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ENTERTAINMENT

Award-winning play champions power of connection

'If you want to cry, you can. I think it will help the audience have catharsis at the end'

By Joel Rubinoff Record Reporter

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Don't expect slapstick comedies or nostalgic musicals from the boldly provocative Green Light Arts.

At a time when political polarization is rampant, identity politics is peaking and outraged people from all camps are manning the barricades, this indie theatre company with a mandate for community conversation has decided to "lean in" to the cultural moment with a play that tackles reality head on.

"This is one of those plays I kept rereading through the pandemic," says artistic director Matt White, helming Green Light's production of "This Is How We Got Here" by award-winning Métis playwright Keith Barker.

"I lost a few people in my life, including my mom, and holed myself up in the attic and read excerpts from this play, and it helped me make sense of what I was experiencing."

Shortlisted for the 2018 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama, nominated for the 2020 Carol Bolt Award and winner of the 2020 Dora award for Outstanding New Play, Barker's work examines the fractured relationships of a close-knit family working through the process of grief following the death of their teenage son by suicide.

Described as "heartbreaking and heartwarming," it moves back and forth in time, allowing audiences to piece together the fragments of these characters' lives as they reconnect with one another.

Is it political? Not overtly. But as post-pandemic society works through its own collective grief, helplessness and rage after two years of lockdowns, death and job losses, White says its timeliness is not in question.

“I think people are desperate to connect,” he notes.

“The last two years we’ve been so cut off from each other in a difficult way. It can manifest in anger because people are so desperate to have their voices heard, whether on social media or the deep web.

“Even though this play has nothing to do with what’s going on right now, I feel it’s adjacent.”

Why? Because “grief touches all of us. When you bottle it, it gets volatile and you can’t sustain it. How do we move forward?”

Which is where the play’s positive message comes in.

“I’m sitting there going, ‘How do we think about a play about grief if people are going, ‘I don’t need more of that. The world is already messed up!’ ” notes White.

“Why are we leaning into the mood of the world as opposed to backing away from it?”

The answer, he says, is that it’s “a hopeful piece that balances the sad with the light.”

“This is a play you will get involved with, with the opportunity to laugh and see yourselves.

“And if you want to cry, you can. I think it will help the audience have catharsis at the end.”

Green Light’s first “full-on, big-set design, back-in-theatre production” since COVID sucker-punched the industry isn’t just the company’s biggest production in three years, it’s the biggest in its entire history.

“We said, ‘Look, let’s come back with something a little bigger,’ ” says White, noting audiences are “still apprehensive” about COVID outbreaks and cancellations.

“Let’s give it our all, as a reminder of what we can do.”

* * *

“This Is How We Got Here” plays Nov. 9-20 at the Conrad Centre for the Performing Arts in Downtown Kitchener. It stars Amy Keating, Cherish Violet Blood, Nicco Lorenzo Garcia and Tim Walker. There will be several post-show discussion panels about grief and mental health, with two pay-what-you-can performances. For information and tickets, go to www.greenlight-arts.com



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