



(from left) John Kidder, Mark Armstrong, Sharon Ambler, Nancy Duchaine, Seanna Sampson, and Barbara Roden wonder 'Where'd Marilla Come From?' in *Anne of Green Gables: The Musical*. Photo: Madel Macalan.

‘Anne of Green Gables’ production nothing short of outstanding

‘A production that many will remember for years’.

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By Esther Darlington

Lucy Maud Montgomery’s timeless story of a young girl growing up was brought to life in Ashcroft from November 2 to 5, with the Winding Rivers Arts & Performance Society’s production of *Anne of Green Gables: The Musical*.

Anne was played by teenager Vivian McLean (complete with pinafore, freckles, and that notorious head of red pigtailed hair), who played the role with the kind of professionalism you’d expect on a New York stage. At the HUB in Ashcroft on November 5, Vivian’s performance was a standout. She’s a natural, and it won’t be a surprise to see that native talent become famous some day.

Anne of Green Gables came out in 1908, and the novel was described as “literature for young girls”. Over the last century, Anne has become world famous, touching the hearts of not only young women and girls in many countries across the globe, but everyone.

Montgomery's depiction of an orphaned teenager who is passionate by nature, uninhibited, and fiercely independent in her imaginative view of herself and the world would, of course, raise doubts and even horror in adults. When an elderly brother and sister, played by Theresa Takacs as Marilla Cuthbert and Jim Mertel as Matthew Cuthbert, take the girl in (against Marilla's initial doubts; she wanted a boy, to help Matthew on the farm), Anne's personality is a challenge for them.

Matthew's gentle nature and understanding compassion for the homeless waif was played with sensitivity by Mertel. Marilla's initial horror as she tries to understand and cope with Anne's bursts of eloquence eventually softens, with not only understanding, but a loyalty that stoutly defends Anne's nature to the less than understanding neighbours and townsfolk. Barbara Roden played bossy Rachel Lynde with a skill and humour that had the audience chuckle at Rachel's brand of hypocrisy.

Takacs's role as the reluctant caregiver of a girl who seems to defy the conventions of the time in rural Prince Edward Island was a challenging one requiring adroit handling. At first there is fierce reluctance, when Marilla threatens to send Anne away and tries to find her another home; only to realize that Anne would be exposed to abuse and misadventure at the hands of Mrs. Blewett, the ever child-bearing, hard-pressed, and just as hard-eyed mother of several pairs of twins, ably played by Skylar Dubois. Marilla's compassion surfaces, and Takacs makes the transition with impressive skill.

In this production of *Anne*, we become totally involved with the play itself; that is, the drama. But it is the music, written by Norman Campbell, which accompanies the drama that carries the drama into eloquence; the kind of pathos that moves the hearts of audiences. There is also a light-hearted texture of humour, and the sheer joy of growing up with the love and loyalty of an elderly couple who've never raised a child before.

Montgomery's understanding of the latent goodness of people comes out. The picnic scene with the large cast of characters who fill the stage with the kind of choreography you might expect in the venue of dance—even the ballet—is carried off with an incredibly contained energy.

The dialogue is crisp, clear, spontaneous. The melodic score of the music enhances the performances throughout. The design of the sets was ingenious; not easy to cope with, but handled by the crew with speed and efficiency. When Anne's elevated bedroom contained three adults, as it did in one scene, you knew the framework was solid and safe.

That the bedroom could be hidden and revealed as it was seems worthy of a special note of admiration for the design, as well as the engineering. Jim Duncan and his set crew deserve special mention.

Which brings the writer to the quality of the singing. All I can write is that everyone sang more than just ably: they sang with spirit, energy, and a solid feeling for the score.

Vivian's spiralling soprano was incredibly clear and bright. Takacs's musical direction was nothing short of marvelous, and her own voice is well known in the community for its clear tone and power.

Matthew Cuthbert's death, played with gentle reverence by Mertel, prompted tears. I felt one slip down my cheek. All I can sum up with is that Mavourneen Varcoe-Ryan has once again directed a production that many will remember for years. She has brought to life a story that many younger generations may not have known. For the rest of us, who read all of Montgomery's *Anne* books and others works as girls, the performance by all was nothing short of outstanding.

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