

Island Lake amphitheatre answers many visions

By Constance Scrafield

Picture this ? A beautiful summer day in the Island Lake park. Standing in the lake, an elegant dome on a sturdy stage, on stilts, within the shelter of the curved inlet. Anything might happen on that stage ? a wonderful concert, a wedding or other social event, classes of art or exercise ? meetings that want the ambience of nature all around.

Picture: Peter Pan flying in through Wendy's window.

A stage, an open theatre or an amphitheatre has long since been the vision of Credit Valley Conservation (CVC), planned to be built on land within the Island Lake Conservation Area.

It was David Nairn, artistic director of Theatre Orangeville, and Marilyn Logan, then general manager, who first approached CVC to build on the water. The curved and sloping shape of the land in front of the water, a natural formation, perfect for audiences, persuaded one and all that this was the right place for such an amphitheatre.

?Floating the stage wasn't practical,? CVC?Manager of Conservation Parks Bill Lidster said. ?We worried about the water's movement while something was happening on the stage. A fixed stage made more sense. For performances, fixed is better.?

Lidster has been in the conservation business for 30 years, of which 17 years have been served with CVC.

?It has always been great,? he said. ?We have challenges but we work together with the communities.?

It is clear that Lidster loves the Island Lake Conservation Area.

?We want it to have that ?Northern Ontario experience' close to home, with canoes, a beach, all this natural area,? he was pleased to say. ?It has become a destination park for people from all over the Golden Horseshoe, the Greater Toronto Area. People come from that far away ? a family will come from the city.?

He explained that management has plans for conservation areas, what parts can be more involved with people without doing any damage. Interestingly, the Island Lake park is 800 acres, of which 400 is land and, of that, only three per cent is developed. There are seven areas specifically for picnics which can now be booked online.

?There should be as much use as possible for a unique multi-generational use (for example), people coming for the old-fashioned idea of a picnic.?

It was exciting to put together the design and execution of the amphitheatre.

?We wanted a unique venue to attract people,? Lidster remarked. ?The site is a perfect shape for the amphitheatre. The noise is absorbed by the trees. There's room for enough seats, but to limit (the numbers) for an intimate experience.?

To test for the potential problems of having the stage in this place, both from the points of view of the environment and the people living around the park, the committee working on the project decided to err on the side of caution and try an event. They wanted to test the noise effect.

An special permit around the issue of noise was granted by the Town of Mono for the sake of the concert. The event was instructive and useful ? how to be respectful to the wildlife and the neighbours.

So, there are no amplified events to be held on the amphitheatre from May to July 1, during the mating and nesting seasons of the wildlife. Otherwise, events are not permitted to run later than 11:30 p.m. Both these cautions are primarily concerned with the noise level during those times.

At the moment, alcohol is not permitted in the park.

?We're going to look at the possibility of licensing,? Lidster said.

There is a great interest in staging weddings there, as it is such a beautiful and different sort of venue. An elegant place with actual floor space for 150 seats, surrounded by water and a completely natural setting makes a fresh approach to social events.

?We want local people to get the business (if possible),? Lidster added. ?We can recommend everyone they would need ? party rentals, caterers. There's all sorts of ideas for decorations ? arbours, centrepieces, we provide some of the products ? the natural amenities, unique amenities that fit in ? people get creative.?

Like all new ideas coming into the park, the management is starting slow to see how things go. There are set plans for disposing of waste after an event, with lots of bins and the staff to clear up afterwards.

It was really Nairn who brought into focus the huge potential for the use of the amphitheatre from an artistic point of view. His take on it is the exciting challenge and celebration of working with nature along with the endless types of entertainment to come.

?I couldn't be more thrilled with the potential and possibilities,? he declared. ?Once again, Orangeville and Dufferin County (helped to create) a unique cultural venue. There has been push back as a concern for the environment and it behooves us as artists and members of the community to respect that and see to it that we do a our part with the CVC.?

?Of course, we are very thrilled that Peter Pan is the inaugural theatrical production to be performed in the Amphitheatre at the end of August,? he added.

Winter comes to the country and there are plenty of great things to do then too. Ice fishing is one of them. Last winter there was also a skating trail to enjoy as a moonlight trip.

?Skating on part of the lake under the moon ? it was magical,? he reminisced. ?There were kick sleighs on the snow ? we made s'mores and hot dogs; there were giant games of checkers and battleship.?

?We want people to come, to bring their kids to really be in nature,? he added. ?Canoeing on the lake in the summer ? get the kids outside.?

?Once they're here, they're in nature and the park sells itself!?

The Theatre Orangeville production of Peter Pan will take place at the ampitheatre Aug. 25 to 27.