

Gassing with a former Relic

CHANGES

Released from Beach battles, the sculptor emerges once again

By LLOYD DYKK

After nearly two decades, The Beachcombers — or "Beach," to use Robert Clothier's actorly verbal shorthand — will soon be packing it in and Relic will be, "Well, let's not say relieved — let's say released."

It's been "a good show and a good experience." It's also been a battle, sometimes, with writers who have tried to "bend" Relic's character. In fact, he says with his jaw clenched, he's got another one of those battles coming up soon.

"It would be a mistake to say I'm sorry it's not going on forever," he says. "These things can take over your life. At some point you have to free yourself."

What he'll miss most is "the water" of Gibsons where the television series was shot. "We could have worked 19 years under hot lights in dusty studios. The things that disrupted us were beauty. It's been our studio for 18½ years, God bless it."

On-set at Gibsons, it was not unusual to find Clothier drawing sketches on the backs of his Beachcomber scripts. These sketches would, he hoped, someday turn into another of his preoccupations — sculpture. And so they have. In fact this particular day finds Relic carting 16 of the relics of his labors out of his car and into the Buschlen Mowatt Gallery for a showing of his work to July 8.

It is ranged on white plinths and light glints off the welded-steel surfaces of spindly organic shapes that might call Giacometti to mind. He's happy to squire a person around and talk about them.

"I'm always gassing. People say there goes Clothier again, opening his mouth and never knowing when to shut it up."

He points out one sculpture that's gnarled all over. "I did this one when I was very angry with Vander Zalm," he laughs. The next minute, he's expounding on "modulating volumes in space" or on the importance of surprise. There are all these parallels between acting and sculpture — the matter of scale, for example. In the way that a sculpture has to remain somehow true if blown up to 10 times its size, a performance has to be true to life while being larger than life. He talks about the basic requirement that sculpture work all the way around, 360 degrees. He likens it to "an actor who can play upstage and let you read what he's thinking from his back."

It seems that for Clothier himself to work 360 degrees in the round, he needs to sculpt. "I have to keep that other half of it going if I'm to wind up as a full human being."

The Prince Rupert native was a bit of a dabbler in his early days, thinking, as a student at UBC in the 1940s, that he'd like to be an architect until a dislike for mathematics finished that business. Then he decided, rashly, he says,



ROBERT CLOTHIER: "At some point you have to free yourself."

IAN LINDSAY

on the theatre. He enrolled in drama school in England, but didn't stay long, deciding that the best way to learn was to go out and start working at it.

On tour, he whittled in his spare time and went to night

school to study art. "It was a hen's-tooth kind of schedule." In 1957, he came back to Vancouver and got into radio "and what little TV and stage there were here." It was that same year that he met Shirley Broderick, also an

actor. (They were both in The Tempest at UBC, and one day when she was hitch-hiking on her way there, he picked her up. They married three months later.)

The husband and wife have been spoken of as a local equivalent of Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy and love to act in shows together. Lately, we've seen too little of their work, the last of which was, memorably, Foxfire, a sort of Ozarkian Our Town done a few seasons ago at the Playhouse.

Clothier more or less gave up sculpture some time in the 1960s because of acting commitments. Now, with The Beachcombers behind him, he's able to get back to it.

"This is my first show in several years. I had only three months to put it together. But there's nothing like a deadline to make you produce."

He supposes he needs sculpture because "in the theatre, acting is a reproductive process. Most of it is a matter of being true to someone else's script. And you're responsible to many people. Sculpture, on the other hand, is completely your own. And you're responsible only to yourself."

"It's scary and gratifying at the same time. When it works, it's wonderful, but it's the abysmal bottom end when it doesn't. You have only yourself to blame."

The welding technique that formed these works in the first place contains an analogy for any kind of creation: "you start with nothing and build up." ◇