

Anne Frank's diary is as powerful as ever for director O'Connell



For more than 70 years, the very private thoughts of Anne Frank, as she recorded them in hiding during the Second World War, have been arguably the most powerful accounts of the realities of the Holocaust.

Generations have been moved by her words, sparking numerous adaptations, including the award-winning play, *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Now, as Theatre Aurora prepares to open the play this week, director Keith O'Connell says her words are as important now as ever before.

'Any time this story can be presented, it needs to be told,' says O'Connell. 'History is beginning to repeat itself, sadly, in many aspects around the world. We're living in a time of war right now. Even though it's not touching us here in Canada, we still see horrific events happening - vandalism and all those sorts of things that are happening at religious venues - history is starting to repeat itself and this story needs to be told as many times as humanly possible so people don't forget. If we either don't continue to tell this story or pretend that it doesn't exist, it could get worse.'

'I think it is very timely to present it again and remind people of the struggles of the past and how we can draw parallel lines to what we're seeing today.'

Since it was first published in English from its native Dutch in 1952, Anne Frank's diary has sparked countless adaptations and interpretations, including the 1955 Tony Award-winning play by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, and the 1959 Oscar-winning film, based on the play, starring Millie Perkins and Shelley Winters.

O'Connell says he's a big fan of the film, particularly Shelley Winters' performance, and was struck how as much as there are moments of tension in the play, they are met with 'a sense of family.'

'I think that's what drew me to this,' he says. 'Given everything they have been going through, everything that has been taken away from them, they are still in some aspects able to thrive in a small confined space. It's impossible to recreate the exact space that Anne Frank and the families were forced to live in for those 761 days; what we were able to recreate is the feeling of having a confined space and to be able to see these individuals, how they adapted, how they were able to strengthen their bond as families within the confines of that space. They had a rhythm of life that was evident from the first day they were brought into until hiding until the very last day - that that is what we're really focusing on: this rhythm of life and what they had to endure for those 761 days.'

Part of his approach in casting the play and having his actors build their characters is the simple reminder that these were real people and not just characters of the writers' imaginations.

“Each one has their own journey they have taken for their roles,” O’Connell explains. “Everyone is concerned with representing these people truthfully and right down to how they use a prop, how they walk, how they talk. We’re not speaking German or Hebrew throughout the play, but each one of these individuals has committed themselves in ways I have never seen other shows I have done. We want to make sure that we are bringing truth to the story, that we are true to these individuals and we’re presenting them with respect. That’s the number one word I can probably say we’re trying to ensure the audience walks away with respect for these people and the journey they went through.”

Theatre Aurora's production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* opens this Thursday, March 2, and runs on select dates and times through March 11. For more information, visit theatreaurora.com.

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