

If/Then explores the 'What if??' at Theatre Aurora

By Brock Weir

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if you went the other direction when you came to a fork in the road?

Of course you have, we all have, but, for most of us, it is a question that will always be unanswered.

The possibilities, however, are fun to explore and that is just what Theatre Aurora will do when the curtain rises on If/Then next Thursday, January 25.

A contemporary musical with music by Tom Kitt and lyrics by Brian Yorkey, the story follows Elizabeth, a city planner, who moves back to New York to re-start her life in the big city. Eventually, her life follows the two parallel paths of 'Liz' and 'Beth', putting the magnifying glass on 'the intersection of choice and chance.'

'For me, it was that we shouldn't be so laden down by choices,' says director Sergio Calderon of what attracted him to the project. 'We should be open and available and be able to say 'yes' and move forward without being too calculating, without being too reserved in how we live our lives. It calls into question whether fate or predestination exists, and how would we ever know? We wouldn't, because we would never get to see multiple versions of our lives, but in a theatrical way it is great to explore those ideas.' If/Then arrived at Theatre Aurora almost entirely by chance.

In this, their 59th season, they intended on staging the landmark musical Rent, but rights were suddenly pulled from community theatres across North America when producers decided to stage a 20th anniversary tour. That same week, however, Mr. Calderon received word that the rights for If/Then had become available and it fit their season's theme like a glove.

'Once me and my team had been chosen to direct it, I had to read the play about 28 times, simply because of the storyline,' he says. 'We're following the life of one woman after she makes a decision that would change the course of her life and we see both of those paths play out on stage, similar to the concept of [the film] Sliding Doors. In order to make sure each life and each of the characters in both of those lives were clear in my mind [in terms of] their arc, their wants, and how they are going to achieve those wants, we had to have a really great sense of what each person does in each life.'

It was a difficult task for both director and cast, particularly lead actress Jody Butler. But, it's a task Mr. Calderon says Ms. Butler makes look 'effortless.'

'It is an incredible thing to witness in itself,' he says. 'We underwent a full day of physical movement workshops in order to try and identify the potential for how physically the life of Beth presents itself, to her, and to everyone who exists in that world. How do you carry yourself in the world of Liz? One life has greater stresses and pressures, and one life has different ones that would affect every person different, physically. It's physicality, but also how each one of them speaks - not about huge differences, but the subtleness of language in the text and how you attack it. She is on stage for virtually the entire show. In order to make those huge transformations, emotionally and physically, in a split second at times, is also a very massive challenge for an actor to undertake.' As such, with such a complex show, Mr. Calderon says the pre-production process on If/Then started a full two months earlier than the typical shows, from the complex scenery changes to ensuring the characters are fully formed.

Sometimes the rehearsal process, he said, felt like a 'freight train that was out of control' with one song calling for six scene changes, flipping back and forth between the lives of Beth and Liz four times, but it is all worth it in the end.

'Before your eyes you will be transported to about 100 different places in New York City,' he says of the intricate set. 'The elements are all coming together and we are steamrolling towards that dress rehearsal where every single element falls into place. As a director, my anticipation is always the sharing. As an artist, I just want to share the work and see the reactions that the audience will get from watching the work that we have created. It is a very, very moving piece of theatre. There are a lot of elements that are quite relevant to our living in today's world, so our hope is that it will strike a chord with our audience members because it certainly has brought many members of our cast to tears over the last number of weeks.'

'The main theme is, 'What if?' While it is worthy spending a bit of time asking that question, it is really wanting the [audience] to realise that spending too much time with that question will actually make them miss out on what is in front of them. It is about being open, ready and willing to accept any possibility that is in front of them without belabouring it because, at any given moment, this time will pass and you'll never get that back.'

If/Then opens at Theatre Aurora next Thursday, January 25 running on select dates and times through February 3. For more information, and tickets, visit www.theatreaurora.ca or call 905-727-3669.