

Theatre Orangeville is premiering Off the Grid

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

Said playwright, John Spurway, 'With this play, the title came first. I saw a headline that read something about 'Off the Grid'. I thought that was a great title for a play. Now that I had a title, I had to write the play. Usually, it's the other way around.'

This said by the author, about the upcoming premier production of Off the Grid, it opens March 28 and runs until April 14, at Theatre Orangeville.

'It's all about the secrets,' he tantalized.

In brief, since no secrets were being actually revealed, the story does tell that Martha, an architect, has developed a passion for the idea of self-sustaining homes, buildings off the grid. She has obtained permission for herself and her sweetie, her husband, Len, to sample living in such a one, for a week.

Although anxious to please his darling wife, Len is very much a fan of his own home comforts, things that plug in to work and screens to entertain him. However, it's only for a week and Martha convinces him to celebrate their sixth wedding anniversary in this, presumably, rustic but, possibly, cozy environment.

What or should one say whom - neither of them is prepared for is meeting the neighbour of this house, Lowell. He has been living closer next door, 'in a shack' than one might wish, for two years, alone and lonely. Isn't he just delighted to see people moving in!

Playing the role, Stephen Sparks told the Citizen, 'As the neighbour, this is the first time anybody has been in the house for years. He's very excited to meet them. I'm having fun playing Lowell. He's quite eccentric.'

This would suit our Mr. Sparks to a tee, as all of us who remember his multi roles in Screwball Comedy here at Theatre Orangeville will know.

Poor 'Len does not get used to roughing it,' Jeffrey Wetsch, doing the part, assured us. 'He's a city boy out of his norm. He came because it's their sixth wedding anniversary and he promised to try. He's very funny about all his complaints but he still goes forward with the plan.'

Taking on the role of architect and environmentalist Martha, Robin Schisler, commented, 'I did a lot of research before I came. She does talk about designing ideas in her business.' Of the come and go between the couple, 'I like the relationship they have. It's fun loving and respectful. I like that.'

When, in the course of rehearsal, does the actor become the character? When is the character's mantle truly settled on the actor's shoulders?

They passed the ideas around among them: 'In the early days,' said Mr. Sparks, 'we talk about our character as 'he' or 'she.' And once we're into it, it's 'I'. That's the moment of passing over into the character.'

From Ms. Schisler: 'I remember a director who used to celebrate that moment - 'when the actors start referring to themselves by the characters' names, then I know we're got a grip on the play...' he used to say.'

'David's really good about asking about a character's reaction.'

David Nairn, Director for this production, explained: 'Sometimes, an actor will stop the rehearsal to object to a line or action and

say, 'no, this character wouldn't do that or say that.' And I just have one question: why? Or, otherwise, why not??

Mr. Nairn has said many times that he has great respect for an actor's instincts.

Mr. Wetsch remarked about acting in the theatre versus film, 'You've developed a unique muscle. I adore new work, being able to work with people to debate and discuss.' His career has seen him in lots of theatre and, recently, many television shows and movies.

Said he, gesticulating around himself and the group, 'I miss this. Doing film work, this is not what it's like, this collaboration.'

Going back to *Off the Grid*, Mr. Nairn's praise was, 'This play? there's wonderful depth of character; not all plays are like that. These are really people.'

'There's real heart to this,' agreed Mr. Wetsch. 'The joys of this are human. Authors strive for this but not all achieve it.'

This is the premier of *Off the Grid* and, with that comes 'a tremendous responsibility,' says Mr. Nairn. 'To serve the play.' He drew an arc with his hand, across the ceiling and us all. 'All of this, the rehearsing, the work back stage. That's what it's all about. To serve the play.'

They gave their reasons for us all to come to see the play.

'I think,' Mr. Wetsch told the company, 'people will go away saying, 'I saw a little bit of myself in those characters.' They'll identify with them.'

Ms. Schisler made clear the best reason to go to theatre: 'Theatre is one of the things we get to do as a community. We're so isolated and theatre is a shared experience.'

Mr. Nairn commented, 'This is perhaps the most important reason.'

'Plus, it's very funny,' Mr. Sparks put in.

The playwright, John Spurway reminded us: 'It's the first 3D entertainment there ever was and you don't have to wear silly glasses!'

Off the Grid runs from March 28 to April 14 at Theatre Orangeville. Tickets may be bought at the Box Office, 87 Broadway (the Town Hall) or the Information Centre on Buena Vista at Hwy 10. By telephone at 519-942-3423. and online at www.theatreorangeville.com