By Greg Chandler

Over a three-month period during the summer, there might not be a harder-working woman than Mary Schakel '69 Van Heyningen. As producing director of the Hope Summer Repertory Theatre, Schakel has been one of the anchors that have led the theatre from its humble beginnings in the early 1970s, to its popularity among local residents and visitors alike, having now worked on more than 300 productions.

“I have so little to do with the success of the theatre,” Schakel said. “I have always had a great partner with whom to work—first, John Tammi and now our current artistic director, David Colacci, who came on board in 1992. I’m sure they would agree that the success of HSRT is all in the terrific people who work here summer after summer.”

Scan around Schakel’s office on the second floor of the DeVitt Center, and you’ll understand how much she values the people that are part of the theatre. The walls are lined with pictures of cast members—some who have gone on to successful careers in television and on Broadway, others who continue to perform in local theatre. On one long wall are posters depicting each season’s schedule. Not bad for someone who didn’t intend to make theatre a career. Schakel was involved in theatre productions as a high school student. But when she enrolled at Hope in the mid-1960s, she had aspirations to become a lawyer.

“I was thinking if you went into theatre, you went into it to become an actor,” Schakel said.

A double major in history and political science, Schakel was in her final semester at Hope in 1969 when she signed up for a technical theatre course, needing to fill an elective for graduation. She learned about sets, costumes and lighting. “I loved it,” she said. Schakel was so hooked on theatre that she spent the next year at Hope taking additional classes in that department, even though she had already satisfied her graduation requirements.

“Was lucky to start with such a small department, so I could get some real hands-on experience,” she said.

Schakel then did graduate work in theatre at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Even though she hadn’t majored in theatre as an undergraduate, Schakel’s liberal arts background had prepared her well for graduate school. “That’s what’s great about a liberal arts education. It serves you well, no matter what you do,” she said.

In fall 1971, the 500-seat DeVitt Center theatre opened its doors. Looking for a way to keep the stage in use when students were away from the summer, Professor Tammi and then-professor Don Finn started the Hope Summer Theatre in the summer of 1972. Schakel designed costumes that first summer.

“My way to relate to a play was to determine what clothes people needed to portray their role,” she said.

The first couple of years, attendance was low, and Professor Tammi considered shutting the theatre down. A former cast member, Tom Stetchschulte, called to inquire about the upcoming season, and a brainstorm resulted in the adding of “repertory” to the theatre name and formation in 1974.

Schakel returned to HSRT that summer after having worked for two years at Meadowbrook Theatre in Rochester Hills, Mich., just north of Detroit. That year, she handled costume design for the productions of The Music Man, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and A Man For All Seasons. From then on, Schakel’s role with HSRT grew. In 1979, she replaced Professor Tammi as the theatre’s managing director, handling administrative and budgetary matters. In 1984, she was promoted to producing director, a year-round position, which she has held ever since.

Summer theatre also found its audience, and Schakel has appreciated the sense of community and even feeling of family that HSRT has developed with its patrons.

“Once they knew we were here, they became the most fabulous audience in the world,” Schakel said. “They’re warm and receptive.”

At the same time, HSRT works to stay fresh not only for its long-time fans but to draw in new audiences as well.

“Everybody is going faster, and people are busier,” Schakel said. “The challenge is to do material that people want to take the time to see.”

First-rate talent helps. Over the years, HSRT has had some of the finest theatre performers in the country. Some of its best-known alumni include: - Kim Zimmer ’77, a four-time Daytime Emmy winner for outstanding lead actress in a drama on CBS’ Guiding Light - Michael Kost, best known as Tim Allen’s sidekick on the ABC comedy Home Improvement and more recently, host of the game show Family Feud. - Stetchschulte, who appeared in the movie The Manhattan Challenger, and has made several guest appearances on NBC’s Law and Order and Law and Order: Criminal Intent. - Norbert Leo Butz, a two-time Tony award winner, capturing the 2002 award for best performance for a lead actor in a musical for Finch’s Ed & Edie, and then winning the 2005 award in the same category for Dirty Rotten Scoundrels. - Jerry Mitchell, who won the 2005 Tony Award for best choreography for La Cage Aux Folles.

While Schakel has drawn in performers from around the country to work with HSRT, she also finds talent, both on and off-stage, among Hope’s student body.

“They bring such energy and joy to the process,” she said. “In my mind, they are the starts of the whole thing.”

This past summer, HSRT began a new chapter in its history by expanding to the downtown Knickerbocker Theatre, where the musical Godspell was performed. It also added more performances of the Children’s Performance Troupe. Professor Tammi, who returned to the summer theatre for the first time in nine years to direct She Loves Me, was amazed by Schakel’s work.

“I really became aware of how much she does, and how much she has to do,” he said. “It was eye-opening.”

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“She’s the continuum. She is the constant in what is, by nature, an ever-changing enterprise. Mary has been an important part of the legacy of the summer theatre.” - John K. V. Tammi

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