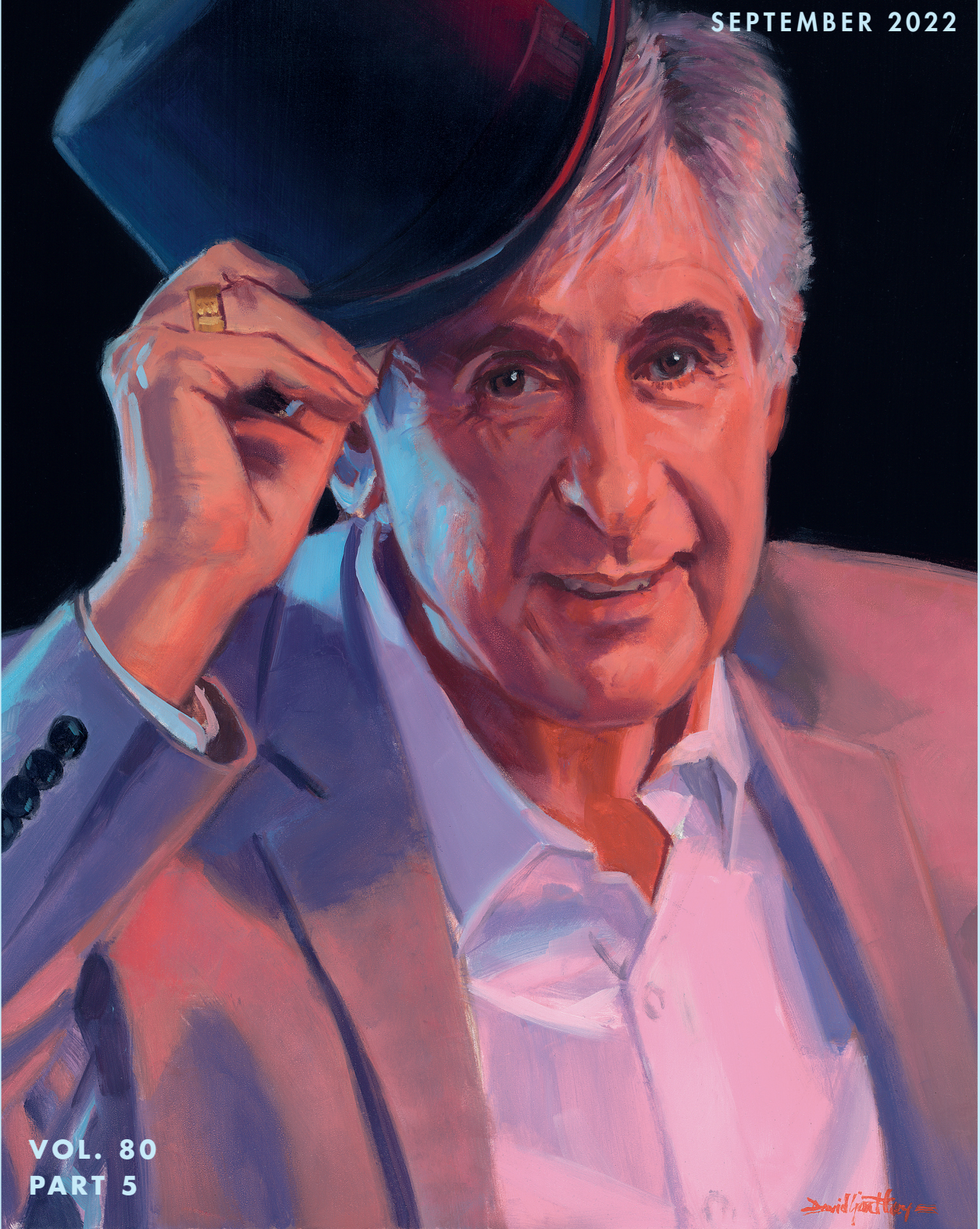


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# ON THE FRONT COVER

## PERRY EHRLICH

By D. Michael Bain, Q.C.



