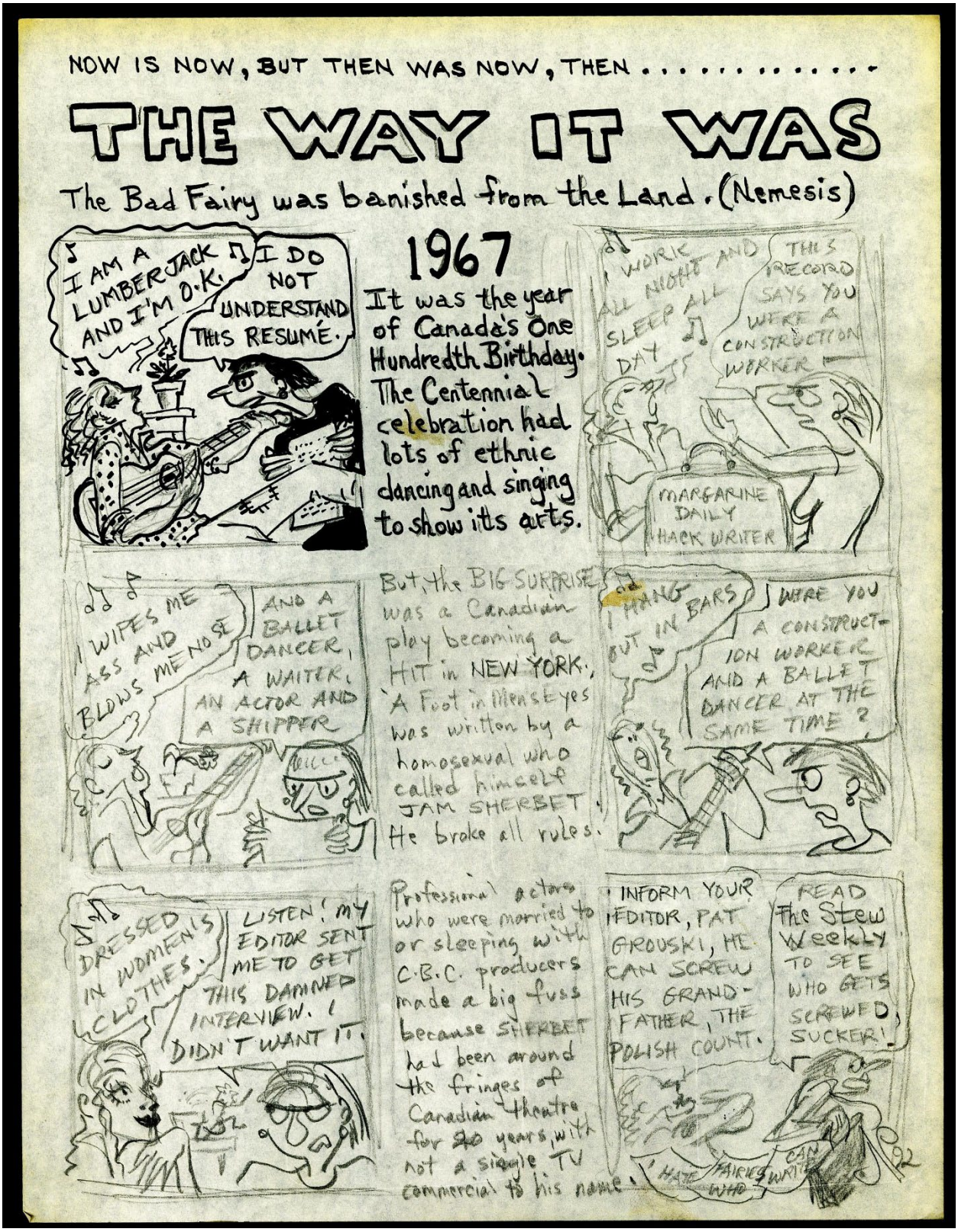
Famous Playwright under Our Noses

Monday, December 17, 2018 by Paulina Hem

Hello, my name is Paulina! This fall term, I've had the wonderful opportunity of working with Special Collections & Archives for my MLIS co-op. As the term ends, I would like to share one of the amazing finds that I've come across during these past few months. One of which is the John Herbert fonds, which spans almost 2 meters of boxes! Now you might be wondering who John Herbert is, much like I did.

