

The real Anne Frank

Theatre Aquarius show will send shivers down your spine

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Need to know

What: The Diary of Anne Frank

Who: Theatre Aquarius

Where: Dofasco Centre for the Arts,
190 King William St.

When: Now through Oct. 10

Tickets: 905-522-PLAY



There are two important things about The Diary of Anne Frank.

What the play says about our human capacity for cruelty is frightening. You won't walk away from Theatre Aquarius's excoriating production without shivers down your back.

More importantly though, Anne's story, as richly observed in this new Wendy Kesselman adaptation of the 1955 Frances Goodrich/Albert Hackett play, transcends the horror of her times. It enforces revivification of the human spirit, something vital in our troubled world today.

In other words, this is more than a chronicle of the Holocaust.

At its greater heart The Diary of Anne Frank is a poignant, moving look at the way the human spirit can survive even the most terrible odds.

A thread of hope winds its way through the darkest moments of Anne Frank's story. It provides gentle humour, warmth and a touching look at the way a young girl finds the tender heart of love even when shadowed by death.

With this production, Theatre Aquarius's artistic director Ron Ulrich offers his calling card. In the first season he has planned, he has asked his audience to step up to the bar.

He has made a commitment to thoughtful, demanding theatre. Theatre that makes you think. And that's all to the good as far as I'm concerned.

Now, none of this would matter a whit without strong and vital productions of the plays he's chosen. Thankfully, Anne Frank gets things off to a riveting start.

Director Marcia Kash has marshalled her forces well. She's given this compelling play wonderful human context. She permits the broiling tensions of life in a secret annex in an Amsterdam office building to flash fire. She allows claustrophobic relationships of these imperfect people to race toward hysteria.

Most important, she allows us to see Anne Frank, warts and all.

In Natasha Greenblatt's nicely modulated performance, this Anne can be infuriating. Her exuberance and youth frequently take her into awkward terrain. She reveals an outsized ego as well as a heart of great warmth.

Greenblatt is one of the marvels of this Aquarius production. The other is Tim Koetting.

Lean and angular, Koetting walks inside the dour clothes of Otto Frank, a man shrunk by the cruelty of life yet still blazing with hope.

Koetting's great restraint here is his ability to speak volumes with his hands and eyes. He imbues this Otto with a sense of noble character that frequently contrasts with the desperate souls around him.

Lisa Norton is an endearing Margot Frank, Jeff Irving a sweetly innocent, if sometimes too simple, Peter Van Daan. Catherine McNally finds the troubled heart of Edith Frank, James Downing suggests the loneliness of Mr. Van Daan and Matt Baram is a twinkling Mr. Dussel.

At first Theresa Tova seems a tad outsized as irrepressible Mrs. Van Daan in her razzled old fur. The thing is though, she breaks your heart into tiny pieces as the play makes its inevitable way toward its conclusion. Kesselman's adaptation of the Hackett-Goodrich script is successful. It expunges moments of the Anne Frank story that cluttered the original play. At the same time, it illuminates others offering a more truthful glimpse of Anne's life. Patrick Clark's cagelike set, with its open lathing suggests a surreal world. At the same time it offers a haunting glimpse of railroad tracks and shadowy concentration camp towers.

With the exception of a bathrobe and a too-modern carrier bag, the trappings here are believable for the play's 1940s time frame.

Director Kash offers intriguing touches that propel the play forward.

The moments when Anne and Peter begin a fumbling understanding of love and sex are sensitively handled. The hushed response as Louise Guinand's evocative lighting swallowed Otto Frank and the world of Anne's story into darkness was like a bolt of lightning piercing the heart.

Gary Smith has written on theatre and dance for The Hamilton Spectator for more than 25 years.