

Guarded Girls humanizes both sides of prison system

Playing through May 19 at Kitchener's Registry Theatre

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In 2013, before Matt White moved from Toronto to Kitchener, he had heard of the inquest into the death of inmate Ashley Smith at the Grand Valley Institution for Women.



"That's when I first learned that there was a prison in Kitchener," says White, who is the artistic director of locally-based theatre company Green Light Arts.

"I knew that I wanted to explore, investigate and learn more about the prison system in a theatrical context, specifically through Ashley's story," he adds.

"We needed to find someone else to write it. Charlotte (Corbeil-Coleman) was really the only person I had in mind," says White. "The play is tackling a really important subject with the solitary confinement discussion back in the news right now."

Solitary confinement is at the core of "Guarded Girls," written by Corbeil-Coleman.

The play is Corbeil-Coleman's disturbing fly-on-the-cell-bars lens into the prison system. A new inmate, 19-year-old "bad girl" Sid, has been transferred from prison to prison across the country. She befriends fellow inmate Brit, who insists she's innocent. Inmate Kit is there for the "bad choices" she made.

The guard sees and hears it all every day as "Guarded Girls" spirals toward its heart-wrenching finale.

Green Light Arts uses theatre as a discourse to encourage audiences toward a positive social change, be it the stigma of mental illness, the challenges of cultural diversity, or the thin line between those on the inside and the outside of the women's prison system.

White is an actor, director, dramaturge, educator and theatre producer. For five years, he produced theatre with Toronto's Necessary Angel Theatre. Before that, he spent three years as an education co-ordinator and administrator with Toronto's Factory Theatre.

That's where he met playwright Corbeil-Coleman.

"She had just graduated from National Theatre School in the playwright's wing. The Factory actually premiered her (2008) play 'Scratch.' "

"Scratch" was nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play in 2009, and Corbeil-Coleman was also a shortlisted nominee for the Governor General's Award for English-language drama in 2010. She also writes for radio, film and television.

"Charlotte is a truly gifted playwright and poet who also has a great understanding of writing women — especially teenagers and young women," notes White.

Tarragon Theatre and Green Light Arts workshopped "Guarded Girls" for two years.

Over time, the play evolved past Smith's story into a humanization of both sides of Canada's correctional service.

Green Light Arts will host several after-show discussions during the play's run, including special guest, Sen. Kim Pate, who is known for her research about women in the criminal justice system. There will also be representatives from Community Justice Initiatives, Elizabeth Fry societies, and the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council.

White is very excited "Guarded Girls" is also going to be published by Playwrights Canada Press.

The play had its world première last month in Toronto at Tarragon Theatre.

"When we began this project, there was no text," notes White. "We just read the research and interview materials to get a sense of the prison system and Corrections Canada.

"With Charlotte coming on board, she was keen to expand the scope and really look at the prison system in general, while also exploring the generational cycles of mothers and daughters.

"At the core and in terms of the actual narrative and story structure that question of family and cycles comes up. Even with the correctional officer — it is one of those situations that is really interesting," notes White.

"At the heart of this play is Charlotte's text. 'Guarded Girls' is structured in such a unique way. There are three separate pieces. The audience has to work to piece it together. The story is like a jigsaw puzzle."

"There is a final monologue in the show that also came through that workshopping process. It has been so amazing to see these actors work on this play from the first workshop. They are at the top of their game."