

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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Steve Beecroft

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2021**

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In this oral history, Steve Beecroft discusses his life and his work with Mill Valley's Curtain Theatre. Born and raised in Canada, Steve moved to the UK for graduate school, receiving a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Cambridge. He then worked internationally for several years before moving to the Bay Area. In 2010 Steve joined the Curtain Theatre, which puts on free productions of mostly Shakespeare plays annually in Old Mill Park. Steve describes his work as an actor, producer, and fight director for the Curtain Theatre. He discusses some of the most memorable Shakespeare plays that he has produced, acted in, and directed, and shares his thoughts on the Bard's genius. Throughout this oral history, Steve conveys his love of performance as well as his joy in being able to bring this cultural offering to the community.

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Oral History of Steve Beecroft
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Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Steve Beecroft, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:04 Debra Schwartz: Today is July 20th, 2021. My name is Debra Schwartz, and I am sitting with Steve Beecroft. We are here on behalf of the Mill Valley Public Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society Oral History Program. In the past, our interviews have been conducted in the sound room, the recording room at the basement of the Mill Valley Public Library, but because of the pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic, we are recording from the comfort of our own homes. I'm very, very pleased to have Steve with us today. This is an interview I've been trying to capture for many years. Steve is an interesting fellow. Who is he anyway? I have seen him be so many people, so many faces, so many costumes, genders, that it's questionable.

I've seen him in sword fights and I've seen him in death scenes and chaos and shipwrecks and glorious magical moments in the forest. In comedy and in heartbreak, I have seen him singing beautifully, acting beautifully, and moving the audience that watches aptly as he and others perform in the beauty of the Mill Valley Public Library's amphitheater under the redwood trees, as a member of my favorite Shakespeare company in all the world, the Curtain Theatre. Steve, it's really great to have you here, finally, to tell your story about yourself and the Curtain Theatre. I have lots of questions and I'm particularly excited to be able to — last year, we didn't get to watch any performances, there were no performances anywhere, but this year there will be, so it's a perfect time to finally capture your story and to understand better the gift that Mill Valley is giving in the productions put on by the Curtain Theatre.

0:02:29 Steve Beecroft: Thank you for having me. It's wonderful to be here. Like you said, we've been trying to get this organized for a few years now, for some reason it never happened, and it's wonderful to finally be speaking to you about this.

0:02:41 Debra Schwartz: Well, you're a hard-working man, I can appreciate it. And I will always be coming back to watch the show, so I'll always be there to nag you, and finally, it worked. Let's get a little background before we jump into your participation with the Curtain Theatre. Just to help our listeners understand a little bit more about who you are, maybe you can tell me a little bit about where you were born, and how you came to Mill Valley, and how you came to be an actor and a singer, performer.

0:03:13 Steve Beecroft: Sure. Very briefly, I'm Canadian. I grew up there, and then for my post-graduate work, I went to England, Cambridge University. I did a Master's and Ph.D. in International Relations, then worked in London for another five years or so. I moved to Hong Kong, worked there for five years as global head of sales for an Asian broker. And then I've been in the Bay Area for a little over 20 years now. I've always been — well, from high school years, at least, I've been involved in theatrical endeavors as well as singing endeavors that carried to university, and after a respite when work was

just way too hectic to make it happen, I got back into it again and started with the Curtain Theatre in 2010.

0:04:04 Debra Schwartz: Somehow it always feels like you've been with the Curtain Theatre, and the Curtain Theatre has always been in Mill Valley, but it's just been here for about 11 years.

0:04:14 Steve Beecroft: Well, the Curtain Theatre has been here since 2001, actually.

0:04:19 Debra Schwartz: 2001, but you've been involved —

0:04:20 Steve Beecroft: I joined in 2010.

0:04:24 Debra Schwartz: So that explains a little bit how good you are with accents. [chuckles]

0:04:30 Steve Beecroft: Well, it helps when you've lived in England and traveled all around to do particularly British accents, but the play in 2019, I played a crazy French doctor there, of course, using some of my French-Canadian things on that. So, yeah, it certainly helps.

0:04:47 Debra Schwartz: Well, you look so normal in real life when you're not all dressed up. One might pass right by you and not understand how many people you can be and how many dire situations you can be in, but only in August and September.

0:05:04 Steve Beecroft: Correct.

0:05:07 Debra Schwartz: Well, let us just jump in right to it, shall we?

0:05:14 Steve Beecroft: Sure.

