

**by Mavor Moore**

Life in Canada's professional theatre was considerably different in 1912, when Dora Mavor got her first job (at 24) with Ottawa's Colonial Stock Company. With very few exceptions, such local companies as existed were New York based, and did their casting there. The plays were pre-used Broadway or London hits, requiring American or British accents. There were no theatre unions, thus plenty of abuse. Pay was low and uncertain, as was the life of the company. No radio, television or film work, and few teaching jobs because there was not much of a profession to enter.

The previous year, in Toronto, Dora had won a scholarship to London's RADA – its first Canadian student. Determined to make a career in the theatre (one of the few professions then open to women), she went to New York to join the Ben Greet Players, who toured the U.S. Chatauqua circuit with a classical repertory. The company included such future stars as Sidney Greenstreet, Ben Webster and Leo G. Carroll. Within two years she had become its leading lady. She appeared on Broadway in 1913 in Edward Sheldon's *Romance*, and in the 1915 silent film version of *Anna Karenina*.

In wartime 1916, she returned to Toronto, married, and accompanied her chaplain husband overseas. In London, where Philip Ben Greet had become head of the Old Vic Theatre, she appeared as his Viola in *Twelfth Night* – the Vic's first Canadian actor. When war ended in 1918, she returned to Toronto to raise three sons, join the feminist movement, act in the new experimental Hart House Theatre, teach and direct. In 1931 she founded the Hart House Touring Players to take Shakespeare into Ontario high schools.

In 1938, with a group of keen young amateurs (invariably referred to as "the kids"), she formed The Village Players to continue the tradition. In a makeshift theatre in the barn beside her old farmhouse on Bathurst Street north of Eglinton (then a dirt road), the Players also premiered works by Canadian playwrights and introduced Canadian audiences to Lorca and Brecht.

When the Royal Ontario Museum made available a small downtown theatre in 1946, she cashed in her \$3,000 worth of Victory bonds to – "establish a living theatre in Canada on a professional but non-profit basis."

The New Play Society lasted until 1971 when its founder was 83. In its 25 years it presented some 200 plays, a quarter of them Canadian, and launched the legendary annual revue *Spring Thaw*. Dora involved Tyrone Guthrie in the Stratford venture.

She represented Canada at the 1957 International Festival of Theatre in Mexico. During the same period she also pioneered drama -therapy with the Canadian Mental Health Association, and ran an -unconventional school through which passed hundreds of future actors, teachers, stage managers, writers, lawyers and other community activists.

Among the national and international honours she received were the Order of Canada, the first Drama Bench Award, and honorary doctorates from Ohio State University and, in 1970, the University of Toronto – from which, 65-years earlier, she had been an ignominious dropout. Only weeks before she died, at age 90, she was asked to lend her name to Toronto's annual -theatre awards. "Yes, of course," she said, "if it'll help the kids."