



ABOVE: Kate McGowan as Anne Shirley and Adam Harasimiuk as Gilbert Blythe rehearse for Judy Russell’s production of Anne of Green Gables. The show is set to run from July 18 to 29 at the Prince George Playhouse. BELOW: Dancers rehearse for a set piece in Anne of Green Gables.

Anne of Green Gables

Judy Russell brings a national icon to the stage for Canada 150

Frank PEEBLES Citizen staff
fpeebles@pgcitizen.ca

It’s the most Canadian of stories and so it seems fittingly destined to become an unusual kind of musical. Anne of Green Gables was a fabulously popular series of books when they were set free into the literary world by writer Lucy Maude Montgomery in 1908.

Anyone who has ever been to Prince Edward Island can tell you, and easily show you, the impact these books had on local culture. Set in P.E.I., but based on real people and places, the entire Anne realm turned into an industry. Tourists flock from the world over to see the actual Green Gables home and walk the fields where Anne had her youthful adventures with best friend Diana, heartthrob Gilbert, and caretakers Marilla and Matthew.

You can see the effects of Anne across mainstream culture as well. When she was played on the television movie series directed by Kevin Sullivan, it catapulted an already famous Megan Follows into Canadian superstardom playing the title character. The same thing happened for Sarah Polley when she portrayed the character Sara Stanley in the six-year run of the spinoff series Road To Avonlea.

There were also many other film and television versions dating back to 1919 adding cache to the Green Gables fame.

In a modern teen-lit world of Twilight and Hunger Games and Maze Runners, there is less limelight for the girl of the green cottage on the red island. Yet Anne lives on in yet another form,



thanks to a 1964 premiere of a play written by famed entertainment figures Don Harron, Norman Campbell, Elaine Campbell and Mavor Moore (three of the four are Order of Canada recipients). Their adaptive skills made Anne of Green Gables: The Musical an enduring staple of the national musical theatre industry. Few Canuck stage productions have ever grabbed the world by the pigtailed like this one, and it was done in oh-so-Canadian style.

“The thing about this musical is, it’s so real, so true to life,” said Shelby Meany, co-directing with principal auteur Judy Russell in the Prince George production about to launch. “So many musicals are big Broadway mew-zeeecalllll thee-ahhhhh-terrrrrrr,” she said, singing the words opulently. “This one is much more authentic. There is no flying, no big musical mega-numbers to hide behind. It takes really strong actors because it is really strong storytelling.”

The strength of the Anne character – a girl who defies convention, squares her shoulders to take on the world, yet remains an everyday woman-in-progress – is what made her such a popular character around the world and so loved by Canadians for her symbolism of the culture itself. Russell has chosen two local actors to portray her in this production. It’s such a demanding role that Kate McGowan and Makenna Thiffault are alternating from night to night.

Both are young veterans of the local musical theatre stage, but neither has had to embody such a big personality as this character.

“I knew Anne Shirley was iconic,” said McGowan, who, like most of the other young cast members, had only heard of the story in passing. “I like how it shows a lot of how things used to be back then. We get to go back in time a little bit.”

“I knew there was a place called Green Gables and I knew it was in

P.E.I., but I didn’t know the story at all. I’ve been surprised by all I’ve learned as I’ve gotten to know this script,” said Thiffault.

This is a script that takes study, the actors agreed, because it is a period piece as well as a musical, and because there is actual character definition to the main portrayals. “I like to keep a little bit of myself in there. Little things,” McGowan said.

Her counterpart said she, too, couldn’t help but slip a little of herself into her version of Anne. Thiffault said, “It’s a bit difficult in a way. We have never had to go through what she went through. We haven’t had our families ripped apart and bounced around through multiple orphanages, and yet we have to be that strong even though we’ve never been broken like that. We would go inward and look down if someone spoke to us as harshly as Anne gets spoken to, but she gets her back up and gives it back to them. Anne doesn’t ever

back down, so we have to learn that.”

“It makes me have to act differently all the time, depending on who is playing the Anne part,” said Madison Hill, the one actor who plays best friend Diana. “You’re going to have to come watch both actors do it, because we all react differently to the things they do, Kate is different than Makenna, but both are so good. It just changes things. There’s an effect on the whole show.”

She wagged her finger back and forth from Thiffault to McGowan and half whispered “they’re doing awesome.”

Hill is enjoying the supporting role in this production because she gets to perform every night, which hasn’t always been the case. In roles she’s held before, like Clara in The Nutcracker, she was one of those double-cast. She gets no nights off this time.

For weeks the cast worked on their parts in select chunks at Russell’s Echaimement Dance Centre. Now they have moved to the Prince George Playhouse to finish the polishing. Each day more details of costume, props, set and technical effects are added and each day that helps them lock in their acting and dancing duties.

It all comes together on opening night Tuesday. There is only one night off (July 24) between July 18 to 29, all at the Prince George Playhouse. All showtimes are 7 p.m. except the 2 p.m. matinee on July 22. Tickets are \$42 regular or \$36.75 for those 18 and younger. Tickets are available online at www.centralinteriortickets.com or in person at the box office at Enchainement Dance Centre (3540 Opie Crescent).

Does your wallet look like this?

Would you like to add to your available income?





Just minutes per day can put cash in your pocket!
Daily routes and 1 day per week available!

 **CITIZEN** Call 250-562-3301 to apply

R0011343268