0:05:16 Debra Schwartz: About the Curtain Theatre. I did a little research before our interview today, and I learned that the original Curtain Theatre was an Elizabethan playhouse. Maybe you can talk a bit about that.

0:05:29 Steve Beecroft: It was one of Shakespeare's very first theaters. Before he went to the Globe, he performed a lot of his plays at the Curtain, which paradoxically did not have a curtain in front of the stage, but that was always one of his original venues, and that's where we got the name for it from. We felt that was an homage to Shakespeare and to the original company. And so yeah, it's a great company, the Curtain Theatre. I love it because not only is it free theatre, which is wonderful, and in a totally fantastic place in the redwoods in the middle of Mill Valley, so those are all tremendous pluses, but I think what we try to bring to it reflects what Shakespeare's companies were like at the time. Remember that in London in that period, in the Elizabethan period, going to the theater was a very big deal.

It was a major source of entertainment. The percentage of the population of inner London that actually went to the theater was extremely high, it was the entertainment thing to do, and they would always have buskers out ahead of time. They'd have jugglers, they'd have other things going on. There would be food served, and the company would bring in music and dance and clowning and other things, it was holistic entertainment, and that's some of what we try to do at the Curtain. We have our own band run by Don Clark, who writes almost all the music that is played. We have original choreography and fight choreography from myself, we have excellent actors, we go out and we entertain the audience before shows, I'm often one of the ones stealing food and going on having fun with audience members beforehand. So the idea is when people come, however soon they come before the show until the very end of the show, they're thoroughly entertained. And that really stemmed from looking at how Shakespeare's performances occurred, both at the Globe and at the Curtain before it, we've taken that and brought it here to Mill Valley, which I think is kind of special.

0:07:45 Debra Schwartz: Equally special is the time of year, because in late August, the light changes. There starts to be a golden cast that goes across the forest. I'm a hiker, I've seen it many times. There is a trill in the air; it's like summer's just met up with fall and they have fallen for each other. There is an electrical charge, and during your performances, I've seen it so many times that as the performance goes on, the light is changing, the light's filtering through these magnificent redwoods, the smell of the bay trees is wafting through the air, that you can smell the coffee and the food that you sell, and the music filters through. It's interesting how sound travels in a forest, actually, and then, of course, it's outdoor seating and on rock, very informal, very small town. And for free. Is there anything like this anywhere else in the Bay Area that you know of?

0:08:55 Steve Beecroft: Not really that I know of. Certainly not Shakespeare. There's the odd free production in the East Bay that I've seen in the past, but nothing quite like this. I'd like to think we put on very, very good performances. As I say, everything from the costumes to Steve Coleman's wonderful, wonderful sets. From the music to the performances, the whole thing I think is pretty well done, and for that to be free, it's kind of an amazing thing, and I think it impacts the community a lot. We get a lot of families, a lot of young children coming out, and it's their first experience of Shakespeare, and I'll even get kids coming up to me downtown and saying, "You're the Shakespeare man," which believe me, I've been called a lot of things worse than that. So it's pretty wonderful. We get people coming to our rehearsals just to watch how we prepare for this stuff, it's not a lot, but people will come through and they'll stop for 20 minutes and watch us rehearse or watch us sword fight or whatever, and then as you get closer to the end, often you'll get people actually, kids mostly, coming to actually sit down and watch for half an hour, sometimes an hour as we're rehearsing things. They get into it, and it's become a real part of the community. I certainly hope that is the case, and it feels like it is.

0:10:21 Debra Schwartz: I think so. You have my vote. I've many times been coming down the dipsy stairs or coming back from Cascade Canyon and I hear the practicing and I think, "Oh, goody. It's coming. It's coming."

0:10:36 Steve Beecroft: Yeah, it's fun.

0:10:38 Debra Schwartz: I've interviewed Steve Coleman. He is somebody unusual and wonderful and magical. I read on the website you're a non-profit, the Curtain Theatre is a non-profit, and we'll get into this later how very important it is that you do rely on the kindness of strangers in the donations during the performances, the way you managed to stay afloat, and I agree with you, this is a very high quality performance. The costumes are beautiful, the music is amazing, the orchestra is amazing, they're all dressed in costume as well.

0:11:14 Steve Beecroft: Yeah.

