

Jane Spence - a rising director with good sense

Written By Constance Scrafield

Jane Spence looked back on her friendship with Theatre Orangeville with sincere admiration.

Her first appearance on Theatre Orangeville's main stage was in Ed's Garage by Dan Needles in 2010. Since then, Ms. Spence has been back many times to perform and, last year, with the help of an arts grant, she spent some months as Assistant Director to David Nairn, who mentored and helped her toward learning the craft of directing and, further, the job of being artistic director.

'I don't see how you could learn all you need about directing in a class,' she commented. 'It's really something you have to do to learn how.'

She praised Mr. Nairn on another level: 'The amount David has grown this theatre since the last 10 years,' she began, by coaching hundreds of students through the Youth Programs, including T.O.E.P. (Theatre Orangeville for Exceptional Players) and the Creative Partners on Stage (Youth and adult programs for actors with special needs).

'They are all showcased on the same stage. It breaks down differences. It's about the process - what kind of world you want to make.'

Not as her directing debut in her professional life but her first time as Director, Ms. Spence has taken on directing Theatre Orangeville's final production of the season, the Birds and the Bees by Mark Crawford.

Ms. Spence has herself played the role of Sarah in this play a couple of years ago, performing along side Susan Johnston-Collins, in the role of Gail, Sarah's mother, both then and now.

'One thing it [the play] says is what people want can come in a different package, not in the package they were expecting,' she commented.

We went on to discuss the delicate business of performing intimate scenes on the stage, for there is romance and kissing in this play.

'We clear the clouds,' said Ms. Spence. 'What makes it okay or not? We talk it through; people suggest and comment, learning the lines step by step.'

Sometimes, it's a closed rehearsal for this preparation. If anyone feels unbalanced, not clear if you're feeling exposed. Especially in comedy, the choreography is important.

'Since 'not in my space,' we're developing new ways to approach the matter - you have to give everybody the opportunity to be heard.'

When Ms. Spence performed in Ed's Garage, she said, 'I fell in love with Orangeville right away.'

She has been back to play in Melville Boys, Ladies' Foursome and Elvis and Mavis.

'There isn't a lot of training for being Artistic Director,' Ms. Spence continued, speaking of her long-term ambition. 'In a conversation with David, we decided and co-wrote an application for the grant (which she got) for me to come in and study with him. He opened up and took me to board meetings, staff meetings. I think the only way to learn is to intern. Go to the Rotary meetings.'

Her ambition? 'To have a theatre of my own? Yes,' she admitted modestly.

Born in Calgary, Jane Spence got her first directing job with theatre students, freshly graduating, who were acting in the One Act Play Festival at the Pump House in Calgary. She won Best Director and Best Production. Her first professional acting was at the Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver.

"I went to Vancouver and never went back [as an actor] to Calgary," she remarked. "I got an agent and did the Bard on the Beach and some other things."

Then, she had the opportunity to attend the Conservatory in Stratford. "Where you get the best classical training. I've worked more in all the theatres in Ontario. Travelling to all those theatres has introduced me to how beautiful Ontario is. The glorious summers in cottage country and the amazing falls in Dufferin. Island Lake is one of our favourite places."

When she says "our," she is referring to her husband and her 11-year-old son.

Although becoming an artistic director of a theatre is her goal, "To continue acting for me is essential. I don't think you have to give up one for the other. I think it's really hard to only be a director. One or two spots open to direct can come from other plays on tour."

She added, "For up-and-coming directors, it can be hard with rare opportunities but, after my learning and experience here, I am more likely to be able to take on whatever comes next. There's moments when you have a successful year and then it can be quieter."

Ms. Spence has for sure discovered that she enjoys directing: "One of the wonderful things about rehearsals are the stories that come up that influence how the actor sees the role. I always feel I've learned a lot about human nature."

Opening the page to her own words about her experiences at Theatre Orangeville, Ms. Spence said, in part, "I just want to say how incredibly grateful I am for David Nairn and the incredible Theatre Orangeville team so generously welcoming me into their fold and helping to nurture my development as director. ..."

"While this opportunity is a rare and precious occurrence in my life, I know that I am one of many people whose lives have been changed because of their experience here. ... I have seen students from their various programs embark on professional careers... Theatre practitioners of every discipline, all of us owing our future successes in part, to the investment that the Theatre Orangeville family has made in us... This is a very special place run in a way for which I have the utmost respect and admiration and, as I move forward, I aspire to create with the passion and heart that I have been so inspired by at Theatre Orangeville."

The Birds and the Bees opens tonight, May 3. The Opening Night Gala is Friday, May 4 and the play runs until May 20.

Before the play starts, David Nairn will stand on a chair to announce the new season's attractions, beginning early next October. You will have the opportunity even at this early date to book your subscriptions for the new season, for either all five plays or for three.

Ms. Spence has given you plenty of incentive to support your theatre, as Mr. Nairn calls it, in addition to the first class entertainment.

For tickets to the Birds and the Bees and all the information go to the Box Office, 87 Broadway or the Information Centre on Buena Vista Drive at Highway 10; by telephone at 519-942-3423 or online at www.theatreorangeville.ca.