

Theatre Aurora puts best foot forward with Stepping Out

By Brock Weir

Everyone knows how difficult it is to take that first step out of your comfort zones, and that is exactly what the characters do in *Stepping Out*, which opens next Thursday at Theatre Aurora.

Written by Richard Harris, *Stepping Out* is a comedy about working class amateurs attempting to overcome their inhibitions and left feet in a low-rent dance studio in North London.

While the characters work to step outside of their day-to-day routine, *Stepping Out* is helping first-time director Judi Cragg get back into familiar territory.

Ms. Cragg, a resident of Newmarket, has always had a love of theatre. Once upon a time, she was very involved in local theatre, particularly musicals, in Ottawa. She continued her love after moving to Toronto, but life intervened. Her daughter was born, she raised her family, and her first love took something of a backseat.

Now, at Theatre Aurora, she's back in her element.

"I really missed being involved with theatre, so I asked around and I found Theatre Aurora," she says, noting Theatre Aurora Board Member Barb Jones helped open the door. "The first thing I did was co-produce *The Drowsy Chaperone* with Barb in the fall, but, as I was doing that, I already thought I would like to get back into directing. As I watched the rehearsal process, I kept thinking I just wanted to get back on stage.

"Although I had never directed before, I am a retired teacher with a specialization in drama, running the drama club, putting on big musical performances, so I have that behind me."

All the components came into place, however, late last fall when the director originally slated for *Stepping Out* had to step back. Ms. Cragg saw an opportunity and stepped up to make her pitch to the Theatre Aurora Board.

Her vision for the play struck a chord and she was asked to take the helm and take on a challenge.

"When I read this

play, I noticed that the characters are not really as developed as they could be from a writing perspective," she says. "My first thought was, instead of seeing that as a real problem, how can I develop those characters further without changing dialogue? That was an appealing challenge for me.

"These people are in tap class every week, there's dancing, there's music involved and, for me, that was also a little bit of a pull."

At the end of the day, Stepping Out is essentially a comedy, she says. Ms. Craig likens it in some ways to the sitcom M*A*S*H that perfected comedy that could turn on a dime to the more emotional, poignant moments.

"This is a group of people who are very different from one another," she says of Stepping Out. "They just come together once a week for their tap dance with varying degrees of ability, from different backgrounds and bringing with them different personalities. We, as humans, all have a chink in our armour and that is what I was looking for: some of the characters, in the writing, reveal more to the audience than others, but there are still little moments for everybody and I want to make sure the audience gets that and feels that."

They will be helped through the behind-the-scenes creativity of the actors as well.

As part of her directorial process, Ms. Cragg tasked her actors with coming up with detailed backstories for their respective characters. In the process, they brought in their own lived experiences and the personalities of themselves and others they've encountered throughout their lives. In the process, they have developed on-stage personas that will reach each and every audience member "for better or worse!

"Some of the character development is not written in the script, so we needed to look for body language and facial expressions, how they feel about someone else," she says. "This is a feel-good play and I want people to leave the theatre feeling good and uplifted. I want them to be able to relate to the characters in different ways. There's one character that's, well, that is just completely annoying and I think most people have met someone like that in their lives. Maybe they'll even say, 'I want to go out and take a tap class.'"

Stepping Out opens at Theatre Aurora next Thursday, April 4, at 8 p.m., and running at select dates and times through April 13. For more information, including tickets, visit www.theatreaurora.com or call 905-727-3669.