**H**er name was Lulu. She was a showgirl. Lulu Sweet was a member of the Potter Troupe, an American Music Hall theatre troupe that performed in Victoria and New Westminster in the mid-1860s. Something of a triple threat, Lulu was introduced in the press at the time as “the beautiful Juvenile Actress, Songstress and Danseuse”. One of the many Royal Engineers stationed in New Westminster at the time (in fact the Commander of said engineers and first Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia), Richard Moody, was traveling with Lulu and her mother on a boat from New Westminster to Victoria, and as they passed a large island in the Fraser River, Lulu asked what the name of the island was. “By Jove!” Moody exclaimed, “I’ll name it after you!”

Lulu Island is still so named after that young performer, although today it is more commonly referred to by the city that occupies most of it: Richmond, B.C. It has also been the home of Perry Ehrlich for more than 40 years, where he has raised a family and developed a thriving solicitor’s practice. It seems somehow fitting, though, that Perry should live and work on an island named after a showgirl, because Lulu Island is where, for the past nearly 30 years, Perry has nurtured the musical theatre skills of literally thousands of young people between the ages of 9 and 19 through his programs for youth: Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance!, Sound Sensation and ShowStoppers.

Perry grew up in Yorkton, Saskatchewan. His mother is a second-generation Canadian and his father is a survivor of the concentration camp at Auschwitz. His parents met and fell in love in Winnipeg, where Perry’s father travelled to after the war. They settled in Yorkton, where they ran a dry-cleaning business. The Ehrlichs had three sons: Perry (the eldest),

Howard and Brent. Two of these boys would go on to become well-regarded lawyers with practices in British Columbia: Perry and Howard.<sup>1</sup>

While still a boy in Yorkton, Perry knew of Nancy Morrison<sup>2</sup> (16 years older than him) and her father, William, who was “like royalty” in Yorkton because he was a lawyer. Perry notes that at the time in small-town Saskatchewan, if you were a doctor or a lawyer, you were a somebody. The law partially appealed to him as a career calling because he grew up in the era of Perry Mason, a popular fictional lawyer who had the same first name as him and was based on a real lawyer with the same last name as him.<sup>3</sup> Being in a courtroom appealed to Perry, who had shown an early interest in performance and was intrigued by the theatricality of the courtroom. More significantly, though, the law rang true to Perry because it involved human communication and caring about people.

Perry's parents were not especially musical. Although his mother's father had been a cantor (the singer at the synagogue), Perry says that when he sang “O Canada” with his parents, it was always in three-part harmony only because neither of his parents could stay in tune. He took piano lessons from an early age and entered the Yorkton Music Festival competitions. At eight years old, he came in second, singing a song called “Fishing” (first place went to David MacIntyre, who went on to teach musical composition at SFU). The comment on the adjudication form (which Perry still has) reads: “You weren't the best voice here, but you sang the song with such a degree of truth I could tell you love fishing and you communicated it.” In fact, Perry hates fishing.

Perry's father did not make much money, and as a child of a holocaust survivor, Perry was all too aware that he needed to seize any opportunities he had. As he told me: “When you grow up as the child of a holocaust survivor who lost his entire family and didn't have the luxury of a good life or an education or any food on the table, you realize: ‘My father didn't have this opportunity; I have this opportunity.’ You make the most of it. It wasn't demanded; it was expected.”

As a result, Perry entered law school at the age of 20 with only two years of university education behind him. He financed his legal tuition (\$400 per year) by selling carpets and playing piano. He graduated from the University of Saskatchewan with an LL.B. in 1976 at the age of 23. While at university, he entered another musical competition called “I Can Hear Canada Singing” for which he won a case of beer. In his final year of law school, he was the musical director of the school's Legal Follies production. That year, Perry and others penned a legal parody of *Fiddler on the Roof* restyled as *Fiddling with the Truth*.

Having spent previous summers in British Columbia visiting his grandparents, and realising that *The Piano Stylings of Perry Ehrlich* at the Holiday Inn would only take him so far, Perry headed west to look for articles—not an easy prospect at the time for someone with a law degree with “Sask” on it. The policy at the time was for law firms to hire B.C. students first. He finally secured a position, but unfortunately, a month before the job was to start, the lawyer got cited by the Law Society and the job evaporated. Perry, being rather tenacious, managed to find another position where he was offered substantially less than the going rate and was required to do all his own typing (this was in 1976). Perry seized the opportunity.

After articling, Perry got a job with Barry Kerfoot, who had just left Cumming Richards (now Richards Buell Sutton). He let Perry loose with all his clients. Barry was a great mentor who guided Perry and gave him confidence. The first few years, though, were tough. Perry ran criminal trials, contested divorce cases, finalized conveyances, handled complicated trust agreements and advised on s. 85 rollovers. There was nothing he did not do. It was trial by fire.

Helping him through these tumultuous years was the woman who has been Perry's wife now for over 45 years, Marilyn. In 1980, Marilyn's aunt, Rosalee Hardin, a probation officer in Richmond, knew a lawyer named Danny Zack who worked with his childhood friend, Larry Kahn, and another lawyer, Soren Hammerberg, practising family law and civil litigation. They were looking for someone to start up a business law practice with them. Rosalee told Marilyn, who told Perry, and against all the naysayers who told Perry that moving away from Vancouver was “professional suicide”, he seized the opportunity. Perry joined Kahn Zack Hammerberg, and he and Marilyn moved to Lulu Island.

Perry and Marilyn had two daughters. Lisa was born in 1982, and Mandy arrived in 1987. By then, Perry had become a partner. Starting with 13 corporate records, he was growing the business (to almost 1,000 eventually) and growing with his clients. For example, someone might come in for a simple notarization, then perhaps a lease. The next time they came in, they needed a share purchase agreement, or were engaged in a merger or buy-out. Perry also developed a personal wills and estates practice. His solicitor practice grew with his clients, and he became part of the business team of multiple businesses including Costco Wholesale Canada, Keg Restaurants Ltd. and Shoppers Drug Mart. By that time, the firm had its current name—Kahn Zack Ehrlich Lithwick—and Perry was outside counsel for a number of growing companies.

Perry's partners encouraged a work-life balance that enabled a presence in the community that humanized what they did. Larry Kahn was involved

in minor sports and hockey coaching. Danny Zack was active in Maccabi Canada, an organization devoted to developing Jewish identity and future leaders through sport. Perry, meanwhile, had enrolled his daughter Lisa in a summer musical theatre program. There were things that Perry liked about the program, and things he did not. He therefore set about designing a program that he would want his own kids to be in.

Initially, Perry founded a show choir for teens called Sound Sensation in 1994 together with Simon Isherwood, who ran a drama program at Notre Dame Secondary School. Sound Sensation performed at the World Figure Skating Championship and started a Canada Day performance tradition at Canada Place that has continued for nearly 30 years.

Perry had previously witnessed musical programs focused on competition and creating stars. He saw only a few who might be elevated and many who were defeated. He therefore wanted to create a program where the ultimate goal was not to create musical theatre professionals, but to help young people develop their self-esteem, work collaboratively, learn to focus and benefit from a sense of accomplishment. Perry wanted to set young people up for success.

To these ambitious ends, Perry approached the Jewish Community Centre in Vancouver about establishing a musical theatre program for kids aged 9-19. While he feels it was no different than the father who wants to coach his kids in sports, Perry actually set about creating the entire league, developing the rules of the game they would be playing and populating the pitch with coaches and mentors to develop the various skills necessary for the kids to become the best players.

Perry assembled an impressive list of educators, actors, musicians and choreographers as his "faculty". He took on the role of overall director, which has evolved over the years to "impresario". His initial goal with Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! was to get 25 kids to sign up so as to break even. He got 72. Do not let the title of "impresario" fool you. Perry is the heart of Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! He is the person who puts fire into the bellies of the young performers. Perry is all about positivity and energy. He invites kids to go all in, to believe in themselves and also in one another. He invites them to overcome whatever shortcomings they may think they have and to commit to the event they are staging.

With a ratio of one faculty member to ten students, Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! is a safe environment for young people. Perry wants to pass on what he knows, and what he knows is that hard work and dedication pay off. He comes from a time "when dinosaurs ruled the earth," he says, so he is "no nonsense." You will not find a smartphone or iPad in sight during

rehearsals. You will also not find a parent. Perry is very strict about building self-reliance among his performers. The kids are not coddled, and they navigate the program on their own, not through a meddling parent.

Students are taught to develop their performance skills as well as their life skills. One of the first lessons Perry teaches the kids is that “if you’re not ten minutes early, you’re already ten minutes late.” More recently, he has found that he needs to teach kids eye contact, as they are too often engaged with screens rather than one another. He does not tolerate laziness or slackers. “When you make a commitment,” he tells me, “you keep it. By building the commitments, that’s how you build strength. Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! is about building community.” To his students, who willingly give up their screens for the experience (it’s the parents who complain, as they need to get in touch with their precious darlings), Perry is affectionately known as “Uncle Perry!”

