

Whodunnit overs intrigue, laughs and a bit of stage fright at Theatre Aurora

By Brock Weir

‘Challenge accepted.’

That's what Linda Stott says went through her mind when she read a review calling Bettine Manktelow's play *Proscenophobia* as ‘a nice piece of fluff.’

Ms. Stott says she saw something much different, and the first-time director is determined to bring this deceptively multifaceted play to life next week at Theatre Aurora as part of its 60th anniversary season.

Theatre Aurora's milestone season is built around the theme ‘the life of a theatre’ and *Proscenophobia* fits the bill like a glove, being directly translated to mean ‘stage fright,’ an essential, if unwanted, part of any actor's journey.

The play is described as a ‘clever whodunnit’ all taking place in the dressing room of a community theatre during the production of a thriller.

The play within the play stars Addie, a fading star who is attempting a comeback. Here, she is understudied by her best friend Millie, but the two women share more than just a love for the theatre; they were both married to the same theatrical empresario who left one woman for the other.

‘Addie and Millie are both aging and are fighting the sexism that happens in some acting worlds,’ explains Ms. Stott. ‘Addie is desperately trying to get that one last hurrah, that one big comeback. It took years for Addie and Millie's friendship to come back together and when we join them their friendship is going from strength to strength. At the last minute, Millie needs to fill in for Addie and instead of the gun that was part of the play shooting a blank, a real bullet goes off and Millie is killed.’

‘That's all in the first half of the play!’ adds Ms. Stott with a laugh, noting the second act looks at the ins and outs of how all this unfolded.

Was it an accident?

Was it a suicide?

Was this Millie's way out?

Was it her grand finale as an actress?

Or, was it murder?

‘I read this play for the first time as an actor and thought it was clever,’ says Ms. Stott. ‘Then, I read it again and thought it would be cool to direct. I started reading it over and over again and moving pieces were appearing in my head. I realised I was developing a vision for a play. I wrote down my vision and submitted it to Theatre Aurora.’

Ms. Stott comes to Theatre Aurora with a major in Theatre Studies, but, in the years since earning her degree, there was a time when she shied away from the performing arts. Her ambition at the outset was to be a teacher, but she quickly found out that teaching a group of kids wasn't the best fit.

‘I was very introverted and shy as a child, painfully so,’ she says, ‘with a lot of self-esteem issues. I was in a French immersion program and we had to do these little skits, and one I played a clown and all of a sudden the room started to laugh, and there was that high! The audience was laughing at what I just did and I realised I could present myself as somebody else and be really comfortable with it and get that feedback from the audience, which I think draws many of us to the art form.’

‘I loved examining plays and taking them apart. That's how my professors prepared for a play and I missed that kind of analysis as it was something I really, really loved and craved. Here, with *Proscenophobia*, we dedicated our first five rehearsals to table work, which is a significant amount of time for a play that is 90 minutes. We spent our first rehearsals developing the timelines of all the characters and how they interact, the history of each one, what their true feelings are. It was amazing because on that sixth rehearsal we started blocking and the actors got up and it felt easy. All of a sudden, we had these wonderful, amazing choices being made by the actors because they are so intimate with their characters.’

Although *Proscenophobia* is a bona fide whodunnit, Ms. Stott says it is a whodunnit that comes with a real lesson upon the big reveal. That lesson intrigued her, and she says she is sure it will intrigue the people who come out to see the show this coming Thursday, January 24.

‘The way the ending is written and presented, you can't help but keep thinking about it and forcing the audience to think and escape. I lived with this play for seven months and I am still laughing. It's a very enjoyable night out and it is going to leave you with a thinker at the end. It just so happens to be a really poignant message and one I think we can all apply in different parts of our own lives.’

Proscenophobia opens at Theatre Aurora next Thursday, January 24, at 8 p.m., running on select dates and times through Saturday, February 2. For tickets and further information, visit www.theatreaurora.com or call 905-727-3669.