

Michael Verdon: Brewery Follies Owner/Director, 1988-2023

Mike Verdon [00:00:09] I'm Mike Verdon. I work here at the HS Gilbert Brewery in what's called the Brewery Follies in the HS Gilbert Brewery is a building here in Virginia City. It was an established brewery, 1863, the oldest established brewery in what was then Montana territory, and then until statehood. The brewery brewed beer from 1863 until prohibition was enacted in 1919 but was never able to reorganize as a brewery again after that. But it was an award winning beer and at the time well regarded and probably drunk by many, many miners and various people around here because it was probably the cleanest thing to drink in the day. However, I've worked here at the brewery follies since 1988. I came here when it was still Bovey Restorations. There's a lot of history about Bovey restorations. It was a company that owned all of these properties, many of them not the whole town. Many of the properties here in Virginia City; a very philanthropic gentleman by the name of Charlie Bovey and his wife Sue Ford Bovey. They had a lot of money. I don't know what extent, but they had plenty and they had like that philanthropic kind of idea. He loved history, he wanted to preserve history and so once they could acquire these places, many of them just don't back taxes that were unpaid for next to nothing and then began the restoration process, the brewery being one of them. In fact, it was one of the earliest establishments that was opened. It started opening in 1947, something like that. And somewhere around that time I couldn't tell you the exact date, but around 47, 48, somewhere in there, a guy named. Larry and his wife, Larry Barsness. Larry Barsness was in here when it was an establishment where they could drink beer and eat peanuts and feed the peanuts to the mice. And there was a square grand piano in here, and Larry's wife started singing songs and playing on the piano. Charlie Bobby was here at the time, and he said, "Wait a minute, I've got an idea". And so the Virginia City players were kind of born out of that, even though they were not playing here in Brewery Follies, they went over to what's now known as the Wells Fargo Steakhouse. And it was even then Wells Fargo within a year or two, I'm not sure, I think 49. So they started doing their, you know, their vaudeville revues and melodramas as they were constructing the Old Stone Barn into a theater space, which is now known as the Opera House. And, you know, of course, they had to dig out the middle of the building to create a raked area for seating and then ultimately a stage, you know, place to hang role drops by 50 or 51, someone will be clear on that day, where they were able to open up as the Illustrious Virginia City Players at the Opera House proceeded to continue on for many, many years. And the popularity of theater in this town got so that early in the 80s and maybe, perhaps the late 70s, they started to see that this brewery should probably be used as kind of an overflow house because there were people being turned away. So by the time we hit 1984, the Brewery has been renovated into a performing space and it was called the Bowery Follies. 88 is when I came here and it was, you know, a revue format where it was a little more updated than, say, the early turn of the century, late 19th century, early 20th century style melodrama, music so was more contemporary, but still very much a review format. Over time, we really created what we would like to call a contemporary comedy cabaret format here. And I say over time, because it really, really wasn't that long. I mean, within a year or two, we really came to understand what we were delivering for people and creating our own fan base and audience. And so, as I say to people now is a contemporary comedy cabaret with sketch comedy, celebrity impersonations, political satire and song parodies. We are not politically correct. That is not fine for some people, but most people are looking for that, as well as the other types of entertainment that they can encounter here in Virginia City. As I said, I came here in 1988. By 1993, Bovey Restorations promoted me to director of the show Bovey Restoration, s still owned this facility and many other buildings. But the heir to Charlie Bovey, who'd passed away in 1978, his name was Ford Bovey. He wanted to divest, if you will, sell this off, and he had many offers. But one thing he really wanted to

do is he understood his father and his mother's passion for the history of Virginia City and the history of Montana; wanted to save it so that the state of Montana could come to own it so that the people of Montana would own these properties. And so by 1997, the state legislature went forward with the legislation needed to purchase the properties from Ford Bovey and the Bovey Restorations. As that occurred, the state then decided that the mission would be to have independent concessionaires, people who wanted to be business people in the community rather than one big umbrella corporation running everything that the state would have to monitor. So in 1997, process started rolling in the Fall, and by the Winter of 1998, I acquired this business and have run it as my business ever since 1998. So I'm producer, director and perform in the show, and I hope that kind of gets you the rundown of what it is we do here. And we sell beer and we have the Gilbert beer. A guy named Max Pigman in Helena, he owns and is brew master at Lewis and Clark brewing company there 19 years ago, a little over 19 years ago, contacted me, told me he had done the research and that he had the recipe for Gilbert's beer. It's a lager beer. It's a Kolsch style lager. If you know what that means, good for you. I like the beer very much. Though, I'm not a huge beer drinker. It is a beer that I like and most people do. And it's very popular here in Virginia City. I think that's in a nutshell about everything of my history.

Daniel Schindler [00:06:28] What has kept you coming back? So you started as an actor solely, and then it shifted into director and manager and owner. What has kept you coming back to this place?

