the utterly delightful memorial print program; Carrie and David Wintersteen, our ever-gracious yet much-besieged bartenders who were hands-down the busiest workers that day; Daamen, Ron, Dan, Jason, Graham and Anna Marie for contributions already mentioned; Flaco and his highly-skilled crew for creating a magical atmosphere and ensuring all the audiovisual stuff ran smoothly throughout; and Mike Fellner, Darla Drew Lerdal, and many others for lending valuable setup help before and during the event.

Special mention must finally go out to the 2018 BHP company for making Hap's memorial an even more meaningful occasion that it already was. As Linda so rightly observed, it was really terrific to have today's BHP crew present, including many first-timers who'd only been on site a couple of days, to begin appreciating the strong, deep roots of the Playhouse and the hold it still keeps on the imaginations of so many current and former alumni, a precious few still stretching all the way back to the BHP's founding seasons in the late 1940s. We know Hap would have fully concurred on that point!

Now looking back at that magical memorial over two months later, what struck us most deeply was that heartfelt confirmation of a rock-solid shared bond among all who've contributed our skills and talents to the Black Hills Playhouse over the past 70-plus years. And did it ever give back, supplying each of us with a lifetime of abundant cherished memories indelibly created in perhaps just one fast-paced summer, or two, or perhaps several. In the case of Hap and his amazing Ellie, the tally was 42 seasons, a record unlikely to be equaled soon, and one which made them nearly synonymous with the Playhouse over a very long stretch. That's what made it so perfectly fitting that Hap's final landing, after all those beloved summers of directing, acting and mentoring, so memorably took place in the precise setting that became and remained always at the very heart of his career and lifelong passion. Our eternal thanks to all of you who helped to bring him home to the BHP so magnificently!