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A Musical Cure-All

Everyone should see 'Come From Away'

By Ellen Snortland
Pasadena Weekly Columnist

As I approached the press check-in desk at "A Noise Within" (ANW) theater in Pasadena, I was already choking up. This would be my fourth time seeing "Come from Away"; I don't think I'll ever tire of it. If I were a doctor, I'd prescribe it because it's so healing. And I can say that ANW's production is my favorite so far. I don't care where you live; please come from "a-ways" away to see this production, as I'm sure it'll sell out. As soon as you finish reading this, pick up the phone and buy your tickets! (And while you're at it, become a season subscriber.)

The award-winning musical "Come From Away" is based on the true story of how a tiny Canadian town, Gander, Newfoundland, on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, suddenly hosted 38 jumbo jets rerouted out of U.S. airspace on Sept. 11, 2001. The residents of Gander lovingly call it "The Rock." With a wild, storm-prone coast, verdant forests, no beaches and crashing waves, Gander and its neighboring towns wouldn't be considered geographically friendly. However, as events unfolded on that fateful day in the U.S., no one knew whether other U.S. airports were safe, though it's telling that authorities deemed Canadian airspace and airports safe.

Decades ago, Gander was a crucial refueling center because it was the most "reachable" airport for transatlantic flights between Europe and North America. With the introduction of the 747 in the early 1970s, Gander's importance diminished because long-haul nonstop transatlantic flights were now possible. The 38 pilots, their planes and the passengers were very lucky that Gander had not abandoned their "irrelevant" airfield.

The musical relies on split-second timing, and Julia Rodrigues-Elliott's direction and choreography were spot-on, with the entire (very) large cast stellar. The casting, choral precision, solos, dance, set, lighting and the overall experience of "Come From Away" had me laughing and crying in equal measure. The sheer energy, talent and work that went into this production are mind-boggling. There was not a single weak link in this ensemble's chain.

Each of the 13 cast members played and sang multiple roles, from Gander residents to what they called "the plane people." The cast toggled between the distinctive Gander brogue — derived from early settlers from southern Ireland and western England — and Texan, British and Brooklyn accents. If I closed my eyes, I could swear there was a tinge of a Norwegian brogue. Since the Vikings also reached Newfoundland

around 1000 A.D., 400 years before the Niña, Pinta and Santa María, it's not that far-fetched. Well, actually it is, but I'm Norwegian-American, and I give Leif Erikson credit over that putz, Columbus, every chance I can!

The first two times I saw this show were at the Ahmanson, where I was hooked after the very first number, "Welcome To The Rock"! I laughed and cried, as did the rest of the audience, and I vowed to see it as often as I could. The third time I saw it was the Broadway production captured for Apple TV, which was glorious. That said, watching on TV can't hold a candle to seeing the ANW production live. The venue is perfect for an intimate show like this, with 324 seats compared with the Ahmanson's 2,100.

Why is it called "Come From Away"? It's the Ganderese (Ganderinian?) idiom for being a guest: They don't come from here; they come from "away."

Can you imagine what it took for a small town of 9,000 people to swell by 70% overnight? To house and feed 7,000 strangers who had deplaned? No one knew how long the planes would be grounded. The local animal welfare official had to move heaven and earth just to reach the holds to feed and care for the animals aboard, including two Bonobo chimps, one pregnant.

This year marks the 25th anniversary

of 9/11, making "Come From Away" the perfect choice for this resident theater company. The show celebrates the depth of care and generosity a community can show for people it doesn't know, including those who were upset and didn't yet know what had happened at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. There was no cell reception on the grounded planes. The telephone plays a central role in "Come From Away," as loved ones didn't know whether they had family and friends on the flights that were used as bombs, while the "deplaned" were similarly desperate to let their people know they were safe. One passenger, in particular, is desperate to find out whether her son, an NYFD firefighter, is safe. He wasn't.

The musical itself won only one Tony Award (!) for direction, yet it has been performed continuously worldwide ever since. The book, music, and lyrics by Irene Sankoff and David Hein form a masterful weave of micro and macro themes. The micro ideas: a love story, a breakup story, the forging of new friendships and trusting strangers. The macro motifs include loyalty to citizens of a neighboring country, opening homes and hearts to strangers of different creeds and languages, and hospitality. These are all tropes we need to be reminded of in these divisive days.

Many of us suffer under our horrible administration and its cruel, despicable treatment of migrants, which perpetuates daily indignities and casual cruelty. I'm particularly sickened by the Orange Menace's treatment of Canada and Canadians, which makes me want to move to Canada. Meanwhile, I encourage everyone to see "Come From Away" for a potent dose of the Canadian spirit. It plays through Nov. 8. Go to anoisewithin.org or call 626-356-3100.