

20th Annual Victorian Christmas Gala a huge hit



By Constance Scrafield

It was an elegant affair: gentlemen dressed in tuxedos, including the Chair of the Gala Committee, who was wearing a formal jacket embossed in a same-black brocade, made by Elvis' tailor; smart suits and one in a full regalia of kilt and colours. The ladies were likewise donned in stunning long dresses or chic cocktail, each sporting a glass of sparkling wine while opening the feast with raw oysters at the bar.

All were gathered at Orangeville's Best Western Inn & Suites last Saturday evening for a number of purposes in addition to the oysters: to meet new people and old friends; the opportunity to find interesting items, restaurant meals and experiences in the silent auction, often the place to get bargains.

They were attending this 20th annual gala primarily to celebrate the work and contribution to the arts community and at large of Theatre Orangeville.

The Victorian Christmas Gala is Theatre Orangeville's largest fundraiser of the year, the biggest social event, the premier function, requiring months of preparation and contacting donors.

As usual with a social event, the reality is even more exciting than the theory. It was noisy with conversation and laughter in the hallways, filled with tables laden with donations from the wider community. There is an understanding on the part of even people quite unconnected to the theatre but who have heard the good stories that offering a donation for this special event makes sense.

At the appointed time, the 200-plus guests filed into the dining room. The timing of the dinner depends on the Live Auction, captained by David Nairn, Artistic Director and, for this event, Auctioneer Extraordinaire.

If there were no other entertainment, Mr. Nairn's auctioneering would be worth the price of the ticket. Relentless he is, prodding, offering undeniably good reasons for bidding ? not about the theatre only but the fun of the bid object, a trip to Shaw Festival or Stratford : ?Absolutely the best tickets in the house, go back stage and meet the cast ? check out the costumes; dinner or lunch ? visit a winery...? The winners are escorted by Mr. Nairn and, perhaps, another member of Theatre Orangeville.

Avery Saltzman brings an evening to the Harold Green Jewish Theatre, with tickets for an opening night with the party and backstage meetings ? a full package, with the best seats.

Mag Ruffman came along with an amazing sculpture put together by ?12 ladies who came last year for a welding class- one of last year's Live Auction items. We gave them martinis and then did welding,? she joked.

The resultant steel wire assemblage was a wonder to behold and, after reasonable badgering from the two of them, the sculpture will adorn someone's garden next summer or a large wall in a home.

So it went. Between bidding, there was entertainment, featuring the T.O.Y.S. Choir in the first stage of the dinner. This was followed, in the dinner's next stage, by most of the cast from Les Miserables, the hit Theatre Orangeville Young Company show that packed the house for a record five performances last July.

They sang and they were still wonderful, bringing down the house and the audience to its feet with several standing ovations for the solos and the ensembles.

Speaking of Les Mis ... during a break in the action, we took the opportunity to go to a private room where the cast was congregated. We wanted to talk to them once more about the show and what it did and does mean to them.

As a person, they agreed it was a life-altering time and the bonds they had formed (with one another) would matter for years to

come.

?We should make a recording! We should take it on tour!?' they declared.

In truth, the experience of putting Les Mis on and performing it to one packed house after another has pushed more than one of them to want the theatre as their lives' careers, confirmed the others in their choice of theatre and gave those who want other careers, a love of theatre that will never leave them.

They knew already there would be other shows and more friendships but they all concurred that this, this Theatre Orangeville experience of doing a professional standard production of Les Miserables, albeit the slightly shorter student version, made a difference to their individual relationships to the theatre.

Back in the dining room, dessert had been served and Mr. Nairn was about to embark on auctioning the last item ? certainly a one-off: tickets to the Toronto Diana Krall concert and to meet her back stage. It was a reasonably easy sell.

The entertainment was rounded out by a few of the cast from the upcoming Christmas show, Dan Needles' The Last Christmas Turkey, opening next week on November 30 and playing until December 23.

Leah Oster, Justin Stadnyk and Trevor Pratt sang a few songs, one from the show and others, as enticement for us all to hurry for tickets to this year's Christmas show. They are really terrific.

All this is achieved and run by the combined work of the theatre's administrative staff, the Board of Directors and the volunteers, dozens of them, ready and very willing do everything that is needed to run, with charm and efficiency, a complicated and utterly pleasant event.

At the end of the evening, David Nairn reminded us what it is all about: the first-class performances on the professional stage and the many programs that reach out to all levels of young people, as well as new and established writers' producing new plays, like the one coming up. And he thanked the patrons of the Gala, the shows and the fund raisers for their parts in making it happen.

For tickets to The Last Christmas Turkey, see the Box Office at 87 Broadway or the Information Centre on Buena Vista Drive at Highway 10; call 519-942-3423 or go online at www.theatreorangeville.ca