0:11:15 Debra Schwartz: And the set designs are incredible. I've seen Shakespeare all over the place and you're up there to the very best. I'll keep using superlatives, because I know this to be true, at least in my limited experience, that this is really a wonderful quality production. It says on the website, "Our organization was formed by Mill Valley arts producer John Leonard, set designer Steve Coleman," who we all know from the Throckmorton Theater, "and artistic director Mikel Clifford."

0:11:53 Steve Beecroft: Right.

0:11:53 Debra Schwartz: Tell me a little bit about this group.

0:11:56 Steve Beecroft: Well, the only one that is still involved with the company is Steve Coleman. John Leonard is my neighbor up the street here on Molino Avenue and I still see him regularly, but he was involved in the company for about 10 years and then decided it was time to back off and so he did so. I never met Mikel Clifford. He was only involved really in the original production or two. The real stalwarts of the Curtain Theatre are our Curtain Theatre Board of Directors, and that consists of Michele Delattre, who is directing this year's production of *Twelfth Night* starting August 14th.

0:12:35: She's been involved in the company right from the beginning. She directs, she's in the band, she's acted a few times, etc. Her husband Don Clark, who's the musician, he runs the band, and writes almost all the music that we play. He, again, has been involved from the beginning. And then the other three board members came later and tried to change the way things were done, and it's a very, very effective board. I myself joined in 2010. Diane Pickell-Gore is our stage manager and has done a lot of musical theater with me elsewhere, I brought her into the company and she's been a board member, I think since 2012, maybe 2014, something like that. I can't remember. And then just recently, we've had Nic Meredith of Mill Valley joining us as a board member as well. So it's a five-person board and everything is done together, it's very harmonious in terms of the way we work, so I think it's got that behind it. And it's got a core of actors and musicians that have been with it for a very long time.

0:13:46 Debra Schwartz: And what is your place in the company specifically?

0:13:50 Steve Beecroft: I'm a board member, I tend to produce the plays, which has a lot involved in it that people don't really recognize.

0:14:01 Debra Schwartz: Like what?

0:14:04 Steve Beecroft: Well, part of my job is to liaise with Mill Valley Recreation, our partners who let us use the stage. They're wonderful and they're great supporters of us, but I have to arrange dates and move dates when things happen that they need the park for. I have to organize rehearsal space outside of that, because we only rehearse in the park on the weekends. In the summer we rehearse actually in my church, Church of our Savior in Mill Valley. So I get that organized. It's organizing funding and working with the town and other things, dealing with any problems or complaints that come up, all that is the producer's role, plus generally to be guiding and make sure everybody's on the same page in terms of when do we get the programs out, what's the advertising question and so on. That's the producer's role. I also tend to be involved, I'm always the choreographer and fight director and then I tend to be acting in them. And in 2018, I directed as well. I directed *Henry IV, Part 1*.

0:15:12 Debra Schwartz: The fight director. [chuckles] I've never heard anybody say that before: "I'm the fight director." Well, you should be, because there's some pretty fierce sword fights that take place.

0:15:26 Steve Beecroft: Right.

0:15:26 Debra Schwartz: Off the stage, they spill off the stage and into the grove.

0:15:31 Steve Beecroft: Yeah, it was particularly in *Henry IV* that in the latter part of the play is a long battle and I had it circling the audience, so people didn't know where to look. It was quite interesting, I think people really enjoyed it, because it was all broadswords, it was very real. I go for realistic choreography. Whether it's wrestling or its sword fights or it's just pure fencing, I always try to go fairly realistic. And then when people were watching the action on the stage and then a fight would break out behind them, they turn around. It was quite interesting, and think got lot of support for doing that.

0:16:08 Debra Schwartz: That was a really good performance. Have you ever had dust in the face during a fight? You wonder about how it really must have been. There must have been a lot of dirt in the face and everything else.

0:16:20 Steve Beecroft: Oh, for sure. You work as a fight director to get everything, like a choreographer, you get it in sequence and it's all memorized and you know exactly how to do this and that action with it, but inevitably, sometimes things go wrong. And so you have to be able to adapt to that as well.

0:16:41 Debra Schwartz: How many actors do you have? And do you call in all actors to just audition, or do you have a core group of actors that you work with? How does it work in the Shakespearean world?

0:17:00 Steve Beecroft: Well, for the Curtain Theatre, we always hold open auditions, we always advertise those auditions so people can come, we also reach out to actors that we know elsewhere. For this show, *Twelfth Night*, we have 16 performers on stage. Others have been as low as 10, as high as, I think 20. There're definitely some people who you'll see many times.

