

Come Down from up River - a neverending test of love

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

Come Down from up River, by Norm Foster, on now at Theatre Orangeville and running until November 3, throws a lot of food for thought at the audience.

In fact, although the 'fourth wall' is never broken, there are plenty of worrying times for the audience in this play, as icy rebuffs from one person, deny plea for love from the other.

For a short prelude to seeing the play, here is the basis of the story: Liv (Olivia) Arsenault, a person of colour from Ottawa, and Bonne Doyle, a white person from St. John's, met at a hockey game in Montreal where, by mere happenstance, they were sitting side by side, each of them rooting for the 'other' team. Nevertheless, they hit it off and agreed to keep in touch.

Keeping in touch from Ottawa to St. John's and back led to their acknowledging deeper feelings, and these two ladies pledged their troth. They bought a house together in St. John's, where Bonnie is a lawyer and Liv could bring her business as a graphic designer, to easily work from home.

Well and good so far, but the thorn in the side of this domestic bliss is Bonnie's uncle's imminent visit from his life in the wilds of northern Newfoundland, a man for whom Bonnie has no love, with whom there was a parting of the ways upon her mother's death and funeral when she was 12 years old.

Uncle Shaver has never been forgiven. Period. He is not welcomed into his niece's home. He is on his way, anyway, reason given: he has to have medical tests done at the city hospital.

Bonnie is furious and Liv is determined to make it work but Bonnie simply must attend a meeting at her office and Liv is left to welcome the not-welcomed uncle. A three-hander, this play very often leaves just two at a time exchanging very humorous dialogue or suffering the barbs of a broken relationship or one at battle. Never a dull moment.

As 'down-home' as 'home-spun' is Neil Foster (no relation to the playwright) as the uncle, Shaver Bennett, who arrives to deal with Bonnie in her own home, in his home-spun clothes and working boots. Playing the old guy with more on his mind than tests in the hospital, Mr. Foster is even-keeled as necessary and still very funny with his wonderings and his philosophies. How he reacts to the news of a lesbian interracial marriage is one thing and handles his niece's hard heartedness is another. Playwright Norm Foster's understanding of how people really talk comes through with Shaver's language and turn of phrase - very funny.

Everyone adores Joella Crichton as Liv; her bounce and animation are wonderful. The other two accept her being in the middle and, nothing daunted, she does everything she can to mend the gap between them. Does she succeed? You will have to come and see for yourselves.

Stoic to the end, Robin Schisler as Bonnie is tight, hurt, righteous in her condemnation of her uncle's behaviour all those years ago. How could she ever bend when she was so heartlessly treated as an orphaned child? Ms. Schisler carries the frigidity and the underlying pain with conviction, keeping us and Uncle Shaver on pins.

We, the audience, are helpless to influence the outcome but can only pine for tenderness to ease in its tendrils and begin to crumble the hard wall of Bonnie's dislike and resentment.

Always a delight to sit before a set created by Beckie Morris, now over a decade with Theatre Orangeville, as set designer and production manager. This one is so clever that when the hospital set was exposed, the opening night audience applauded.

For the most part, the action takes place in Liv's and Bonnie's home living room. The story moves along well, too, in a small bar and the hospital waiting room. Every detail in place; all the colours are appealing or correct, an integral part of the story without unnecessary distraction.

The lighting, as designer Jeff Pybus saw its role in the whole production, opens and closes, adds but does not detract, appropriate and beautiful.

Chef d'équipe and Director of the feast, David Nairn, has kept the dialogue flowing and funny, accustomed to and fond of Norm Foster's plays as he is. Timing is all with comedy and these three deliver with exactly the right touch.

The opening night audience is the stringent test of all the entertainments and this audience loved this play, leaping to their feet at its end, in a resounding standing ovation.

For more information and tickets for Come Down from up River, subscriptions for the season and the party of the year ? the Victorian Christmas Gala, Theatre Orangeville's biggest fund raiser of the year ? drop in to the Box Office at 87 Broadway (the Town Hall) or the Information Centre on Buena Vista Drive at Highway 10; call 519-942-3423 or go online-www.theatreorangeville.ca.