

Sunday at Alton Mill: Nonnie Griffin is Marilyn ? After

By Constance Scrafield

What if the much touted, unforgettable Marilyn Monroe were to come back to talk to audiences for an hour and a half?

To talk to them, as we contend, and tell them all they need to know, all the truth about her life ? about her death? Would she be allowed to rest after that?

Perhaps, Nonnie Griffin will provide the answer to those questions with her fabulous show Marilyn ? After! It opens for one performance at the Alton Mill Arts Centre Sunday afternoon (May 1) as a special fundraiser for Haiti.

Like many inspirations that lead to a great deal of hard work, resulting in a stunning production, Griffin's road to writing Marilyn ? After began simply enough.

?A friend of mine said, ?You look like Marilyn ? why don't you write a show about her'? Griffin told us in a telephone interview. Naturally, there was nothing simple about the research or the writing. So much has been written about, thought about, filmed about Marilyn that to come up with something original was no small feat.

?She (Marilyn) comes back older as herself,? she said. ?I absolutely believe in it because only when the actor believes it, the audience believes it.?

To tell something of Griffin's recent history, she started writing a prior show, Sister Annunciata's Secret, in 2009 and performed the piece first at the Alex Theatre on Bathurst Street, Toronto.

After a couple of other ?spots? of playing the piece, her cousins, living in Edinburgh, Scotland, invited her to come over. There, she did the show for two weeks at the Edinburgh Fringe.

Following Edinburgh, Griffin began to write Marilyn, in 2012.

There were long hours of research and Griffin set herself to the task. She was determined to get to the root of Marilyn's history, to a real understanding of her whole story. There could be no shirking Marilyn's truths nor dodging the details behind her death.

She said the show took eight months of research, ?pouring over hundreds of books to put it together.?

?Of course, I'm telling the truth about Marilyn,? she asserted. ?She talks about her life and her death.?

The show runs for close on an hour and a half with no intermission. ?I wish I could spend more time, but you don't want the audience to fall over in a coma.?

As to how she maintains her energy to deliver such a performance over the whole length of the show, she said, ?To bring a character like her to life and feel that passion, it carries me.?

Marilyn ? After has been seen in some wonderful venues and the actress is very happy about the kind of success she has had with it. For its first production, she took it to Buddy's in Bad Times in Toronto for two weeks. She then played it in London, Hamilton, Kitchener and Collingwood.

In October, 2015, Griffin was thrilled to play it in New York at the Broadway Row Theatre. For her remarkable Marilyn ? After, she was awarded Best International Production.

She was travelling for the adventure with Darren Steward, her producer. In New York, Henry Keeler put the very simple set together.

It was a sensational highlight for her. Griffin's excitement with her experience there rang out, ?I was so glad I experienced a New York audience. They clapped at everything ? they got it . . . I was lifted to the skies by them.?

?My cousins came too ? it was ? you know ? just wonderful.? And, of course: ?I wish I could do Broadway.?

We chatted a while about her own history.

?I studied at the Toronto Conservatory . . . It was called the Royal Conservatory then, and had an excellent Speech Arts and Drama section. My great and beloved drama teacher was Mrs. Clara Baker . . . She was the greatest teacher of my life. She combined talent, wisdom and incredible humanity.

?She told me, ?Margaret, you've got the magic.'?

Reminiscing, she added, ?To hear her do a poem was to be transfixed. She is now and always will be unforgettable.?

Continuing her studies in England, she trained under the tutelage of Denys Blacklock, who reassured her: ?You know what you're doing.?

In England, she performed in, amongst others, the Bristol Old Vic, ?the oldest, most distinguished theatre in the U.K.?

Her change of name came about while she was joining Equity in America. Apparently, there was another Margaret Griffin, so ours decided to change her name to Nonnie.

?It is so Irish,? she laughed. ?I was born here, but I have so much Irish in me and Ukrainian. Two Celts.?

During the very early seasons at the Griffin has been writing throughout her long career.

"I did write for radio," she commented. I was a constant radio actor "Orphelia (in Hamlet) " As You Like It."

About her present project and her performance at the Alton Mill, she said, "It's a treat to share the story. This is a fundraiser for KAMI, the local Haiti charity."

As to donating her performance for the cause, she replied simply, "What's an actor to do? Pauline Johnson, the great Canadian poet, went across Canada performing."

Marilyn "After, written and performed by Nonnie Griffin, is on for one performance only at the Alton Mill at 3:30 p.m. Sunday. For tickets, go to BookLore on First Street in Orangeville or call Anne Ley, the organizer, at 519-940-3659.