0:17:25 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:17:26 Steve Beecroft: Very, very good actors. Grey Wolf, was playing Falstaff twice; Heather Cherry, who was one of the wives of Windsor and played King Henry IV and has done all kinds of things before; myself, there's a bunch of us who've done that, but nobody is assured of a role. We all have to get in there and audition and fight for the role with whoever the director is. The director makes the choice. And we've had visiting directors like Kim Bromley, he's done two, Carl Jordan did two, Michelle's directed a lot, I've done one, I may direct again in the future, but it's all up to the director who they choose. I would say that some of our actors are from here, from Marin County, but we definitely always have actors come in from the East Bay, from San Francisco, Rohnert Park, Sonoma and as far away as Half Moon Bay.

0:18:29 Debra Schwartz: Interesting, you said a woman played Henry IV. I have noticed your adaptations may go from the classical Shakespearean experience to something that may cross centuries and be modern. What was the one you had where it was kind of a 1930s setting, I believe, with the gangsters?

0:18:54 Steve Beecroft: *Comedy of Errors*.

0:18:55 Debra Schwartz: *Comedy of Errors*. And then you have a woman playing Henry IV. Is this typical?

0:19:02 Steve Beecroft: Different companies will do different things. A lot of the time we do it in the traditional period, we will do it Elizabethan period. For *Henry IV*, which I directed, I did that in the period that it came from, early-1400s. But I decided on using a woman as Henry IV, because it made the relationship between her and her recalcitrant son, Prince Hal, kind of more interesting and a different dynamic than it would have been if it was a man playing the father.

0:19:37: Also, Heather's just an excellent actor and I knew she would do a fantastic job at it. So I thought it brought a different idea to it. Now, we have to step back and look in Shakespeare's world when he performed, of course, and he did perform as well as write the plays, there were no women allowed on the stage. So you had young boys or teenage boys playing women all the time, so it was a lot of gender-bending that occurred. I would say as well that Shakespeare was an amazing writer for how he portrayed women, if you

go to his plays, women are often the smartest, the strongest characters in his plays. Very, very regularly, that is the case. He understood women, I think, pretty darn well. He doubtless thought they should have been on the stage. But I think he really tried to make women characters extremely intricate, detailed and strong. So the idea of having a woman play Henry IV, for me, came from that to a degree, and from the fact that I thought Heather would do a good job.

0:20:52 Debra Schwartz: It's interesting that he had this perception of women and how it could be so readily available to modern audiences to be able to enjoy. It would be a lot harder to sell these kinds of performances when women are very belittled, but nowadays because of women empowerment and equality and all that, the plays have a significance, culturally for us. They're stories that can impact us in a modern level.

0:21:33 Steve Beecroft: He was centuries ahead of his time in many, many things. The Bard was just way ahead of his time in the way he portrayed women, for sure, two and a half, three centuries ahead.

0:21:49 Debra Schwartz: Have you done this research on Shakespeare. I mean, have you delved into the character, the person?

0:21:56 Steve Beecroft: Oh, for sure. Yeah, I have a whole library of books about Shakespeare, about the plays, about literary criticism, etc.

0:22:03 Debra Schwartz: May I ask your opinions about Shakespeare?

0:22:13 Steve Beecroft: My opinion of Shakespeare?

0:22:14 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, there's a lot of mystery around who this person really was. I've heard so many stories, I suspend opinions, so I'd like to know yours.

0:22:29 Steve Beecroft: I would say this, in terms of the authorship controversy, I don't think it really matters. Somebody wrote this, and it's the most amazing work I think that exists in the world. I fell in love with Shakespeare really from the first time I heard it as a young boy. The rhyme, the meter, the depth of the words, the humor, the deep romantic love and expressions that occur grabbed me very much even as a young boy, so I've always been into it. In terms of Shakespeare, I can go into all the different theories that are there, I don't tend to hold with them. Frankly, I think a lot of that comes from the view that a writer has to write from his own experience, Mark Twain type thing, and that he has to understand how nobility works. "It must have been someone who was noble, it must have been the Earl of Essex, it must have been whoever." And I think that is not correct. He had a very good education in grammar school, he was exposed to theater a lot. Remember that he's writing his plays under deadlines, he's not sitting there writing a book. It works out to be the most fantastic works ever in theater, but he's writing under deadlines all the time, changing things, getting actors to be involved and they put an input and he changes it, is the way I see it.