John Herbert was the pen name of John Herbert Brundage, who was a Canadian playwright known for breaking ground in his depictions of gay and queer characters in plays. In his 75 years, John Herbert wrote over twenty-five plays, along with stories and novels. He was also a respected mentor in the Toronto theatre scene. Herbert, however, is most known for his play *Fortune and Men's Eyes*. The play went on to be adapted into a film and see more than one hundred productions worldwide.[1] As a gay man himself, John Herbert knew first-hand the experiences and abuses that the community faces, as seen in the autobiographical accounts in the play. Incorporating his real-life experiences, the play broke stereotypical depictions of gay men and introduced audiences to the harsh realities of prison life.

A shocking story at the time, the play was considered "too radical" for York University. Even the Stratford Festival refused to permit a public showing of the play.[2]



A comic by Herbert about his feelings of being in the limelight after years of being rejected by Canadian media.

Transcription

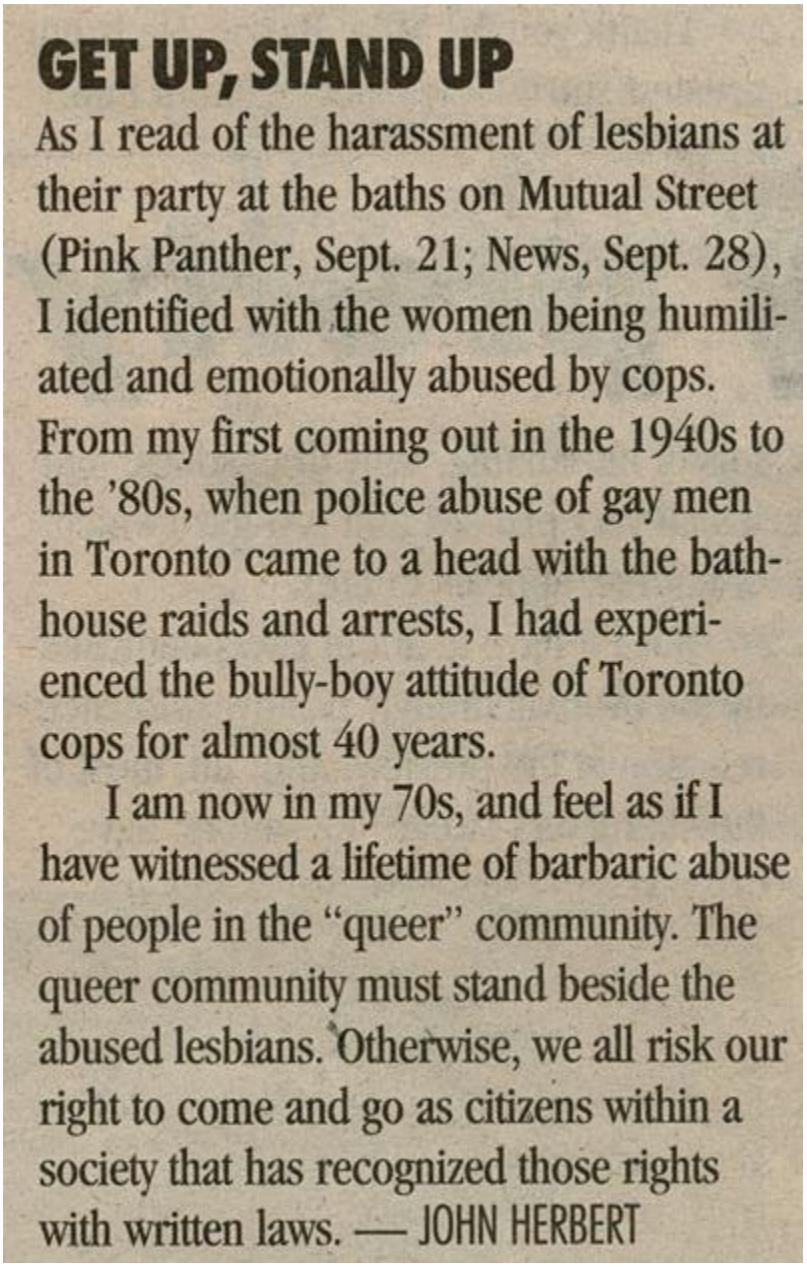
Now is now, but then was now, then .....

