

Battling through the butterflies, actress Stuart-Jones keeps coming back for more



By Brock Weir

She had to fight her way through the butterflies in her stomach, her nerves, and an overall adrenaline rush, but once she broke through that barrier, an actress was born.

And so was a strong relationship between Zara Stuart-Jones and Theatre Aurora.

Ms. Stuart-Jones, who opens in the lead role of Annie this Thursday in the Theatre's production of Mansel Robinson's play 'The Heart as it Lived?', was bitten by the acting bug at the Henderson Drive theatre over 30 years ago.

At that time, her 11-year-old daughter already got her feet wet as a member of the local company, but acting wasn't a gene she inherited from her mother. As one production was mounted, however, Ms. Stuart-Jones and her husband were asked to become involved behind the scenes.

'Neither my husband nor I had ever done anything like that before,' says the long-time Aurora resident. 'But, he was willing to go out and give it a go. My husband acted in a couple of shows, I worked backstage and had no interest in going on stage at all, and then I was convinced to come out to audition for 'This Evening's Performance.'

'I wasn't terribly interested, but I thought I would audition with no commitment and I was offered the part of the ingénue. At this time I was about 44, and I played the part of a 24 year old, so that was interesting!'

Now 73, Ms. Stuart-Jones is sinking her teeth into another juicy leading part, something she says is all too rare for actors in her age bracket.

Set mainly in 1996, 'The Heart as it Lives?' follows Annie, who is described as a 'cranky, puritanical spinster who never questioned the status quo' until her world is upended by the arrival of Zak, the grandson of her estranged sister. His arrival leads Annie to reflect back on the events surrounding 1935's Regina Riots and the consequences of very important decisions made during a very heady time in the country's history.

'What keeps me coming back is the chance to play a good role, the social part of the theatre company, keeping in contact with old

friends, and making new ones," says Ms. Stuart-Jones. "Once I read the play, I realised her emotions were totally committed to her dead boyfriend and have been for the last 60 years. I wasn't entirely sure about the 'puritanical' though. She is strict, was a strict teacher in the handling of students, and those ideas are still carrying on through the way she talks to Zak. She doesn't stand any nonsense, expects a good response to discipline, and is probably disappointed in the responses she gets."

The historical events informing Annie's life were certainly before Ms. Stuart-Jones' time, but getting under the character's skin offered her a chance to learn about a time period in Canadian history she knew little to nothing about, and how someone in Annie's situation might have reacted to the events unfolding around her.

From her initial steps on the stage at Theatre Aurora, she has played many roles, with one of her favourites taking the lead role of Diana in Neil Simon's 'California Suite.' It was a role that required considerable emotional gymnastics, but an exercise she said was particularly rewarding. In fact, she found her first ever experience on the stage to be a rewarding one as well and it is a feeling that keeps her always coming back for more.

"I just love the whole process from getting a script in my hand, reading it, marking up the part, and interacting with the other characters," she says. "It is about working on the character development and just seeing the whole thing come together. I find it a remarkable process."

The Heart as it Lived opens at Theatre Aurora this Thursday, December 3, and runs at select dates and times through Saturday, December 12. For more information, visit www.theatreaurora.com or call 905-727-3669.