

Needles, Cole to give playwriting workshop

By Constance Scrafield

For anyone with even the slightest interest in the evolution of a play (this includes all audience members who have ever wondered, 'How did he/she do that?' to those with a passion for the theatre arts), there is a wonderful treat in store at the Orangeville Town Hall Opera House this Sunday (Feb. 8), dubbed From Page to Stage.

Playwrights Dan Needles and Trevor Cole are being joined by Theatre Orangeville's David Nairn, as host, to give insights to the process of taking an idea, a story, a few notes jotted on the back of an envelope to a full-blown and ready-to-entertain stage play. It is an interesting combination of personalities that will offer this discussion.

Needles is 'The grand old man,' as Nairn called him during an interview last week, with a long list of highly successful plays over 30-plus years of writing. His original Letter from Wingfield Farm is up next in Theatre Orangeville's season and his latest play, Baco Noir, will premier as the last of this season's productions.

Cole, a highly successful and award-winning novelist, is bringing his first play, which also premieres at Theatre Orangeville this season. Norman Bray, in The Performance of his Life, is coming via a simple conversation at a Theatre Orangeville event.

'It happened as a casual conversation at the book signing after the Leacock event in 2013,' Nairn explained. 'Trevor had written this wonderful novel about the theatre - his father was an actor. Trevor came to the Leacock and we were standing around talking with Nancy and she said something about what a wonderful play the book would make. Two years later, we are bringing it to the stage.'

'Of course,' he went to say, 'there were workshops and readings, but that is what the fund for new play development is for. Over the time, Trevor and I have gone hammer-and-tong because we disagreed about something.'

'There's still a ton about writing plays that I don't understand and I'm really looking forward to the discussion on stage,' he added.

'This is for all the theatre's patrons who are always telling me about their interest in the process.'

'When we have one of our new play readings, with simply the actors standing and reading the play, people tell me, 'I'd be happy to sit in on a reading, just to take those voices into my head,' Nairn commented.

'Writing is a solitary form of creation,' he observed. 'It will be tremendous insight to get into the head of a writer - where do these ideas come from? Writers talk about the characters taking over the story. As a non-writer, myself, I don't what that's like but, perhaps, over the course of the Page to Stage talk, I'll understand it a bit better.'

Using an old English expression, Nairn described Needles and Cole: 'Dan and Trevor are chalk and cheese,' he said. 'They're quite different from each other. Dan is well established - this is Trevor's first play. He is an award-winning novelist but this is his first play. How is that experience?'

'Here we have Dan, the grand old man of Canadian plays and Trevor, a very successful novelist, coming at the process from another point of view.'

Of the format that the afternoon's event will take, he said, 'It's going to be a dialogue; this is not like a book reading at all. It is a conversation for passionate supporters of the theatrical art form.'

'What part of Dan Needles' tortured imagination did 'Wing' come from?' he wondered aloud. 'Did he dream how successful these plays would be or that there would be seven of them being performed all over Canada?'

'When he was writing Norman Bray, did Trevor imagine that his characters would actually come to the stage?' he continued. 'This conversation between these two very diverse writers will really appeal to those who appreciate the process - how does it all come to that point?'

When a writer breaks from a format that has worked well for years, does that change the approach to the basic process of writing a specific play? Did Needles find it harder to break from what he so thoroughly understood? A larger number of characters, a swap from comedy to drama, an entirely different theme - did any of these change the way in which a play was confronted? Or did he simply continue to swim in his own ocean of creativity, merely visiting other aspects but remaining the same soul?

How much of a jump was it for Cole to make from the comfort and intimacy of writing a novel to the sudden exposure and instant response (of an audience) for his characters to be on a stage?

Well, there will be a question and answer portion to the event. Perhaps some of these questions will be raised then.

More conversations, closer up, as it were, at the wine and cheese reception later and book signing too.

Sounds fantastic.

From Page to Stage is a once-only event for Feb. 8 from 2 to 4 p.m. Tickets are available from the theatre box office at the town hall or the visitors' centre on Buena Vista. Telephone 519-942-3423, or order online at theatreorangeville.ca

This event is in support of the New Play Development fund.