The way it was

The Bad Fairy was banished from the Land (Nemesis)

1. *Person 1: "I am a lumberjack and I'm O.K." Person 2: "I do not understand this resume."*
2. *1967, It was the year of Canada's One Hundredth Birthday. The Centennial celebration had lots of ethnic dancing and singing to show its arts.*
3. *Margarine daily hack writer. Person 1: "Work all night and sleep all day." Person 2: "This record says you were a construction worker."*
4. *Person 1: "I wipes me ass and blows me nose." Person 2: "And a ballet dancer, a waiter, an actor and a shipper."*
5. *But, the BIG SURPRISE was a Canadian play becoming a HIT in NEW YORK. 'A Foot in the Men's Eyes' was written by a homosexual who called himself JAM SHERBET. He broke all the rules.*
6. *Person 1: "I hang out in bars." Person 2: "Were you a construction worker and a ballet dancer at the same time?"*
7. *Person 1: "Dressed in women's clothes." Person 2: "Listen! My editor sent me to get this damned interview. I didn't want it."*
8. *Professional actors who were married to or sleeping with C.B.C. producers made a big fuss because SHERBET had been around the fringes of Canadian theatre for 20 years with not a single TV commercial to his name.*
9. *Person 1: "Inform your editor, Pat Grouski, He can screw his grandfather, the Polish count." Person 2: "Read the Stew Weekly to see who gets screwed, sucker!" Papers spilling out of person 2's bag reads, "I hate fairies who can write."*

Along with his plays and prowess in the arts, John Herbert was also a vocal activist for the Toronto gay and drag communities. His famous play recounts his experiences after being arrested and jailed for dressing in drag in the 1940s [2]. John Herbert wrote the play 2 years before the Stonewall riots of 1969 in New York City, which is considered an important event that helped spark the gay liberation movement and the fight for LGBT rights in the United States.



GET UP, STAND UP

As I read of the harassment of lesbians at their party at the baths on Mutual Street (Pink Panther, Sept. 21; News, Sept. 28), I identified with the women being humiliated and emotionally abused by cops. From my first coming out in the 1940s to the '80s, when police abuse of gay men in Toronto came to a head with the bathhouse raids and arrests, I had experienced the bully-boy attitude of Toronto cops for almost 40 years.

I am now in my 70s, and feel as if I have witnessed a lifetime of barbaric abuse of people in the "queer" community. The queer community must stand beside the abused lesbians. Otherwise, we all risk our right to come and go as citizens within a society that has recognized those rights with written laws. — JOHN HERBERT

A newspaper clipping detailing Herbert's outspoken defence of lesbian women.