0:24:05: And so it was an organic, developing thing. And he's using stories, other people's stories all the time. If you look at *As You Like It*, the whole idea behind that came from [Thomas] Lodge, it came from a different story about Rosalind, but he takes it and he makes it extremely different, puts in fantastic language and humor and other things, and you've got a very different play, but on a central theme. And he did that all the time. *Comedy of Errors* comes from Plautus, a Roman writer. So you've got all this stuff that he's using as source material, he's just putting his own genius into it in terms of developing character and developing language, I would say.

0:24:57: And so, to me, it doesn't frankly matter who wrote it. Somebody wrote this wonderful treasure of work that we celebrate in the Curtain Theatre and that I love to read. That person was an immense genius that has not been seen before or since, in my opinion. Was it the person from Stratford? I think so. I think there's a lot of evidence to prove that. When you have Ben Johnson, a rival, saying that he was "not of an age, but for all time" — this is not somebody who loved him, this is someone who believed it about him, and so you get all these commentary from his own people at the time. So I think the controversy comes from people looking back and wondering how Shakespeare became Shakespeare and putting their own construct of what genius is, that genius sits in a room and works on their own life experiences and then comes out with something on paper, but that's not the way Shakespeare worked at all.

0:26:08 Debra Schwartz: In an era when a large number of films are vapid and with such minimal character development, that is why I so enjoy your Shakespeare productions, because his study of character and the development of characters and their transformations are so keen and stunning that it's moving. You find yourself in the story, just hanging onto every word. And speaking of the word, I've heard that there's a way that you speak Shakespearean. If I was to read it today, it would butcher it, but if you were to read it, you have a way. What is that way? Is that training? Is there some way that you're guided or trained to say these things in such a way that they're so alive and attainable to the listener?

0:27:17 Steve Beecroft: Yeah. I come from originally being a singer. So that helps me to no end, because of the learning how to project, learning how to enunciate, etc., comes from that. But there's also just understanding how Shakespeare flows in terms of the rhyme of it, in terms of the meter of it, in terms of the emotional build and the ebbs and flows of his work. And that comes from experience. People teach it in college who do acting courses, they get taught how to do it, but I don't think it has to come from that. What he's writing is, in many cases, so profound or so humorous that once you understand it, you start to pick up on things. So if you go to *Henry V*, for example, it starts with the best introduction, I think, ever written to a play, where the Prologue, the person called Prologue comes on and he basically wants to explain what the play is about.

0:28:31 : His first line is, "Oh, for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention," and it goes on from there. Basically, at one point he says, "For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings, carry them here and there, jumping o'er times, turning the accomplishment of many years into an hour glass." And so he's setting

the play up, he's introducing it. And we do this at our shows, by the way, we do it differently, we have a song to begin with, or as in *Henry IV* I did this whole introduction of the key groups of actors and what was happening. And then I get people cheering from the different groups. You get people into the play right from the beginning, but they also gain knowledge of what this play is about. So even if you've never seen this play, you've never read it, you hopefully at the end of that, knew what it was about, who the key groups of characters were, and you got brought into the production right from the beginning.

0:29:40: That's critical for us, because we're often dealing with people who haven't seen the particular play. And in terms of the words, I think yes there is a different way of speaking Shakespeare than you would others, you can do it without having a Shakespearean accent or way of speaking, but you do need to be able to project, to enunciate, and even more so when you're on a stage in the middle of the redwoods. One of the first things you'll do in rehearsal is when you start rehearsing on the stage, we'll stand back and say, "We can't hear you." [chuckles] And eventually, actors get used to it.

0:30:22 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh. So can you give us an example, any stanza or any part, just say it flat and then say it the way you say it.

0:30:32 Steve Beecroft: Oh, wow.

0:30:35 Debra Schwartz: Not to put you on the spot here.

0:30:38 Steve Beecroft: There's so many to choose from. "Blow, winds, and crack thy cheeks. Rage, blow." That's King Lear. [louder] "Blow, winds, and crack thy cheeks. Rage, blow." It's just a different way of —

0:31:11 Debra Schwartz: Oh, yeah. [laughs] Absolutely noticeable. Any other examples?

0:31:19 Steve Beecroft: Oh, you don't even want to get me started.

0:31:25 Debra Schwartz: Oh. [chuckles]

0:31:26 Steve Beecroft: But again, you just have to feel into it, what he's trying to get across. And there's so many wonderful pieces of Shakespeare that you just have to feel it in your mouth.

0:31:47 Debra Schwartz: Do you ever feel like you are falling into it and being swept away?

