

MEDIA RELEASE

Soulpepper presents John Murrell's Waiting for the Parade

Toronto, ON – April 5, 2010 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's production of *Waiting for the Parade* will run May 1 - May 29, 2010, at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.

One of our country's most enduring and best-loved plays, *Waiting for the Parade* explores the lives and loves of five Canadian women on the home front during WWII. Through these five characters: Catherine, Margaret, Janet, Eve and Marta, John Murrell explores the secrets, tensions, struggles and quiet unsung heroism of these women who kept "the home fires burning." *Waiting for the Parade* won a Chalmer's Best Play Award and in 2008, Murrell was honoured with the Governor General's Lifetime Artistic Achievement Award.

Soulpepper founding member **Joseph Ziegler** directs **Fiona Byrne** (*Shaw Festival*) and **Michelle Monteith** in their Soulpepper debuts, as well as **Krystin Pellerin**, **Deborah Drakeford** and founding member **Nancy Palk**. Musical director is **Mike Ross**.

Waiting for the Parade previews May 1, 2010, opens May 5, and runs until May 29 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$29 - \$70 and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting www.soulpepper.ca. \$20 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at www.stageplay.ca. StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group.

This production is sponsored by TOP WOMEN. TOP WOMEN members donate \$1000 each to collectively support one Soulpepper production annually. 2010 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access programs.

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BACKGROUND NOTES

Some plays are born from a chance comment, or a memory. Some - rare, remarkable ones! - spring nearly whole into existence, pouring out of the writer. (At least, so I've heard.) Many plays in Canada are commissioned. A commission can mean one of several circumstances: either a theatre is looking for a play, or a theatre has an idea for a play and is looking for somebody to write it, or a writer has pitched an idea to a theatre and been taken up on it. A commission almost always means two things that are critical to the writing process: money and a deadline. A writer needs the space to write, which funds provide, and a wall to press his or her back against, to get the ball rolling. When Alberta Theatre Projects made John Murrell their Playwright-in-Residence in 1975, they commissioned him to write a Canadian history play. From the crazy open-endedness of that commission, *Waiting for the Parade* was born.

In his search for material, Murrell elected to interview people in and around Calgary (where ATP is located) who had survived the Second World War. The stories that captured his imagination were told by women, those who had "kept the home fires burning," whose husbands, brothers, sons and fathers had gone off to fight. No bombs fell on Calgary yet these women survived a war just the same. The young writer sensed a story that had not been told, a story he wanted to bring to light and honour.

Murrell has said, "Women are the connective tissue which allows the human race to keep faith that normal life will ultimately return. Women remind us, with wit and resilience, of the great importance of family, and also that family is not everything; of the great importance of patriotism, and also that patriotism is not everything. Their pragmatism is utterly heroic." Through these five fictional characters: Catherine, Margaret, Janet, Eve and Marta, John Murrell explores the secrets, tensions, struggles and quiet unsung heroism he uncovered in suburban kitchens and living rooms out West.

The relationships and difficulties between the characters reflect the war itself. The lives they have known are gone and each woman tests herself against new and prickly realities, in some cases discovering hidden reserves of strength, and in others, grappling with frustration and despair. In a season that has celebrated the panache and the hidden cost of being a flying ace in *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, and looked satirically at the life of an ordinary soldier in *Oh, What a Lovely War*, this play provides a bracing and tender look at the supposedly less dramatic, but sometimes equally as challenging role of being the one - or ones - left behind. Not the one saving the world, but the one saving the coupons.

As with those two previously mentioned productions, music is a key component of this theatrical world. The songs and dances of the 1940s surround the action, reminding us of the soldiers far away and temptations closer to home with "Lili Marlene" (a song that was a hit on both sides of the conflict), or of long convivial nights carousing with "Beer Barrel Polka." Music can also separate people: the German lieder Marta listens to arouses not only suspicion but outright hostility, a hostility very few people actually question, despite her long ties to the community.

BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED ...

It turns out there's no safe place in war time. No matter where you are you're ambushed by uncertainty. How do you carry on when you are left alone? How do you respond when you neighbours redefine you as their enemy? What happens to a woman when she cannot respect her husband? How do you preserve a sense of normalcy, or a belief in the future, when everything is unpredictable? How, in the darkest times, do we survive? These questions confront the women of this play, these women who were our mothers and grandmothers. So often that generation minimized their legitimate life experience, brushed aside questions, kept their mouths shut. Thanks to a young writer who asked the right questions, and listened to the answers we have this testament to their human struggle, to their ordinary frailty in extraordinary circumstances. Thanks to him we are privy to some of the ways they coped and endured and how they found comfort, frustration, strength, irritation, and maybe above all connection in each other. How, fully as much as the men they loved and waited for, they came to define themselves differently.

And it is perhaps important to note finally that the play reflects an experience that is still very current. Across Canada today thousands of men and women keep a home waiting for a loved one who is fighting across the world in Afghanistan. Their problems might seem small in comparison to those facing their men, but they are real enough to warrant our compassion, and more urgently, our attention. As John Murrell proves with this gentle, insightful play, sometimes just listening is the most powerful act of all.

