

Dan Needles to receive Order of Canada

Perhaps Dufferin's most famous native son, playwright Dan Needles is one of 61 Canadians who have been honoured as new members of the Order of Canada.

In a year's-end news release, the Governor-General's office said Mr. Needles was selected for the honour "for celebrating our rural communities as the playwright of the much-loved Wingfield Farm series, and for championing the dramatic arts outside of Canada's major centres."

A native of Mono whose sister is current mayor Laura Ryan, Mr. Needles is now a resident of the Nottawa area (near Collingwood). In a telephone interview Wednesday, he clearly recalled the unusual origin of his first Letter from Wingfield Farm column. It was back in September 1974, as Harry White, then-publisher of The Free Press and Economist and Orangeville Citizen, prepared to get out the second issue of the Citizen and found himself in need of someone to do some writing, having just fired the editor of The Free Press.

Harry called Dan, who had just graduated from the University of Toronto, and asked him to fill in for awhile.

"The column was the first piece I wrote, and it ran in both papers," Mr. Needles said. He moved into the editor's chair in Shelburne and the column became a weekly feature of the editorial page, winning an award in its first year of publication and forming the basis for his now-famous series of Wingfield plays.

He said it was in mid-December that he got the call from Ottawa. "When they said it was the Governor-General's office I thought it was just a telemarketer."

Although there has been no announcement of when the awards will be made, Mr. Needles said it is usually in March or April.

The 61 new appointees to the Order announced by Governor-General David Johnston are in addition to four named as Companions of the Order and 25 as Officers. All 90 appointments were made on the recommendation of the Advisory Council for the Order of Canada.

The Order of Canada, one of our country's highest civilian honours, was established in 1967, Canada's centennial year, to recognize outstanding achievement, dedication to the community and service to the nation. Over the last 45 years, more than 6 000 people from all sectors of society have been invested into the Order.

Mr. Needles will be in Orangeville on Wednesday, February 11, to give a workshop. His original Letter from Wingfield Farm, the one-man play starring Rod Beattie, will open at Theatre Orangeville on Feb. 18 and run until March 8. The award-winning play premiered at Theatre Orangeville in 1994.

By Tom Claridge