The irony about the “no stars” approach of Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! is that, inevitably, stars do shine. His students have gone on to perform professionally on almost every stage in British Columbia and on many stages beyond, including on Broadway and in film and television. Even long after his daughters came and went from the program and grew into adults, Perry took such joy in what he was doing that he continued Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! Also, Sound Sensation evolved into ShowStoppers, a teenage glee choir “before *Glee* was even in the womb,” as Perry notes. That choir belts out a colourful, high-energy show for crowds across the province. Showstoppers have performed with the Universal Gospel Choir, The Nylons, Foreigner and—much to Perry’s delight—even Barry Manilow. “Her name was Lola. She was a showgirl.”

The transformative nature of what Perry’s programs accomplish should not be underestimated. Kids might go into his program at age 9 and leave at age 19—or they might start later, at 16. Either way, they emerge not only having evolved through the incredible growth spurt of puberty, but as fully formed human beings with confidence, enthusiasm, friendships and a realization that accomplishment comes through hard work and commitment. What’s more, they know how to sing and dance!

Some of those singers and dancers have gone on to become all types of professionals, including lawyers—even an international lawyer in Washington, D.C. For his efforts, Perry has received an Ovation! Award<sup>4</sup> for outstanding long-time contribution to the theatre community. The award is given to “a member of the community who has contributed more than 10 years to the development, promotion and continuation of musical theatre in the lower mainland”. In 2008, the Canadian Bar Association, BC Branch hon-

oured Perry with a Community Service Award, “the highest honour provided by the CBABC in recognition of community involvement and contributions outside of the practise of law”.

Perry's ability to mentor young people extends to his mentoring of other lawyers. Inevitably, through word of mouth, Perry gets asked to mentor articling students and young lawyers who may need direction in what they are doing. His mentees are referred to him by the Law Society and by other lawyers. “These are kids who are trying to find themselves,” he tells me:

Every single lawyer says they're working too hard, they're taken for granted, they don't know when they have to work late or on weekends, they have no life. So many of them are sucked into the downtown mentality. What I tell them is what people of my generation say: sometimes the best thing that can happen is you take a risk. You're attractive, you're bright, you're personable. Let's assume you have brains and know how to do the work. The most important thing you have to do is care about what you do. We've got to get back to a place where it is less about the money we make and the documents we produce, and more about values, morals and caring.

Perry often recommends taking on a practice outside of the downtown core in a place where young lawyers can be more involved in their communities. He also notes that we are very lucky in the legal profession. Unlike doctors looking to change direction, if we want to do environmental law, estate law, employment law or indeed any area of legal practice, we do not need to formally retrain and get certificates. We have opportunities. We can seize them. Just as he encourages young kids, Perry encourages young lawyers.

Perry was special counsel to RBC for many years and was once invited to a huge reception in Toronto. In the corner of the room was a young woman playing the harp. Perry stopped to listen to her for a while. At an appropriate moment, he approached her and said: “I feel really sorry for you. I'm listening to you and you are terrific! I wish the people here would shut up and listen to you.” The woman looked at him and paused before speaking: “Thanks so much, Uncle Perry. I knew you were listening. I was in Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! year two.” Alas, her name was neither Lola nor Lulu, but she *was* a showgirl!

#### ENDNOTES

1. Howard Ehrlich was a highly regarded labour and employment lawyer at Davis & Co. and Bull Housser & Tupper who tragically died at age 57 from lung cancer. His life was celebrated in the *Nos Disparus* section of this magazine at (2016) 74 Advocate 180.
2. While we strive for diversity in the *Advocate*, this means two kids from Yorkton, Saskatchewan have been on our covers in the past four months. The Honourable Nancy Morrison features on our May 2022 cover.
3. Jake Ehrlich was a lawyer from Brooklyn who was born in 1900. He was known as “The Master” and coined the phrase “Never plead guilty.” He is said to be the inspiration for Erle Stanley Gardner's fictional defence lawyer, Perry Mason.
4. Musical theatre people love exclamation marks!