

Catherine Dixon: Scenic Designer/TD '84, '85, & '93

Daniel Schindler [00:00:10] Hi, Catherine.

Catherine Dixon [00:00:10] Hello.

Daniel Schindler [00:00:11] Could you tell us a little bit about your association with the Players when you got here, what your capacity was at the Players?

Catherine Dixon [00:00:19] Okay. I came to Virginia City to work at the Players, and I'm going to guess here because my memory is bad either in 1984 or 1985. And I came because my teacher in Missoula, I was at the University of Montana, Bill Raoul, knew Bruce Hurlbutt, who was directing. And so they recommended me to be their designer / TD for the summer. And so Bill Raoul, I didn't have car at the time, so Bill Raoul threw me and my stuff in his truck and brought me down here and dropped me off. And it was love at first sight.

Daniel Schindler [00:01:05] Can I ask how old you were when you first came here?

Catherine Dixon [00:01:09] Oh, let's do the math. I came in, I was probably approaching 30. Yeah, because I moved here in 1980, which would make me 26 or something like that. And now I'm 70.

Daniel Schindler [00:01:28] What did that job entail? What did you do when you were here?

Catherine Dixon [00:01:32] The job entailed me designing the productions. Building the productions. And of course, I had help from the actors, the ones that weren't primarily involved a lot of the time. And so they were a lot of help, bless their hearts. And yes, so we got it done. And then when it came time to prepare for the ollos, they oftentimes had their own total projects to do to make and so things always got a little bit harried at the end. But it was fun. And I love the idea of building scenery in a chicken coop because that's what the shop is, an old forestry chicken coop and it has all these windows on the sides. Have you noticed that? And it's it's totally I mean, you could take it apart. It's a, I always thought that was nice.

Daniel Schindler [00:02:25] How many years total were you here?

Catherine Dixon [00:02:27] I was here two seasons, one as the design / tech person and the second season, I was the designer / painter. Then my third involvement dealt with me being a scenic artist up in Missoula. And so I painted like, four drops and then brought them down for the season.

Daniel Schindler [00:02:57] And now you live here?.

Catherine Dixon [00:02:58] And now live here.

Daniel Schindler [00:03:00] Was that, when you came to work for the Players, was that the first time you'd been into Virginia City?

Catherine Dixon [00:03:04] Yes. Yes.

Daniel Schindler [00:03:06] What do you think that draw is, that now you moved down here to live permanently?

Catherine Dixon [00:03:11] That's an interesting question and I would have to say, and this was true of Montana when I first moved here, is that having grown up in North Carolina, the mountains of North Carolina, where it's very humid and very sort of soft. Everything in Montana was crystal clear. You know, it's almost as if you could see all the leaves on the trees. And I came in the Fall when I moved here. But anyway, coming down here in the early spring and then to watch it become Virginia City in the summer and then to turn to the Fall again. I don't know. There's something about the light. Something about the crispness of it. All through the rainy seasons and the snow and the smell of it, sage and cottonwood and just the way it looked, I mean, I just was I was it was magical to me. And the old buildings and the whole idea of what had happened to get it to that place. And the displays. I loved the displays and I liked I liked it when there was no one here. Because walking up and down the streets, like in the early morning or at dusk... magical.

Daniel Schindler [00:04:41] Do you have any specific memories of being with the players and working? How did you how did you manage doing the designing and painting out of a chicken coop?

Catherine Dixon [00:04:51] Well, the parking lot helped. But, as you well know, you have to, one has to bargain for space and time, you know. But at that time, the rehearsal space was in what is now the... What do they call it now? They don't call it the community center. They call it the meeting center.

Daniel Schindler [00:05:19] Oh, then that's no longer a players space?

Catherine Dixon [00:05:21] No. I even painted a drop in there on that floor. So it was about juggling space. And then one year, I was able to paint up at the school house on the second floor. And that was just a deluxe situation.

Daniel Schindler [00:05:37] The old gymnasium, right?