Mike Verdon [00:06:39] Well, needing a job was originally, I mean, seriously, you know, I thought three summers and I'd probably cycle out and try to do something else and then craving it because I like it here. The town is fun. We call it summer camp with beer. And that is not a lie. It's not an exaggeration. So at any rate, coming into my fourth season in 91, I decided I needed to come back. I needed to make some money, I needed to be employed. And I was a flower shop employee in Missoula and my boss was very in favor, very much in favor of supporting the arts, loved theater, and encouraged me always to keep coming back here and that I would always have my job back in Missoula at the flower shop I worked at, which I did. So I would come here and I would do the summer. And then I thought, well, maybe I should move on and year after year, as the winter progressed, I would just like I yearned to be back. I want to come back. And I kept coming back. And then, though I never lost my way in that thinking, the opportunity of actually having it as my own business was very enticing, was intoxicating, you know, in a sense. And so that that that happened. And that's what keeps me coming back.

Daniel Schindler [00:07:58] So you're one of the longest running Players in town, I think?

Mike Verdon [00:08:04] I'm fairly certain I'm probably the longest. So 36 seasons, I think that out does everybody.

Daniel Schindler [00:08:12] That's a lot. Have you seen the audiences change from the time you started to now?

Mike Verdon [00:08:17] Yes, The audience is changed because times change. The audiences are different now than they were, say, in 1988. In 1988 when I came in as 23 years old. I turned 24 that summer, but I was 23 years old. The audiences were older than me for the most part. Now I'm 59 years old, the audiences are predominantly younger than me. Not all, but a lot of them. So it's a different kind of feeling as you're interacting with those members of the audience. And times change there's a lot of people that were

mainstays in the many, many years ago, early years who not only lived here or in the area that are sadly gone. So we don't see them anymore. And so I'm seeing people who are younger. There are all kinds of walks of life, whether they're, you know, professionals like lawyers, doctors, that sort of thing, or blue collar workers, mechanics and farmers around here is everything. And so I see them all and so now I feel a bit more like a peer to my audience than I did probably when I was younger. You got to understand that. Even say the price difference from what was in 1988 to what it is now in 2023. It's grown with inflation, certainly. But 19 year old kids probably don't really have the money to come see the Follies all the time. They may sometimes. But, you know, when you have stability in terms of your income or perhaps you a lot of income and you're visiting the area, maybe the fishing lodges, whatever you have a summer home, you're visiting more often. And now those people are my age.

Daniel Schindler [00:10:10] What sort of sense do you have as to what this, the Brewery Follies means to the community in the valley?

Mike Verdon [00:10:18] You know, that's a tough one to really answer. People say very complimentary things to all of us who work here about, you know, the show and what it means to them. I think no matter where you live you want something to do, you want some entertainment. You know, once was a time when you had small communities. There really wasn't a whole lot. Maybe it's maybe to a point where it wasn't maybe ladylike or gentlemanly-like to be at certain establishments, hurty gurdy girls and that sort of thing. But, you know, the circus came to town or nearby, and that was the big deal for the year or the carnival or whatever. Now we have entertainment everywhere. We have it online, digital, we have streaming services. So I think some people really enjoy a live format and people want to laugh. People want humor. And one thing, though, we have political satire in our show. We are not banging the gavel to try to convince or sway people one way or the other. We're just trying to make fun of the folly of people who are in those political positions when they do something silly. We will point it out.

Daniel Schindler [00:11:30] Are there any moments that stand out over your long career here? That you'd be willing to share.

Mike Verdon [00:11:38] Oh, lots of things. Gosh, that's that's a tough one to honest with you, Dan. Well, night after night, there's something you know, you have certain hecklers and then you have certain wonderful crowds. I mean, you have because there is beer involved in this summer camp with beer. You know, the guy who wet his pants in the front row to the guy who got lost trying to find the bathroom and started relieving himself over by our light board. It's just those kinds of things. Those are negatives. But there's all kinds of positives. Bachelorette parties are just fantastic and have a great time. Bachelor parties, birthday parties, anniversaries and interacting with them because we do interact with the audience. We used to interact a lot more in terms of getting out there and sitting on their laps. You know, I used to dress up as a woman. Climb on, guys. Really try to make them uncomfortable because, you know, they're feeling their own sense of uncomfortableness with a man on their lap; and I like that. And but since COVID came, we had to eliminate that as part of our format, being that intimate with strangers, it's just not a thing anymore. Interestingly enough, taking that off the show, people are getting less colds. And nobody, well one person to get COVID. That was last summer, but we don't know that we can trace it to the show because there wasn't really audience contact involved. Nobody seems to know where they got the COVID, when they get it.

Daniel Schindler [00:13:06] Did COVID affect, other than taking the audience contact out, how did that year go?

