

Flaunting our Success

The second of ten exhibits to be presented during OLT's 100th Anniversary Season. This exhibit will remain on display in the Besserer Street Lobby during the entire run of *The Hollow* (October 23 – November 10).

Exhibit Preamble

The Ottawa Drama League, as Ottawa Little Theatre was then known, was the birthplace of a new national theatre festival established by the Governor-General of the day, Lord Bessborough, in 1933. The Dominion Drama Festival, as it was known, also led to the creation of the Eastern Ontario Drama League, which continues to hold festivals for one-act and full-length plays today.

Lord Bessborough



Lord Bessborough
(Vere Brabazon Ponsonby)

Vere Brabazon Ponsonby, First Earl of Bessborough, was appointed the 14th Governor General of Canada, serving from April 4, 1931 to November 2, 1935. Although he was a British aristocrat who served as a politician and businessman at home, he and his wife had a strong interest in the theatre. Working with Vincent Massey and the Ottawa Little Theatre's Henry C. Osborne, and representatives of other little theatres across Canada, Lord Bessborough is best known for establishing the Dominion Drama Festival and awarding the Bessborough Trophy to the winner among the competing amateur theatre companies of Canada.

The Dominion Drama Festival was founded by Bessborough in 1932 to encourage amateur theatre activities in Canada. The Governor-General was already a patron of the Ottawa Drama League (OLT), and his son, Viscount Duncannon, appeared on the Ottawa Drama League stage in productions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and James Bridie's *Tobias and the Angel*, a 1930 drama based on the apocryphal Book of Tobit.

Bessborough had observed that live theatre was endangered in the early 1930s, partly due to competition from the movies and partly due to the dire economic circumstances of the Great Depression. Yet he noted that there were amateur theatre companies like the Ottawa Drama League across Canada and wondered, "Why not harness and consolidate this national movement by holding a Dominion Drama Festival?"

"I should like to see as a normal part of our life in this country dramatic performances taking place of plays by Canadian authors and music by Canadian composers, with scenic decoration and costumes by Canadian artists, performed by Canadian players. The drama can be made not only an artistic but a great educational influence. I visualize a movement that might develop into a great Drama League, Dominion wide. The keen and growing interest in the little theatre and repertory theatre movement, extending as it does right across the Dominion from Ottawa, through Winnipeg and Vancouver, is proof in my mind that a movement for national drama might be born."

– Lord Bessborough, speaking in November 1932 at Toronto's Empire Club



The First Festival: 1933

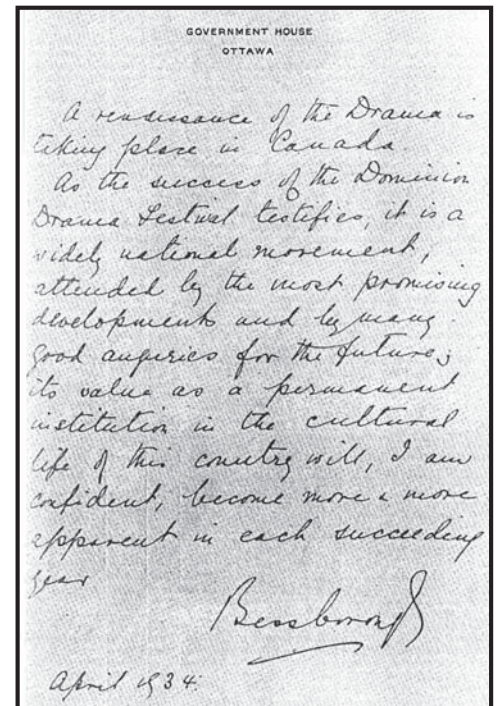
The Ottawa Drama League's home, the Ottawa Little Theatre, was the natural host for the first Dominion Drama Festival in April, 1933. Bessborough served as its patron, while former Prime Minister Robert Borden served as president and Vincent Massey, himself a later Governor-General, as its chairman.

Companies from eight provinces in Canada presented one-act plays and excerpts from full-length plays. The Winnipeg Little Theatre, which is no longer with us, won that first competition.

In later years, the Bessborough trophy was succeeded by the Calvert Trophy.



Bessborough Trophy



Handwritten welcome note from Lord Bessborough

"At the end of October in 1932, a meeting was held in Government House in Ottawa of a group of people who eventually became the first Governors of the Dominion Drama Festival and arranged for the first Festival to be held in Ottawa, in the Little Theatre, the following April. The people who comprised this group [were] selected from every province in Canada"

— J.M.C. Meiklejohn,
Theatre in Ottawa in the 1930s: A Memoir

— The History of the Dominion Drama Festival —

The Ottawa Drama League (now OLT) was the birthplace of the Dominion Drama Festival and served as its host for its first five years. The prestige afforded to the festival by Bessborough and his successor, Lord Tweedsmuir, as well as politicians, university leaders and church leaders across the country, helped to establish the Ottawa Drama League and its new Little Theatre, which had opened its doors in 1928.

