

Coming to Orangeville's opera house: O Canada, We Sing For Thee!

By Constance Scrafield

I don't write these shows, so much as I create them.

So said Leisa Way of the eight shows she has created, the seventh of which, O Canada, We Sing For Thee! is coming to the Opera House June 28 and 29 to help launch Orangeville into the Canada 150 celebrations.

The premier production of this show took place at the Upper Canada Playhouse in Morrisburg and the idea sprang up in the course of a conversation between Way and Donnie Bowes, artistic director of the Upper Canada.

It was about two years ago, Way explained. People thought I wrote it for the 150th, but I didn't. Donnie and I were sitting around talking about ideas and thought; why don't we do a show celebrating Canada. We worked the idea around.

It's a party, she declared, come to the party with us and celebrate Canada Day!

When they later produced the show at the Port Stanley Theatre, We wanted to greet the audience after the show, Way said, and the people kept saying, thank you, thank you so much! We sang along with the songs.

Bruce (Ley) has written a montage of Canadian songs the songs of our nation Four Strong Winds Gordon Lightfoot song writers give us a great gift they tell stories, she added.

We live in the greatest country, she said. Gordon Lightfoot gave us the (Canadian Railway) Trilogy about the railway bringing us together as a country.

Way and the gentlemen of her band have really thought out how different, artistically, this show is from the others that she has created and they have performed.

We just had a meeting about the show because we are going on a trans-Canada tour (of 80 concerts) and this show is so different, she said. Each band member takes a lead during the show. We do four-part singing and the singing is so strong.

On a personal note, Every production we do, I'm so proud of these guys I created the shows but they give amazing performances.

The drummer in the band, Sam Cino, has been involved with the First Nations community all his life, playing the drum and going to drum circles. He wrote an original section for the show and received permission from the Elders to include it.

In addition, the other band members sharing the stage are Ley on piano he is a fixture in this area as a musician, teacher and composer; Fred Smith as lead singer and guitars, who has played for many stars; Nathan Smith a lead singer, as well as violin and fiddle, the difference between which depends on what music he is playing for symphony or (blues) band; and Bobby Prochaska, a familiar face on the main stage here, is a lead singer and bass player.

The program covers works by the great Canadian poet, Pauline Johnson (Tekhionwake, whose father was a Mohawk Chief and mother was British).

There is a French section in the show.

People thanked us for that, Way remarked. Some of the songs in French are sad a mix of joy and sadness.

It is a long list of whom the show covers: Michael Buble he got children to enjoy classical music. They recall The Nylons with their a cappella cover of the Lion Sleeps Tonight.

Back in Canadian music to Don Messer and the songs of Paul Anka, O Canada, We Sing For Thee! covers all the history of Canada's tremendous musical career.

During the show, Way comes on stage in 12 different costumes with 11 wig changes to emulate the stars whose work she is singing. It is her respect for her musical colleagues and their performances that captivates her.

You may almost feel as though there's an orchestra, but there's just five guys, she said. The growth that I've seen in these band members we challenge each other and I'm so thrilled and grateful for this. We have such fun doing this show!

When I was writing it, I was thinking about who is the audience, she added. They are kids to older people. One of the highlights is we put together a great Canadian medley.

While Way was organizing the show's trans-Canada tour, David Nairn, artistic director of Theatre Orangeville, asked her to save the dates of June 28 and 29 for production at the Opera House, in Orangeville.

She was more than pleased with the invitation.

It's so exciting for us to be playing the show this close to Canada Day in our own home, she said.

For tickets and information, call the theatre Box Office 519-942-3423; call in person at the box Office, 87 Broadway and the Tourist Information Centre on Buena Vista and Highway 10; or go online at www.theatreorangeville.ca