0:31:53 Steve Beecroft: Sure. Just for those people who love the movie, if you watch *Shakespeare in Love*, which I think is terrific, what's really interesting in that movie is when they're rehearsing and he's finally got the play together, they're rehearsing and they're understanding where this is going, this tragedy, and you watch the actors who

now are all watching the play being rehearsed. They're being drawn into the story, and they do that very, very effectively. And you'll find that in our rehearsals. Initially, it's all trying to remember your lines and where do you go, but as you get beyond that, you can see actors, even when they don't have to be there, just watching the play develop, watching character develop, the stories interweave and it's quite amazing, actually.

0:32:50 Debra Schwartz: Probably you're asked this all the time, but I have to ask, how in the world do you memorize all your lines?

0:32:58 Steve Beecroft: It has its tricks and there's always going to be one line or two that will pick you up and throw you down. But on average, I think Shakespeare makes it relatively easy, because there's a music to it, there's a pattern to it. "What light is light, if Sylvia be not seen? What joy is joy, if Silvia be not by? Unless it be to think that she is by, and gaze upon the shadow of perfection." So that is from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which I'm hoping to direct some time, but it's got a movement to it, right? They aren't just words, they flow, they create a beauty in themselves. As an actor, that makes it easier to memorize. I mean, there's some stuff that's hard, don't get me wrong, like when he gets into some of his comic things, and there're just lines that are kind of crazy that don't seem to fit, but he's doing it for a purpose. So that's harder, but generally speaking, it takes time, you just work on it every day if you can.

0:34:12 Debra Schwartz: I studied American Sign Language and I love that language, it's beautiful. It has dimension. And it seems to me that Shakespeare is similar in that way, in that there's so much dimension to the movement and the words and the meaning, that it sort of carries itself along.

0:34:44 Steve Beecroft: Right. Well, that's interesting.

0:34:48 Debra Schwartz: Tell me about people that have inspired you along the way in your career?

0:34:55 Steve Beecroft: My acting career you're talking about?

0:34:57 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:35:00 Steve Beecroft: Wow. That's difficult. I'm not sure. Obviously, there're people that I've watched on stage that are amazing performers or in movies as well. Kenneth Branagh for sure. I saw Kenneth Branagh, who's known as a director, and he did a lot of Shakespeare films. *Much Ado About Nothing* is in my opinion the single best Shakespeare film ever made. But he also did *Henry V*, which was great. I saw him originally as a performer in London on the Barbican with the Royal Shakespeare Company when he was 22 or 23, something like that, just phenomenal. Very, very good, very physical. Good comic sort of touch to him, spoke it beautifully, depth of emotion. So, I guess if I was going to try to emulate anybody it was him, in terms of doing Shakespeare particularly, but now there's great actors all over the place which are wonderful to watch.

0:36:00 Debra Schwartz: Tell me more about working in the theater itself. Any disasters, any windstorms, rain?

0:36:11 Steve Beecroft: Oh, gosh, yeah, sure. [chuckles] Because I started doing, primarily musical theater. And basically, I remember when I was doing *Oklahoma!* and *Summer Stock* in Canada, I was playing Curly, the lead role. And I had to pull my gun and supposedly shoot or take a shot at Judge Fry. Of course, I did this with great physical aplomb and then the sound effect didn't happen. There was no sound. So I took the gun and I said, "Cheap Japanese gun," then I just went on adlibbing on this. So you get that kind of thing. In the Curtain we had one show, it was quite amazing. I can't remember when the production was, nearly five years ago. There was a lot of fires further north and it created this heat effect that blew in the middle of a performance in a wind and the red wood just started dropping, dropping branches and leaves and we literally had to send the guy out in intermission and sweep the stage. And he came on once in the second act and swept again, because it was two inches deep on the stage. We were slipping around and it was quite amazing. So, you occasionally get that sort of thing happening which is a bit of a fun.

0:37:36 Debra Schwartz: It is a performance and it is live. I know that there's been some controversy about the plays, let's talk about that a little bit.

0:37:50 Steve Beecroft: About the Curtain, you mean?

0:37:51 Debra Schwartz: Yes, the noise.

