

Play based on The Diary of Anne Frank a tearjerker

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Here's a tip for anyone thinking of attending the upcoming Theatre Arts Guild (TAG) production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*: Bring tissues.

That's the advice of Esther VanGorder, stage manager for this production and artistic director for TAG. Her husband Bill is the director of the well-known Second World War story being presented at the Pond Playhouse in Halifax April 5-21.

"For all the time Bill and I have been working on this — and we started ourselves about a year ago — and the number of times we've read it and seen it, we still will get a little choked up at some of the points," Esther said during a joint phone interview.

"There are funny moments in it, just the interactions of the people, but I think the fact that you know it's not going to end happily, and they have all this hope at the end that the war is going to be over and they're going to be freed, and anybody who knows the story knows that's not true. It just makes it even more poignant."

Set in German-occupied Amsterdam, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a stage version of the posthumously published impressions of the teen girl who hid from the Nazis for two years with family members and others. Her story of strength in the face of the evils of the Holocaust is, sadly, brimming with teachable moments.

"I think people understand that there's a message in the story here that is just as real today as it was back in the '40s when Anne wrote her diary, and that there are many examples of things happening around the world today that are unfortunately very similar," Bill said.

"This is not a play for young children, but for those 12 and up it would probably be very suitable."

The production has a symbolic set designed by Roxanne Smith.

"When you look at it closely you realize it's an exploded Star of David and quite fractured in its approach," Bill said.

The feeling of claustrophobia should also be palpable, as the area of the stage at TAG is roughly similar to the real hiding place, he said.

"It's very crowded. You will notice that the actors have to move chairs to get around, they bump into each other, they squeeze by."

The TAG production of The Diary of Anne Frank, by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, is using a newer adaptation by Wendy Kesselman. Esther said it ends up being even more impactful than previous versions.

“Instead of having an actor talk about what’s going on in Holland at the time, or the progress of the war, there’s a lot of radio broadcasts and voice-overs that make it a lot more powerful when you hear what the Germans are doing.”

TAG can claim to be the oldest continuously operating theatre organization in Canada. There is no paid staff, and between 150 and 300 people get involved with productions on a regular basis.

The Diary of Anne Frank has about 35 people signed on, including cast and crew.

“We’ve been in operation since 1931 and performed every year since then,” said Bill.

“We’ve got a long history. We’re fortunate that we have our own theatre space so that we’re able to be creative, and we also want to give our actors and directors and producers and crews the opportunity to experiment and do things with theatre that are beyond maybe, the once or twice a year local neighbourhood theatre kind of production.”

To that end, TAG tries to present a range of styles throughout its seasons and dash any stereotypical views of community theatre.

“We don’t shy away from strong subjects and important subjects like this,” Esther said of The Diary of Anne Frank.

“To have this in our season, it shows that we’re a more rounded company, that we don’t just do farce after farce or comedies or musicals to fill the seats.”

The TAG season ends with a production of Death and the Maiden from June 7- 23.

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