

The unmitigated delight of live, professional theatre

On a First Name Basis gives audiences something we all desperately need

By Andrew Wagner-Chazalon

Performers around the world have found creative ways to give audiences what they crave. Plays are being presented in parks and parking lots, driveways and front yards, and – of course – online.

But there's still nothing like seeing professional performers playing live on an actual stage.

Most companies have given up any hope of bringing audiences indoors for the foreseeable future. But the Orillia Opera House has found a solution. And for three weeks at the end of this summer, Orillia is just about the only place in the country where you can see professional theatre in a theatre.

The Orillia Opera House is presenting Norm Foster's *On a First Name Basis*, a delicious two-actor comedy starring Viviana Zarrillo and Jesse Collins.

They are able to pull off this amazing feat thanks in part to the historical accident of the building itself, a grand old hall that was erected in 1895. Orillia's enormously popular summer theatre season is usually presented downstairs in the Studio Theatre, a 100-seat space in what was once the Town Council chambers. But upstairs sits the grand space that gives the Opera House its name – the 700-seat Gordon Lightfoot Theatre.

This gorgeous space is usually reserved for concerts and community events. But it also provides plenty of room for an audience of 50 people to enjoy a play while seated in socially-distanced clusters.

Like the theatre, the cast and the play itself were also chosen with an eye to both artistic excellence and pandemic precaution. Zarrillo and Collins are both long-time favourites of Opera House audiences. Zarrillo was seen last year in a delightful production of *Same Time, Next Year*; Collins is the theatre's artistic director, and also directs and takes the occasional role – in this production, he does both.

The two are within each other's social bubbles, allowing them to perform on stage together. And it's a delight to see the chemistry they produce.

Orillia audiences are no strangers to Norm Foster's work – the 2020 summer season (which is now the 2021 summer season) features two plays by the prolific Canadian dramatist. *On a First Name Basis* isn't one of them. It was selected for this production in part because it has no set changes or costume changes and hardly any props – meaning there's no need for backstage crew to wipe things down between scenes.

It helps that it's also hilarious and touching.

The play is simply a conversation between two people. David Kilbride (Collins) is a wealthy novelist, a writer of spy thrillers that have been turned into successful movies. Miss Hopperstaad (Zarrillo) is his housekeeper. One evening, Kilbride realizes he knows nothing at all about Miss Hopperstaad – not even

her first name – despite the fact that she has worked for him for 28 years and knows everything about his habits. So, he decides that they should have a drink and chat “as chums.”

Miss Hopperstaad is extremely reluctant, but as Kilbride persists (and the drinks flow), she begins to relax, the stories emerge, and we come to see what has been hidden during the course of this long, imbalanced relationship.

At their best, Norm Foster’s plays are funny without being heartless, and that’s certainly the case here. His characters are often flawed – Kilbride is particularly self-absorbed and pompous – and the humour may come at their expense, but it’s never cruel. There’s a warts-and-all love here, which Collins and Zarrillo bring to the fore.

Zarrillo is particularly effective when expressing her character’s exasperation with Kilbride. At times she positively bursts with frustration at his obtuseness, seeming to deliver entire lines with both feet off the floor. Her angular presentation is hilarious, and contrasts beautifully with the slow awakening that Collins brings to the stage, his character gradually coming to awareness like a man emerging from an extremely deep sleep.

As we are drawn further in their stories, everything else vanishes. The news headlines, the initial oddness of being in this big theatre with so few people, even the very masks we are wearing – it all slips away as we become absorbed in the world that is unfolding before us.

The best theatre is an act of both awakening and forgetfulness. It’s something we desperately need right now, and *On a First Name Basis* delivers it.