

Director Riddell celebrates the less familiar at Theatre Aurora

By Brock Weir

Theatre-goers are usually familiar with popular stage musicals like 'My Fair Lady' or 'Oklahoma!' and while familiarity can often breed contempt, that's not normally the case with musical theatre enthusiasts, says Bob Riddell.

Mr. Riddell directs Theatre Aurora's current production of Jason Robert Brown's 'Songs for a New World.' The musical made its debut in New York in 1995, but, if you have heard neither of 'Songs' nor of 'Brown', you're not alone. And that was part of Mr. Riddell's excitement in taking this on.

'It is not one of your typical pieces of musical comedy fare with a simple plot, or a boy meets girl kind of a thing,' he says. 'It is a song cycle and it is very intimate. Within the community theatre realm, that is taking a risk because it is different than the usual fare where audiences come in knowing it right away.'

'That might be a hindrance in having the audience want to come out versus a more commercial project where they have certain expectations going in. On the other hand, when they are going to see something new, they have no expectations.'

Mr. Riddell brings an extensive musical theatre background to Theatre Aurora's latest production, which opened last week and runs through December 14. His relationship with the local theatre company began nearly 25 years ago with a production of 'Gypsy', continuing through recent years to include 'Urinetown' and 'You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown.'

'I was one of those kids at the end of the 1950s who was really weaned on the variety show like Ed Sullivan, Carol Burnett, and Sonny & Cher, but I also used to love movie musicals and anything that had song and dance in it,' says Mr. Riddell. 'I eventually got into doing musicals as a performer and came back to Toronto in the mid-1980s to make it my career and it just took off from there.'

Mr. Riddell counts Gene Kelly and his ability to make complete stories out of mere dance steps, as well as the sleek and sophisticated choreography of Bob Fosse among his chief influences and whose styles he tries to incorporate into his own work. 'I love Fosse's style, slickness, quirky moves and little mannerisms,' he says.

But as far as choreography goes, Mr. Riddell has taken a different approach with 'Songs for A New World', an approach as different as the show itself. It is very character-driven, centred around four unnamed characters each facing an important crossroads in their lives. It examines through a song cycle each next step and the consequences of those steps, and the emotional journey they follow.

'Being a smaller musical definitely lends itself the advantage of doing something where everything is set out and you have to get from point A to point B,' he says. 'This definitely gave me a little bit more freedom.'

As people sit in the audience, Mr. Riddell says he hopes people ask just who this Jason Robert Brown is. He might not be as famous as Rogers & Hammerstein, but his work and career are on an upward trajectory. He also hopes people will find a personal connection along the way as they learn more about the four characters of the musical.

'Hopefully you will recognize some of their moments and connect with the challenges of the people on stage, compare notes, and maybe say 'wow!' at some of the talented performers at Theatre Aurora. Theatre Aurora is a nice little intimate space. 'Songs for a New World' needs that intimate space for the audience and the performers.'