

LIVES LIVED

Robert Labatt Whitehead

Patriarch, Broadway producer, class act. Born March 3, 1916, in Montreal. Died June 15, in Pound Ridge, N.Y., of complications from liver cancer, aged 86.

The profile and the mustache will never leave me. He had a great cascading ski-run of a face with a line of carefully maintained bushes right where the hill dropped off precipitously. We all listened when Uncle Robert spoke — he knew so much of so many things, it seemed, and he had been everywhere (he had been an ambulance driver in Africa in the Second World War and he had skied many of the great slopes of the world).

Such a teller of tales of strangers and of great-whatevers in the family, such a gentle but authoritative voice dressed in a noisy, hearty laugh, he was proudly watched over by, and eventually provided the fulcrum for, the remnants of one of those old Montreal Anglo families that never really survived the 1970s in Quebec.



Young Robert was different — after Trinity College School, he set out for the theatre and New England in the late 1930s, fulfilling the promise of childhood games he had played with his cousin, Hume Cronyn. Uncle Robert made a remarkable name for himself in live theatre production, and occasionally direction, after moving on from acting. He found his forte in bringing people together and creating something special and memorable, all the while maintaining the highest artistic standards and usually making money for his backers.

From the 1940s to the late 1990s, he produced many of the most notable Broadway plays (*Medea*, *Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Man for All Seasons*, *Master Class*, *Death of a Salesman*) and luminaries (Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Katherine Hepburn, John Gielgud) in serious theatre. (He once complained to me many years ago that musicals just “never happened” for him — he never gave up on chasing that elusive success in lighter theatre.) Robert Whitehead’s name, in partnership for many years with Roger L. Stevens, stood for quality artistry and entertainment. This was the kind of dream uncle they named awards for.

But he always came back for summer visits to the two family cottages, on either side of Knowlton Landing in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. He was crazy about us four “young people” (my brother, two cousins, and me). It appeared that he and his wife Virginia would be childless; thus my brother was named Robert Whitehead Orvig in 1959.

Widowed in 1965, Uncle Robert disappeared from us for a while; after a string of work successes, he returned one summer in the late 1960s with a new wife — the most charismatic flash ever to hit our family, Zoe Caldwell (rhymes with Moe, and never Auntie Zoey!). His enthusiasm and pride in family finally led to one of his own: Uncle Robert and Zoe subsequently brought Sam and Charlie to Lake Memphremagog for summer vacations.

For the last years of his life, we all came to him, various cousins, nieces and nephews, many from Canada. Zoe and he would host festive holiday dinners (stragglers always warmly welcomed) on July 4 and U.S. Thanksgiving. The tables groaned, an occasional clay pigeon was shot, the stories sparkled, and everybody went to bed very late indeed. Their house rambles over a hilltop in New York’s Westchester County and imparted to these occasions the feeling that you had been whisked away to paradise for a long weekend.

Uncle Robert and I would walk in the woods around the lake after dinner while he dispensed equal measures of sage advice and probing insightful questions — he always wanted to know about science, having left school so young and feeling himself uneducated. I silently marvelled at his modesty in the face of such great success and acclaim.

Chris Orvig

Robert Whitehead was Chris Orvig’s (half) great-uncle.