Tidbits

- John Murrell came to Canada originally in 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War and the resistance at home. Some sources say he chose to come here to avoid the draft.
- Actor Gary Sinise directed *Waiting for the Parade* at Steppenwolf in Chicago in 1981 with a cast that included Joan Allen and Laurie Metcalf.
- This play was translated into Japanese by T. Yoshihara for Half Moon Theatre in Tokyo in the 1990's.

Notes by Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing

JOHN MURRELL ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

1945 – John Murrell, future Canadian playwright, is born in Lubbock Texas.

1963–67 – He completes his BFA Degree at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas.

1968 – Murrell comes to Canada to get an education degree at the University of Calgary and as of this writing is still here.

1969 – 1974 – He teaches in the Alberta school system, writing plays in his spare time.

1975 – His second play *Power in the Blood*, about a female evangelist in crisis, wins the University of Alberta's Clifford E. Lee Playwrighting Award. Murrell promptly quits teaching to write full time. In short order he's named Playwright-in-Residence at Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary.

1977 – On February 4th *Waiting for the Parade* première. Produced by ATP at the Canmore Opera House, Heritage Park, Calgary, it's an instant hit and in the next few years is produced around the country, as well as being staged in London and New York. Murrell will later pen a screenplay adaptation (of the Robin Phillips-directed Grand Theatre production) for television. In this same year, his two-hander *Memoir*, about the final days of Sarah Bernhardt, debuts at the Guelph Spring Festival. This play takes off too, touring to the USA, South America and Japan. It will run for more than three years in Paris in the mid-80s.

1978 – Murrell is an opera buff and a fan of the Italian language, which leads him to translate Machiavelli's *Mandragola* for Theatre Calgary, followed by Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*.

1979 – *Parade* gets its first Toronto production at the Tarragon and wins a Chalmers Award for Playwrighting. Murrell, who also speaks French, translates Racine's *Bajazet* for the Tarragon in this same year.

1980 – The Stratford Festival commissions a Murrell translation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

1982 – A new Murrell original, *Farther West*, première in Calgary, directed by Robin Phillips and starring Martha Henry. It is the first of many Murrell plays that look at the history of Canada through fictional characters. This one revolves around a prostitute seeking freedom and wins Murrell his second Chalmers Best Play Award.

1983 – His translation of Sardou's *Divorçons* (*Let's Get a Divorce*) première at Theatre Calgary.

JOHN MURRELL ARTIST BIOGRAPHY CONTINUED ...

1984 – *New World*, an original play inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, has its first production in Ottawa at the National Arts Centre. Robin Phillips directs.

1986 – Murrell's mentoring of young writers becomes more formal when he is named head of the Banff Playwrights Colony, a post he will hold until 1989.

1988 – His latest play *October* focuses again on historical figures, this time the Italian actress Eleonora Duse and the dancer Isadora Duncan. Murrell the arts advocate begins a stint as Head of the Theatre Section at the Canada Council for the Arts, where he will serve until 1992.

1992 – Continuing his penchant for using historical figures for dramatic purposes, *Democracy* is about a meeting between Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson. It wins a Canadian Authors' Association Best Play Award.

1994 – His play *The Faraway Nearby*, about Georgia O'Keeffe, wins him a third Chalmers Best Play Award.

1996 – He translates Carole Fréchette's *The Four Lives of Marie* for the Tarragon.

1998 – One Yellow Rabbit's production of Murrell's new play *Death in New Orleans* premières at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre during the International Festival of the Arts. It wins a Fringe Award for Outstanding New Writing - no doubt a very satisfying prize for a writer who's been on the scene for thirty years.

1999 – He becomes Artistic Director and then Executive Producer of Theatre Arts at the Banff Centre. He will step down from the latter position in 2007.

2001 – Murrell does a dramatic adaptation of *The Odyssey* for the Banff Arts Festival. This adaptation is later produced to great acclaim in Winnipeg by the Manitoba Theatre for Young People.

2003 – John Murrell is appointed as an Officer of the Order of Canada and the Alberta Order of Excellence. Not content to rest on his laurels, he writes his first libretto for the opera *Filumena*, with music composed by John Estacio. The opera is multiply produced in western Canada and garners four Betty Mitchell Awards.

2004 – Murrell becomes the first ever Canadian playwright to have plays on simultaneously at the Stratford and Shaw Festivals: *Waiting for the Parade* and a new translation of Jean Cocteau's *La Voix Humaine* respectively.

JOHN MURRELL ARTIST BIOGRAPHY CONTINUED ...

2005 – *Filumena* is remounted in Ottawa and Edmonton in and televised on CBC's Opening Night series.

2007 – His second opera *Frobisher*, again composed by John Estacio, is seen at the Banff Centre and the Calgary Opera.

2008 – He is honoured with the Governor General's Lifetime Artistic Achievement Award.

2009 – John Murrell, playwright, arts advocate, mentor, translator and teacher continues to live, teach, translate advocate and write in Canada. His plays have been translated into fifteen languages and performed in more than thirty countries. He participates in the 2009 Playwrights Retreat at the Stratford Festival as both mentor and creator. 1983 – His translation of Sardou's *Divorçons* (*Let's Get a Divorce*) premières at Theatre Calgary.

Artist Biography by Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing