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The Day After Tragedy

‘Come From Away’ shares story about the town which abruptly hosted the world

By Ed Condran
Pasadena Weekly Contributor

Directing a theatrical production is a challenge.

However, helming a show as complex and demanding as “Come From Away” is on another level. It’s been a rigorous span over the last few months for Julia Rodriguez-Elliott as she prepares for the “Come From Away” run, which is slated for Oct. 10 through Nov. 1 at A Noise Within.

“A cast member came up to me and said, ‘I’m surprised you’re so calm,’” Rodriguez-Elliott said while chuckling.

That’s understandable since “Come From Away” is a play inspired by actual events, which required heavy lifting.

“Come From Away,” with the book, music and lyrics by David Hein and Irene Sanckoff, is a musical based on the events in the tiny Newfoundland town of Gander during the week following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Thirty-eight planes carrying 7,000 passengers were ordered to land unexpectedly at Gander International Airport. The characters are based on Gander residents and the stranded travelers they housed, fed and befriended. Gander’s population doubled immediately.

The musical, which ran on Broadway from 2017-22, is really about Sept. 12,

since the focus is on what happens after the terrorist attacks occurred.

“It’s a complicated play,” Rodriguez-Elliott said. “It’s very episodic. There’s no break between scenes. The challenge is moving location to location with specificity. You have a dozen actors telling the story. It’s an athletic event.”

Each performer plays multiple parts, and it’s deceptively difficult. Actors change accents and clothing at a moment’s notice. Performers make a transformation on a dime with a dialect or popping on glasses or a hat. There’s a throughline going back and forth between characters. It’s an exercise for the performers and the audience, but it’s an exhilarating experience.

“It’s such a challenge to make this work but I think A Noise Within has the advantage of doing ensemble-driven work,” Rodriguez-Elliott said. “I’ve directed a lot of productions that tell stories that feature ensembles. So, with a musical like this, we have a leg up on most to make it work with actors that have the necessary muscularity. There’s a familiarity the way we tell stories from A Noise Within. You have people coming into the process with a similar vocabulary. With this production it’s all about executing shifts from scene to scene. There’s a lot of stylized movement and there’s dance. They’re juggling



The ensemble of A Noise Within’s production of “Come From Away,” which is slated for Oct. 10 through Nov. 1.

(Craig Schwartz Photography/Submitted)

all of these things. How do you make the characters authentic? It’s a challenge but it’s worthwhile.”

The characters are as varied as one would expect. There’s Claude, the gregarious mayor of Gander. Bonnie, the no-nonsense mother of three, who is the head of the Gander SPCA. Hannah, the mother of a New York firefighter, who awaits word about the fate of her son. Beulah, a Gander resident, who also has a son who is a firefighter. Beverly is the first female captain at American Airlines. There’s Nick, an English oil engineer, who falls in love with Diane, a divorcee from Texas.

Provincial and sleepy Gander is inundated with diversity. “The writers are authentic to the spirit of these people,” Rodriguez-Elliott said.

Some of the characters have remained friends, such as Beulah and Hannah, whose son passed away while trying to help those at the World Trade Center. The bond between the mothers of the firefighters has only deepened a quarter century after the tragedy.

Every Sept. 11, the focus is on those who suffered through the awful collective experience of the terrorist attacks. But there are so many people who have been born after Sept. 11, 2001, and Rodriguez-Elliott be-

lieves that “Come From Away” is an educational experience for them.

“It’s a story that a whole generation missed since they weren’t around yet but they should learn about it,” Rodriguez-Elliott said. “‘Come From Away’ tells a very unique and impactful story. It’s unforgettable.”

The experience is etched in Rodriguez-Elliott’s memory. “The theater was in Glendale, and just like everyone else we remember 9/11,” Rodriguez-Elliott said.

But not everyone recalls what is dubbed “The 9/12 story.” Gander, while hosting a myriad of folks from around the world, was a prominent story but slipped through the cracks of history after the next news cycle arrived.

“That’s why it’s great that this beautiful story was presented in such a theatrical way is so significant,” Rodriguez-Elliott said. “‘Come From Away’ is an incredible story of resilience and hope.” ■



Kasey Mahaffy and Nathan Mohebbi star in A Noise Within Theatre’s production of “Come From Away.”

(Craig Schwartz Photography/Submitted)

‘Come From Away’

WHEN: Oct. 10 through Nov. 1, 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Boulevard, Pasadena

COST: \$41.75

INFO: 626-356-3121, anoisewithin.org.