

The Magic and Pain of Storytelling: New Ground Theatre's "The Drawer Boy"

Written by Jill Walsh

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The Drawer Boy, opening this weekend at New Ground Theatre, is not only an emotional journey through the suppressed memories of two old farmers and a unique observation of the art of storytelling; it also plays an important role in contemporary Canadian theatre history.

About 35 years ago, a group of young actors from Toronto launched a research project within a farming community in rural Ontario. The actors lived and worked with local farmers while collecting stories for a group of plays called *The Farm Show*, which opened in Toronto and also inspired a television show and film. David Fox and Miles Potter, who were actor and director in the original award-winning production at Theatre Passe Muraille, helped create and appeared in the original production of *The Farm Show*.

The Drawer Boy emerged from this scene in 1999, almost 30 years after the original research, from newspaper journalist Michael Healey, who was inspired by the project that led to *The Farm Show*.

The Drawer Boy

is now one of the most produced plays in America and Canada and also won four Dora Mavor Moore Awards, a Governor General's Literary Award for Best English Drama, and the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Plays Award for Best New Play.

Basing his lead character on Miles Potter, Healey created a comedy-drama about a young actor who asks two old farmers, Morgan and Angus, for permission to do hands-on research (including milking cows and running a tractor) for a play about rural life. Angus has no memory because of a war injury, and Morgan tells Angus partially fabricated stories about their shared past. Morgan comforts his friend with the story of the creative "drawer boy" and the logical "farmer boy" who grow up, leave for war together, fall in love, and lose their loves in a car crash, a story that Miles converts into drama.

When Angus and Morgan return home after attending the play's rehearsal, Angus' restricted mind, influenced by seeing someone else publicly recite the story Morgan's been telling him for years, begins to recall the events that really occurred. We discover the reasons Morgan has

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been lying throughout the years, and the amount of healing power storytelling can have.

This style of "meta-fiction" is one of my favorite types of plays, because the script subtly makes observations about the art of playwriting and the importance of storytelling in our lives. Behind the characters' words, we see the nature of the author's craft. For example, Angus has grown so accustomed to hearing the story of the drawer boy and the farmer from Morgan, he refuses to believe anything else, even when deep down, he knows the truth about the past. "I want the story!" he demands, frustrated, as Morgan attempts to dissuade him from the pattern of the drawer-boy tale.

Healey's script is also full of vivid images and memorable details, such as the pails of raspberries on the car seat or the three boots shared between the two men during the war.

The work is also incredibly challenging in terms of acting. Each of the three male characters has such a specific personality to portray, which makes necessary an intense devotion on the parts of the actors. Jim Driscoll (Angus), especially, conveyed distinct character traits that were not overdone, but used frequently enough for the audience to believe in the emotional and mental torment the character endured. For example, Driscoll appropriately chose a boyish tilt of the head when confused, downcast eyes when upset, and a flick of the wrist when excited. Each of these simple gestures added depth to the character of Angus because his emotions were conveyed through both movement and speech.

Pat Flaherty (Morgan) incorporated a stern, unyielding speech tone that made plain Morgan's stubborn disposition, and a slight limp, which drew attention to the character's age and hard life on the farm. As Miles, Jeff De Leon brought a youthful innocence and energy, providing a more distinct division in age and experience between the characters.

While the script *could* veer in the direction of being too sympathetic, it doesn't, and instead we are introduced to three believably human characters, complete with imperfections and convictions. We empathize with Morgan's plight, with Angus' attempts to block out his past (don't we all wish we could do that sometimes?), and with Miles' eagerness to impress his acting troupe, regardless of the consequences. I enjoyed the complexity of

The Drawer Boy

and the fact that it captured both the magic and pain that can lie within a story.

The Drawer Boy will be performed at 7:30 p.m. March 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, and 12, and at 2 p.m. March 6 and 13, in Becherer Hall of Rivermont Collegiate in Bettendorf. For more information or tickets, visit (<http://www.newgroundtheatre.com>) or call (563)326-7529.