

Wingfield's Progress is still fresh and fabulous

By Constance Scrafield

When Walt Wingfield decides to run for a seat in the local council to fight off a condo development on the 7th Concession, his neighbours try to dissuade him: they advise a holiday away, sharing a room at a retirement home, keeping out of sight in his own home.

To learn whether he does take a run at local politics or not, come and see *Wingfield's Progress*, currently playing at Theatre Orangeville until Feb. 19.

Walt Wingfield is a Bay Street stock broker, escaping to the country, deserting the rigours of city life for, as he hoped, the easy joys of the country, buying a 100-acre farm and settling in.

He little understood the ramifications of his move, the lessons that take a lifetime or generations to learn, the deep attachment of neighbours for each other that rural life necessitates. For attachment, also read knowing everything about your life, as soon or sooner than you do.

Playwright Dan Needles, author of the seven Wingfield plays, of which *Progress* is the second, admitted humorously that he is 'more of a vacuum cleaner than a playwright,' for he garners the flowers of speech from the farming community within which he lives and has spent many of the summers of his childhood. This study and collection of the eccentricities of country speech is how, Needles willingly confessed, he furnishes the dialogue within his plays, for the range of characters in the plays ring true even to the ears of the farmer neighbours who believe they recognize themselves or others.

Wingfield's Progress tells the tale of a developer buying a large lot and building condos on it, very much over Walt's objections. He suffers witnessing the simple economic acceptance of the project by the municipality and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood until he is cheered when the latter begin to see the downside.

Added to this, of course, the other little problems of the geese, the confusion with local police, and the plan of action for discouraging the successful sale of the condos and, with six or so actors performing, it would be a funny play.

Actually, it is a hilarious play because only one actor, Rod Beattie, takes on all the roles and you will be glad he does.

There are plenty of one-person shows and this play ranks completely outside them, for there is no discussion about his being the only person on the stage; he just is. In a sort-of magic act, Beattie transfers from one contrasting character to another so that the conversation they are having is completely fluid.

In fact, there can be several people having a conversation and, with the same incredible flow, Beattie is all of them. Because each character in the play is quite distinct, with stammers, or a bent posture, or a twitch to his eye, or she's a female, or whatever the reason, Beattie shifts among them bringing each to his 'or her' say-so flawlessly and so clearly.

He makes us hoot with laughter in the skill and perfect timing of his delivery.

The stories within the play are presented as Walt writing his weekly letter to the editor of the local paper which evolves from narration to action.

This is the 30th anniversary of *Wingfield's Progress* and Beattie has been the only person to play the multiple roles in this and all the seven plays of the Wingfield series. He and director Douglas Beattie 'they are brothers' have been touring the plays across Canada for all those years. As well, Rod performs other roles in other plays; likewise, Douglas produces and directs elsewhere.

They have their own set for *Wingfield*, which travels neatly and never changes. It is the perfect arrangement for the plays, built to be clearly a corner on the farm, with a ladder, table, stool, chair, a few hooks and other small accoutrements. A hat, a jacket, a visor is all that ever marks a different person beyond Rod's body language and voice.

We once asked Douglas what was involved in directing this one man in, especially, a new play. Inasmuch as the plays creation are all collaborative among the three men, with the final writing by Needles, the brothers are already well-acquainted with each new work. The real work, as in any play, is the development of the characters and fine tuning the performance from one personality to the next.

Wingfield's Progress runs at Theatre Orangeville until Feb. 19.

For tickets, go to the Box Office at the Town Hall, 87 Broadway or the Tourist Information Centre on Buena Vista at Highway 10; by telephone 519-942-3423 or online at www.theatreorangeville.ca