

Local theatre comes alive with 'hopeful' post-pandemic playlets

Waterloo Region Record · 20 Aug 2021 · JOEL RUBINOFF

KITCHENER — With six inspirational playlets created by a diverse group of actors and playwrights, Green Light Arts' premiere of "We Could Be" in an outdoor, COVID-friendly setting — free of charge — may be the perfect message for this close-to-post-pandemic moment.



"It's definitely wonderful to be in front of an audience and super awesome to have people laughing and nodding with the stories," notes artistic director Matt White, who had to scramble with his cast and crew amid ever-shifting COVID restrictions.

"We wanted to commission work that would respond to the current moment — the challenges and uncertainty — without being about the pandemic directly. It's that sense of sharing a moment and trying to reconnect when we've been living in isolation for 18 months."

With their experimental, eclectic origins, these vibrant indie plays — diverse, inclusive, racially aware — are the perfect vehicle for a theatrical renaissance, staged, literally, on the streets of Kitchener (technically, in the covered parking lot/ vendor area of the Kitchener Market).

"It's not like there's a beginning, middle and end, like Shakespeare," notes White.

"With new pieces, the playwrights are still finding their voices. With the audience, we're learning together."

Bold, unconventional, in the moment. "I think of it as a short story collection, connected by a theme of resilience and hope," adds White.

"We were conscious of trying to find out whose stories aren't being told and who isn't in our audience and how to make them feel comfortable."

In this case, it's with six thematically linked miniproductions:

Ciaran Myers' "Climb, Swim, Cry, Fly," about a swimmer and a climber grappling with opposing viewpoints that "acknowledges the universal tribulations of the last two years without squaring a focus on the pandemic." Agada, who plays the climber, loves it "because it's so physically demanding. I'm on a ladder the entire show."

Ahmad Meree's "Oh Canada," structured as a standup comedy set and expose on Canadian culture from the perspective of a Syrian actor and refugee, dedicated to "all those who feel alienated and embarrassed and can't express themselves due to the difference in language or culture."

Intisar's Awisse's "we be splendid," a collection of interludes — inspired by a larger play "(m)otherhood" Awisse is developing as Green Light's playwright-in-residence — that examine "surveillance culture as something we actively partake in, that inordinately impacts the lives of Black people."

Ciaran Myers' "Whale," about a group working together to save a beached whale that explores feelings of isolation, ambition and the importance of community.

Teneile Warren's "Preach, Boy," about a street preacher attempting to connect with his estranged father, billed as "a story of resistance and resilience" that "sits at the intersection of Diasporic Blackness, immigrant experience, Christianity and Black parenthood."

Nicole Smith's "Euphemia," described as "a magically playful piece about life's smallest moments," dedicated to "anyone who is too much, not enough, lonely, suffocated, longing, looking, grateful, satisfied, angry" and "to all of ourselves together."

Front and centre in five of the six, intriguingly, is Emeka Agada, hot off his turn as a burn victim of the network TV show "Nurses" (episode eight).

"It's like putting people into this world of imagination and seeing the possibilities of what could be," notes the 27-year-old Elmira actor, who has a raft of TV appearances under his belt, is angling to play D.C. superhero Green Lantern on screen, and will head off to the prestigious Guildford School of Acting in England this fall.

"They're all connected by a hope for change."

As an actor who, like many, has seen his career sidelined by the pandemic, he finds it invigorating to be back in front of a live audience, transforming himself from one character to another.

"We've been cooped up in our houses a long time now," he confides. "It feels good to see other people again."

The challenge for the cast, which also includes Ahmad Meree, Lily GKS and Samantha Mercury, was pivoting on a dime in the face of changing COVID restrictions.

"We had to adjust both with the scheduling of rehearsals in our backyards and over Zoom and really having only one week," notes White, who had fleeting access to the Kitchener Market parking garage before the production's debut. "With an audience, we're learning together what the pace is. We're still tweaking some things."