

The Gentleman Clothier: be careful what you wish for

By Constance Scrafield

We all want to escape our lives some of the time ? forget to be grateful for what we have, where we are ? and these feelings are the pivot of Theatre Orangeville's production of The Gentleman Clothier, by Norm Foster, currently playing at the Opera House until April 9.

There are a few things we learn about Norman Davenport early on: that he is a reluctant bachelor, a more modern man than he knows in his acceptance of people and a fussy sort of chap who reckons he would be happier living in a more reserved, disciplined, even stuffy time ? say, 1892.

On the opening day of his new tailor shop, set in this here-and-now time, his last-minute preparations are interrupted by a feisty, bright young woman, Sophie, who is quite open about being a lesbian ? it is 2017, after all.

She informs him that he cannot open without staff to show his readiness for the crowds that will surely come and that, as a highly knowledgeable measurer for the making of suits, it is she whom he must hire immediately.

Lots of humorous bullying on her part and shilly-shally on his and, sure enough, it looks as though she is irresistible.

Then, in comes Patrick, also slightly before the door to the shop is officially open, looking for a job as a handyman, a chap without a wife but with a daughter so ill that she must have dialysis three times a week. Norman's resistance is already at a low ebb, so there is much less persuasion needed for Patrick to secure a position.

At last, the shade on his door window is pulled up and the moment, years in the waiting for Norman, has come: his shop is open!

And look, here comes his first customer, Mrs. Alisha Sparrow, seeking to have a bespoke suit made for her husband.

Alisha is quite a contrast to the down-to-earth Sophie, and the banter between them uses those differences for great fun.

Although the four actors have not worked before together, they have all performed at Theatre Orangeville. So, welcome back to Maria Dinn as the effervescent Sophie, tall, leggy, chucking her lines at the other characters, laying it down ? all that ? hilarious.

Likewise, the elegant Heather Hodgson is back as Mrs. Alisha Sparrow, with her etiquette and sad story about a wayward husband for whom she is nevertheless buying a suit, if only to remind him that she is his wife.

Coming back to us after his last stint here, is Jeff Hanson as Patrick, rolling along, accepting his trials philosophically, determined to be cheerful through them. Solving all the minor problems both here and there, Patrick is quick and resourceful.

To them all, Norman talks about his disillusionment with the present day and his certainty that for him another time would be a better time.

Then, Sophie offers the moment for Norman to make a wish ? if he dares to believe.

Which he does: kudos to Stephen Sparks for his delivery of Norman.

Fancy living in another time? No problem, Norman ? here is a lady bug. Just put her on your hand, make a wish and blow your little lady bug to fly away and voila! You are whisked back to the ?good old days? of 1892, with your own tailor shop, in London, in a time and place that is perfect for you.

Funny thing is that the same three characters of his 2017 life are now back with him, their lives entrenched and not new to the rigours of living in 1892. It is no easy moment for Norman to realize the amazing transformation that has taken place: his wish has been granted. Wonderful, wonderful ? until he discovers that it has taken a century or more to develop the freedoms his own modern world enjoys.

There is one aspect to his new life in the old world that is truly splendid for Norman. He finds love. Well, well.

The Gentleman Clothier is both funny and sweet, with a good surprise ending and an interesting moral dilemma. It is, after all, a Norm Foster play. It's on now until April 9.

For tickets and information, you can drop in to the Box Office at 87 Broadway or the Tourist Information Centre on Buena Vista Drive at Highway 10; or call 519-942-3423; online at www.theatreorangeville.ca