



***Bed and Breakfast* draws the audience into its compelling story**

By Andrew Wagner-Chazalon

It's not uncommon for actors to break the fourth wall, to speak directly to the audience rather than speaking to each other. But there is another wall in the theatre that is much more rarely broken – the one that exists between audience members. For a couple of hours we are in the darkness together, watching the same play, laughing and weeping and even breathing in tandem. But afterward, few of us ever do more than exchange simple pleasantries with the strangers we are sitting beside.

It takes a powerful experience to crack those walls, but they were shattered this week at the opening of the Orillia Opera House's production of *Bed and Breakfast*. After the applause faded, the lights had come up, and the audience began shuffling out of the theatre, we couldn't help but acknowledge that we had all been moved together. The show is so good – so well written, directed, and performed, so funny, touching, and thought-provoking – that all around the theatre you could see strangers nodding to each other and even speaking in approval and delight.

You could, I suppose, summarize *Bed and Breakfast* quite simply: Brett (Thomas Alderson) and Drew (Matt Pilipiak) are a gay couple from Toronto who inherit a home in a small Ontario town. Rather than selling the house and staying in the city, they decide to move to the town and open a bed and breakfast.

You can picture where this will go, right? As the only openly gay couple in town, they will no doubt encounter reactions that range from bemusement to outright hostility. But gradually their charm and joy will win over the locals, and they will all live happily in small town bucolic bliss. It's Normal Rockwell meets RuPaul.

In the hands of a lesser playwright, that's exactly how this would unfold. But Mark Crawford is too good a writer for that. Instead, we are engulfed in a world of complex human relationships. Yes, there's hostility and bemusement, love and joy, but there are also family secrets, misperceptions, mixed motives, intersecting storylines, and an entire small town's worth of characters who make it all happen.

Telling those stories requires incredible feats of agility from the two actors, both of whom are making their Orillia Opera House debuts. Each presents a dozen or so characters – male and female, young and old – whipsawing in and out of roles with breathtaking speed. There are scenes with four, five or more characters on stage at once, and there's not a moment where you wonder which character each of these two is portraying. In one hilarious scene, Pilipiak plays both bride and groom as they engage in noisy and enthusiastic honeymoon sex – a feat which would be impressive enough if he and Alderson weren't also portraying five other people and a puppy in the same scene. It's truly a tour de force from both actors.

Driving all this mayhem is director Fiona Sauder. The winner of multiple Dora awards, she is widely regarded as one of the most exciting young directors working in this country, and this show reveals why. The production crackles and snaps like a thing possessed, bringing us to the brink of tears then engulfing us in roars of laughter with nary a pause for breath. We travel from sharp, pointed moments to broad physical comedy with whiplash-inducing speed, and the entire ride is a non-stop thrill.

It's also worth noting the work of the production team, particularly lighting designer Andrew Dollar, as well as production manager Ashley Whitten and assistant stage manager Amelia Mielke-O'Grady. The lighting and sound changes throughout the show are rapid and effective, yet often so subtle that you hardly even notice they're happening.

The set is minimal – a table, two chairs, and a drop cloth – and the props nearly nonexistent. But the combination of lighting, sound, direction, and performance bring it all seamlessly to life as we journey with Brett and Drew and a host of other characters.

Kudos also to the Opera House itself for bringing this fascinating and entertaining show to Orillia. It's a testament to the leadership of Artistic Director Jesse Collins that this small town theatre can present a show that explores life in a small town, with all its joys and heartaches, and anticipate that audiences will respond. Theatre at its best shines a light on the audience and invites us to see ourselves in the stories being told on stage. And this production truly does just that.

Bed and Breakfast runs until August 11. The Opera House summer season concludes with Norm Foster's *Halfway There*, running August 16 to September 1.