

Temple of Fame to show the progress of women, and how much work there is still to do



By Brock Weir

A lot has changed in Canada over the last 100 years.

At this time, just a century ago, we were at the height of war, our men were dying by the thousands, and women were just on the cusp of getting the vote.

It seems a world away but, in many respects, that century hasn't seen wholesale change across the board. In many parts of Canada, there are still biases to address, stigmas to tackle, and long-simmering questions to ultimately be asked and answered.

That is part of what drew Kim Wheatley to the Temple of Fame.

Next weekend, May 11 ? 13, on its centenary, the Aurora Museum & Archive will re-mount The Temple of Fame, a modernized play which has, since its first performance here in Aurora in 1900, celebrated the achievements and impact of remarkable women throughout history.

Modernized for today's audiences by local writer and actress Corrie Clark ? and, in this case ?modernized? means adding and subtracting characters to reflect today's cultural awareness and sensitivity ? the play will be brought to life by many local women (and a few men) and bring together the efforts of a whole community.

The first performance will take place at Trinity Anglican Church on Friday, May 11 at 8.30 p.m. This performance will feature an opening reception hosted by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev entitled ?Beyond the Crown: Celebrating Strong Women.?

The second performance will take place at the same time Saturday evening, with a special evening reception hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Mother's Day will be marked with a Sunday matinee at 2.30 p.m. featuring a Mother's Day Tea, in two sittings, hosted by the Aurora Historical Society.

The Temple of Fame is based on a poem by Alexander Pope and features women throughout history pleading their case before the ?Goddess of Fame? on why they should win the crown and take their rightful place in the Pantheon.

Over time, and in its many iterations, it has featured largely white women, occasionally figures of colonialism.

This time is markedly different and, in auditioning for a place in the production, Ms. Wheatley, an Ojibwe women, says she sensed an opportunity.

Ms. Wheatley takes on three different roles in The Temple of Fame, an allegorical ?Canada? and the warrior Queen Boudicca, but, perhaps most importantly, she is sharing the story of Shkoden Neegaan Waawaaskonen.

That is, she's sharing her own story. Shkoden Neegaan Waawaaskonen is her spirit name. The member of the Shawnaga First Nation is an Anishnaabe Cultural Consultant who has dedicated her life to foster and renew relationships and partnerships in this country that should be the norm.

?Shkoden Neegaan Waawaaskonen is a personal expression of who I am, because it is truly who I am,? she explains. ?As an Ojibwe

woman, it is an honour to be included as part of the panorama of women that are going to be presenting their claim for the crown. I am very excited about this. Boudicca is a warrior and I take into positive expressions of my anger and my passion; it is a little out of my element, but I was so excited to have an opportunity to portray strong women, and that is what I am doing.

'As 'Canada' I am representing a new nation of people. This nation affected my people on a personal level greatly. I like holding the space of land and really reminding people that yes, there is land here, but there were people here long before this land got this new name. I am looking forward to inserting elements of truth and really kind of nudging people into a recognition that [Canada] is longer than 150 years with my presence.'

Ms. Wheatley describes herself as a 'cultural educator' rather than 'cultural performer.' The lines are definite. A performer, she says, is pretending to be something; but this is who she really is.

'My role in the public realm is to remind people of the true history of Canada, the fact that we are still here, sensitize them towards another way of knowing and renew the relationships and partnerships we should have as sovereign nations in this country.'

The Temple of Fame has brought together a diverse cross-section of local women to breathe life into an equally diverse cross section of international 'her-story.'

Patricia Wallace, for instance, is taking on three roles, including that of Elizabeth I.

Having retired from her job with the York Regional Police earlier this year, Ms. Wallace says she was looking for volunteer opportunities within the community, and Shawna White, Curator of the Aurora Museum and Archives, suggested she come out to audition for Temple of Fame.

'She said, 'Have I got the thing for you!' and I thought, 'Come on! I've never acted in my life, but okay!' I came out to the auditions, still laughing at myself that I was even considering it, got up there, read the part, and lo and behold I got a part ' I couldn't believe it,' says Ms. Wallace. 'What attracted me is it is a part of Aurora history. It is 100 years old, it speaks to the progression of women in Canadian and North American society, business, education, how far we have come and how far we have yet to go. What we achieved over 100 years is really a drop in the bucket. That is important as a review of the next 100 years, so we can see our way forward.'

This is a sentiment shared by Alison Collins-Mrakas, who takes on the role of 'The Goddess' to whom each of the women are pleading their cases.

'I think it is an extraordinary opportunity for a once in a century event,' says Ms. Collins-Mrakas. 'In this age of #metoo and empowerment, it is a positive story about the history and resilience of women and what they can achieve.'

For Jasmine Johnson, this is not only a chance to be part of local history, but to explore roots as well.

'When I heard it was about women and a 100 year old play, I was interested to see what characters they added, which characters were removed, and how it would all come together in the end,' says Ms. Johnson, who plays a 'Woman of the Next Century' as well as Mary Ann Shadd, the first Black publisher in North America. 'I studied so much Black history and I never heard of her before. The fact she wasn't in any prominent books makes her an important character for people to know about and the influence she had on both Canada and the United States.'

It is all about these opportunities for Ms. Wheatley.

As she looks forward to the Mother's Day Weekend performances, she says she hopes the latest incarnation of The Temple of Fame opens up a dialogue, particularly between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

'I hope that people are more than curious and they do get to the stage of asking questions and continuing to provide invitations for us to be part of events and performances and gatherings that happen, not only in Aurora, but across the Region. 'We're still here and we're always open and willing as nations of people to bring that indigenous presence so I am hoping that is what will happen. I hope people will get comfortable with the reality we're still here and that they will be sensitized to open up some good dialogue and perhaps shift their perspective on our place in Canadian society.'

For more on The Temple of Fame, including tickets for each performance, visit auroramuseum.ca/temple.