

The remarkable true story is real Canadiana

By Mark Pavilons

There are many pivotal moments in history that change all of our lives. Most of us remember exactly what we were doing when we heard the awful news of the events of 9/11.

Come From Away resonates with crowds because it's a true Canadian story.

The award-winning stage play, on an extended run in Toronto, is void of elaborate sets and special effects. It's basic storytelling, an adventure with heart and soul. Throw in a taste of *The Rock*, and you have a welcoming tale of human compassion.

It makes you laugh, cry and sing, often at the same time. It's 12 performers, several musicians and a few wooden chairs that paints a full picture unbelievably well.

Come From Away has been embraced by all, and enhanced Canadian pride like nothing else. Even 18 years after 9/11 the tale is as poignant as ever.

It's written by Tony-nominated Canadians Irene Sankoff and David Hein, and guided by Tony-winning Best Director, Christopher Ashley.

While you wouldn't think a tragedy would make for a lively musical, this play makes it work. Hein and Sankoff researched the amazing story of how a small Newfoundland town (Gander) welcomed some 7,000 passengers on 38 planes that were diverted to their town on 9/11.

The couple spent a month in Gander and surrounding communities on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 interviewing hundreds of people involved.

As we heard numerous tales of ordinary people and extraordinary generosity, it became clear that during the week of 9/11, for the 7,000 stranded passengers and people of Newfoundland, the island was a safe harbor in a world thrown into chaos. We laughed, we cried, we were invited over for dinner and offered cars. We made lifetime friends out of strangers and we came home wanting to share every story we heard about 16,000 of them! Through this journey, we've learned it's important to tell stories about welcoming strangers and stories of kindness. It's important to honor what was lost and commemorate what was found.

The result is not a story of 9/11 but rather the compassionate, heroic actions of those on the ground, who welcomed the plane people.

Unlike other musicals, there is no one lead character. All of the actors take on several roles with different, using their voices and storytelling skills to paint a picture. All are amazing and they complement each other very well.

For me, standouts were George Masswohl (Mayor Claude), Lisa Horner (Beulah) and Cory O'Brien (Oz).

A bonus to last week's performance was a Q&A with the actual former mayor of Gander, Claude Elliott. He arrived in Toronto on his way home, from the show's premiere in Melbourne, Australia.

Elliott served as mayor of Gander from 1996 to 2017, while also working as a full-time paramedic at Gander's James Paton Memorial Hospital.

With genuine wit, humour and love, Elliott shared some anecdotes. He reminded everyone in the audience to always extend compassion to others, especially those in your own community. All of the bits and pieces portrayed in *Come From Away* are real. He also told the audience none of the resident hosts would accept any money as payment for their generosity. Visitors were told if they really wanted to donate, they could put money in the town's suggestion box. That generated more than \$60,000.

Elliott said tourism has increased noticeably in Gander with the bulk of visitors coming from Ontario. He did say many of the travellers from that fateful day have returned, just to rekindle friendships with townspeople.

With casts in cities around the world, *Come From Away* continues to spread. In October 2018 it became the longest-running Canadian musical in Broadway history.

This story is remarkable and will remain as one of the truly heartwarming Canadian tales of the century.

If you haven't had a chance to see *Come From Away*, it's definitely a must-see. Like 9/11 itself, it will change your life!