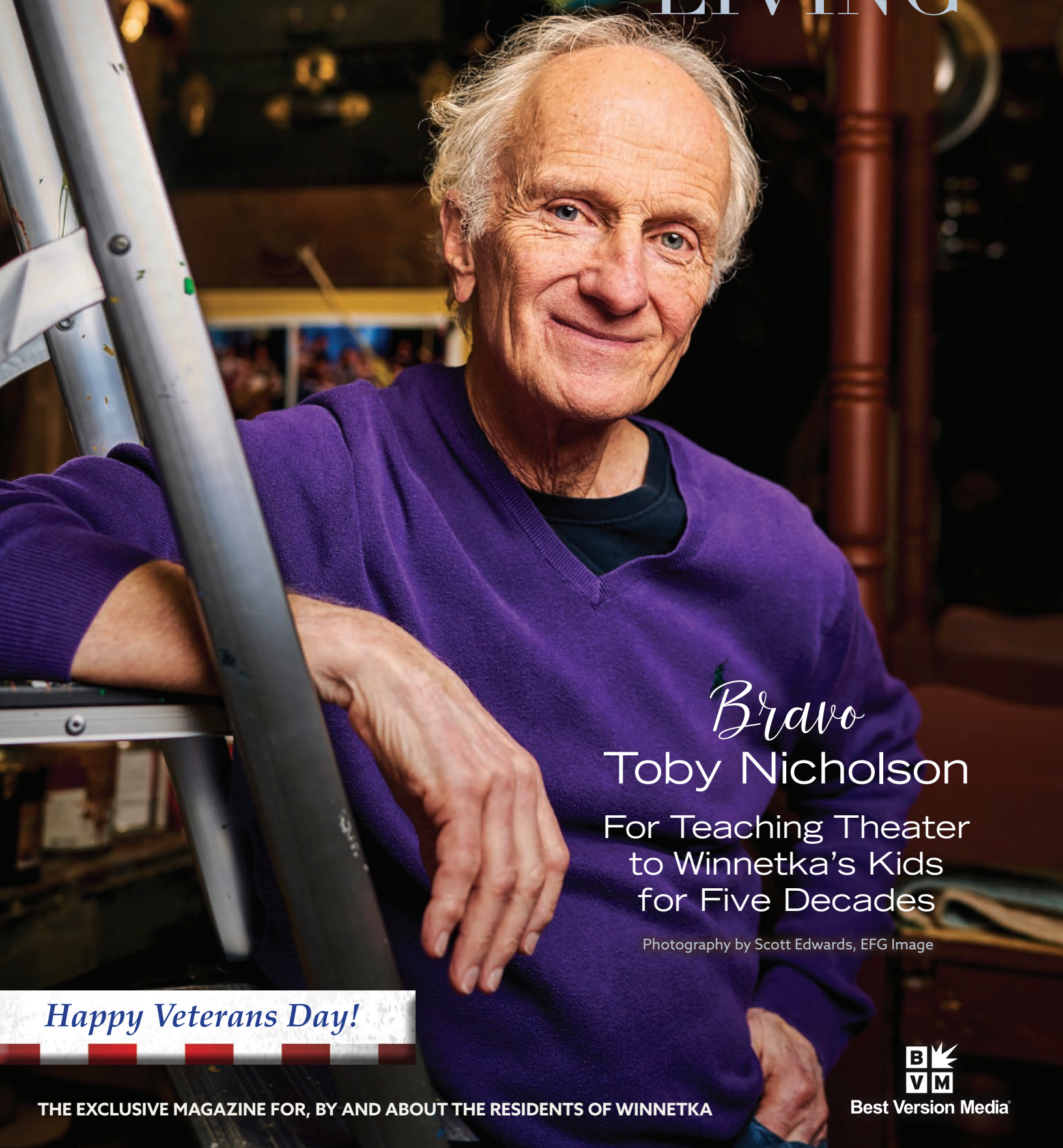


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WINNETKA LIVING



Bravo
Toby Nicholson
For Teaching Theater
to Winnetka's Kids
for Five Decades

Photography by Scott Edwards, EFG Image

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Bravo Toby Nicholson For Teaching Theater to Winnetka's Kids for Five Decades

By Paul Clements | Photography by Scott Edwards, efg image

Rare is the performer who doesn't seek the spotlight, but beyond rare is the performer who instead devotes his life to sharing his talent, creativity and showmanship freely, with love and kindness, to generation after generation of children. Yet Winnetka is blessed to have just such a performer in Toby Nicholson, the rarest of rare, unmoved by ego, unrivalled in ability, and unmatched in modesty.

According to Cathy Hirschmann (pictured above), who brought him on board as her co-director at Children's Theater of Winnetka (CTW) nearly 20 years ago, "He has no ego, he's always just about the kids. He's also helped me grow as a director and as a choreographer, and it's so hard to find someone in the business who is just so kind. But not only that. He's a renaissance man. He can dance, he can teach, he can act, he plays the piano, and if that's not enough, he can also build the sets, and he's an artist who has been drawing and painting for years. There really isn't anything he can't do. Years ago, my mother used to help him with the set painting and he was so wonderful to her. Then when she took ill, he sat with her reading for hours while she was in hospice. That's the kind of person he is."

While it would seem that Nicholson must have discovered the fountain of youth, he did turn 80 in October, but that hardly stopped him from his numerous volunteer responsibilities on the upcoming productions of *Beauty and the Beast* and *A Christmas Carol*.

Starring as Scrooge in the upcoming production of *A Christmas Carol* is Tim Walsh. Tim is one of the many Nicholson students who first learned under him as a student at New Trier, where he taught performing arts, including dance and drama, for more than 30 years. "Renaissance man is to put it mildly," Walsh said. "He does art, dance, mime, and as a teacher, he knew everything, about acting, dance, directing. He just has a wonderful way with people of all ages. Over the years, our relationship has developed into a really lovely friendship."

