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Living in Shuster's house

I'll always treasure the aura the late comic left behind as the original owner of my house

You could say the recent death of Canadian comic legend Frank Shuster hit me where I live. Emotionally and literally.

You see, the place I call home was built for Shuster in 1951 and he lived here for 19 years during the heyday of his world-famous television show. So, as a devout fan of Frank Shuster and his partner Johnny Wayne, starting from the time their CBC TV shows were broadcast in black and white, I feel lucky to be surrounded by the magical Shuster aura.

The study where these New in Homes columns are written every week was the workroom where the two comedians created so many of the television scripts that are now entertainment classics.

Back in July, 1955, a magazine called Canadian Homes and Gardens ran a photo feature entitled "Wayne and Shuster at Home." It's apparent, when comparing the photographs of the 1,800-square-foot Shuster house back then, with how it is today, that not much has changed. The furniture is different, of course, but the living room, dining room, centre hall and main staircase look today just as they did in 1955. Even our living room piano is in the same position as Shuster's was back then.

Although the built-in bookshelves in the Shuster study have remained the same, the comedian and his partner might not recognize the room, which is now crammed with computers, printer, fax machine, desks, file cabinets, and a lot of books on real estate and coins (my other life interest). The position of honour occupied by the Shuster typewriter is long gone, and our old electric typewriter sits on the floor in a case now used for a footrest.

Writing for Canadian Homes almost a half century ago, Stanley Fillmore said that radio and TV comedians Johnny Wayne and Frank Shuster, like other people in the public eye, were determined that their professional lives would not spoil their private lives.

"Frank Shuster's home," wrote Fillmore, "only a few doors away from his partner's, is where the two men write their broadcast scripts. Their 'writing factory' is a second-storey study where the team put in a regular 9-to-5 workday.

"But the house, designed by Ruth Shuster's brother, architect Harry D. Burston, keeps separate this workplace and the Shuster family life. The office-study is private, quiet and business-like, filled with books, comfortable chairs and couches. There are plenty of pencils lying about and a typewriter stands ready."

Shuster was quoted as saying that the pair kept regular office hours and reserved the evenings for their families and friends.

"On the other hand," the feature continues, "the rest of the Shuster house is subdued and luxurious. Colours are soft, muted and relaxing. The furniture is comfortable."

My wife, Dorothy, and I have lived in this brick, two-storey, north Toronto house for 27 years, but many people still call it "the Shuster house." From this house, Saturday Night Live TV producer Lorne Michaels courted, and then married, Rosie Shuster, the elder of the Shuster children.

A Shuster family friend once told us a story about the use of the second-floor study during the days when the TV show was created here. Little Stevie Shuster was home from school one day with a minor ailment. His mother cautioned him to be very quiet because his father and Johnny Wayne were hard at work in the study across the hall from Stevie's bedroom.

Some time later, Stevie tiptoed downstairs to complain to his mother. "They're not working," he said, "they're laughing."

The joy of laughter is certainly a nice aura to have in your home.

But what's the big deal about owning a celebrity home?

It's certainly a term rarely used in the local marketing of real estate. When we bought this house we didn't know it had belonged to the Shusters. We just liked it. Coincidentally, later we came to know the Shusters socially.

In her book *Sex and Real Estate Why We Love Houses* (see [Erotic affair with the home](#)), author Marjorie Garber, a Harvard professor, devotes a section to celebrity homes. For some purchasers, she argues, the pride of place normally occupied by the house itself has been overtaken by the aura of the former owner. In the U.S., she says, there is a thriving market in celebrity homes that belong, or once belonged, to members of America's "other royalty," the stars of film and entertainment.

Some people call the purchasers of celebrity homes "house groupies." Says Garber, "The house becomes quite literally a dream or fantasy house for those buyers, who hobnob with the famous ex-residents, harmlessly at second-hand, by walking the same floors and flushing the same toilets that were once used by their idols."

Although I don't buy that argument, I can agree with Garber when she says the buyers of celebrity homes forge a relationship with the aura of the previous owner.

Certainly, it feels different to watch an old Wayne and Shuster video or TV rerun in the home where the scripts were written than it would be to watch them



anywhere else.

And it seemed even more poignant earlier this week to listen to Shuster's voice on old CBC radio interviews and TV show clips as it echoed in the same rooms where the Shuster family lived, worked and played. Wherever I live, I'll always treasure the hours of joy and laughter that Wayne and Shuster brought to the Aaron house, formerly the Shuster house.

Thanks for the memories, Frank.

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