

Trudeau Stories are remarkable in every way

By Constance Scrafield

Here is a story, actually, a collection of related stories, as the title implies.

Brooke Johnson has brought us the remarkable tale of her friendship with Pierre Trudeau and tells it in a very remarkable way, on now at Theatre Orangeville and running until March 4.

To barely touch on the whole but to brief it lightly, the story is about this friendship with a very famous Canadian political figure, who was widely loved and hated. However, this is a complete break ? totally non-partisan and free of controversy, as far as policies and decisions during Trudeau's tenure as Prime Minister were concerned.

It begins 18 months after his role in politics was finished. When he and Brooke met, he was no longer a politician, but back in high-powered legal work. He still travelled extensively and lived life at the top, which makes the stories she tells even more amazing.

Free as he was from the many encumbrances of his former life, such a friendship, also kept free of consequence by its platonic nature, was likely a natural sequence for him. He clearly did not see it as condescension from his great heights. By her telling, he was truly interested in hearing her relay the details of her life as a student, a young woman working on that life as an actress. At the time of their meeting, Brooke was in the second of her three years' studies at the National Theatre School in Montreal. She was invited to attend this glamorous function and, while feeling excited and obliged to go, she had no dress, no shoes for such an occasion. To fill the need, a friend was able to lend her a black evening dress, low cut at the back, and black shoes, suitable to match. Both were a couple of sizes too big.

Who knows why a particular face in a crowd is the one a person sees? Others are there, old friends and colleagues, the famous, probably the infamous, but who is that young lady, looking somewhat out of place and a little uncomfortable? It seems Pierre decided to discover who she was.

He asked her to dance; demanded her promise. Once that promise was kept, she confessed to the too large shoes and her solution for keeping them on and the adventure began.

Johnson stays on the stage, taking us through the very memorable comings and goings between herself and Pierre Trudeau over the years of their friendship in this one act play. There is no intermission, no pause for her. She carries the whole delivery wonderfully well.

She bounces back and forth in conversions between Trudeau and herself, not the same way as actors performing all the characters, with hats and props, but just in the quiet change in her voice, Trudeau's intonations, giving him a presence that is clear and definitive. Very clever.

A semblance of ballet lends her performance constant flow, where she shares the stage with just an arm chair and a large hamper, used for storage and to sit on. Employing her powers of description, in her words and her body language, brings the fairy tale to us, taking us into the tall hallways, the northern forests and the icy sidewalks to slide on.

The artistry of it all is beautiful.

Winner of two Gemini Awards for her roles in Canadian television and four Dora Mavor Moore nominations ?for her theatre work in Toronto,? Johnson has performed in a wide variety of productions in theatres across Canada. She has enthralled audiences, likewise, in many cities throughout the nation, with her Trudeau Stories.

This truly is a rather eccentric friendship, which she often does not altogether understand, until she simply accepts his sincere interest in herself as a person, with no motive other than as a friend, a sometime companion, a source of conversation quite apart from the whirlwind of his usual life.

Using snippets of her own memoirs and letters to and from Trudeau, Johnson relays the tale from several points of view, keeping it different and holding the audience so skillfully to the ultimate unfolding, the last of Trudeau's own saga. There is a punch line, a final proof of the veracity of it all.

A work of art, a demonstration of genius, Trudeau Stories runs at the Opera House until March 4. Tickets are at the Theatre Box Office at 87 Broadway or the Information Centre on Buena Vista at Highway 10; by telephone at 519-942-3423 or online at www.theatreorangeville.ca

Theatre Orangeville also invites you to send them your own Trudeau stories which they are posting on their Facebook page.