Born in Baton Rouge, LA, Nicholson was drawn to the theater at an early age. "There was a wonderful children's theater there and I especially loved the marionette shows," Nicholson said. "My parents then got me some marionettes and I would dress them, write scripts for them and put on shows all over town, doing birthday parties and things like that. My grandma even made me marionettes of the Seven Dwarfs, carving them herself, and I still have them."

It was in junior high that he started doing live acting and then the high school he attended in Baton Rouge had a four-year theater program, which he still credits for the impact it had on his development. Unfortunately for him though, his father was transferred to New Jersey prior to his senior year and the new high school only offered a one semester class in theater. But by that point, it didn't matter in the least, because his direction was set.

"My parents were always very supportive of me and never missed a single one of my performances," he said. "That's especially important, because many times children that are drawn to the performing arts may feel like misfits, but my parents made me feel special and that's how I feel about all the children I've taught over the years."

College brought Nicholson to the North Shore to attend Northwestern for theater and while there, he also became head cheerleader, which speaks to his strength and dexterity, as well as his talent. Prior to graduation in 1961, he began to cut his teeth professionally in all places, Highland Park, starting in 1959, which was then home to the Tenthouse Theater in the Round, a summer drama playhouse that featured "all Equity actors," as their adverts stated. (Equity actors being those who qualify for membership in the Actors' Equity Association, the labor union representing American actors and stage managers in the theater.) This proved to be a great experience for Nicholson who appeared in a production of *Guys and Dolls* with Tony Bennett and in a production of *The Music Man* with Van Johnson.

Nicholson, in his typically unassuming way, then offers that he, "stayed around to join the Sybil Shearer Dance Company." For those in the know, Shearer is highly regarded as one of the 20th century's most significant dancers. Critic John Martin wrote of Shearer that she was a dancer, "with a matchless technique, a curiously creative sense of movement, and a powerful presence. She has been, indeed, a kind of symbol of the next step forward for the modern dance."

Nicholson performed in her company for 20 years and today he is a trustee in The Morrison and Shearer Foundation, which continues to support dancers financially, and is working to build

and open a dancers' retreat and studio at Ragdale, the nonprofit artists community located in Lake Forest on the former country estate of architect Howard Van Doren Shaw. Nicholson's wife, Juanita, was also a member of the company and the two married in 1967. The couple have a son, Christopher, who is performing in his father's production of *A Christmas Carol* this year.

In addition to summer stock, dance company and working on sets for NU's Theater Association, where his wife was now Technical Director, Nicholson began doing volunteer work in school productions in Winnetka upon graduating from NU in '61 and at New Trier starting in 1965. He also launched his own school, The Toby Nicholson School of Dance and Community Theater, where he taught students at the Winnetka Community House from 1961-65.

The life of an itinerant performer can be trying, but as Nicholson says, "I never starved! But, I never went to New York either. I had already found happiness in Winnetka."

With happiness found, his wife told him to get his teaching certificate, which he did, after getting his Masters in Dance Education from Northwestern, and officially joining the staff at New Trier in 1971. I asked Nicholson what it was like teaching theater at New Trier in the turbulent 1960's, but he joked and said, "in the 60's, New Trier was still in the 50's."

He went on to say though that in 1965, "New Trier was still very formal and somewhat homogeneous, but over my 30 years there it really changed. When I started, a sport coat and tie were officially mandated and it was a big deal if you took off your coat to teach. By the time I left, in 1997, people were wearing shorts and sports shirts to school. However, it was still pretty conservative and that aspect has always agreed with me. I prefer to produce the old



standards, like Music Man. West Side Story is my favorite. I don't believe in putting on shows that have foul language. As a performer, I wouldn't want to say that from the stage."

He credits Winnetka with being, "a community that is pro arts and the emphasis on the arts continues to survive and thrive." He is especially pleased that New Trier has "25 performing arts teachers, even today."

When he retired in '97, he really thought he was going to exit stage left to a life of leisure, but his leisure life was short-lived as Children's Theater of Winnetka beckoned him in 2000.

"I kind of asked Toby to join me to be co-director and that is probably the best decision I ever made in my life," said Hirschmann. "His patience and experience, and the way he loves and respects the kids. I've never seen anything like it. He changed everything. Moving us to two full casts was amazing and changed children's theater. So we totally became more about the kids than the play. He taught me that that's what children's theater is about, the kids and the process."

Nicholson says, "I never met a kid I didn't like. I've always been supportive and never yelled or screamed, because it's important to me that in addition to learning the performing arts, the kids also learn leadership. Even though CTW only goes up to eighth grade, I was always sad when I would lose the kids to New Trier. That's why I'm so glad we are allowed to bring some of them back now as volunteers, so that they can get experience in leadership roles too."

So, what does Nicholson say to kids who have always wanted to be in the arts, but ask how they can make a living too. "Be as diverse as possible, because you don't know what



part will open up to you. Every aspect is important; singing, dancing, managing. Education is important, so take classes, and the business aspect is important too. Also, be sure to pick up as much leadership training as you can along the way.”

Children’s Theater of Winnetka will have six performances of *Beauty and the Beast* Nov. 21-24. To purchase tickets go to <https://www.childrenstheatrewinnetka.com>. All performances are at the Winnetka Community House.

The Community House presents Toby Nicholson’s original production of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* with two performances on Saturday, December 7 at 3PM and 7PM, and on Sunday, December 8 at 1PM and 4PM. Tickets are available at www.mycommunityhouse.org. Go to the Special Events Calendar for those dates.



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