

Actor brings joy to the stage as Theatre Aurora prepares to open new season with The Music Man

Keith O'Connell and Harold Hill go way back.

O'Connell may not have spearheaded the development of a boys' band or patented his own version of ?teaching? music through the Think System, but their history goes back 35 years.

The Brampton-based actor first played the lead of the travelling salesman intending to hoodwink the good citizens of River City, Iowa, as a young man in 1989. With a little more life experience under his belt, he tackled the role again in 1996.

Fast forward another 28 years, he's getting under Hill's skin once more as the Theatre Aurora veteran returns to the stage next week as Theatre Aurora opens its 2024-2025 season with Meredith Wilson's perennially-popular The Music Man.

?There's a maturity that goes along playing this character, which I think I now have,? says O'Connell about playing the lead for the third time in as many decades.

The Music Man has always been a favourite for O'Connell, who counts actor Robert Preston, who debuted the role on Broadway and made his portrayal immortal in the 1960s film adaptation, as a personal icon.

?The movie version can't be touched and I think it is one of the best adaptations of a movie musical from a stage musical ? it pays homage while creating its own allure,? he says, of why the musical resonates after some 60 years. ?It's one of those musicals where you shouldn't be rooting for Harold, but somehow the way the character is written, how the songs envelop the story, and how the songs move the story along, you can't help but fall in love with this guy and kind of hope that he gets not his comeuppance, but what he wants in the end ? which is obviously Marian.?

For the uninitiated, The Music Man revolves around Hill's quest to swindle the small town into enrolling their sons in a fake boys' band, complete with the purchase of band uniforms and instruments, sure in the intent of taking the money and running. Things get complicated, however, when he finds himself smitten with one of his key marks ? the local librarian, Marian Paroo.

With age, O'Connell says he finds himself coming into this particular production with ?a bit more of an understanding as to what's prompting Harold to act the way he is and to come across the way he is.?

?When you've got some life experience, you can understand better how people find themselves in certain situations, maybe in spite of themselves,? he says. ?He's still a swindler, he's still a snake oil salesman ? there's no getting around that ? but you can portray the character in a way that makes a little bit more sense and that resonates a little bit more with the audience so they can see how he might find himself in that situation.?

Having directed the last two productions of Music Man in which he found himself in the lead, this production at Theatre Aurora is being helmed by long-time Theatre Aurora director Judi Cragg. It's a new experience for O'Connell and he says it's been ?fun to explore the character in someone else's sandbox.?

?The Music Man, to me, is like putting on a pair of comfy pyjamas ? I know these songs, I know there's a happy ending at the end of the musical and, to me, that's why this doesn't go away. It's like going home again when you're watching The Music Man.?For a show he knows so well, O'Connell hopes when audience members leave they will do so not just with a ?collective sigh? but a collective ?It was so nice to go home again ? it was so nice to see something that just had a plain, simple message and a message of community.?

?When we're looking at Aurora and its theatre, it just has that kind of family feel to it and I think that's why this musical lends itself

to Aurora, the theatre group and the town. I hope they walk out humming or tapping the tunes ? or marching to them!?

?I think this is my Harold Hill swansong,? he concludes with a laugh. ?I love this character, I know this character, and not that I've ever cheated people for band instruments and collected money for things that didn't exist, but I understand why he does what he does and I understand this guy.?

By Brock Weir