

# Susan Rubes, founder of Young People's Theatre, dead at age 87

Susan Douglas Rubes was an actress, head of CBC Radio Drama and president of the Family Channel

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FILE PHOTO

Susan Rubes, on left, pictured with Morrison and Sharon Hampson of Sharon, Lois and Bram fame, founded Toronto's Young People's Theatre in 1965.

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**By: Richard Ouzounian** Theatre Critic, Published on Thu Jan 24 2013

Susan Douglas Rubes revolutionized the world of theatre for young audiences in the city of Toronto by staying true to one simple belief: “Only the best is good enough for children.”

She died peacefully in Toronto after a lengthy illness on Jan. 23, surrounded by her family. She was 87.

“She would never take no for an answer,” her son Jonathan said Thursday. “That was the secret of her success. One way or another, she always got the last word in.”

That stick-to-it-iveness helped her create Prologue to the Performing Arts, serve as head of CBC Radio Drama and helped her during her term as president of the Family Channel.

But her proudest achievement and most lasting gift to this city was the creation of Young People's Theatre in 1966.

At a time when “children's theatre” conjured up visions of slapdash cotton-candy entertainments, Rubes dreamed big, not just in terms of size, but in the kind of work she wanted to present.

She started small, touring schools and “dodging spitballs” as she told the Star in 2006, but she soon found the home she'd always dreamed of, in a heritage building on Front St. that had served as a stable in the 19th century.

And when she opened it on a frosty February night in 1978, it was with *The Diary of Anne Frank*, starring her old friends Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson.

Right out of high school, she made her New York debut and earned the first Donaldson Award for Best Debut on Broadway for her performance in the 1945 revival of *He Who Gets Slapped* by Leonid Andreyev.

She also started making movies and, while shooting *Forbidden Journey* in Montreal in 1950, she met the renowned actor and singer Jan Rubes. They married the same year, had three sons and were together until his death in 2009.

But, according to her son Jonathan, her favourite role was as Kathy on the soap opera *The Guiding Light*, which she played for two years on radio, followed by eight on television.

“She first got pregnant with my older brother Chris and they hid it by having her stand behind the sofa. Then she got pregnant with me and they made her have an accident so she could sit in a wheelchair.

“But when she got pregnant with my brother Tony, the producer said, ‘That’s it! Time for you to get hit by a bus.’”

So the Rubes family moved to Toronto in 1959 and set the stage for one of the city’s most important theatres and the largest one in Canada devoted to work for young audiences.

After Rubes’ departure, a wide variety of artistic directors such as Peter Moss, Maja Ardal and the current Allen MacInnis upheld her dreams. Many of the country’s finest actors have appeared on its stages, including Brent Carver, Cynthia Dale, Megan Follows, Kate Reid, Eric Peterson, Gordon Pinsent, R.H. Thomson, Martin Short and Sheila McCarthy.

On Thursday, MacInnis said, “We are so grateful for the life and work of Susan Rubes. I feel truly blessed to have had her advice and presence since I was appointed to this incredible job. YPT thrives today because it has the indomitable spirit of Susan in its DNA.”

She leaves her sons Jonathan and Tony, her grandchildren Morgan, Colin and Jasan, and her half-brothers Clement Weinberger and Mirek Burstein.

Friends are invited to leave memories and photos in the memorial book in the lobby of Young People’s Theatre, 165 Front St. E. Donations to YPT or the Temmy Latner Centre for Palliative Care at Mount Sinai Hospital are welcome.