

Mighty heroines reign supreme as Theatre Aurora lifts curtain on new season

Strong female characters, many of whom made an indelible mark on history and culture, will reign supreme as part of Theatre Aurora's 2022/2023 season.

In what is set to be the first full in-person season since the start of the global pandemic, the new season, dubbed 'The Mighty Heroine' will explore the lives of Anne Frank, performer Florence Foster Jenkins, cartoonist and writer Alison Bechdel and Isabelle Romee, the mother of Joan of Arc.

'The Mighty Heroine is a theme that has been in our pockets since we struck our play-reading committee in 2019,' says Sergio Calderon, Theatre Aurora's Artistic Director. 'Back then, we certainly had a lot of social commentary and discussions around female representations and the big movement of #MeToo. When I was thinking about the next theme I would explore and have Aurora audiences ponder, discuss and consider, I thought this was right on the nose - certainly back then and it will always remain relevant.'

The theme itself is built around the Tony-winning musical *Fun Home*, drawn upon the life of Bechdel who has prompted creators to re-think female representation in media with the development of The Bechdel Test, which rates how plays, musicals, and films, for instance, portray women outside of a direct connection with men.

'We really wanted to be true to female representation and what that meant,' says Calderon. 'That is really the only guiding source that is semi-official out there. I thought, 'Okay, let's then take a look at all the plays we want to produce, that we think we should produce, the story we should tell, and put it to the Bechdel Test as a measuring point. Once we feel good about that we can move forward with picking our two traditional comedies, two dramas, a musical - giving us a well-rounded showcase of strong female characters to the Aurora public.'

The season opens with the first of its traditional dramas, 'The Mother of the Maid', on October 20. Running through October 29, the moving play follows the life of Joan of Arc's mother at a pivotal point in history.

'It's a wonderful re-imagining of the story of Joan of Arc, but through the lens of Joan's mother, which is very interesting because any time we see any story about Joan of Arc, she is the protagonist and the main focus. As we all know, all of the main historical figures in time don't live in silos; there's either a huge support system or antagonists that surround those people, so it is interesting to examine [a] story that is perhaps well-known or at least familiar, but from a different angle.'

The season continues with 'A Nice Family Christmas', which runs November 24 through December 3.

The first comedy in the season, it's the only one that doesn't feature a real-life female character. Nonetheless, it's fictional women embody the strength Theatre Aurora is looking to convey this year.

'Try as I might with my resources and my library, it was interesting to find a plethora of beautiful dramas about historical figures but there weren't that many comedies,' says Calderon. 'We ventured off the path a little bit here, but there are still very strong female representations which follow the Bechdel Test and it speaks to a sensibility of our contemporary lives and how families behave and come together during the holiday season.'

The first production of 2023 will give audiences a taste of where the Bechdel test came from with the musical *Fun Home*, which runs from January 26 through February 4.

Fun Home, with music by Jeanine Tesori with book and lyrics by Lisa Kron, is a musical based on Bechdel's graphic novel of the same name which looks at her childhood, her complex relationship with her father, and how the heroine begins to discover her identity.

"I am very proud and happy with our theatre company in that we have produced some musicals that haven't been done either in the community theatre stages and even just locally," says Calderon, who directs the musical. "We [were] pushing the boundaries with Next To Normal and Spring Awakening and If/Then. None of those had been done anywhere in the area and I am happy to say that Fun Home fits in to the same category where we will likely be one of the first community theatres to put it on the stage.

"When you think of strong, female-driven comedies and historical figures, we would be remiss to really ignore such a powerhouse [as Bechdel] that influenced a generation of people. Not only as a graphic novelist and a cartoonist and the way she approaches the world politically, but now that we actually get to tell her story through a theatrical lens. It seems to me like a no-brainer when we're looking at intimate, interesting, challenging first time pieces to present on our stage. It anchored the ideas of presenting a season that was themed The Mighty Heroine."

NEXT WEEK: A small but mighty heroine with an immortal legacy continues the theme.

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