

Over 250 fans charmed by Steve Paikin and Bruce Dowbiggin's afternoon of anecdotes at Aurora Town Square



An Afternoon with Steve Paikin and Bruce Dowbiggin was enjoyed by over 250 attendees at Aurora Town Square on Sunday, September 7.

Emcee Andrew Applebaum, host of the podcast Toronto Legends, put the two Canadian media icons through their paces much to the delight of the audience which was amused and engaged by the trio's insights and showmanship.

Mayor Tom Mrakas welcomed the audience and introduced Applebaum to get the show rolling.

Mayor Mrakas was pleased by the turnout and the quality of the performers who took center stage.

It's what we envisioned when we built the Square and the Performance Hall. It's nice to have such talented people on stage. Steve, Bruce, and Andrew have all had fine careers in their fields. This is a great place to spend a Sunday afternoon hearing Steve Paikin and Bruce Dowbiggin tell their stories.

The stories were, indeed, engaging and Applebaum moved the two television personalities through their experiences in broadcasting. The sold-out venue suggested the staying power of these broadcasting legends and the audience enjoyed not only the comfy confines of Town Square, but the trips down memory lane as Paikin and Dowbiggin described their early days together at CBC Toronto as well as The Fan 590.

Dowbiggin who aspired to be a playwright used self-effacing humor about how he seemed to fall into his sports broadcasting career. He wanted to be the next Arthur Miller, but when the money got tight, I took a job with TV Guide magazine.

Dowbiggin reflected humorously that every Canadian living room in the 1970s featured a television remote and a copy of the TV Guide. My first big story was on Sugar Ray Leonard, I spent the day with CBS's Morley Safer, golfed with Fred MacMurray, and bet on the horseraces with Jimmy the Greek at Aqueduct.

His rapid ascension up the ranks of TV Guide led to a serendipitous moment involving the national broadcaster: Out of the blue, I got a phone call asking me to be on a panel on a CBC Radio Sports show. I had no idea how to perform on radio, but things went well and then I was asked to be the Sports Anchor on CBC's 6:00 news show. I had no experience doing television, either, but they reassured me that they'd teach me what was needed.

After describing how he muddled through all three platforms print, radio, and television into national prominence, Paikin interrupted his former colleague and asked him point blank: Did you ever get any good at it?

The audience erupted in laughter at the good-hearted jibe.

Dowbiggin smiled and deadpanned, 'I did win the Gemini Award two years in a row' which elicited more applause from the appreciative audience who could see the camaraderie between the two media personalities.

Dowbiggin described how he took over William Houston's sports rumors column at The Globe and Mail which was 'the most-read column in The Globe and Mail.'

'I had done TV, radio, and print and Bill didn't want to branch out so I was able to bring my guests' comments from the radio and TV shows into the column. This led to another opportunity to appear on the show of another Toronto sports broadcasting legend: Every Friday, I'd go on with Bob McCown to do NFL picks. Bob changed the sports in Toronto and made it more exciting. He had seven different personalities—all of them tragic.'

The knowledgeable audience laughed at the reference to the mercurial McCown and Dowbiggin pivoted to mention a FAN 590 show entitled 'Double Play' DP for short—standing for Dowbiggin and Paikin,—and discussed his successful multi-year run with Paikin.

The reference served as a perfect segue into the famous TVO host's 'getting to know you' segment deftly moderated by Applebaum.

When Applebaum asked Paikin what his Eureka moment was that made him want to be a broadcaster, the long-time host of TVO's The Agenda regaled the audience with an anecdote from his freshman year at the University of Toronto's downtown campus: 'I was in first year at UT and I went to Hart House where all the university clubs were recruiting new members. There was a table for U of T Radio. That was my Eureka moment. I asked them if they had a play-by-play announcer for the hockey and football teams. They didn't and I asked them if I could do it. They said sure and suddenly I thought I could become the Foster Hewitt of the Varsity Blues.'

The appreciative audience chuckled at the historical allusion to the pioneering broadcaster and Paikin transitioned from his experiences in the broadcast booth at Varsity Stadium and Varsity Arena to a seminal journalism gig he took at a local newspaper.

The Hamilton-born-and-raised Paikin had his heart set on covering sports that summer when he got home to The Hammer.

'I decided that I wanted to be in sports broadcasting and wanted to write sports stories as a summer replacement writer at The Hamilton Spectator. The Editor gave me everything but sports. He sent me to cover community activities, fires, school board meetings, chasing ambulances—and it forced me to rethink. I got turned on to news coverage at the age of 19 and decided 'It's not going to be sports—it's going to be news.'

Paikin described how he became a big Red Sox fan in 1975 during the great Cincinnati-Boston World Series and, after graduating from U of T, he decided to 'do my Masters of Journalism degree at Boston University since it was the closest university to Fenway Park. After I returned to Canada in 1982, I got my first job at CFTR and CHFI covering City Hall. I was a one-man-band, carrying around my tape recorder, and editing my own audio recordings with Scotch tape as I prepared my on-air voiceovers. My daughter thinks that I was living in the Stone Age.'

The famous current affairs host cut his teeth 'as an anchor with CBLT and imitated Fraser Kelly. I also shared a dressing room with Bill Lawrence from Tiny Talent Time who was so supportive, especially if you had a bad day on air.'

Now retired after nineteen seasons as host of The Agenda at TVO, Paikin cautioned that 'I'm not retiring; I'm rewiring.'

He spoke fondly of his final show: 'The last guest on the show was my father who's 92 and took a bus and a subway to get to the show. After 19,000 guests, it was a nice way to end with my dad and I engaged in natural conversation. I had mentioned that when I signed my last three-year contract, that it would likely be my last. It's important to leave a job before they fire you.'

Paikin spoke warmly about his new broadcasting gig?The Paikin Podcast?and described his plans to do a 75th anniversary documentary on Bill Barilko's Stanley Cup-winning goal in 1951, made famous by the Tragically Hip song ?Fifty Mission Cap.?

Both Paikin and Dowbiggin continue to be multiplatform journalists. Dowbiggin has authored eleven books and his next one ?is going to be a book of poetry that I'll self-publish.? The famous sports broadcaster?who plied his trade in Toronto and Calgary?will return to his creative writing roots in his twelfth publication.

The stories about the past and their connection to the present made Paikin and Dowbiggin inspirational guest speakers at Town Square on Sunday afternoon?much to the delight of the 250 appreciative fans in attendance. Applebaum observed this connection during the various facets of the afternoon gathering: ?It was a great example of this new kind of event?not only was it about the sharing of their career highlights, but the audience offered great insights during the Q and A session and, later, at the meet and greet in the Square and in the Library. Everybody enjoyed the stories and it was a two-way street as so many people shared stories with Steve and Bruce that they enjoyed hearing. As one of the audience members noted, ?After COVID, we're all hungry for this kind of connection.'?

By Jim StewartLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter