



***Halfway There* goes all-in on friendship**

By Andrew Wagner-Chazalon

How important are your friends to you? More important than career? More important than romance? That question is explored in *Halfway There*, the final production in this year's summer theatre season at the Orillia Opera House.

It's an important question in our age – after all, we are beset by data that more and more of us are living lonely, isolated lives. And it's taking a toll: having a strong network of friends has been linked to a host of positive outcomes, including longer life and better health.

But while *Halfway There* deals with a serious topic, it never once feels heavy. This is a Norm Foster play, after all, and the playwright is renowned for his ability to touch on serious topics without once letting up on the laughs.

The title refers to the setting – Stewiacke, Nova Scotia, which sits on the 45th parallel, making it halfway between the equator and the North Pole. But it also hints at the

journey of some of the characters, as they move from a life that is only halfway lived to one that fully embraces the entire journey.

Stewiacke is a small town: not “small compared to Toronto,” but genuinely small. The real-life town has a population of 1,500 people, and is home to a bar, a couple of restaurants, and a handful of other businesses. This play embraces that smallness, and considers what life is like for residents who never desire to leave, as well as for those who consider moving in.

We are introduced to a tight-knit group of four friends: middle-aged Rita, Mary Ellen and Vi, and their slightly younger friend Janine. They gather regularly in the coffee shop where Janine works as a waitress, to chat, gossip, and just share their lives.

One day, they're joined by a handsome stranger, Sean, played by Reid Janisse (making his Orillia debut). He's in town for a month, covering the local medical practice while the town's doctor is overseas. Romantic sparks begin to fly, despite the fact that he's from the much-despised city of Toronto. Secrets are revealed and shared, the friends explore their relationships with each other, and Sean is drawn into the warm embrace of this tiny town.

This is very much an ensemble piece: the action is primarily driven by the interaction between the characters rather than by any one character's journey. There are no soliloquies, no long monologues, and the entire cast is onstage for much of the play. Director Jesse Collins has assembled a crackerjack ensemble to tell this story and drawn them into a tight circle. The four women really do feel like a group of old friends who share every detail of their lives.

Three of the four are familiar faces to Orillia Opera House audiences – Debbie Collins, Alison Mackay, and Viviana Zarrillo have all played here frequently, and it is a treat to see all three of them on stage together. Newcomer Melodee Finlay is an excellent addition to the group, and the four of them crackle with loving energy as they banter in the coffee shop.

Janisse's Sean brings a delightful wistfulness to the group, as he moves from being wary of this odd group of small towners to willingly accept their rather quirky and blunt embrace.

This production rings with authenticity – which is aided in part by set designer Ashley Whitten's keen eye for detail. Every element of the simple set is a pitch-perfect evocation of a small-town coffee shop, right down to the layout of the menu cards propped on the counter.

From set to cast, script to pacing, there's not an element out of place. Spend a couple of hours in this restaurant in Stewiacke, and you'll be entertained as well as inspired: it may just be time to call up your own friends and spend more time with them.