

Wingfield ? much more than just a one-man show at Theatre Orangeville

By Constance Scrafield

Thirty years on, the original of the seven Wingfield plays, Letters from Wingfield Farm, currently running at Theatre Orangeville until this Sunday (March 8), is still filling the house and delighting the crowds.

Not only the play itself but, as well, over all these years, the only actor to perform the numerous roles within each story, Rod Beattie, is still the single star on the stage.

That is to say, in all the successful years of Wingfield, numbers one to seven, all across this great land of ours, Rod Beattie is the only actor to ever play all the parts in these exceptional plays (except very briefly, at the very beginning, when Dan Needles' brother Reid took a couple of turns at it in Rosemont). That is remarkable enough, but more, much more, remarkable is the performance to which he is treating audiences.

The play begins gently enough, with the editor of the Larkspur newspaper, The Free Press and Economist, talking about the newly arrived city man, Walt Wingfield, coming from a six-figure job in the stock market to live as a gentleman farmer in the small town of Persephone Township.

The editor expresses the hope that the gentlemen will see fit to write to the paper, reflecting the experiences of his new life. No sooner wished for than granted, as he hears the fall of an envelope on the floor where such a letter has been pushed through the mail slot of the paper's door.

There ensues a series of ?letters,? hilarious in the telling and quite amazing in the portrayal of each character in the individual stories, as Beattie slips from one to the next of their diverse personalities flawlessly.

The experiences Walt Wingfield lives through as he learns what he can about farming but, more importantly, as he becomes acquainted with his neighbours, are narrated by Walt himself with the comments and advice offered by his new friends, themselves. Each of them is so close to real people that the members of the farming communities in the audiences all know one or several of them personally.

As the letters to the editor (starting ?Dear Ed?) keep coming, the action ramps up with the passing of the seasons and the flow of life all around. Advice gives way to action; groups gather for conversation and reflection; an old dog adopts Walt and Walt learns more than he bargained for when he first thought about trying on life in the country.

The set is the one Rod and his brother (and director of the Wingfield plays) Doug Beattie, own and set up at most of the Wingfield performances. It's a straightforward country structure that tells the whole story as Rod comes and goes around it to change his hat or simply shrug into another person.

Although the play is primarily very funny, there are elements of reality, of sadness and fear. Life is never just a spoof and there are moments of genuine emotion to tear at your heart.

Through it all, Beattie flows from one personality to the next while they exchange views and news, both struggling and agreeing. The performance is one of consummate acting athleticism. It is never simple, for each character has his own voice, of course, but also impediments, strange deformities, odd laughs, problems with their eyes and all of these are swapped about within Beattie's one body as though he had the use of several bodies.

It is a touch of having to be seen to be believed.

Walt decides to go back to old-fashioned farming and, having acquired a couple of horses with nothing in common, begins to plough his field in the antique tried and true method. When the magic date of June 10 arrives and his fields are still largely unfinished, his fellow farmers take matters into their own hands, reminding him of the cardinal rule in the country. Learning what that is, is all part of the fun.

Letters from Wingfield Farm is on at Theatre Orangeville through March 8. For information and tickets, go to Theatre Orangeville Box Office, telephone 519-942-3423 or on line at www.theatreorangeville.ca