

Looking, for a rock star

By Will Jones

Haliburton's resident rock star, Carl Dixon, was live on stage at the Northern Lights Theatre on Monday night but fans might have wondered what happened to the trademark guitar riffs. Dixon was treading the boards not as musician, but fledgling actor, in his first ever theatrical role, as smooth talking jazz radio host Matt Kennedy, in the Norm Foster play, 'Looking.'

"I went to the audition for a lark," laughs Dixon, "to see what they were all about. I read for a part in Educating Rita but the director very tactfully said, 'Hmm, why don't you read this instead', and here I am in Looking."

Dixon's Matt is best friend to Andy (played by Tom Regina), a downtrodden storage space salesman looking for love. Andy's personal ad in the newspaper classifieds is answered by O.R. nurse Val (Myrna McBrien) who is six years out of a divorce and hasn't had a date in what seems like an eternity. The two agree to meet but Val insists on bringing along a friend, policewoman Nina (Lesley English); so Matt gets roped in to what is now a double blind date. From that point on the comedic voyage of romance and self discovery for four forty-somethings unfolds.

While Andy and Val struggle to connect, the radio host who thinks he can pick up any woman and drop her as quickly is transfixed by Nina. Each character is instantly likeable and the audience at this opening performance connected with them immediately.

Directed by veteran thespian, Ralph Small, the play is one of Canadian playwright Norm Foster's most accessible and easily enjoyed. It relies totally on a quick and witty repartee between the two pairs of friends, and on the awkward silences that punctuate the initial meetings in a pub called the Private Dick (a device that gives ample room for very obvious but utterly hilarious sexual innuendo several times!).

A series of man to man and woman to woman chats capture the anticipation and reaction to the dates, while cleverly scripted phone calls bring all four actors together on stage, their dialogue gradually synching as each discusses the other to their friend.

About his character, Matt, Dixon says: "I really enjoy getting into the role because I can understand the character totally, although his surface behaviour is very different to mine. And, I think I can do that because of the wonderful writing of Norm Foster. A good playwright can infuse universal traits into characters that make them appeal to an audience: it is up to the actor to bring them out."

Dixon is right. The play moves along at a brisk pace and the four actors at the Northern Lights Theatre swept the audience along with them on a wave of laughter. No one actor or character stood out, which is as it should be in a play with four lead roles. Each character had their moment and all hammed it up nicely when the time and scripted called.



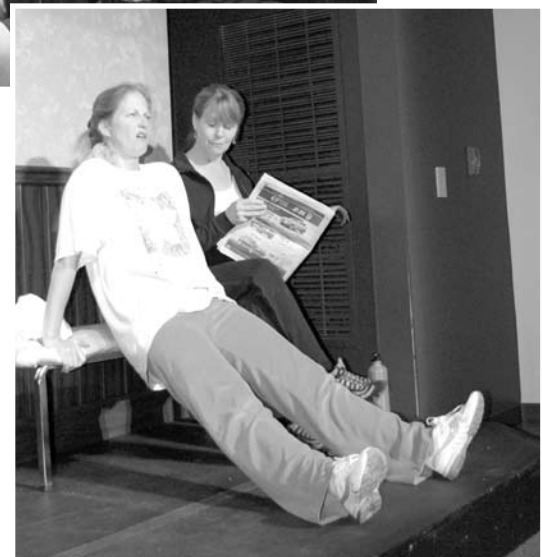
Above: The cast of Looking, left to right; Tom Regina (Andy), Carl Dixon (Matt), Lesley English (Nina) and Myrna McBrien (Val).

Foster's writing is multi-levelled and while the play is termed a romantic comedy, there are moments of poignancy, humility and vulnerability. This is a play about real life and love and all the emotions that affect every one of us. As such, it was a good choice for Dixon to dip his toe into the theatrical world.

The one flaw in the performance was that while everything was well rehearsed, the actors perhaps did not expect the uproarious response from the audience and at times they neglected to wait for the laughter to die down before continuing their lines. This quirk will be ironed out by the end of the second performance I'm sure, and, hey if the only complaint is that the audience laughs too much folks, you can't be going far wrong.

But how did the rock star do? He was totally believable in character (as were all the players); "a transformation that came about because of wonderful advice and much hand holding by this cast of talented performers and an experienced director," insists Dixon; as gracious as radio presenter Matt is smooth.

There are four remaining performances of Looking (from July 25th to 28th). Be quick to get a ticket for this laugh out loud comedy that leaves you wondering about the faces behind the personal ads.



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