

Foster's Mending Fences next at Theatre Orangeville

By Constance Scrafield

Norm Foster's comedy/drama *Mending Fences* will open at Theatre Orangeville tonight (Thursday).

It tells the story of a son returning to his father's and the former family home ? a Saskatchewan farm ? after 20 years of estrangement. The whole tale takes place in the farmhouse kitchen with numerous flashbacks to explain the origins of the alienation and present-day moments that will eventually deal with a reconnection, for better or for worse.

The cast of three, including Norm Foster himself, Heather Hodgson and Derek Ritschel along with director David Nairn, took a break from rehearsal for a brief interview about the upcoming production.

?There was a hard split when he (the son, Drew) was 14,? Foster briefed us about the plot. ?Since then, Harry, (the father) has become involved with the lady rancher next door and they have their own life.?

We asked Ritschel, who plays Drew, why he thought the son returns after so many years.

It was an interesting reply: ?His life is in a bit of a shambles. There's something missing ? some unfinished business.?

Each of the three actors play multiple roles, among which are the younger/older versions of the primary characters. There are five characters in the play, but they appear at various times in their lives as the flashbacks tell the individual histories.

Naturally, as this is a Norm Foster play, it is both a comedy and a drama. ?It was a nice idea with the western setting. ? Never autobiographical with his plays, Foster commented, ?It's more fun to just make it up.?

?One of the themes is the miscommunication, the horrible things when people don't communicate properly,? Hodgson reflected.

As the only woman in the play, she portrays the three female characters: Gin, the ex-wife and Drew's mother; Lori, who is the neighbouring rancher and Harry's sweetie, and, in a moment of history, Harry's mother.

She said, ?In a few seconds, the chance to say the right thing is missed and the person's history is changed forever.?

?As if to say, the one thought ? ?when I was 14, at the time, he didn't care,? said Nairn, enlarging on the theme of the play.

?It's the first time we've done this play here,? Nairn remarked. ?For 10 years, I've wanted to do this play. It was an opportunity to work with these three actors who are also dear friends.?

It was Ritschel who brought to our attention to what a privilege it is to have Norm Foster performing ?in our own back yard. He was just a name when we studied his work at university. Now, here's the person and we are fortunate to have him in this play.?

?I feel a personal connection with the play,? he added. ?It reminded me very much of my own connection with my father.?

In short, when the parting of ways is hard ? when the moment to speak is missed, what fences can be mended?

Foster's plays are produced all around the world. He told us that three or four of his plays have been translated into Polish and have been produced in Poland. One of them was also translated and performed on stage in Russia. Certainly, they are very popular in the English speaking countries and across Canada.

Beginning this summer is the Foster Festival in St. Catherine's where his new play, *Half Way to the North Pole* (not a Christmas play) will premiere.

Ritschel is Artistic Director of Lighthouse Festival Theatre in Port Dover, where, so he said, ?Everything is done. We have two world premiers. Doing this play fitted in just in time.?

Of the upcoming production of *Mending Fences*, there was one important aspect to be made clear.

So as not to miss the main headline about this play, Foster assured us: ?There are some huge laughs.?

And Nairn emphasized, ?Some very funny moments.?

How do actors resist laughing on stage when the audience is reacting to the hilarity of the moment, we wondered.

It is not always easy, they admitted. ?There are moments when you just don't look (at each other),? Nairn confided.

Then, the four of them looked at each other and laughed with a hundred memories of ?nearly.?

Mending Fences opens officially tomorrow (April 1 ? no kidding) with a preview show tonight (Thursday). The show runs until April 17. Tickets, as usual, are available at the box office at the Orangeville Town Hall, Broadway, by telephone at 519-941-3423 and online at www.theatreorangeville.ca