Mike Verdon [00:13:11] Yeah, that's that's a great question. What happened the year of COVID was, you know, the government and Trump started it, Biden kept it going, the PPP money that you could get to try to get your place up and running. Now, the one unique thing here in Montana, our Governor Bullock, you know, the situation was they were letting things open kind of bit by bit. First it was restaurants could open with a certain spacing, and then bars, they hadn't made any determination you know on live theatre. So I had, was able to secure PPP money through my banker, at the Ennis bank, the Madison Valley Bank. Which was great. All I knew is that I had until the 30th of June to use there. And even though we had it clear that we would be able to do a show, I just said, Here's my courtroom. We have the money. I can pay at least a least through the 30th June. There's a lot to clean up and a lot we can we can paint a bench five times if we have to. You know we're going to be working till the money runs out and then lo and behold about, near the 1st of June. Governor Bullock took away those restrictions and said we could go ahead and do theatre. Of course, we had to do it at half capacity, so we had to reconfigure the entire room. So, you know, we typically, you know, we're maxed at 80. So we just said 42 and we set everything up so we could be at 40 to 42. Truth be told, we were half of half capacity. A lot of the time. People were staying home they were scared. And of course, we had to wear masks when we were serving, but we could take the masks off to perform. But people in the audience were supposed to wear masks. And we felt like it was pretty safe. So people came through the door and were, you know, recalcitrant about the idea of wearing masks and just sat right down without them on. They were sometimes sort of local "important people". We just didn't fight them. Others, several people just turned away, because they're not wearing masks. So we were half capacity, but we were usually about a quarter capacity. Fortunately, Governor Bullock put together grants for artists in the state like performing arts. So we were able to take that PPP money and get through June, then through the governor's office. It was Bullock putting it together so that we could get more grants and we were able to keep going for the rest of the summer. Now, was it a profitable summer? No. But, we kept the brand alive. That was what was most important to me, that we were here, we were making it, and doing it, and we did. Then, you know, those restrictions start to go away as things get more in control of COVID. The summer of 2021, people came out like gangbusters. We were able to have full seating again. Some still to this day choose to wear masks. I say, go for it if that makes you feel better. But now we're filling up again. 2021 was one of those crazy years where just everybody was just craving out. Busy. We were busy. We were thankful for it because it made up for the year before. But sometimes, you have to take those losses because you want your brand to exist. Unfortunately, the Virginia City Players at the Opera House shut down that summer instead of trying to maintain and I don't know why, what their reasons were. They had to do what they had to do, But the word was spreading around that we were closed, which was unfortunate. We did the best we could to make sure people understood and get the word out that we are open. It's funny, in 2021, when a lot of people said, "It was so sad you were shut down last year". No we weren't. We made it the whole way..

Daniel Schindler [00:17:26] What do you think the next step is for the Brewery? What's the future like?

Mike Verdon [00:17:30] A new cooler. You know, keep going. We, you know, the news cycles are always changing. We don't know what's going on. There are aspects to what happens. Politics is going to come into play by next year, specially with the election cycle. That tends to affect what we do and things we talk about or make fun of it, make sketches

about, make skits about. So the future, I think as long as I'm here is going to maintain, it just tends to grow and evolve on its own. I try not to get in the way. I probably do sometimes, but I try not to. I mean, one of the biggest changes and that's not a deliberate thing, but, you know, as you go through employees and try to keep personal, you know, musical directors are not easy to come by. And so we've had some great Ken Christensen and I started here in 88 together we are just as good a friends as can be. He's a dynamic and wonderful pianist. And we just had so much fun together. You know, eventually his life took a change and he couldn't come back any more and he's very busy as a college professor, university professor at MSU. That's what he does. He's a piano teacher. But over time, eventually, we end up within the past, since 2010, a gentleman by the name of Fred Crase, that's Fred Crase, C R A S E. But he's been with us and he brought a whole technological component to it. He's a savant I think it would be fair to say he can play about 14 instruments, guitar, banjo, you name it, if it's got strings on it he play it and he's a virtuoso on the piano as well. So he brought to it a lot of technology they're necessarily sitting over here, but mixing boards, wah pedals, and things that that we are not just a piano. We are everything. And he has his own personal studio where he can make drum tracks, whatever tracks to enhance the music. So we've come a long way technologically and I credit it to him. It is his baby, in terms of that. So yeah, musical directors change things an awful lot. I don't want to lose him.

Daniel Schindler [00:19:52] If you could tell an audience that's watching this anything about the Brewery, what would be the one thing you would sort of like to showcase about this type of performance that you do here?

Mike Verdon [00:20:04] Yeah... You're not going to find, it's not going to be Bill Maher. It's not going to be, oftentimes, what might be on some of the other entertainers, late night talk shows stuff. I really don't want to be advocating a particular side to any issue other than when you deal with the ludicrousness silliness, silliness of things that go on. I do not want to alienate half the crowd over the other half, basically by promoting one agenda over another. And so feel free. You're welcome in here if you're easily offended. You will be. But, a famous comedian, one of the people involved in Living Color? I'm sorry, I can't remember... I saw him in the interview and he said if you get up and do your comedy routine and everybody leaves happy and no one is offended, you haven't done your job. So, you know, comedy is pain, there is truth in comedy. From slipping on a banana peel to being made aware of whatever idiosyncrasies anybody has, height, weight, size, whatever. It all involves pain. If you don't believe it, go back and check it out. Watch Bugs Bunny, Laurel and Hardy, Three Stooges, anything. Somebody is going to be sacrificed, so if can't handle it, I say go out and watch. Make it right, I don't know. This is a place to let your hair down. Have a beer. Have fun and laugh at yourself and us.