

Theatre review: Lucien's Labour Lost reflects reality

Poignant play filled with down-home humour and wisdom resonates with audience



Marshall Button brings his New Brunswick millworker Lucien to Halifax with his hit comedy, *Lucien's Labour Lost*, an Eastern Front Theatre production at Neptune's Scotiabank Studio Theatre through Sunday.

A paper mill closes in a small town, throwing its citizens out of work.

What's a 50-something North Shore New Brunswick boy to do?

Lucien observes sadly that he is too old for Fort McMurray, too young for the golden handshake.

So the charming raconteur, who weathers life's hard knocks with the tenacity of a world-class fighter, opens a bar.

Not a fancy drinking establishment with gleaming hardwood floors and shiny brass fixtures — it looks more like a dusty, stuffed-to-the-rafters consignment store, where treasures of yesteryear

lie waiting to be discovered amidst souvenir lobster traps, Alpine beer paraphernalia and a battered table with mismatched chairs.

Many stories are told in that bar in Lucien's Labour Lost, a solo show presented by Eastern Front Theatre, onstage till Sunday at Neptune's Scotiabank Studio Theatre. Whether poignant or funny, all are sure to resonate with Maritimers (particularly New Brunswickers), those of a certain age who find the employment rug unexpectedly pulled out from under them and political junkies.

Marshall Button, who created Lucien 30 years ago, is a New Brunswick icon, notes Eastern Front artistic producer Charlie Rhindress, who lived and worked for a couple of decades in Sackville, N.B., where he was co-founder and artistic director of Live Bait Theatre.

Lucien's Labour Lost is the second of four Lucien plays, and Rhindress chose the production, first staged 20 years ago and updated with references to Stephen Harper, Mike Duffy and Stephen McNeil, to introduce the beloved character to Nova Scotia audiences. He thought the subject would resonate in the province's economic climate.

Though set in New Brunswick and peppered with comic references to former premier Shawn Graham and new premier Brian Gallant, as well as industry titans the McCains and Irvings, the play broadens its reach with mentions of Neil Young and the oilsands, Peter MacKay and his military helicopter taxi service and more.

Button is bilingual, but his alter ego Lucien speaks in humorous Franglais, mangling words and phrases for comic effect. Button has a loving relationship with language, throwing in quick one-liners and astute observations like the older you get, the more cowboy music makes sense.

And his beautifully rendered songs — a fast-paced New Brunswick version of I've Been Everywhere, the 1962 Hank Snow hit, and You Don't Bring Me Flowers — are highlights of the show, which runs about an hour and 45 minutes with intermission.

The second act, in which Lucien discusses love with an unseen customer — commiserating, encouraging, sharing his own experiences and philosophies while still full of laughs — goes deeper than the first and is more thoughtful.

Lucien and his storytelling brings to mind Walt Wingfield, memorably portrayed by Rod Beattie in seven charming one-man stage shows, crossed with TV's Red Green. Lucien is more a man of the people, less educated and more prone to swearing and fits of temper than the erudite and gentle Wingfield.

But both are very clever, and their down-home humour contains words of wisdom that will resonate with audience members.

About the Author

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