Catherine Dixon [00:05:38] Yeah. No, no, no. The school.

Daniel Schindler [00:05:40] Oh, the actual school up on the hill.

Catherine Dixon [00:05:41] On the second floor. Yeah. And at that time, the county offices were still in the on the first floor then. So, yeah, it was all about compromise and juggling space and time and all of that stuff, weather, you know, that kind of stuff. But I mean, many hands make light work, and I don't think I was, well, there might have been a few times when somebody was like. You know, I can't help you. But that was few and far between. Everybody was really willing. I mean, we were all in it together, Right? And so that's kind of... I didn't do much lighting at all. And I can't remember I think maybe it was Billy Koch at the time and at the time Pete Walther did all the the rigging and running of the roll drops.

Daniel Schindler [00:06:36] Which is a weird art in and of itself.

Catherine Dixon [00:06:38] Oh, it is. Yeah. I was just so mesmerized by the simple mechanics of the whole deal, you know? And that was another intriguing part of this, is that we were, that first season that I worked here, we were just trying to maintain that 19th

century style, if you will. So we used traditional methods. We we lashed a lot of flats together. Everything had to move because, you know, we had different shows going. But it was a really nice lesson in traditional scenery. In fact, when I came here that first year, the whole back wall of the theater to about this high was cans of dry pigment.

Daniel Schindler [00:07:28] Really?

Catherine Dixon [00:07:32] Yeah! And I have to say that at that moment in my painting history, I was stupid and I did not know about how to use dry pigments.

Daniel Schindler [00:07:46] It's a different process than just opening a can, for sure.

Catherine Dixon [00:07:49] Exactly and it wasn't until, I don't know, 10, 15 years later, when I was in a situation where we were using dry pigments and I was going, Oh, my God, this is what they mean. This is what you know how beautiful this is.

Daniel Schindler [00:08:08] The colors are stunning.

Catherine Dixon [00:08:10] Yeah. And when I think about kids who have the traditional paint palettes that you get now from Rosco and all those places, I go, Oh, you know, you don't know what you're missing.. the beautiful. Anyway, that's what we did.

Daniel Schindler [00:08:30] Do you have any particular moments that stand out in your time being the designer and technical director here?

Catherine Dixon [00:08:38] Oh, my gosh. Okay, one good, one bad. One good was a drop that I painted in Missoula. And when I saw it on stage, I went, all right, this is how you do it. And the other one was when I was here the first year, and I designed this awful piece of scenery in which the actors had to slide these two platforms onto stage. And they hated me for it. They hated me. What can you do?

Daniel Schindler [00:09:19] You told me a story the other day about discovering an old drop.

Catherine Dixon [00:09:22] Yes.

Daniel Schindler [00:09:23] Could you talk a little bit about that?

Catherine Dixon [00:09:25] Okay. On the second, when I was painting up at the school, I found these flats. There was a bunch of scenery pushed back in the corner, and I recognized that some of the scenery was from a previous company's production of Rip Van Winkle. And I could tell that they had used dye on it. Beautiful, beautiful work and it must have been a gentleman's name that I cannot remember who passed away not too long ago.

Daniel Schindler [00:09:58] John Ellingson?

Catherine Dixon [00:09:59] No, no, no. no. Sorry. He came lots of summers painted lots of stuff, did beautiful work. But I cannot remember. Anyway, so I found these two panels and they were painted in a beautiful, very painterly style. And, you know, there were these two birds on each panel, just like a simple brushstroke made the tail, you know, a simple brush stroke made the beak. Just beautiful stuff. And so I told Roger Williams about it and

he said, Oh, I've got this piece of canvas that I was going to use under my truck to drain the oil out of my truck. I said, All right, you better let me look at that. And so we went up to his shop and I unfolded this thing, and it was the matching drop to what would probably have been like a library set, because a lot of times they did really generic sets, you know, like a road crossing or house in the distance, that kind of stuff. And so I took it up to the schoolhouse, stapled it down and sprayed it with water. And it just came alive. It just it just sucked right up. Everything was nice. All the sticky parts stuck. It was beautiful. And they used it. They used it for a lot of stuff. Yeah. And it was made, painted at the H.L. Landesman Studios in Minnesota. Maybe in Minneapolis, if I recall, specifically for Virginia City and it was 1893, I think, on it. Yeah. Beautiful.

