

## Leisa Way bringing 'Across the Pond, the British Invasion' to town



By Constance Scrafield

Leisa Way gives Ed Sullivan credit for initiating and, in large part, maintaining the British Invasion of North America. Ms. Way is bringing her own version of the British invasion to Theatre Orangeville, opening on Valentine's Day, Thursday, February 14 and running until March 3.

'We're going to bring pure musical joy to Orangeville,' Leisa Way promised in a telephone interview. 'We load in Wednesday. We preview on the 14th. The preview is on Valentine's - that's a nice way to spend Valentine's.'

Why a British Isles show?

'There are many different reasons,' she explained. 'After performing one-woman shows for so long, and then, we did the Oh, Canada show on a 44-city tour across the country last year, for the 150th. This is the next show I wrote after the Canada show.'

She said, 'It's a great way to show off my fellows on the band. It's about the British invasion then and now, a two-hour journey.'

The story about Ed Sullivan starting it all was this: 'He was flying in to Heathrow [airport] and he heard a lot of screaming teenagers but it was not for him, it was for the Beatles. He had never heard of them but he called their manager. 'If the girls are that frenzied about them, we need to have them in America.' Of course, they were a huge hit and, then, he started bringing other British acts and launched their careers - Rod Stewart, Elton John, George Michael - the British invasion never stopped.'

As she rightly observes, the influence of the British invasion on other cultural aspects continued with the James Bond films, the most profitable series of movies ever. With that, came big opportunities for singers performing the big Bond songs: Tom Jones singing Thunderball, Shirley Bassey doing Goldfinger.

She pointed out that, 'Every year of the 60's decade, many Oscars went to British films - Lynn Redgrave in *Georgie Girl*; Michael Caine in *Alfie*. The British invasion invaded everything: the mini-skirt. The Rolling Stones came on the scene raunchier, wilder, they really changed things.'

The glory days of the British influence over American culture is far from over.

'I saw Tom Jones in Vegas. Tom Jones is phenomenal. He sang for an hour and a half straight up, at full blast - I kept saying he can't keep this up but he did, at age 72.'

All said, the first reason she wrote this show is her band, this really shows the talent in that small group of men.

'Fred singing *House of the Rising Sun* is fantastic. I've got guys who are really talented. I was born in the 60's but my sister was 12. And I was researching not only the impact of the British but, in the late 50's, the U.S. was going through a lull, where all the big stars

had started to fade or Elvis was in Europe and Bill Haley was getting old. Then, Ed Sullivan brought the Beatles over.

?America was also going through this very sad time when John Kennedy was killed and they needed this to cheer them.?

Something was shifting, too, and Ms. Way has a story to tell about the British singer, Petula Clark's stand that broke another American barrier.

?The power of music,? she commented, ?reaches so much further than just entertainment. When you look at the things that they [musicians] changed. Musicians shouldn't be involved in politics? When people say that, it just drives me crazy. We talk about the songs we're doing and why they matter.?

Then, there is Freddie Mercury of the band, Queen.

?Lots of rock musicians were classically trained,? she told us. ?Bohemian Rhapsody took classical music ? mixed it; a classically trained musician wrote this wonderful composition.?

The list is impressive, as is Ms. Way's presentation of the story.

If you do not know him, Leisa Way will introduce you to Long John Baldry, an icon of English rock and roll.

She worked with him on Peter Pan. ?I was Wendy,? she recounted. ?In a later one, I was Peter and he was Captain. Hook with the double role of the father.?

She laughed at the memory, ?he was 6' 7" with the deepest voice I ever met. And, then, [doing Peter Pan] I didn't realize what a star she was when I first met Cathy Rigby, an Olympic medalist [for gymnastics]. And an actor. She was 4'11".?

?Long John always wore a long coat, all six foot, four of it and he was always late. He wasn't a morning person, We didn't care, he was just a delight to work with. I have such good memories of that play and I wish I'd asked more questions.?

It was fun researching all of that and she has stories about the well-loved stars that will pepper the songs and delight us about the humble beginnings and the lofty successes. How it all happened because a person saw the potential in another and pressured him to try his luck. She will tell us how one person ?was the catalyst for so many careers.?

Of Long John, she said, ?What I really remember was how much fun he was. He never lost the joy of being on stage.?

While making people happy is what she loves doing the most, she did tell us, ?I did Judy Garland's story, Over the Rainbow. There was a lot of [screaming] and crying, it was an exciting exercise as an actor but I was used to making people happy. Fans came to see me and, afterward, they said, it was passionate but it was sad.

?I really love getting onstage and knowing that people are leaving feeling happier . This is circle of happy energy.?

Her conversation took a philosophical turn, ?There is a gift that audience gives us, of them being happy, like breathing in and out. Every single night of being on stage that we love.

?What keeps me at it is the people, the audience, the joy; working with these talented guys. I love my band and my job is make people happy.?

The British invasion show is the best show ever; she is sure of that. ?We had whole rows of people dancing and they sing along, it's a party atmosphere. I thought it would be a brilliant thing for schools,? she told us, ?In Collingwood, we had 80 kids in the front rows dancing. We had so much fun. I love to do this show for school audiences. It's part of history.?

A new show is being written, by Ms. Way herself; she writes all her shows. Next is about Rock and Roll.

'It's here to stay,' she assured us.

She wanted everyone to know, 'How excited I am, first time in the 20 years, to be part of the season as a full run show!'

Across the Pond, starring Leisa Way and 'the Lonely Hearts' Club Band' opens Thursday, February 14 and runs to March 3. Tickets as usual at the Box Office in the Opera House, 87 Broadway or at the Information Centre on Buena Vista Drive at Highway 10; by telephone at 519-942-3423 or online at [www.theatreorangeville.ca](http://www.theatreorangeville.ca)