Transcription

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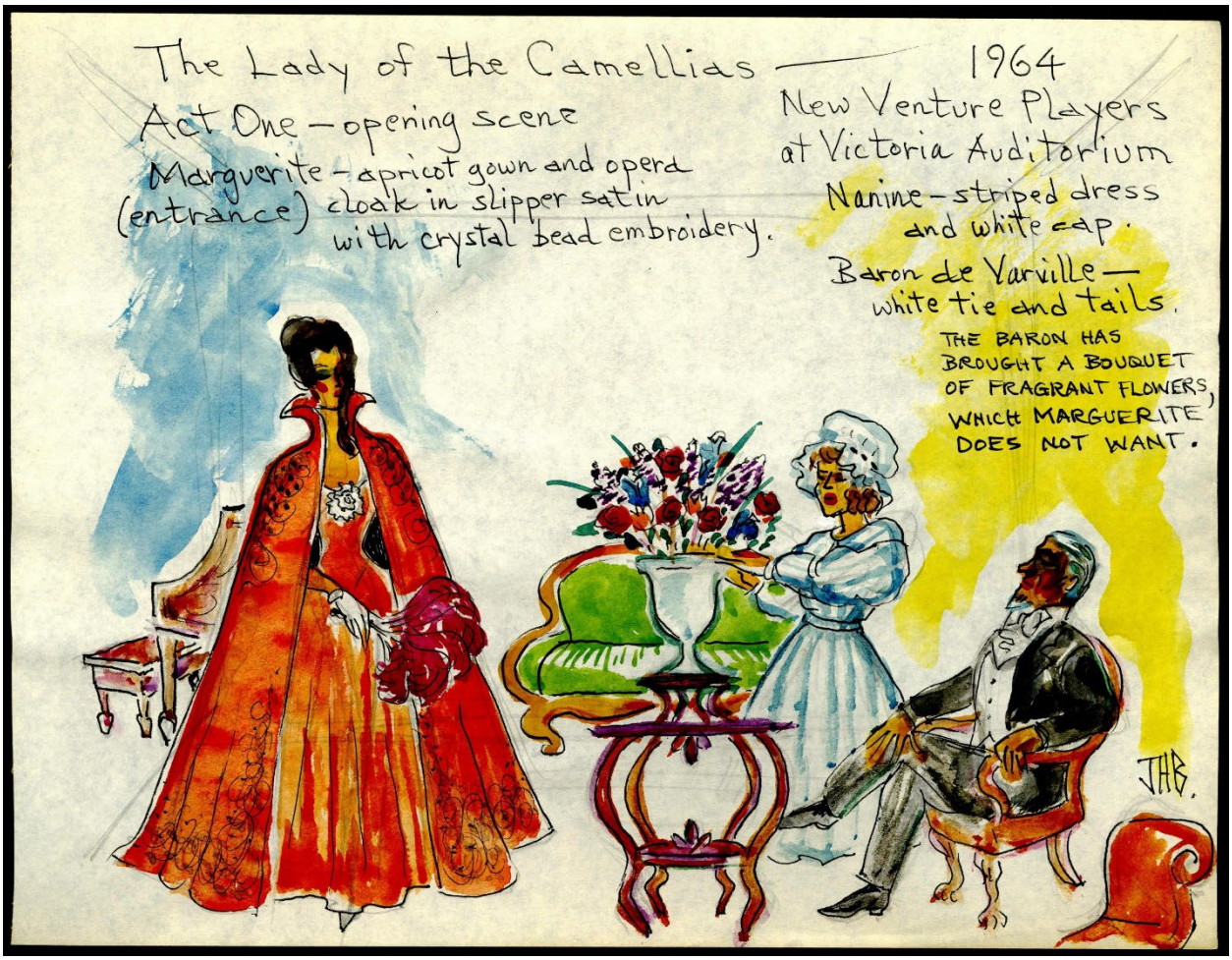
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Other interesting finds in the John Herbert fonds are materials that reflect his writing process. Below are a few sketches showcasing the intense detail he brought to his costume, prop, and set designs.