Thereafter, in keeping with its stature as a national institution, the festival began to travel from city to city across Canada.

The festival ran from 1932 to 1939 and then resumed after the war from 1947 to 1978.

A key feature of the festival was adjudication – an assessment of each production by an experienced practitioner whose comments helped to elevate the standards of production across the country. Adjudicators assigned scores to various elements of the show, such as acting, directing, presentation, design.

The Festival's photographer in its early years was none other than Yousuf Karsh, who also enjoyed working with the Ottawa Drama League as he established himself in Ottawa as one of the world's premier portrait photographers. (He also met his future wife Solonge at the theatre.) Some of his early theatre work is on display.



"While my career seemed to be well launched, I had few friends in Ottawa during those early months, and I welcomed an invitation to join the Ottawa Little Theatre, an enthusiastic group of amateur players. The casual invitation was to have lasting effects on my life and career."

– Yousuf Karsh

The Eastern Ontario Drama League

Like the Dominion Drama Festival, the Eastern Ontario Drama League was established in the 1930s, and like the national festival it owes much to the enthusiasm for theatre of the Governor General of the day, Lord Bessborough.

Bessborough invited sixty people from across Canada to Ottawa to discuss plans for a series of regional festivals which could feed the Dominion Drama Festival at the national level. Rupert Davies of the Kingston Arts and Music group was one of those present; on his return to Kingston, he was instrumental in organizing the EODL.

The EODL produced the first regional theatre festival in the country. The first EODL festival took place at Queen's University in Kingston in February 1933, when thirteen one-act plays and scenes competed. The Ottawa Drama League was an active participant in the EODL festival from the start and was a frequent winner of Best Production over the years.

One particularly notable Ottawa entry was the 1948 production of *Eros at Breakfast* by Robertson Davies. The play won Best Production at EODL, went on to win again at the Dominion Drama Festival, and was then selected as the Canadian contender for amateur theatre at the Edinburgh festival in 1949, although British critic Philip Hope Wallace lamented that "this excellent cast and excellently played production ... did not draw the crowds or the notices it deserved."



Blithe Spirit (1947)
- Backstage



Blithe Spirit (1947)
- On-stage

The EODL Today

EODL members include 28 community theatres from throughout eastern Ontario. Its festivals provide member groups the opportunity to hone their theatre skills and as such offer learning experiences for participants and audience members alike. The principal feature of the festivals is the adjudication of each production, in which a theatre professional provides both a general assessment of the production, which is open to the public, and a more detailed appraisal in private. Based on the adjudication, trophies are awarded to member companies and individuals in recognition of their achievements in the various elements of putting together a production (directing, acting, design, etc.)

The EODL holds two festivals each year. The first, devoted to full-length productions, is held in the spring, while a one-act festival is held in the fall. The festivals are generally hosted by a member company where plays that have been selected in a pre-adjudication process are presented. The winner of the full-length festival then represents EODL at the annual Theatre Ontario Festival.

Earlier this year, Ottawa Little Theatre hosted the 2012 spring festival for full-length plays. Its entry, Norm Foster's *Self Help*, won for Best Actress in a Major Role (Chantale Plante) and Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Cindy Beaton).



EODL adjudication, 2012



EODL 2012 winners

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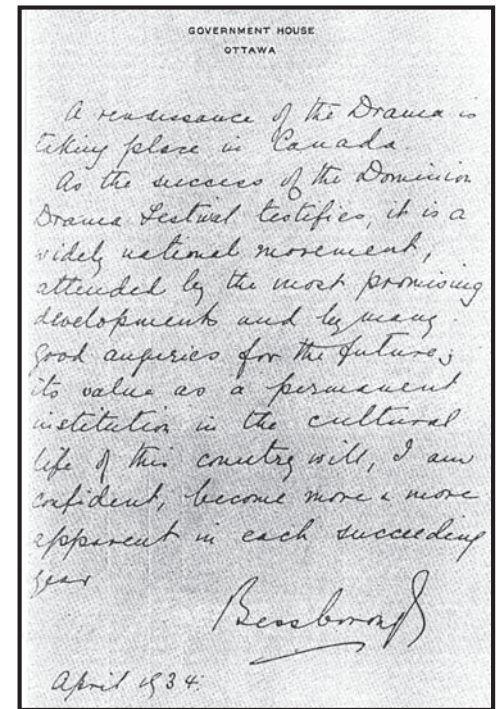
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