

# Small town drama ... 'It'll be great'



A blessing and burden of small-town life is the need for people to participate in a variety of activities. Some are predictable — school fundraising, church socials — others come out of

nowhere.

Like many folks in Hoopeston, I've done my share of the predictable. I served on the school board, chaired the United Fund pledge drive and, later, was president. Over the years, there have been stints on various other boards. I have traveled on weeklong mission trips with St. Anthony's Catholic Church and "volunteered" at parish events when so ordered by my wife, Yolanda.

Taking the stage for dramatic readings, however, came out of nowhere, courtesy of local playwright/director Tom Sweeney.

Sweeney is a white-haired, quick-moving Irishman with the gift of gab and a prolific pen — he writes at least an hour a day. I wish I had his discipline. He's also a "retired," award-winning drama teacher from the south suburbs of Chicago. His wife, Jane, hails from Hoopeston, so here they landed after raising a son and daughters.

I popped onto his radar after reading an excerpt from my novel at the Hoopeston Public Library. Not long after Tom burst into my Main Street office, a whirlwind of enthusiasm I never saw coming.

"You have a presence about you, Mike," he said. "I'd like you to play the lead in a show I've written for the library."

He shoved a script at me.

"I don't know," I said, hands up, high school speech class flashing across my mind. "It's one thing to read my own stuff or speak about a topic I know, but I'm no actor. I don't want to memorize anything. Heck, there's too many times I find myself upstairs and can't recall why I went there to begin with."

"It's just a reading," Tom said with a smile. "Like you do with your writing. You'll have the script in front of you."

"What's my role?"

"An iceberg."

"An iceberg?"

"With an attitude," Tom said, eyes twinkling. "We're commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Titanic. You're the iceberg, and you're tired of taking the rap for the sinking. After all, you were just being an iceberg. The ship hit you."

"Well, I don't know ...."

"It'll be great. It'll be great," he said. "Rehearsal is Tuesday, 6:30 at

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the library. Thanks, Mike."

The script magically appeared in my hands, and I flipped through it. When I looked up, Tom had vanished like an uncatchable leprechaun.

I played the Iceberg.

The library audience of senior citizens, spouses and children of participants, along with Tom himself, gave the cast of Hoopeston citizens rave reviews. I enjoyed it. But I did my part, somebody else's turn.

Before I knew it, however, Tom cast me as General Robert E. Lee in a piece he wrote about Gettysburg. Again, it was fun, but I figured I would be in the audience for the next show.

Then, one Saturday night after

Mass, as I knelt to genuflect:

"Mike, Mike," Tom said, rolling in from nowhere. "I've got another lead role for you."

"Jeez, Tom," I said, jumping up.

"Sorry, sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to startle you. But it's perfect."

"I don't know. ... Who do I play?"

"Clifford the Big Red Dog."

"A dog?"

"A very special dog, Mike," Tom said, voice somber. "A beloved figure. The library is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Clifford series."

"Do I bark?"

"It'll be great. It'll be great.

Rehearsal, Tuesday. Thanks, Mike." He slipped a script under my arm and careened into the congregation.

Tom's rehearsals are filled with encouragement and topped with a sprinkling of constructive criticism.

"Faster. Louder. Senior citizens in the crowd. ... Play to the last row. ... Look up, look up. We need eye contact. ... You'll have to memorize that sentence. ... You've got to be here, on this mark, at this point. Cannot miss. Cannot miss. ... C'mon folks. We can do this."

Tom roams as we rehearse — "I taught for over 30 years at tough schools. Had a hammer tossed at me. I learned to keep movin'."

He deletes and adds lines. A lat-

ter-day Columbo, he says: "Just one more thing. Two more minutes. Then we can go."

Ten minutes pass, and we're still there, but most don't mind. We've bought in. He's coaching us up, and we know it.

One of Tom's recent works is "Chalk" about the late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. We performed it on a Lenten Friday night at St. Anthony's Parish Hall. The crowd, dotted with watchful priests, gave the parishioner-filled cast a standing ovation.

"Author, author," I shouted over the applause, and Tom strode forward to take a brisk bow.

He pumped my hand.

"Remember, Mike," he shouted over the cheers. "Rehearsal on Tuesday. You're playing the lead. The coyote."

"Do I howl?"

"It'll be great. It'll be great," Tom said, patting my back.

Yolanda gave me a hug. When I turned around, Tom Sweeney had already whirled away.

Mike Pemberton's short stories have appeared in such literary journals as *Aethlon*, *Touchstone* and *Euphemism*. His first novel, *Transcendental Basketball Blues*, was published in 2011. He lives in Hoopeston and can be contacted at [www.mikepembertonbooks.com](http://www.mikepembertonbooks.com).