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Coward's Present Laughter sends up the theatre scene

TAG's production borrows from French farce

By ANDREA NEMETZ Entertainment Reporter

HALIFAX — Rebecca Humphreys is not the type of director who will tell her cast exactly what to do.

"Some people don't want to waiver from their vision. As a director, I'm open to suggestions. Some of the best stuff gets found that way," she says.

"My approach to directing is very collaborative, so my style lends itself to co-directing."

For Present Laughter, running at the Theatre Arts Guild's Pond Playhouse Sept. 22 to Oct. 8, she'll be sharing directing duties with Eric Rountree.

"Eric was my apprentice director for Red Hot & Cole (at TAG in 2006) and we did a double bill of Harold Pinter plays (at TAG in 2007) with me directing one and him the other," says Humphreys. She has directed almost a play a year at TAG since her directorial debut with Norm Foster's One Night in 1998.

Having two directors helps when one or the other has other commitments, she says. "We're on the same page most of the time and we go over notes before talking to the cast."

Written by Noel Coward, Present Laughter is not produced as often as his plays Blithe Spirit or Private Lives.

But it is a very funny play, says Halifax's Humphreys, who earned a degree in theatre from the University of Saskatchewan and graduated from a two-year musical theatre program at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton.

"It's about a self-absorbed, aging actor who just turned 40," she says. "Back in the 1940s, 40 was washed up. It's a semi-autobiographical account. It's got some of the attributes of a French farce but is very upper-class British."

At the centre of the story is Garry Essidine, played by Terry Coolen. Amid a series of events, Garry's London flat is invaded by a love-struck ingenue, an adulterous producer and a married seductress, not to mention Garry's estranged wife, his long-suffering secretary and a crazed young playwright.

"It's fun, it's about acting, about the theatre and is very tongue-in-cheek," says Humphreys. "We're doing it in period costumes, with period music. You can immerse yourself in another world. It's a nice way to escape."

Each of the 10 members of the cast has been asked to pick out a song from the '40s he or she thinks his or her character would listen to.

The songs will be played pre-show and during intermission.

"It helps set the period," she says. "They've brought a bunch of really great music to the table."

Humphreys is enthused about her mix of acting veterans and newbies.

"Terry Coolen has been in a number of productions, including Red, Hot & Cole. He has about 60 per cent of the dialogue in the show.

"Helen Goodwin plays Monica his secretary and Rayna Smith-Camp is Joanna, who is married to Henry, Garry's producer. Eileen Carey jumped in at the last minute as Liz, Garry's ex-wife, and John Bullock, who is Henry, was in 12 Angry Men. The rest are new."

Because there are 32 costume changes (designed by Judy Reade), the set by Bill VanGorder and Austin Reade has been kept deliberately simple.

The show runs Thursdays to Saturdays at the Pond Playhouse, 6 Parkhill Rd., Halifax, at 8 p.m. with a 2 p.m. matinee on Oct. 2. Tickets are \$16, \$13 for members, students and seniors.

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