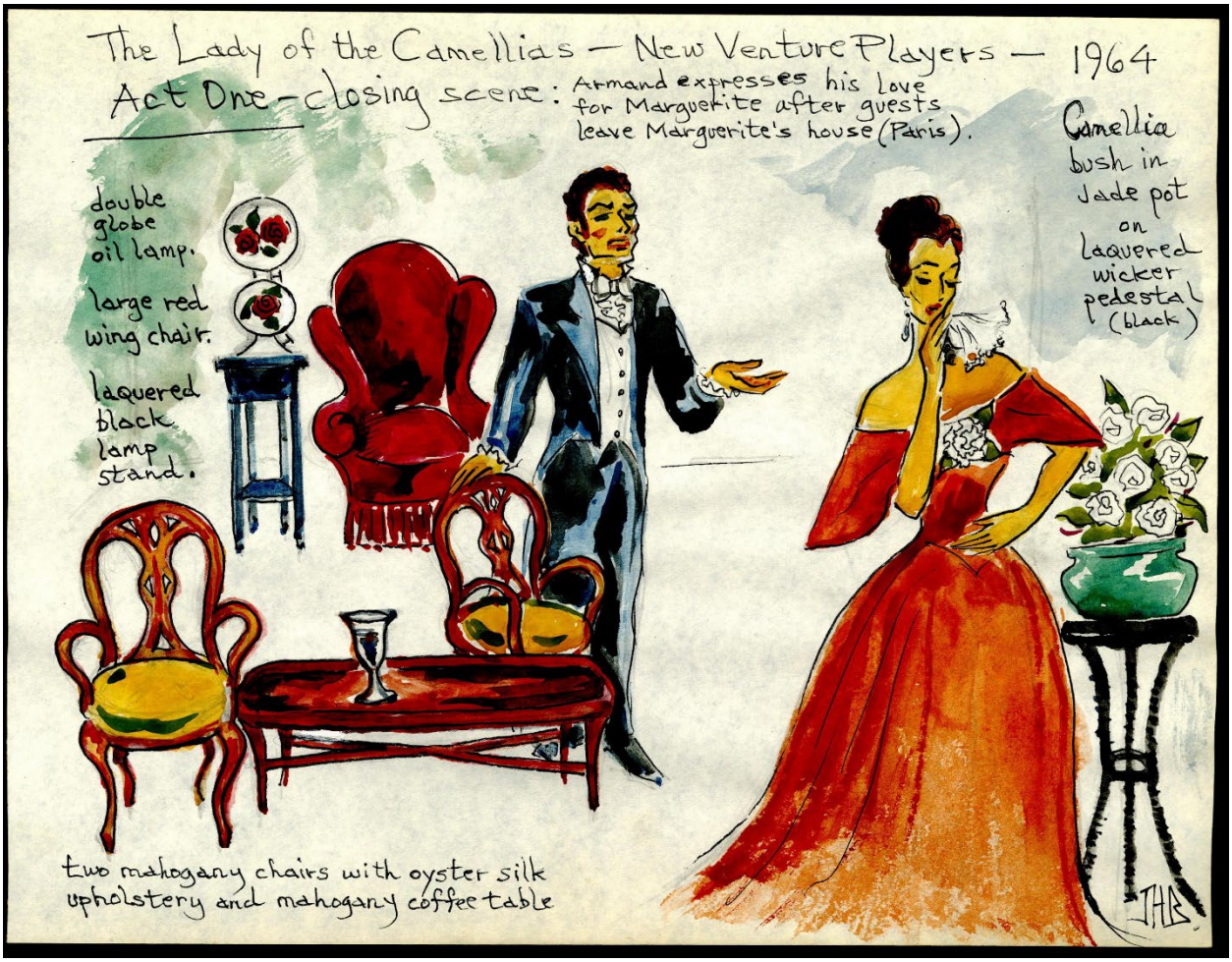
Transcription

The Lady of the Camellias at Victoria Auditorium New Venture Players 1964. Costumes. Act One. At Piano: Gaston, Olympe, Armand. Prudence (Frilled Blue silk), Marguerite (apricot satin with slight train), St. Gaudens, Nanine.



Transcription

The Lady of Camellias, 1964 New Venture Players at Victoria Auditorium. Act One – Opening scene. Marguerite-apricot gown and opera (entrance) cloak in slipper satin with crystal bead embroidery. Nanine- striped dress and white cap. Baron de Varville – white tie and tails. The baron has brought a bouquet of fragrant flowers, which Marguerite does not want.



Transcription

The Lady of the Camellias - New Venture Players - 1964. Act One – closing scene: Armand expresses his love for Marguerite after guests leave Marguerite's house (Paris). Double globe oil lamp, large red wing chair, lacquered black lamp stand. Camellia bush in jade pot on lacquered wicker pedestal (black). Two mahogany chairs with oyster silk upholstery and mahogany coffee table.



