

DENISE BURSON FREESTONE

A pioneer in bringing theatrical offerings to Fort Collins, Denise Burson Freestone co-founded OpenStage Theatre & Company with her husband, Bruce, while they were students at Colorado State University (CSU). She has taken part in every aspect of theatrical production, administration, and leadership and has helped establish OpenStage Theatre as a vital aspect of cultural life in the city.

EARLY LIFE

Denise Burson was born in Denver and graduated from South High School in 1967. The following year, she moved to Fort Collins to attend CSU, where she met her husband, Bruce Freestone. The couple married and soon afterward founded the theatre company. When Bruce suggested the idea, Denise told him he was insane—but they forged ahead anyway. She graduated from CSU in 1975 with a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre.

OPENSTAGE THEATRE & COMPANY

When the Freestones founded the Theatre in 1973, the only other performing arts groups in the city, outside of schools and churches, were the Fort Collins Symphony Orchestra and the Fort Collins Children's Theatre, both of which performed at the university. OpenStage Theatre's first production was on an open stage — outdoors, in the grass in City Park. The new theatre group mounted *Thieves Carnival* despite several setbacks: cast members quit in the midst of rehearsals, the city was reluctant to grant a permit for performances in the park, and business owners and individuals required considerable cajoling to loan props, costumes and building materials. But with perseverance and determination, the Company was launched and is now a mainstay of the cultural scene in Fort Collins. Denise credits OpenStage as a key player in launching a cultural renaissance in the city.

THEATRICAL CAREER

Denise has had leading roles in numerous OpenStage productions. Some of her favorites include Emily Dickinson in the one-woman show, *The Belle of Amherst*,

which she presented throughout the state for two decades as part of the Colorado Endowment for the Humanities Chautauqua program; Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Dotty in *Noises Off*; Violet Weston in *August: Osage County*; Professor Vivian Bearing in *Wit*; Hannah Pitt/Ethel Rosenberg/Roy Cohn's Doctor/the Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz/the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik in *Angels in America*; and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. Denise has also directed extensively, as well as designing sets and producing plays. Some directing credits include *Men On Boats*, *The Tempest*, *The Three Musketeers*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Proof*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the 1990s, she served as assistant director of the CSU Institute for Women and Leadership. Although retired, Denise and Bruce are still integrally involved in OpenStage Theatre.

HONORS AND AWARDS

OpenStage has received numerous prestigious awards including the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts and the Colorado Henry Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre. Denise has been honored as a *BizWest* magazine Woman of the West and a Colorado Woman of Influence, among others.

HER LEGACY

Denise initiated a theatre that creates a space where ethnic, social and religious boundaries dissolve in the joy of performing and the satisfaction of having touched people's lives. The pleasures and rewards audiences gain from seeing the performances add immeasurably to her enduring contributions.

"We firmly believe, indeed we know from our hearts and our experience, that the communion between Artist and Audience – the sharing in the power of theatrical story – alters the very fabric of our community. Our Artists and Audience take the tears and laughter, revelations and inspiration of the theatrical magic into the larger community, and by doing so, they broaden the depth and understanding of the entity that is Fort Collins and nurture and strengthen our city's civility, compassion, and conscience." -Denise Burson Freestone

QUESTIONS

1. What is involved in putting on a play?
2. What does the play's director do?
3. What does the play's producer do?
4. What do the actors have to do?

TIMELINE

1967—graduation from South High School in Denver

1973—founding of OpenStage Theatre & Company

1975—graduation from CSU

1973-2019—variously actor, director, producer and designer of OpenStage productions

GLOSSARY

Cajoling—persuading

Laurels—honors, recognition

Venue--location

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Zonta Club interview with Denise Freestone, undated. Updated May 2022.