

Theatre Orangeville season opens in Lunenberg

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

Norm Foster is very fond of disruption and rebuilding. Perhaps a lifelong feeling that the status quo needs a good shake up once in a while, he brings to Theatre Orangeville another fine example of shaken, not stirred, with his 2016 play, Lunenberg, on now and running until October 28.

Once again, a great cast, beautiful set, the lighting has an important role which it carries just right and the story is full of laughs ? with lots to consider. Deceit, betrayal and dying are all the legacy of Iris' husband, who leaves her mourning but headed for some terrible truths which could go so far as to change how she feels about herself.

It is up to Helena Janik to carry all this off as the bereaved widow, Iris, for the majority of the play, until part way through the second act to the end, which you will not read about here ? go and see the play. Ms Janik handles this with true sensitivity and humour, in its place, providing the perfect foil for the shenanigans of Iris' best friend and companion on her journey, Natalie, performed by Melanie Janzen, with the next-door neighbour, Charley, played by Terry Barna.

Natalie and Charley hit it off the way it sometimes happens when two people with a history of need realize they could be consenting adults. She has come to Lunenberg with Iris to check out the house in that town which Iris' husband, Robert or Bobby as he is known by his friends and neighbours in Lunenberg, left her.

Iris knew nothing about the house nor about the life he had there before her husband's death.

The details about both, supplied in snippets by Charley, change as he tries to soften the blows they inflict on the already desperate Iris. Aching to find a way to reconcile what she has learned, Iris turns to the journal of the other, unseen woman in the tale to discover the buried truths. As she comes and goes, between moments when she retires to the inside of the house to read, Natalie and Charley are left to flirt and plan.

What is particularly humorous and charming about all this is the grey hair: Charley and Natalie are both over 40, and their approach to the subject of their mutual attraction is pretty straight forward and outrageously funny.

All Mr. Foster's characters struggle. Natalie is torn between her self-assigned role of being the pillar of strength, a constant companion to the needy, the best friend for Iris. On the other side of herself, she is tremulously excited about meeting Charley, who could - and would! - from the sounds of him, provide her with a little innocent frolic, for which she so earnestly yearns.

Ms. Janzen plays her lustful role with real abandon, keeping us a little surprised yet sympathetic to her honesty. She is on her toes and flexes with the moments' many moods like a humour athlete. Fantastic.

Terry Barna brings lust to avuncular, with a suavety few could manage. Just the neighbour next door in a small fishing village, on the lookout for possible adventure. A you-never-know sort of fellow, when Charley goes against his grain to think about things, they turn out differently.

Playing it confused and sad at the beginning, Ms Janik gives the story weight and substance. She is beautiful but not anguished and her handling of the latter part of the story really brings it home.

Very well-known actor, on stage, film and television, welcome to Sheila McCarthy, as first time directing a Norm Foster play. Although Ms McCarthy avers that the combined talent of the cast, crew and volunteers means, 'My job is done!?' this play must, nevertheless, have challenges to direct, for Iris has to carry a consistent tone for much of it. To have kept that so successfully fresh certainly required thought and skill from both the actor and the director. For the rest, maintaining the balance between the two might-be lovers demonstrates that Ms McCarthy was doing her job well.

Designed by Theatre Orangeville's Set Designer/Production Manager for more than a decade, Beckie Morris gives the play exactly what it needs for a backdrop. Staging the whole story on the front porch of the deceased Robert/Bobby's Lunenberg home, the detail and comfortable facade behind the porch and the action makes us want to stay and never leave.

This combined with the lighting (designed by Louise Guinand) that brings in the days and the evenings, the sounds of the water of the bay and the birds (Dan Palmieri) close at hand, the whole ambiance, make the place real and wonderful; make Iris and Natalie long to be back before they have even left.

It is time too, amongst all the back-stage stars who make Theatre Orangeville productions so good, to send kudos to Cathy Dalton, the lady artist who paints most of the sets with floral trim, a harbour, a painted -in scene, exactly all the right colours. Be sure to look at the back of the theatre for her Lunenberg panorama.

Lunenberg is on now and runs until October 28. Sunday matinees are free D-Q ice cream shows. Tickets, as usual, at the Box Office, 87 Broadway or the Information Centre on Buena Vista at Hwy 10; by telephone at 519-942-3423 or online at tickets@theatreorangeville.ca

Check out the subscription deals and have a look at buying tickets for the Victorian Christmas Gala, November 18, the most important fund-raiser of the year for your theatre.