

Up next at Theatre Orangeville: Trudeau Stories

By Constance Scrafield

So, at 22 years of age, you're in your second year of a three-year acting program at the National Theatre School of Canada, and you have been invited to a function at which Pierre Trudeau, whom you have never met, has also accepted an invitation.

Your borrowed dress and shoes are too big for you and this becomes a joke, and a point of rapport between yourself and Trudeau, now retired from his Prime Ministerial life for 18 months.

This and the ensuing friendship are the basis of the true story acted out by the author Brooke Johnson, coming up next in the Theatre Orangeville's season, opening Feb. 15 running to March 4.

'We met at the (function) and he asked me to dance, but I was uncomfortable in my shoes that were too big and we laughed about it,' Johnson said.

The play and the friendship are one.

'People with whom you've such a great affinity, for so many years, so many times ? I'm finding, as I get older, it (the play) is easier to re-discover. I rarely feel that I haven't done a good job. I just feel that I'm in the room with my best friend. This is a very simple show about me and a great friend.'

Saying which, Johnson plays a few versions of herself, according her age in the scene, and all of Trudeau.

With lots of performances over the years ? she reckons she has done the play before as many as 20,000 people, all told ? there are moments when peripheral changes occur. One such was during a three-week run in Ottawa, when she happened to arrive a little later than usual, thereby being forced to forgo her usual warm-up exercises. Her performance was perfectly fine that evening.

She pondered the matter and concluded, 'Maybe, I don't have to do this routine (before the show). I just have to be myself ? I was pretty well myself that evening in my uncomfortable too-big shoes.'

Reflecting on the reactions she has heard over the years of doing the play, she remarked, 'What people are surprised about is how shy and soft spoken he was. Anyone who was a fan of his, I guarantee they'll enjoy it. The evening goes by in a heartbeat.'

While she was acting it in Montreal, she talked to some separatists about Trudeau, and they relayed their comments to her: 'We think it's time we looked back on Trudeau with fondness.'

Johnson has had family in this area, near Tottenham, back since the beginning of the 20th century. They held tremendous family reunions every year during the mid-century and she remembers coming to them with real pleasure.

'They were over by Thompsonville, south of the Nottawasaga Inn,' she recalled. 'Charles and Cicely had 11 children ? all farmers.'

She is also a fan of hockey and a player herself, a lady with one other in two otherwise male teams and with the 'Thursday Parkdale crowd, a community group.'

'It's great exercise,' she said

She has taken Trudeau Stories all over Canada, with her smallest audience in Millford Heights Senior Residence and lots of numbers elsewhere, which are Whitehorse across to St. John's and several stops in Atlantic Canada. There is a theatre in Old Montreal with a 'real fairy tale quality.' Plus other theatres in Quebec and Ontario.

'More than ever,' she commented, 'when I look back on when I started it, I love being in that world because the audience comes there with me.'

She continued by talking about the importance of live theatre.

'You don't feel alone when you go to the theatre with the surprising connection (between audience and the actors),' she said. 'It is incumbent on us to connect with people who are out of our own sphere. Each of us has the right and the duty to say what you think and, then, we meet the most surprising people.'

'It's the engaging experience of those for whom he was such a part of our living,' she said of the play and its vision of Trudeau. 'It's a very Canadian play.'

Tickets for Trudeau Stories at Theatre Orangeville are available in person at the Box Office at 87 Broadway and the Information Centre on Buena Vista Drive at Highway 10; by telephone at 519-942-3423 and online at www.theatreorangeville.ca