

The Relaxed Performance at Theatre Orangeville and what it is

By Constance Scrafield

Many wonders have come from a simple, somewhat sour conversation.

David Nairn, artistic director of Theatre Orangeville, related the story:

'It all started with a chance remark during the run of the first performance of *A Gift to Last* several years ago,' he said. 'A couple, regulars to the theatre, saw me after a matinee performance and told me how much they loved the show.'

But then the couple asked to be informed the next time people with mental health issues were going to be accommodated, using a word that many might find offensive.

'The conversation went a bit sideways,' he recalled 'I said, 'We'll never deny anyone coming to the theatre because of a disability . . .' They got in a huff and said they were never coming back and off they went.'

He shook his head, 'It could have been handled a lot differently, but it got me thinking.'

'I realized that, in many ways, I was no better. How many times do we look around (at the issue of disability) sideways, any way but never straight on?'

'A year or so later,' Nairn continued, 'I was asked to be on the Board of Directors of CLD (Community Living Dufferin). Then we started doing the 'R' word at the high schools - all the schools. That one chance comment has had this company on a journey of true inclusion.'

Since the building of the Dream Factory, as Nairn calls the CLD building immediately inside the boundaries of East Garafaxa on County Road 3, which was raised by the partnership formed between Theatre Orangeville and CLD, the theatre people and CLD clients and employees have been sharing all the space.

For the theatre, there is a beautiful rehearsal hall, tremendous work shop, offices and storage area.

The rest of the building houses the offices and meeting rooms for CLD and the factory in which members work, packing goods for companies.

It means: 'We live it every day,' Nairn observed. 'We live with them.'

The renovations at the theatre are an excellent example of the kind of growth the theatre company is experiencing. Before the renovations were begun, the wheelchair accessible spots were 'the worst seats in the house!' Nairn exclaimed.

'They were over to one side; there were only two of them,' he added. 'The view of the stage even had some obstruction to seeing the stage.'

Once the renovations were completed, though, it is a different story.

With some excitement, he remarked, 'Now, there are 16 wheelchair accessible seats and they're the best seats in the house. Why should someone in a wheelchair not be able to sit in the best seat?'

As well, the low broad steps have been replaced by a smooth slope, as they previously impeded any access for wheelchairs to move up to the higher seats. Now, the majority of the theatre can be reached by anyone.

There is equipment to assist people with hearing deficiencies to be able to hear the entertainment on the stage but, as Nairn noted, 'We need to bring in signing as well.'

'The next step of our enlightenment is the Relaxed Performance,' he announced.

Finally, those next steps to universal accessibility, the Relaxed Performance, has been a growing part of theatre scheduling in Britain for some time, where the ambition is to see Relaxed Performances scheduled as regularly and normally as signed performances, one performance during a run.

It has come to Canada, led by the Young People's Theatre, Stratford Festival, others and, for the first time with this season's Christmas show, at Theatre Orangeville.

'During the PACT conference at Charlottetown, I was invited to sit in on a discussion about Relaxed Performances,' Nairn said.

It was the moment of decision for Theatre Orangeville's first Relaxed Performance to come.

'I wanted it to be the Christmas show, the show that a family shares. Autism and other challenges or members of their families.

People with an acceptable level of dementia or Alzheimers; people can be claustrophobic, have anxiety, be afraid of the dark or of closed doors,' he said, listing the possible audience members at a Relaxed Performance. 'Mothers with young babies or toddlers, children that have a hard time sitting still. It will be okay for them to walk around or go in and out of the theatre.'

'Trevor (Patt) is creating a video that we'll share online all about the experience to give people the idea of what happening,' he added.

Quite contrary to the norm, the theatre doors will be left open with safe spaces outside the theatre where children can come and go.

The lights are only half down to reassure those who are afraid of the dark.

The cast is very excited about the experience. Of them, Trevor Patt has some experience of this through his acting at the Stratford Festival.

?With families who might have one disabled family member ? that person can come so that they don't have leave anybody behind,? he was pleased to say. ?They can enjoy the music component ? see it, hear it ? understand ? primarily, enjoy it.?

After the show, the cast stays to meet some of the audience. ?They can meet Liam and Sniffer-dog. They can meet John Hughes, the pianist.?

?They'll see the masks ? how they come on and off ? the Owl can say, look, it's me, Debbie,? Nairn observed.

?We still have a way to go,? He admitted. ?We're still working for the visually impaired and signing performances.?

Yet, he said with tentative satisfaction, ?I believe Theatre Orangeville is the lead for inclusion of people who have been marginalized all their lives.?

Looking back on the chance remark, some 17 years ago, that really began this journey to the Relaxed Performance, Nairn expressed a wish: ?I wish with all my heart that I could have another chance at that conversation.?

The Relaxed Performance is scheduled for Dec. 19, at 7 p.m. at Theatre Orangeville. For details and tickets, go the Box Office on 87 Broadway or the Information Centre on Buena Vista, by telephone at 519-942-3423 or online and see the video too at www.theatreorangeville.ca