0:37:52 Steve Beecroft: There were a few neighbors behind on Cascade who complained about the noise. One of them came up and complained during a rehearsal before our production, and so being one of the lead members of the board, I spoke to her and we changed things. We only rehearse in the evenings, in the week before the show. That's the only time we rehearse in the evenings. And because of that event we now go absolutely quiet at nine o'clock. We'll rehearse till 10:00, but, I think it's actually about 8:30 that we go completely quiet. So we're just talking like I'm talking to you. We're not projecting at all, there's no music, there's no sword fighting. We try to be very cognizant of this stuff. There was definitely a period when — it was in 2019 — there were some real complaints and it got up to the Mill Valley City Council. And so I and others had to go and defend our position and say, "Look, we think the Curtain's very good for the community. We will make our compromises to get the noise down." And we did X, Y and Z. But they were able to air their grievances. We responded with some compromises, but in the end, I think we had a huge turnout for that.

0:39:16 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, a lot of community support for your theater. It would be unthinkable not to have the Curtain Theater.

0:39:25 Steve Beecroft: It was touch and go there for a while there, frankly, but I'm glad we prevailed and we got to make some compromises and hopefully, it won't be a problem again.

0:39:36 Debra Schwartz: Let's talk about the ways that you are supported. First of all, the different agencies that support you and the ways, at the end of each performance, the actors are out with their baskets and they're collecting donations, but I suspect you probably could use a little more help than that. I can't believe those donations keep you floating.

0:40:00 Steve Beecroft: The donations in the baskets after our performances are extremely important, but no, we have some regular donors in the community. The Mill Valley Art and Garden Club, for example, has been a long-term supporter of the Curtain Theatre without whom we simply wouldn't exist. They are a financial supporter and help us in other ways as well. I also have some individuals in the community that regularly donate \$500, \$1000 to the Curtain Theatre. We run a very, very tight ship in terms of budget, and considering what we actually end up putting on, it's quite amazing we get it done with that level of budget, but we definitely do have other financial supporters. And then, of course, in the town, the Mill Valley Arts Commission, Mill Valley Recreation are huge supporters for us as well.

0:40:56 Debra Schwartz: I'm looking at the list of plays since — I'm going to just read them out loud, okay? Tell me if I missed anything. 2007, *Twelfth Night*. 2008, *Romeo and Juliet*. 2009, *A Hot Day in* —

0:41:10 Steve Beecroft: *Ephesus*.

0:41:11 Debra Schwartz: *Ephesus*. 2010, *As You Like It*. 2011, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. 2012, *Much Ado About Nothing*. 2013, *King Stag*. 2014, *The Tempest*. That was a good one. 2015, *The Winter's Tale*. 2016, *Comedy of Errors*, another great one. 2017, *The Miser*. 2018, *Henry IV Part 1*. 2019, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. And then 2020, nada, closed.

0:41:49 Steve Beecroft: Yeah, it should have been *The Twelfth Night*. There's one in there, I think it was the 2016 one, which I think you said *The Winter's Tale*, was it?

0:41:58 Debra Schwartz: 2015.

0:42:00 Steve Beecroft: Yeah, 2015, *The Winter's Tale*, that was actually a stage reading in the library. The play in the summer was *The Taming of the Shrew*.

0:42:05 Debra Schwartz: Oh, *The Taming of the Shrew*, this is what's on your website, you'll have to fix that.

0:42:09 Steve Beecroft: Yeah, we need to correct that.

0:42:09 Debra Schwartz: *The Taming of the Shrew*. Oh, that was so good.

0:42:12 Steve Beecroft: That was fun. I like that play a lot.

0:42:14 Debra Schwartz: Oh yes.

0:42:15 Steve Beecroft: That was directed by Carl Jordan. And I suddenly realized when you read that, that I started the company in 2009 with *A Hot Day in Ephesus*.

0:42:23 Debra Schwartz: It's also on your website, "If music be the food of love, play on."

0:42:28 Steve Beecroft: That's the first line in *Twelfth Night*.

0:42:31 Debra Schwartz: Yes. And that is what we have this August. It begins August 14th to September 6th, Saturdays, Sundays and Labor Day Monday. All shows begin at 2:00 p.m. I'm there early.

0:42:47 Steve Beecroft: You always want to come early, because there's usually some high jinks that happen.

0:42:51 Debra Schwartz: Yes. I bring my own chairs, we have a particular place in the shade that we like, and we also have to have our tea and our snacks and everything else. And you can bring your dogs, you can bring grandma and grandpa, you can bring a blanket, better bring a coat.

0:43:08 Steve Beecroft: Always bring a sweater.

0:43:10 Debra Schwartz: Sometimes it can be cool.

