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Festival Players season heats up

Posted By GREG BURLIUK

Posted 2 hours ago

Prince Edward County is growing in more than just wineries.

Now entering its third season, the Festival Players of Prince Edward County are offering professional theatre in a variety of scenic locations across the county.

Its season opened earlier this week with the premiere of Ship of Fire, a musical based on events in county history. It's written by former Kingstonian Suzanne Pasternak, as well as her husband Bernie Gaw, Marion de Vries (who directs the show) and musician Tom Leighton.

The story is based on the sinking of The Ocean Wave, a luxury passenger steamship on its way from Montreal to Hamilton in 1853.

Pasternak, who has written several other plays about Prince Edward County history, was first interested in The Ocean Wave in 1992.

"People had been trying to find the wreck for years because it was supposed to have silver and gold on her," she says. "But then she was found under 150 feet of water. CJOH-TV brought in a team of elite cave divers to check it out."

The divers didn't find the safe with the loot in it and the condition of the wreck was too dangerous for further exploration. But Pasternak was hooked on the story. "I made mention of it in my play Solomon Mouckin 1993 and it's been under my skin for a couple of years," she says.

Then Pasternak brought on board collaborators: Marion de Vries as a professional theatre person; her husband Bernie Gaw, to write the courtroom scenes because of his experience as a staff sergeant with the OPP; and Tom Leighton, with whom she has collaborated musically for several years.

And slowly the play took shape through a series of workshops.

It didn't take long for Festival Players artistic director Sarah Phillips to get interested.

"It was a great opportunity for us," she says. "It's an incredible bringing to life of history."

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"The two lead characters are fictitious but their stories are based on historical fact."

Pasternak created the lead role of Patience O'Hara -- an Irish immigrant who falls in love with a deckhand -- for her daughter Natasha, who had appeared in some of her other shows and has been trained professionally as an actor.

Marion de Vries lives in Toronto but was born and raised in Picton. She says mounting the show in the tiny Mount Tabor Playhouse in Milford was no small task, especially since the play takes place in so many locations.

"One minute you're at an Irish wedding and the next you're on a big schooner," says de Vries who has a cast of five with three musicians. (There's 23 original songs in the show.)

"At the deepest heart of it is an examination of what makes people do heroic things. On the deck of The Ocean Wave there was 300 kegs of butter, which melted over both sides of the schooner when the fire started. The people trying to

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save them were sailing into an inferno with wooden ships and canvas sails."

Phillips says The Festival Players are similar to the Blyth Festival in that both exclusively feature Canadian plays.

"I call it rural Canadiana," she says. "It's not stuff that's urban in content. It identifies with the area."

Also on the playbill this year is Schoolhouse, by Leanna Brodie, about a one-room rural schoolhouse and its young schoolmarm in 1938; and Colours in the Storm by Jim Betts about artist Tom Thompson in Algonquin Park in 1917.

Festival Players of Prince Edward County

What: The Festival Players of Prince Edward County opened its third season this week with the premiere of Ship of Fire, a local historical musical by Marion de Vries, Bernie Gaw, Tom Leighton and Suzanne Pasternak. The season runs until Aug. 21 in three different county venues. The website is www.festivalplayers.ca.

SCHEDULE

Ship of Fire: Runs until July 25 at the Mount Tabor Playhouse in Milford, with performances from Wednesday to Saturday at 8 p. m.; and matinees on Wednesday and Saturday at 2 p. m.

Schoolhouse: Runs from July 25 to Aug. 8 at Macaulay House in Picton with performances from Wednesday to Saturday at 6:30 p. m. and matinees on Wednesday and Saturday at 1:30 p. m.

Colours in the Storm: Runs from Aug. 8-21 at Fields at West Lake in Bloomfield with performances from Wednesday to Saturday at 8 p. m. (except Aug. 19); and matinees on Wednesday and Saturday at 2 p. m. (except Aug. 19).

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