

Theatre Orangeville presents 'By the Light of a Story': A Review

By Constance Scrafield

As the light comes up on the set for 'By the Light of a Story' we are immediately welcomed into a home. To one side is an office chair and a vintage desk on which lie piles of notebooks; beside it is a couch with a duvet. Past the interior of the kitchen with a table in front are steps going down, and on the wall hang posters of book covers.

Designed by Theatre Orangeville's production manager Beckie Morris, this charming set was built and finished by Theatre Orangeville's creative team, technical director Lisa Lahue and scenic artist Candice Jeromkin. It cradles the action with everything it needs to spin the story.

It is the story of a famous author, Rhys Holland, who died three years ago; his still grieving wife, who sleeps on the couch and the man whom the publisher has hired as a ghostwriter to finish Rhys' work. Dashing in and out of this is the author's sister, Tammy, determined to bring his widow, Madeline, back into the world.

'By the Light of a Story' is on now at Theatre Orangeville and running until March 24.

Early on, Madeline, played well by Daniela Vlaskalic, tells Tammy that her husband's publisher has hired a ghostwriter to complete his book series and also, that someone is coming to rent the coach house at the back of the property.

Rhys was an established fantasy novelist with a large fan base and it turns out his publisher is anxious for the third book of his trilogy to be finished.

Jane Spence plays Tammy, lively and funny. Tammy is a motorcycle mechanic and she comes on with a biker's flair, studded leather jacket, humour ' the works.

A knock on the door ' it's the man who has called to rent the coach house. Enter Noah, performed by Mark Crawford, who tells Madeline, 'I go by Noah.'

He is the ghostwriter Rhys' publishers have hired to finish the series.

This is the first time Mark Crawford has acted on Theatre Orangeville's main stage, although several of the plays he has written have been produced here.

Noah is a huge fan of Rhys Holland, regarding him as something of a writer hero. He reveres Rhys' writing and then suddenly, here was the chance to step in for him. Thrilling.

But...not so much for Madeline who can hardly help from trying to hinder him; refusing to interpret Rhys' handwriting and objecting to his even touching Rhys' things, all the while Noah endeavours to read and discern Rhys' notes.

At one point, Tammy finally persuades Madeline to go to a 'Weiner Festival,' something about little dogs, just to get her out of the house, out of her own sadness.

The repartee between Madeline and Noah can be very funny as are the many moments of clever physical humour throughout the play.

Daniela Vlaskalic handles the heat and cool from which Madeline suffers; the turmoil she endures with a stranger in her beloved but late husband's chair and desk. How is she to forgive him for being the interloper she sees him as but the friend he would be to her?

Noah is readily portrayed by Crawford, who must be strong in the creativity he admires so much about the author and whose shoes he is keen to fill, but somehow still sensitive to that man's widow. She is so obstructive as to stretch his patience but he must cater more to her angst than his own frustration.

Between them and sure to keep the pain at bay and a better time to come, Jane Spence is lovely and spot-on as the ever-caring Tammy. If Madeline can return to a full life, it will be Tammy who shows her the way.

In many ways, one might agree with the audience member who observed this as a 'post-pandemic awakening play.'

As always in 'your favourite theatre,' the lighting, designed by Jeff Johnston Collins, wakens and relaxes in all the right places, providing the mood setting, and keeping pace with the action.

Alex Amini is the costume designer who can fulfill any needs and sees to Tammy's leathers and the dress that provides a very funny muddle.

Stage manager Jory McLean herds the cats as only firm diplomacy and a sense of humour can.

David Nairn, directing, forever claims the best way to direct is to stay out of the way, still shows his hand at how neatly the light of this story pans out. He delivers the misunderstandings and cross purposes of this comedy to its touching finale.

Be sure to go and see 'By the Light of a Story' from now until March 24. For tickets and to purchase your five or three show subscriptions, go to www.theatreorangeville.ca or call the box office at 519-942-3423.