

Jerry Stovin, Mr. Nice Guy

by Gerry Harrison

Occasionally there's someone whose campaigning style makes an impact because, untypically, it is so self-effacing. Jerry Stovin, who died peacefully, aged 82, at his twin brother, Bob's, home in Canada on 10 September, worked tenaciously but gently at winning those causes that most interested him.

Born in Unity, Saskatchewan, on 11 October 1922, the Stovin family moved to the provincial capital Regina in 1929. He joined Imperial Oil and then Regina City Police in a clerical capacity. In his spare time he enjoyed acting at the Regina Little Theatre. From 1942 to 1946 he served in the Canadian Army, after telling the recruiting psychologist that he would never kill anyone. He was accordingly put to work translating Nazi communications into French. He later acted as a guard on captured German airstrips.

Jerry was accepted in 1947 into "Carnegie Tech" in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he graduated with a Fine Arts degree in Drama. After graduation, it was an honour for Jerry to perform in 1952 in the "Theatre Under the Stars" season in Vancouver, British Columbia, as the Scarecrow in the "Wizard of Oz".

By 1955 Jerry had crossed the Atlantic to advance as an actor in Britain. His good nature and resilience probably sprang from this career, where the knocks can come thick and fast. A song and dance man at heart, he loved musical theatre, and retained a comprehensive memory of his favourite songs. In Britain, his talent was soon recognised. Appearances in radio and television followed — including "Hancock" shows in both media. In films such as "The War Lover" and "Lolita", he usually played an American. On the West End stage he was in "The Sport of My Mad Mother" and "The Ides of March". Whenever an American was required, Jerry was invariably the four-star General or the brash US businessman.

Jerry was receptive to the calming influences of Eastern spirituality. Guests for dinner often had to wait until Jerry had completed his meditation. He ran the London office of the movement for transcendental meditation, and visited the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh in India in 1968, where he found himself in glamorous company with the Beatles and Mia Farrow.

Whenever the acting work dried up, Jerry took a succession of “resting” jobs. He demonstrated his manual skills as a prop-maker for theatre productions. As a receptionist or clerk he was respected for his kindness and modesty, his congenial company and his compassionate treatment of the office plants.

Always keen to extend his thinking, Jerry studied economics at the School of Economic Science, and came to believe that Henry George’s idea of the Land Value Tax was fairer than any other system, and would also benefit the environment. He would patiently explain this alternative scheme to anyone who wished to hear, and was not averse to slipping a pamphlet into his correspondence on other matters. When the Foundation staged some social event, Jerry shone in the mini-plays or charades that were performed.

For thirty years Jerry also enjoyed another distraction, ceramics. He was a regular student at the Adult Education Institute near where he lived. He has described the skills that he gained here as “taking me away from domestic ware into the higher reaches of art”. His “raku” fired pottery and other work was held in high esteem, and he often exhibited at Morley Gallery with the London Potters. To one of its exhibitions came Paul McCartney. Jerry asked if he remembered him from Rishikesh, and was astonished to hear McCartney say that he did, and that Jerry was then “becoming a much-acclaimed actor, and all of our wives and girlfriends seemed to like you better than us”. Embarrassed, Jerry then asked if McCartney remembered that he had requested that if he had a daughter he might name her after his own mother, Beatrice. McCartney told him that in 2003 he and his wife Heather had produced a daughter, and she was indeed named Beatrice.

One of Jerry’s last visits to the theatre he so loved was to see “Bloody Sunday”, the dramatisation of the Saville Enquiry, for which he had arranged a block booking for friends. He laid great store in natural justice. These varied enthusiasms took their toll, and his health suffered. He was a campaigner until there was no strength left.

Jerry Stovin never married. He remembered fondly a girl from his youth, but since her he has said that he never found the right person.

After a period in hospital, his family from Canada arrived at Maiden Lane to rescue Jerry Stovin. They flew him back to Calgary and have ensured that his last few weeks were spent with people he loved and who loved him. Around his bedside they joined him in songs like ‘The sun has got his hat on, Hip hip hip hooray’, of which he knew all the verses. Just before he died, he dreamed that he had been offered a part in a

play, and that he had to get in touch with “the Equity” immediately to renew his subscription.