

Laughs aplenty up King's Island

Up Island

At the Stanley Theatre until Feb. 25

Tickets: 604-687-1644

Reviewed by Jo Ledingham

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh, uh-huh." Not often can an actor bring the house down with dialogue like this. Enter Nicola Cavendish, stage left. Let the laughter begin and proceed to a crescendo of good-for-the-soul guffaws. Lord, that woman can wring laughs out of a single word. As Dwight, Cavendish swaggers on stage in black jeans and a black leather bomber jacket, greying hair slicked back, sporting a neat mustache: cock of the walk. Or as Tory Jean in striped socks, wooly cardigan and '50s hairdo, Cavendish pops a too-hot oyster in her mouth and does a little jig while frantically fanning her mouth. Or as blond, dressed-to-kill, dog-walking Audrey, she makes the moves on one of the locals.

Pair this mistress of mirth up with Jay Brazeau, the bluff-and-bluster funnyman, master of the double-take, and you just know that director John Cooper and the Stanley Theatre are bound to have a hit on their hands. Nah, who cares if David King's spanking new play isn't profound; it's funny. And I'd argue that if not profound, it's thoughtful, mature and in tune with the times.

And it's so darned local; we all know where "up island" is. If you live in Nanaimo, up island is Campbell River. If you live in Campbell River, it's Port Hardy. And if you live in Port Hardy, you should probably move. It rains all the time.

Not only charmingly, quirkily wet coast, Up Island shows us people we know. Some of us are these people.

It's either serendipitous or King really has a feel for social change. Recently released studies show an increase in women-especially older women-choosing to live alone. They're separating or divorcing after the age 50, 60 or 70, expressing a desire to stretch their wings, escape the life sentence of living with someone for whom they now feel only vague fondness.

Herb (Brazeau) would drive anyone to divorce or drink. Lorraine (Suzanne Ristic) is fed up to the teeth with him, a guy who won't walk the half-block down to the beach with her because a) it's too far and b) it's raining. Well, it's always raining. Lorraine is eager to move on; Herb is devastated. He knows he's got to "astound" her but he hasn't the imagination to know how. Maybe his old high school buddy George (Wayne Nicklas) has a few ideas.

Ludicrously attempting to be suave, would-be wooer Rocky (Alex Diakun) is waiting in the wings, flowers and, fergawdsake, Pernod in hand. Giving advice is Lorraine's sister-in-law Lois (Patricia Drake); offering support is neighbour and dope supplier to all, Vaughn (Allan Zinyk.)

It's wonderful to see Ristic on stage again. In spite of all the funny business going on around her, Lorraine is the serious heart and soul of Up Island. Ristic is a thoughtful actor and she brings just the right amount of quiet desperation to the role: not so much that Lorraine is melodramatically miserable, but just enough for her to ask, "Is this all there is?"

The attractive, realistic single set-Lorraine's kitchen (by Ted Roberts)-allows glimpses of rainforest and a distant ferry that securely place the play somewhere along the northern Vancouver Island coastline.

It's a great setup, a great cast and a pressing question. But if that weren't enough, King throws in a dog. His own dog, actually: Flip, a charming little terrier with a great feel for acting. He never once cocked his leg on the scenery and when the cast took their second bow on opening night, he turned his furry little backside to the audience as if to say, "You've had your treat. Now where's mine?" Give that dog a bone.

(Note: The part of Herb will be played by Alec Willows from Feb. 20.)

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