



Laughter and love abound at the Orillia Opera House

By Andrew Wagner-Chazalon

It's been said that in any given week a theatre company somewhere in Canada is performing a Norm Foster play. And with good reason: the veteran playwright's work is consistently approachable, entertaining, and reliably funny.

Moving In, is no exception. Opening this week at the Orillia Opera House after a world premiere at Morrisburg, the latest of Foster's 75-plus plays is also one of his funniest. More than one director has noted approvingly that many of Foster's plays have a reliable rhythm, with a solid laugh every few three lines, a pace so steady you can set your watch by it. Orillia audiences might want to reset their watches: there are scenes in *Moving In* where every single line is hilarious.

Director Jesse Collins – who is in his ninth season as Artistic Director of the Orillia Opera House – is no stranger to Norm Foster’s plays. He’s directed a number of them, including last year’s world premiere of *Doris and Ivy In The Home*.

Directing a world premiere can be a daunting task, guiding a cast through a work that nobody has ever seen performed before – a work which may still need some lines tweaked when rehearsals begin. Every decision the director makes is carving new territory, but Collins has made it look easy, crafting a production that flows seamlessly from beginning to end.

Of course, it helps that he’s assembled a cast is as good as the play itself: in other words, phenomenal.

Three of the four performers are newcomers to Orillia. Dan Lett has played at just about every other theatre in the country, including ten seasons at The Shaw Festival. He’s joined by Jake Goldsbie, whose theatre credits include a turn in Mirvish’s *Beauty and the Beast*, and regional theatre veteran Molly Kidder. Local favourite Viviana Zarrillo completes the cast.

Individually, they are all strong and eminently entertaining performers; together, they are a crackling ensemble, throwing lines at each other with all the gleeful abandon of professional athletes tossing a ball around, whipping a fast one across the stage for the pure joy of seeing their colleague catch it and throw it back again.

Some of Foster’s plays have a serious heart, a meditation on a somber theme (the nature of prejudice, the fear of others, our need for a sense of place) woven through amid the laughs. This is not one of those plays. This is, for the most part, a pure romantic comedy, a sweet and charming love story.

The plot swirls around Mark (played with easygoing aplomb by Dan Lett) and Gretchen (an energetic and razor-sharp Viviana Zarrillo). They are a couple in their late fifties who are moving in together. Both have been married before and are surprised and delighted to find love – and, apparently, lots of excellent sex – once again.

It’s moving day when the play opens, and they are joined by Mark’s son, Brett (Jake Goldsbie), and Gretchen’s daughter Rachel (Molly Kidder). Both adult children have strong reservations about this new living arrangement and waste no time in sharing their views with their parents.

Kidder has the most interesting part in the play, and she makes the most of it: her Rachel is strong yet brittle, and Kidder deftly controls the energy of the room in the few brief scenes where tragedy peeks in, pausing the laughter for a few serious lines before dialing the humour right back up again. And Goldsbie is absolutely charming as the happy-go-lucky 30-year-old who plays drums in a cover band and is quite fine with that, thank you very much.

The play is a delight, and it is particularly enjoyable to see it in the intimate Studio Theatre. The 100-seat-theatre was off-limits during the pandemic, so plays were performed in the voluminous Gordon Lightfoot Theatre upstairs.

It’s clear that audiences are eager to return to the theatre: even before the lights went up on opening night, the run of this show was nearly sold out. And ticket holders will not be disappointed. Sitting just a few feet away from the performers, laughing constantly as we watch funny people fall in love – there truly is no better way to spend a summer’s evening.

Moving In runs until July 21. The Opera House summer season continues with *Bed and Breakfast* (July 26 to August 11) and concludes with *Halfway There* (August 16 to September 1).