

Love and deception hit the stage in Theatre Aurora's Kiss of the Spider Woman

By Brock Weir

Kiss of the Spider Woman is nearly 35 years in the making for Neill Kernohan.

Mr. Kernohan first saw Manuel Puig's landmark play about two prisoners in a Buenos Aires prison when the film adaptation first graced the silver screen in the mid 1980s and its plot has stuck with him ever since.

Now, the Theatre Aurora veteran is back in the director's chair bringing Kiss of the Spider Woman to life, preparing for opening night next Thursday, February 28.

Kiss of the Spider Woman follows two prisoners, Molina and Valentin, sharing a cell in Argentina. Molina is described as an effeminate gay window-dresser in jail for corruption of a minor while Valentin is a political prisoner, part of a revolutionary group trying to overthrow the government.

The two men, seemingly opposites in every way, form an intimate bond in their cell and their relationship changes both of them in profound ways.

When it first came out, I felt it was an interesting take on gay life in the 1960s, in some ways, says Mr. Kernohan. One of the two main characters identifies in the play as gay, but, to me, it was kind of interesting for the time. Looking at the play now, [you wonder] if he was really gay or if he was a trans woman. As we begin to discuss that and how attitudes have changed, that's how we approached it.

Mr. Kernohan is also approaching the story with his own rich theatrical experiences.

His first interest in theatre was sparked at a young age. Having appeared in many shows, the watershed moment came during a production of The Wizard of Oz where he played the Cowardly Lion. He heard laughter from the audience and that, he says, is when he blossomed on stage.

I think I have always had theatre in my life, he says. I went to Wilfrid Laurier University for a music degree and during that time we did operas, and I also got involved in the drama group. I don't remember a time when I wasn't doing some kind of theatre, but I had a hiatus of about 25 years after university while I worked as a church musician, which fulfilled a lot of what I wanted to do in the arts. But, when that ended four or five years ago, I took a year or two off and thought, I don't have to worry about music now, but then I just had to get back into it.

He made his return to the stage as a music director at Theatre Aurora and, with a number of musicals under his belt, including Theatre Aurora's recent productions of If/Then and The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, this is the first time in several years that he's had the opportunity to direct a play.

The play version of Kiss of the Spider Woman was first performed in 1983 following the publication of Puig's novel of the same name in 1976.

A lot has changed for the LGBTQ community over the last four decades, and while some of the conversation has changed as it pertains to a number of the issues addressed in the novel, play, and also the 1990s musical, Mr. Kernohan says there isn't anything in the play that rings untrue today.

I think a modern LGBTQ person would have a lot to argue about with Melina, he says. We're using 'him' right now, but we're not really sure what pronoun Melina would use today. Some of the things Melina says in the show I think would set a young queer person's teeth on edge and make them really interested in having a conversation. For the time, I think it was extremely forward-thinking in some ways.

In the end, it is a love story. It's about love and deception. There's a lot of deception happening in the show, but there is definitely a journey that the two characters go on. Each character learns something by being in the presence of the other character. For me, it's a play about love, it's a play about deception and it is a little bit of a mystery too.

I want people to be entertained by the show. There are some deep issues being brought forward about how we deceive people, why we would deceive people, and how we deceive them to get our own way. I want the audience to be entertained first and, secondly, to be able to think about what love and deception mean.

Kiss of the Spider Woman opens at Theatre Aurora's Henderson Drive theatre on Thursday, February 28 at 8 p.m., with additional performances on select dates and times through Saturday, March 9. For tickets and further information, contact Theatre Aurora at 905-727-3669 or visit www.theatreaurora.com.