

Mending Fences: repairing failed family relationships

By Constance Scrafield

When Norm Foster promised 'huge laughs' during our preview conversation, he was not kidding.

Take a relatively serious subject and wait for Norm Foster to pick over the idea and make fun with it.

In *Mending Fences*, playing at Theatre Orangeville until April 17, the reactions of the audience to the many quips and quick witticisms, along with the irrepressible and very funny cynicism, is an almost integral part of the whole entertainment.

The play deals with such issues as sour separations, the need for reconciliation without expectation or really understanding why, alcoholism as a result of a partner's infidelity, being an incommunicative human being and how to repair the damage after a lot of years.

Mending Fences is really a play about how the failings of parents are handed down to subsequent generations of parents. Father to son; mother to (in this case) son. In other hands, this could be a dark and sombre play but it is not, for Foster knows, innately, people like to laugh at themselves and their failings. In fact, we suggest, he further realizes, we have to laugh in order to heal.

The story centres, more or less, around Harry, an older man, a farmer in Saskatchewan, divorced from Lori, with whom he had a son, Drew, neither of whom have been in touch since their leaving him 20 years before. In his present life, Harry has a relationship with his rancher neighbour, Gin, whose husband died some time ago.

The play opens with the information that Drew is waiting at the local train station for Harry to pick him up. Drew has come back to his childhood home to see his father again after so many years of no contact. In those first few moments, Harry is struggling with himself about rushing to the train station and debating the matter with Gin. They talk about how much they enjoy their bed time together, bantering back and forth and putting off the minute when Harry finally goes to meet his son.

Initially and, indeed, subsequently, the two men do not do well with their attempts to communicate, as they struggle with the passage of time. Gin, excited to meet Drew at last, interferes as any woman might, egging them on, pushing Harry to try harder and, then, giving it all up.

Throughout the mainstream of the present day story come the flashbacks that explain that present day. Scenes from Harry's childhood with an indifferent father and an alcoholic mother interweave with moments from the days of Drew's childhood with parents each set on conflicting ideas of what they want for their lives, for their own satisfaction.

'Please come.' 'Please stay.' With no place for compromise, apparently, nothing is left.

The irreverent Foster does not shy away from giving his characters lines that are not quite politically correct, reflecting accurately the tone and truth of those characters and we, the audience, laughed and 'commented' all the way.

Foster, Heather Hodgson and Derek Ritschel all do a thoroughly fine job of their multiple roles; as usual, there is no confusion as to who is who with these switches; all is clear in spite of the absence of set changes: after all, the whole history does take place in the farm's kitchen.

Working with his 'dear friends,' as director David Nairn referred to the actors, the play is the perfect blend of awkwardness and companionable flow, where the characters deal with the changing aspects of their various relationships. It is clear from how very well they handle the all important timing of the dialogue that these actors are completely in sync with one other.

Just exactly right is how we would describe the set and the lighting. A country kitchen, comfortable and, even familiar, Steve Lucas, set and lighting designer for this production, hits the perfect note.

The lighting does what it should; accentuate the moment without imposing itself.

Funny, interesting, a little outrageous and a wonderful couple of hours of theatre, *Mending Fences* is running until April 17.

Tickets are available at the box office on Broadway (Town Hall), by phone 519-941-3423 or online at www.theatreorangeville.ca