

Great Expectations closing this weekend at Theatre Orangeville

By Constance Scrafield

We had the chance to sit down with two of the cast of four for Theatre Orangeville's production of Great Expectations to discuss the history of this new work and their association with it for its life so far.

When Great Expectations premiered at the Talk is Free Theatre in Barrie, the cast only got their scripts the first day of their 12-day rehearsal schedule because Richard Ouzounian, who had written the adaptation, was still fine-tuning the work.

Said Justin Goodhand, who plays the lead role of Pip, 'I had pneumonia at the beginning, but I had a good time. I read the book as soon as Richard called me. It was a pleasure doing the play. I've worked in Barrie since, but people really love this show.'

Carson Nattrass, who came from Winnipeg to act in the performance, told us, 'Richard was Artistic Director of the Manitoba Theatre Centre and he gave my Aunt Tracy (Doll) her start. He wanted to be sure to work and launch two members of a family - two generations. So, he cast me in this production. For me, in my career, I'm glad I got to work with him. This is our third time doing this play, but it is unusual to bring an actor from Winnipeg to a country theatre - there just isn't the budget for it.'

Great Expectations, which runs to March 9, is, like any other new production, somewhat a work in progress and yet as solid and ready to be enjoyed as any classic. Of course, Dickens' tremendous story is a classic and, as with all great writing, it is as relevant to the present day as it was in his time.

Of the language Dickens' used and the dialogue he gave his characters, Nattrass commented, 'It is a gift for me because I grew up with television and the length of the sentences is quite joyous. It's like the Olympics for actors.'

'I had a teacher who said that art consists of concealing art,' Justin Goodhand remarked. 'This show is tremendously satisfying - it's nice when (theatre) companies take a risk.'

'There's the first few minutes in the play when the audience needs to recalibrate. Just to go with us - the invitation is to try something a little different that is great.'

The basis of the tale Great Expectations is about a boy who calls himself Pip, a childhood abbreviation of his full name - Philip Pirrip: 'My family name being Pirrip and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.'

Raised 'by hand' by his sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery, and 'by hand' is meant a slap wherever and whenever seems appropriate to a lady who is free about slapping, as though she were of the philosophy that a rough upbringing will create a strong character, young Pip's life is a sequence of strange and amazing people who make unusual demands of him and from who he either learns or benefits from the acquaintance. The story tells of his eventual adoption by a benefactor who sends him to school and makes a gentleman of him.

What befalls in his adulthood is a continuance of twists and unexpected turns.

Dickens' analysis of people rings so true and those same people still live among us and are us, whether the language has changed or not. To be fair, Dickens' English is not at all mysterious; it is not an impenetrable British dialect. It is simply more ornate than our current fashion of short cut clichés and monosyllabic abbreviated words. His use of language is fulsome, exciting and very interesting.

Ouzounian assured us that every word in this adaption is Dickens' own words, giving audiences the luxury to relax and enjoy every verbal morsel. Sit back and take in superb art, brilliant storytelling and fine, versatile actors to deliver the whole.

Nattrass encouraged everyone to come: 'The best actors, best writing - it'll surprise people - it's funny, moving. There's nothing to be intimidated. You'll see yourself in it and someone you know.'

'Yes,' agreed Goodhand, 'come and listen to a great story.'

Tickets are available at the Box Office, 519-942-3423 and online www.theatreorangeville.ca