

Concert to commemorate lives of World War I soldiers at Grace Tipling Hall

By Paula Brown

The month of April marks the anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge and local residents will have the opportunity to step back in time to the lives and experience of World War I soldiers through music.

Small Town Big Ideas, a speaker series organized by CanHist, will be welcoming Canadian acoustic folk band The Fugitives on April 30 at Grace Tipling Hall for a performance of their 90-minute musical tribute to the Battle of Vimy Ridge, entitled 'Ridge'.

'I think we're being faithful to the vision of what Small Town Big Ideas is all about. The vision always was that we bring in as many big ideas as we can that are current in the Canadian public discourse, whether those are ideas that are spoken from public intellectuals, authors or in this case, artists. It's very important that we have discussion and really provocative insights,' said Neil Orford, founder of CanHist.

After seeing the band perform Ridge in Fergus late last year, Orford approached them about bringing the show to Shelburne.

'I got a very strong sense from the band of how committed they were to telling stories in music and song that are representative of the genuine words of people who were historical actors in important events,' said Orford. 'Getting a chance to see it live myself, certainly opened my eyes to the need to pay close attention to how we talk about historical moments in Canada, like Vimy Ridge, and rededicate ourselves to listening as best we can across the ages to the words of the men who were actually there.'

The Fugitives are a Juno-nominated group consisting of songwriters Adrian Glynn and Brendan McLeod, who are joined by banjo player Chris Suen and violinist Carly Frey.

Ridge is a 90-minute musical tribute to the more than 10,000 Canadian casualties of Vimy Ridge. Through storytelling, theatre and music the show examines the misconceptions and varying perspectives around the battle. Featuring musical interpretations of WWI soldier songs, often known as 'trench songs', Ridge also probes difficult and necessary questions about the wartime experience.

McLeod started writing the outline for Ridge in 2020 while he was exploring the history of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. During his research, he began to comb through songs written by soldiers about their experiences in the war.

'They were funny, they were poignant, they were beautiful and harrowing and really gave you a snapshot of the emotions they were going through,' said McLeod.

Speaking about why they wanted to explore the Battle of Vimy Ridge as the subject of the show, McLeod explained, 'It's one of those formative events in Canadian history and I was curious as to how much of what we're told is real and how much of it lines up with the truth.

He added, 'I was looking at the history of it and wanted to think of the soldier's experience, not what the government tells us happened or what the military told us happened, but what the soldiers' say happened.'

While the battle of Vimy Ridge occurred more than a century ago, McLeod said the themes brought up in Ridge continue to be relevant in the face of modern events.

'Every year we tour the show; it unfortunately gets more resonant with audiences. Since we've been doing it, the world has gone through so many different trajectories with everything happening in the Middle East, war breaking out in the Ukraine, and now we're going on tour while there's an economic trade war between Canada and the US with people talking about Canada's sovereignty,' said McLeod. 'I would never have anticipated five years ago that this is the curtain behind which we're playing the show.'

Tickets for the show are \$40 and can be purchased by visiting the Small Town Big Ideas page on www.canhist.ca.