

Valerie Hill, Record staff Sat Dec 15 2012 09:41:00 0 Comments 1 Recommend

## A new beginning

### Cambridge's new Dunfield Theatre to open with *Mary Poppins*

CAMBRIDGE — For lanky and charming British director Nigel West, opening *Mary Poppins* at the brand-new Dunfield Theatre here on March 6 will be both a challenge and an honour.

"Alex could have directed the show himself," said West, a nod to Drayton Entertainment's artistic director Alex Mustakas.

With a grin, West makes it clear that he is delighted Mustakas chose him, a man with more than two decades of experience directing major theatrical productions around the world, including Broadway and London's famous West End.

Earlier this week, West skipped across the pond and landed in Cambridge, rolling up his sleeves to prepare for the myriad of details necessary to produce a big show like *Mary Poppins*. There are designers to collaborate with, performers to audition, costumes, lighting and stage sets to consider, so much work before rehearsals begin in early February.

And the building is still not complete. So on a cool December afternoon, West and Mustakas traipse around the Dunfield Theatre in hard hats and dusty shoes, stepping over piles of lumber and discarded metal brackets, rolls of this, buckets of that and never stop grinning.

West, who now lives in France, is stunned at the progress of Drayton Entertainment, which started in 1991 in an old theatre space in the rural village of Drayton. Two years later, Mustakas wanted to produce *Me and My Girl*. Knowing West's success with the show, he brazenly asked the high-profile British director to direct.

"He's very clever and charming," said West. "He seems to have this magnetic pull to get people around him."

That charm obviously worked on West as well. He accepted the director's job, with a few reservations.

"I knew it was going to be a challenge when I saw the size of the stage." The show sold out and three years later, West returned to Drayton to direct *She Loves Me*. In 1999, West directed the inaugural production of *Me and My Girl* at Drayton's King's Wharf Theatre in Penetanguishene.

West makes yet another return to Drayton Entertainment for the latest inaugural production, in a theatre space that is certain to become a landmark for the city and add to Drayton's reputation as one of the largest, most successful regional theatre companies in the country.

"To see the development of Drayton, it's quite extraordinary," West said, noting 70 per cent of the staff, board members and volunteers that he met in 1993 are still part of the organization. "That speaks a lot for Alex."

This new 500-seat, 52,000-square-foot (4,830 square metre) building, the seventh and certainly most grand of Drayton's stages, is a co-operative enterprise. The building is owned by the City of Cambridge and operated by Drayton Entertainment, which will use the facility as its head office, with spaces for administration, box office as well as costumes and set designs for all seven theatres.

There are also meeting and party facilities available for public rental plus five enormous rehearsal halls and residential spaces for theatre performers who will have their own bedrooms and share kitchen/washroom/laundry facilities.

As comfortable and unique a space as this will be, Dunfield will truly shine for its high-tech components and *Mary Poppins* will be a showcase of special effects.

Drayton received \$725,000 from the Department of Canadian Heritage for the installation of equipment in Dunfield as well as upgrades at St. Jacobs Country Playhouse. The equipment includes extensive rigging, lighting, sound equipment, stage curtains and sprung flooring at the new theatre. West is most excited about the fly tower, which houses all the mechanics necessary to move set pieces, equipment, lights and even people on stage, quietly, quickly and safely. Dunfield's tower is tucked up so high (three storeys) that it will be virtually invisible to the audience. The much smaller stage at St. Jacobs Country Playhouse will be renovated to mirror Dunfield.

The new theatre is located adjacent to the Southworks Outlet Mall parking lot and was designed to blend into the historic neighbourhood, with its muted colours and use of organic-looking materials. Only the two-storey glass façade bears a sense of ultra-modern design but even that was done for a purpose: to encourage curious passersby to enter and experience live theatre.

West is deeply impressed with Dunfield and said that theatres he has worked in, particularly in London's West End, might have high international profiles, but old buildings also mean cramped spaces, inadequate acoustics and limited ability to feature special effects. *Mary Poppins*, however, will be a testament to modern design in theatre spaces, particularly as they make the good nanny soar.

This particular version of *Mary Poppins*, with its 24-member cast, is a production of Disney and British theatre producer Cameron Mackintosh.

"This is the first new version of the show," said West who assures audiences that all the charm of *Mary Poppins* remains despite the tweaking. "The story is the same, the heart and soul of the show is the same. The choreography is different. There is one constant: Mary will fly."

*Mary Poppins* will feature Jayme Armstrong in the lead as the resident high-flying nanny.

Since finishing as a top three finalist on the reality show, *How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria?*, Armstrong has made a home for herself with Drayton productions, starring in several shows.

"I love her, she's very sweet," said West. "She's as spunky as Mary needs to be."

The well-loved story of *Mary Poppins* takes place at the turn of the last century and centres on two mischievous children, a distracted mother and a magical nanny. The father of the family, George Banks, spends most of his time working and has a limited relationship with his family, a reality many modern families can identify with, West said.

West has also made the character Winifred Banks, the children's mother, more likable than the distant and scatterbrained character from the 1964 film.

"If you don't care about the characters, you don't care about the show," he said. "That's always the challenge."



Mathew McCarthy/Record staff

Nigel West sits in a box at the Dunfield Theatre in Cambridge which is Drayton Entertainment's newest theatre.

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The two children in *Mary Poppins* are played by two sets of young actors. West said casting the children required two very specific attributes: talent obviously, but also the ability to elicit a very specific reaction from the audience.

"It's the awww factor," he said. "It's about the cuteness."

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**Drayton Entertainment**

Mary Poppins

March 6 to April 28

Dunfield Theatre, Cambridge

Box Office toll-free: 1-855-372-9866

Tickets: adults \$40, youth under 20, \$20, preview and group rate \$32

Information **[www.dunfieldtheatrecambridge.com](http://www.dunfieldtheatrecambridge.com)** (<http://www.dunfieldtheatrecambridge.com>)

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