0:43:13 Steve Beecroft: It really can be cool. We always have seats out there, by the way, we always have our seats as well, but then behind that there's benches and then there's the hillside.

0:43:24 Debra Schwartz: How many does the theater actually seat? What's the capacity of the audiences, usually?

0:43:30 Steve Beecroft: Because it's not all just seating, anywhere up to about 130 maximum, I would guess. If you really pack it up the hillside, some of the *Henry IV* performances that we had, and *Taming of the Shrew* too, we had probably about 120 people.

0:43:49 Debra Schwartz: We haven't talked much about your singing, Steve. I love your voice, truly. Beautiful voice.

0:43:58 Steve Beecroft: Thank you. Yeah, I always sang as a kid, and then I started doing musical theater, which I did a lot of. I do classical as well, so German lieder, concerts and things like that. I sing in choirs and conduct a chorale as well, a small chorale doing acapella work. So it's everything from really musical theater to classical to jazz to John Denver. I did a couple of John Denver concerts back in 2017 as well at the church.

0:44:30 Debra Schwartz: And you're quite involved with Church of Our Saviour on Lovell Avenue.

0:44:34 Steve Beecroft: Yes, I am.

0:44:34 Debra Schwartz: Let's talk a little bit about that.

0:44:38 Steve Beecroft: It's a wonderful church, and they're wonderful to us, as they say. We do our mid-week rehearsals in the church, so they are very, very important at the Curtain Theatre. Our rector there, Father Richard Edward Helmer is awesome. He's not only a really good guy and a great speaker and priest, but he's also my accompanist in a lot of my concerts, he is a concert pianist as well. So when we did a Curtain Theatre benefit concert of *Les Misérables*, I did a condensed version of that, which I cut the score and wrote the narration and I played Valjean and got the cast together, and Richard played the entire show on piano. It was amazing. He's just incredibly talented. I like to be surrounded by talented people, it's always fun.

0:45:28 Debra Schwartz: And there are many in our beautiful little town.

0:45:31 Steve Beecroft: There are. It's a terrific place to live.

0:45:36 Debra Schwartz: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to add to this interview?

0:45:40 Steve Beecroft: Yeah, I'd just like to say thank you to all the people who supported the Curtain, like yourself throughout the years, because without an audience, we're not going to be performing. There's no reason for us to perform. Everybody who supported us financially, who supported us when there was people trying to close us down, who throw money in that basket after the shows or just come and get entertained and laugh and sing and cry, whatever it is, it means the world to us. We love performing, we love doing this and the community has been really wonderful. I'd like to thank everybody who comes and supports Curtain Theatre.

0:46:22 Debra Schwartz: I'd like to invite everyone to come and be generous with their support, because it is very clear, for anybody attending these performances, that a tremendous amount of energy goes into them. Really, there's blood, guts and heart and soul that are packed into these performances to the very end and beyond. You're out there communicating with the audience and shaking hands and smiling and engaging, when I think anybody else would just want to go sit backstage, lay on their back and breathe

after those performances. [chuckles] So we owe you a debt, we really do. And I invite everyone to support your non-profit, beautiful, wonderful Shakespeare theatre. I don't know if this is going to be a terrible thing to ask or if I'm going to have to wait, but can we close with a song?

0:47:20 Steve Beecroft: Oh, no, no, no. You should have taken the one from *Henry IV*, the "Drink, boys, drink" song. That was a great one. We do a lot of different music in the shows and it really is integral to what we do. I will say that you're going to hear some very nice tunes in *Twelfth Night*. Don has outdone himself. So come in and we're actually dancing, because we're setting it in Nova Scotia, Canada, around the turn of the century, as in the 1900 period. So, Steve Coleman, we'll have sets showing parts of the sea and houses on the shoreline and what have you. And we've chosen to do contra dancing as the main choreographic style, which is a relative of square dancing in a way, but older. That's what I've been having to teach people to do. So, it's going to be fun and there's some good music in it, for sure.

0:48:21 Debra Schwartz: Okay. Well, thank you very much for giving me your time. I know you're very busy, but I feel like I've just had a wildlife sighting. I finally captured [chuckles] you here after all these years.

0:48:34 Steve Beecroft: Thank you for your perseverance.

0:48:36 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, thank you so much. I support you 100 percent, and I will see you at the performance. God be with you and good health to the entire production and thanks again for everything.

0:48:49 Steve Beecroft: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

0:48:52 Debra Schwartz: On behalf of the Mill Valley Public Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society, we thank you. And that's a wrap.