Transcription

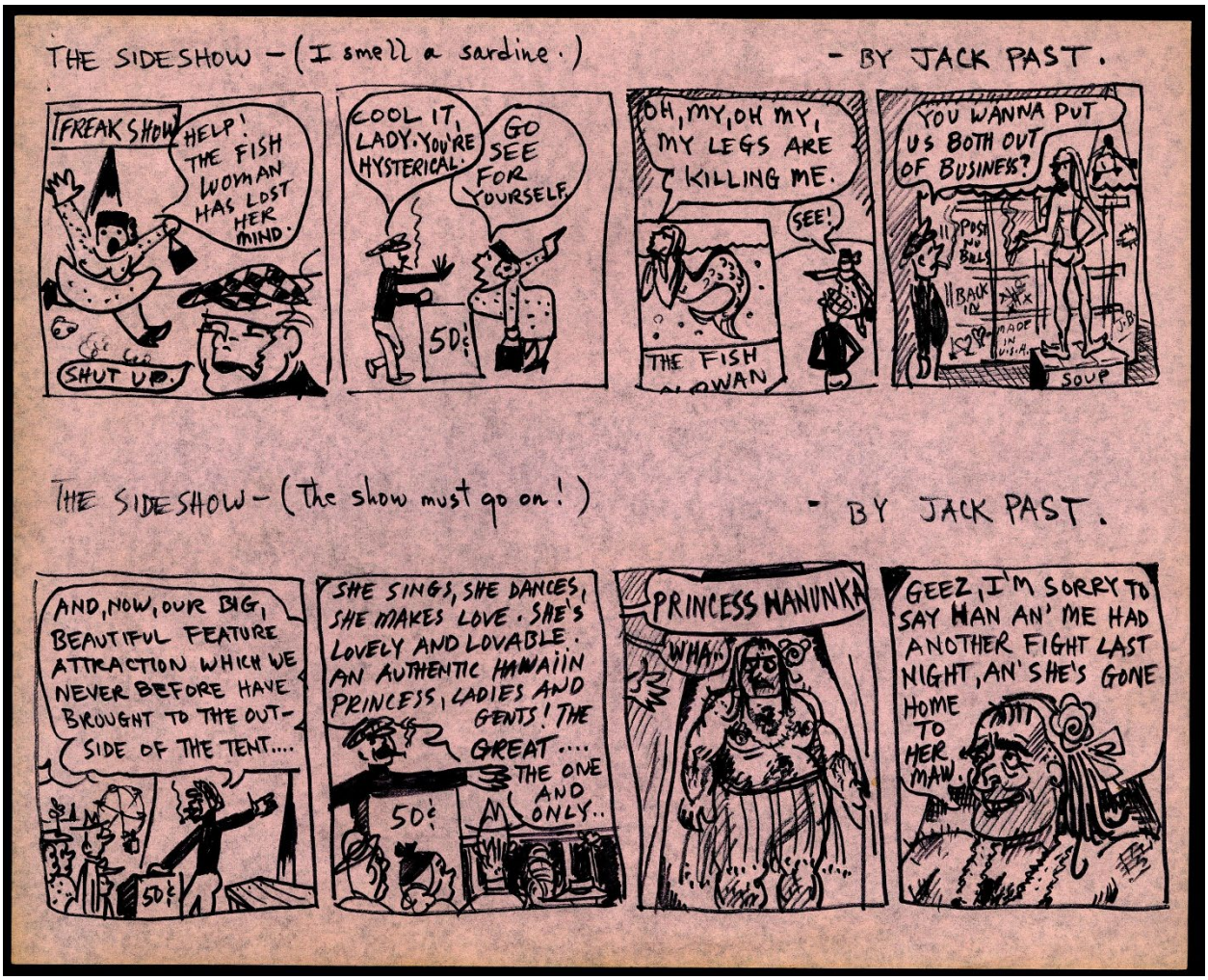
The Lady of the Camellias - New Venture Players - 1964. Act Two – Scene 1. Marguerite's House (Paris). Marguerite – simple blue-grey daytime dress. Baron de Varville – black and grey daytime clothing. Rad cravat. Marguerite asks the baron for money, so she can go to the country.

John Herbert was not only a talented playwright but was also in centre stage himself.



John Herbert as Lorelie Leech, the Gold-digger, in a satirical revision of the play, The Wonderful Whores.

He also dabbled in works outside of theatre. The John Herbert fonds contains many of his poems, short stories, autobiographies, and comics!



Transcript

THE SIDESHOW – (I smell a sardine.) By JACK PAST

Panel 1- FREAK SHOW Lady: "Help! The fish woman has lost her mind." Announcer: "Shut up."

Panel 2- Announcer: "Cool it lady. You're hysterical." Lady: "Go see for yourself."

Panel 3- Fish Woman: "Oh, my, oh my, my legs are killing me." Lady: "See!"

Panel 4- Reveals a person standing behind a mermaid cutout. Announcer: "You wanna put us both out of business?"

THE SLIDESHOW – (THE SHOW MUST GO ON!) – By JACK PAST

Panel 1- Announcer: "And, now, our big, beautiful feature which we never before have brought to the outside of the tent…"

Panel 2- Announcer: “She sings, she dances, she makes love. She’s lovely and lovable. An authentic Hawaiian princess, ladies and gents! The great…. the one and only…”

Panel 3- Announcer: “Princess Hanunka. Wha…”

Panel 4- ‘Princess Hanunka’: “Geez, I’m sorry to say Han an’ me had another fight last night, an’ she’s gone home to her maw.”

Whether of interest or as a source for research, please come in and check out the John Herbert fonds in person!

Bibliography

[1] Dickinson, Peter. "CRITICALLY QUEENIE: THE LESSONS OF FORTUNE AND MEN'S EYES." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 11, no. 2 (Fall, 2002): 19-43.

[2] Taylor, Kate. Playwright wrote landmark drama. *The Globe and Mail*, (June 26, 2001).