Daniel Schindler [00:11:45] What do you think the Players mean to the community? Because they support it, send tourists to it...

Catherine Dixon [00:11:58] Well, that's an that's also an interesting question because I believe at one time that the Players because they participated in, if you will, the turn of the century idea of Virginia City, the mining city idea, the 1860s, 70's and were specifically doing traditional melodrama plays and in melodrama there are certain attitudes that you know, you have the the grieving ingenue and you have the, you know, the young man and you have the villain and so there was a very kind of definite style that they were portraying in this. Certain kinds of shows, certain kinds of music that was only for, from that era. So, I don't think, but I don't know if it matters, but I don't think they participate at the same level with the community as they once did. Does that make sense?

Daniel Schindler [00:13:20] Yeah, that makes sense.

Catherine Dixon [00:13:22] Yeah.

Daniel Schindler [00:13:23] I'm curious, this is their 75th anniversary this year and I'm just, I'm trying to figure out, what has made it last so long? What has made it so that people keep coming back, the community keeps supporting it....

Catherine Dixon [00:13:39] Right. Well, it certainly has a long history and has a good history. And I'm not saying that this, the style they do now, is less. It's just different, but it's always been pretty quality. You know, the people who direct, who run the place have the ear and know what sounds good and are professional. You know, and I think that the Players at one time and I'm sure part of this has to do with money. They used to produce quite a nice program. That talked about the plays, the players. Lots of advertising from the area and I think it was easier then to be that involved. That sounded weird, didn't it? But yeah, I just think it's different styles and different times, too. You know, when I think of when the Bovey Restorations were running, they would have deals like you could come to town, you could have dinner, you could see a show, and you could spend the night and I don't know that that happens. I don't think they have package deals like that anymore. And I think that perhaps the players budget was also influenced by the fact that they were under the umbrella of the Restoration. So, I don't know.

Daniel Schindler [00:15:17] What would you tell someone who asked? What is the deal with the Virginia City Players? Why should I come and see them?

Catherine Dixon [00:15:25] I would tell them to come because it's unique and it still has that unique turn of the century feel for it. Despite, you know, changes in styles of acting or tendencies to choose music from the turn of the century and that it's a good experience,

you know, and the space is so interesting. You know, the theater itself is so unusual and the music is good. You know, That's always been good.

Daniel Schindler [00:15:59] That's fantastic. Is there anything else you would tell people about the players or your experience that you'd like to share?

Catherine Dixon [00:16:09] Gosh, you know, I love theater so much. I love the whole compromising, constantly sharing and relying on people, people doing their job, you know, being on time, you know, things like that, little things like that. The whole creative process for me is very fulfilling. And when it runs correctly, there's nothing better, nothing better. But, you know, when it's run badly, it's usually a cause of lots of friction and unnecessary egos and things like that. So if I were to tell a young actor, coming here, I would say, you know, have fun, you know, don't drink too much, have fun. A technician, you're going to learn, you know, how to work with hand tools and, you know, but because it's so basic and in theater, I mean, aside from the electronic advances and things, it's still the way it's always been, you know? I like that, that's good, and I love those roll drops. How silly, how silly, how simple. You know, they're so magical to watch happen. You know, so fun is what it's about. Fun and people and just the beauty of this place. I just, you know, I'm afraid. I'm afraid I'm biased. I like it a lot. Then, when I had the opportunity to move down here, I was like, okay, yeah.

Daniel Schindler [00:17:54] Well, that's great. Thanks, Catherine.

Catherine Dixon [00:17:57] You're welcome.