

Immersive experience takes the stage as Theatre Aurora caps season with On Golden Pond



On Golden Pond has touched the hearts of theatre- and movie-goers for 45 years but, as Theatre Aurora prepares to bring down the curtain on its 2023-2024 season with Ernest Thompson's play, they're making it an immersive experience for one and all.

Opening April 18 and running on select dates and times through April 27, On Golden Pond is, according to Theatre Aurora, a poignant story of an elderly couple, their estranged daughter, and the unforgettable summer that brings them together as they rediscover the power of love and family.

Directed by Barb Jones and set on the titular lake, set designer Chris Penna, whose credits include Nightmare Alley, Star Trek: Discovery, and Guillermo del Toro's Cabinet of Curiosities, has set out to create a different kind of experience for Theatre Aurora patrons old and new.

The vision he helped bring to life is a focus on the lake, with vignettes suggesting the various parts of the cottage in which the main action is set.

An immersive experience is what I wanted to achieve, says Penna. We wanted to give the audience the sense of coming into the cottage at 8 a.m. or 9 a.m., everything still has dust sheets on it, and they're opening it up after the winter. It's a full-stage open so you can really take in the lake and get a sense of where we are. You can almost feel and hear the 'northernness' of it all and really set yourself up then, the lights will fade up as Norman comes in.

By day, he's is an art director and set designer for film and television. His day-to-day work includes creating sets that are much larger and more expansive compared to the Theatre Aurora stage. Joining the production was a chance to do something different for Penna, who is an avid community theatre patron with his wife in Hamilton, ON.

My university training is in theatre design. I went to Ryerson Theatre School and spent four years there doing pretty much everything, he says. It's a great school, you learn everything, but I majored in set and costume design. From there, I branched out and always wanted to do film work and got into the art department as a trainee and that was about 10 years ago. I have just been working my way up since then. Theatre has always been a love of mine and I have always kept it in my back pocket. Every couple of years I try to do smaller shows just so I can stay in.

And he's glad he has, as he describes *On Golden Pond*, brought to life on screen by Henry Fonda, Katharine Hepburn and Jane Fonda in a Mark Rydell film, as a top notch show with a cast of actors that are "almost beyond community theatre."

This is praise that is anything but light as Penna has had the opportunity to work with some of the best in the business, including del Toro's production designer, Academy Award-nominee Tamara Deverell, who recently won an Emmy Award for *Cabinet of Curiosities*.

"It's always great art and design that (del Toro) pushes for. That has probably been a highlight of my career, being able to work on so many Guillermo del Toro projects with my boss who is now getting the recognition," says Penna.

For more information on Theatre Aurora's production of *On Golden Pond*, which opens next Thursday, April 18, including tickets, visit theatreaurora.com.

By Brock Weir
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