

# Honouring Black History Month with Theatre Orangeville's StageTOScreen

**By Constance Scafield**

Over the last 18 months, including *Beneath Springhill*, currently playing at Theatre Orangeville, there are three shows centring on Black stories or, in the case of Leslie McCurdy's show, *Things My Fore-Sisters Saw*, four stories.

The first of these productions was staged under the canvas at Mount Alverno Resort on Heart Lake Road late in the summer of 2021 and starred Miles Cassel in the role of Josiah and many other characters. Indeed, all three shows are one-person plays with many voices.

Josiah is Josiah Henson's story, an escaped slave who finally managed to arrive in Canada but returned to the United States to bring others to safety. He only learned to read and write once his own son was old enough to teach him. He established a settlement called Dawn in Dresden Canada West for rescued Black settlers.

Leslie McCurdy brought four African-Canadian women to the main stage ? four strong women whose determination to stand up for themselves and against the barriers of racism changed Canadian history in greater and smaller ways.

Marie-Joseph Angélique lived as a slave in a fine Montreal home. All her life, she had struggled with being considered a slave and had consistently attempted to escape. In 1734, while trying to escape from Montreal, she was charged with arson after a fire destroyed the merchants' quarter of the city. She was convicted, tortured and hanged.

Rose Fortune came to Nova Scotia in about 1774, where she worked to become an entrepreneur at a time when all Black people, let alone Black women, were not encouraged to have businesses. She built up a luggage carrier business and was widely known as the first "police officer" in her town Annapolis Royal. Another service she provided was to rouse people to catch their ships in the mornings.

Viola Desmond had her own cosmetic business and inspired young Black women in Nova Scotia through her Desmond School of Beauty Culture. For her bravery in resisting racism by staying her seat in the whites-only section of a cinema, her face was recently printed on a Canadian ten-dollar bill.

Mary Ann Shadd was the first Black woman newspaper publisher in North America. She was also the founder and editor of the *Provincial Freeman* paper. In the 1850's, she established an integrated school for Black refugees, open to all who could afford it in Windsor, Canada West.

*Beneath Springhill*, starring Jeremiah Sparks and running until Feb. 26, tells the tale of Maurice Ruddick and the 1958 No. 2 coal mine disaster in Springhill, Nova Scotia.

When the pandemic started shutting places of entertainment down, David Nairn, Theatre Orangeville's artistic director, was soon determined about two issues: that the theatre would continue to find ways to entertain patrons and that he would find ways to keep the theatre's excellent crew by continuing to employ them.

"So, we did a pirouette to keep the theatre vibrant and the staff employed," said Nairn in an interview earlier this week. "Born out of adversity comes creativity. Of course, we all know that nothing can compare to live entertainment, to being in the theatre to experience performances ? that can never be replaced."

Then he admitted the next best thing was for people who were still reluctant to attend the theatre and, at the time of the shut-downs, could not come was to deliver the same world-class shows and music as they are used to, to their home screens, be it television or computer.

"Not only for them," he expanded, "but people everywhere ? anywhere in Canada, Europe, Britain ? anywhere."

This concept of producing original works to view on screens at home is unique to Theatre Orangeville, for in keeping with its mission at any time, the theatre continued to commission new works by Canadian playwrights. They rehearsed and produced those works remotely until rehearsal was cautiously permitted inside the theatre. This was an elaborate collaboration of plastic sheeting and distancing for and between all the participants, actors, musicians, lights, set construction (more simply designed but still exactly what was needed), director and videographer.

No matter the needs, the show had to go on, and every concession that was required was met to the letter. In the course of the early days of videoing the shows created especially to be offered as home entertainment, a body of work was being compiled. Once audiences of 50% capacity were permitted to attend the theatre, the staff at Theatre Orangeville purchased the equipment needed to film productions as live streaming and recordings.

The upshot of this energy and innovation is the theatre has a library of 21 films that can be viewed at any time and place. Each viewing comes with a ticket price, which helps support the theatre and the many programs Theatre Orangeville runs. These are for youngsters, Young People and the very special partnership between Theatre Orangeville and Community Living Dufferin (CLD), involving so many members of CLD in theatre arts.

"These three shows," Mr. Nairn declared, "have redefined the theatre's creativity. Moving on from the term playwright to something more. Best of all, the actors performing in these shows [Josiah, Sisters and Springhill] have been keen to bring those stories here."

Mr. Nairn feels that companies should do all they can to reflect the changes in the communities by bringing more diverse entertainment.

"I'm really chuffed that we could put together these three shows. It's thrilling to have these opportunities," he said.

In honour of February being Black History Month, Theatre Orangeville is offering three shows, with Josiah and Things My Fore-Sisters Saw as films within the library, called StageTOScreen. Beneath Springhill is included as a live stream.

For all the details and to enjoy all three films, go to <https://stagetoscreen.theatreorangeville.ca/>.