

Music Man, Norm Foster fave to open Theatre Aurora's 2024-2025 season

After a resounding 2023-2024 season which saw attendance beat pre-pandemic levels, Theatre Aurora is gearing up for a new season of audience favourites.

Fresh off last year's season opener of *Anne of Green Gables: The Musical*, the new season will once again have toes tapping as Theatre Aurora presents Meredith Wilson's classic *The Music Man*, opening on November 22, and running on select dates and times through December 1.

Kicking off the New Year is *The Melville Boys* by Norm Foster, one of Canada's most popular playwrights.

"We were just thrilled with (our previous season) and we're still kind of basking in the glow," says Judy Cragg, Artistic Director for Theatre Aurora, with a laugh.

Adds Theatre Aurora President Neill Kernohan, "Last year was one of the best years Theatre Aurora has had in recent memory. We surpassed all ticket sales and new people coming in."

This, says Cragg, added a bit of pressure on the Board to make sure this year lived up to the last.

"We took our time," says Cragg of she and the team crafting the season. "We were supposed to try and not have another musical with as large a cast as *Anne of Green Gables* at 26 ? now we have 30 in *The Music Man*! Sometimes you've just got to do what you've got to do!"

Audience and Board alike, she says, really wanted a musical and *The Music Man* is always a winner.

"There is a lot in *The Music Man* ? there is redemption and growth for all of these people ? and it just gives so much joy. Start with the music, it's just beautiful melodically. When you think of '76 Trombones', I hope people will be dancing out of the theatre when they are leaving. It's just so uplifting and beautiful."

For Cragg, *The Music Man* is all about the people ? particularly the strict Iowans encountered by conman-travelling salesman Harold Hill.

"They are within themselves, live their lives within very strict parameters, their children are supposed to behave in a certain way, and there's not a lot of lightness and joy. In comes Harold Hill, scammer extraordinaire. That's how he sees his life ? he's a scammer, he goes from town to town, with a woman in every town, and, as he says in the end, he gets his foot stuck in the door. There is a huge redemption. For everybody, it's a huge change in how they feel, what their outlook on life is, and that's my big takeaway ? there is definitely more than just music, but, oh, boy, that music is beautiful."

A different kind of arc comes next in the season when *The Melville Boys* treads the boards.

A work by popular playwright and humourist Norm Foster, the production, directed by Theatre Aurora veteran Kay Valentine, follows brothers Owen and Lee Melville at a lakeside cabin for a weekend of fishing. But their time is upended ?by the arrival of two sisters who become catalysts for a tenderly funny and unsentimental look at four lives in transition."

"One of the brothers has cancer and is going to die ? but in all their conversations, it is funny, one of those Norm Fosters where one minute you're laughing? his brother has a really hard time coming to terms with it, and then these two women they meet at a neighbouring cottage?you can do a lot with four characters."

She likens it to the classic sitcom *M*A*S*H* which could have audiences howling one moment and then, all of a sudden, present a

?gut punch? that was part and parcel of the wartime setting.

?I hope when the audiences leave *The Melville Boys* they will be able to empathize or at least sympathize with at least one of the characters. It has depth, humour, things about dying and facing death, and it all takes place in this little cabin by the lake. I think we can mostly say that everybody, once you get to a certain age, you've had somebody close to you die. We've all been there and felt that and this is going to resonate with everybody.?

NEXT WEEK: The season continues next week with Agatha Christie's ?*And Then There Were None*? and ?*Noises Off!*? a backstage (and front-of-stage) farce by Michael Frayn.

By Brock Weir