

Jonas & Barry in the Home: funny, poignant

By Constance Scrafield

Norm Foster's new play, *Jonas & Barry in the Home*, which had its world premiere at Theatre Orangeville Oct. 5, is reliably very funny and rather poignant.

Basically, as this is a play to be seen and not exposed in advance, the story involves two seniors who have moved into a luxurious ?assisted living? home, Gateway Gardens.

Barry Butterfield, a retired dentist, still a good three years on the sunny side of 70, and newly arriving bon vivant retired actor Jonas Ainsworth, meet on the veranda and fall easily into conversation and friendship.

Giving balance to the whole is Barry's daughter Rosie, who is employed at Gateway Gardens as social convenor. It is she who persuaded her father to move into the home after his heart attack, primarily to keep an eye on him and, otherwise, to mend their somewhat broken relationship.

The humour and the heartstrings are all tied up in the dialogue, at which Norm Foster is a master. He, as Jonas, and Theatre Orangeville Artistic Director David Nairn, playing Barry, dash the lines back and forth with that stunning cleverness and offbeat humour, so intrinsic to Norm Foster's creative work.

There are moments when the conversation between the two men is so funny and outrageous that, on opening night they had to wait for the audience to collectively catch its breath from laughing so hard, clapping their hands and twittering (as opposed to tweeting), before the two of them could continue.

Old pros that they are, the time it took for the audience to settle was longer than you might think, but they passed the moments adjusting as one to the other, trying to deal with the remark that had caused the hilarity in the first place.

It was really remarkable, and really fun.

Barry's daughter Rosie, with the delightful Perrie Olthuis in the role, brings to light the stories of each of them, the heartbreaks and the eternal questions of failing, repentance and ? what next? However, Foster never lectures. His dialogue is as close to as it would be to people actually in his given circumstances, not on a stage. He defies the pretense of the stage and plunks simple reality into the exchanges between his characters.

So, the situations he recreates belong to anyone; everyone identifies and laughs and cries right along with the actors telling the tales. A single setting, the beautiful set having been designed by Beckie Morris, Theatre Orangeville's production manager, tells the whole picture of Gateway Gardens, in which all the comedy and drama take place.

Jonas and Barry in the Home is all that we have come to appreciate from Foster over the past years of regularly enjoying his plays here.

In other news about Foster, next June, the newly created Foster Festival will open in St. Catharines. June 16, the festival will make its debut there at the Robertson Theatre in the recently built First Ontario Performing Arts Centre as the resident summer company. This is the first theatre festival that celebrates the work of a living playwright. Foster is obviously happy about the festival, which will premiere a new play of his every season.

Still, there is a shift in Foster's writing that had us wondering just where the famous playwright is trending. In order to satisfy this point of curiosity, we nabbed a brief moment to chat with him about it shortly after opening night.

Asked whether he is changing his focus somewhat with his new plays, taking a bend in the road, as it were, he replied, ?Yes. It started with *On a First Name Basis* and *Hilda's Yard* (which he wrote at the same time). I wanted my characters with more to them, something deeper. I wanted them to have bigger thoughts.?

Jonas and Barry in the Home runs until Nov. 1. Tickets can be purchased as usual at the box office on Broadway and the Tourist Information Centre at Highway 10 and Buena Vista Drive. Phone 519-942-3423, or go online at theatreorangeville.ca