

Opinion | Digging a little deeper into ‘The Time Capsule’

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Matt Murray and Deborah Drakeford. Hamilton theatre audiences may remember Murray as one of the creators of “*Maggie*,” the musical that set Theatre Aquarius on the North American theatre map. Photo: Dahlia Katz

By Gary Smith, Special to the Spectator

Actress Deborah Drakeford and playwright Matt Murray are key to unlocking the mysteries of “*The Time Capsule*,” a new play opening the season at Hamilton’s Theatre Aquarius.

Drakeford spent time in the city in the 1980s going to high school.

“We moved around a lot because my dad was a United Church minister. He was the pastor at St. John United Church on East 38th Street,” Drakeford says.

Murray’s Hamilton connection is more recent. Growing up in Sarnia, he remembers a time capsule discovered during the demolition of a local high school. That was probably the genesis for his new play that’s now set in Hamilton.

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Talking with these two linchpins about the secrets of Murray’s new play set in our city, I discovered the play has much more than just a great sense of humour.

“I play Erin in Murray’s play,” Drakeford says. “She’s a high school history teacher on the brink of retiring. She’s responsible for gathering a group of people together to help create her passion project, creating and burying a 100-year time capsule.”

It soon becomes obvious she’s pretty much the catalyst for the important conversations in Murray’s play.

“If I had to describe the play, I’d say it’s a comedy with lots of humanity and heart,” Murray says. “Everyone in the play is trying to manoeuvre something in their own lives. At their core, they are all very alike. I think boiled down, the play is really about legacy; what we leave behind, literally and figuratively.”

“It says don’t judge a book by its cover,” Drakeford adds. “We discover all the characters have way more going on than what we initially thought. Compassion, honesty, acceptance, bravery are all very apparent in this play.”

The play has comedic elements but it isn’t just a comedy.

“The characters Matt has created are delicious, real and diverse. They’re all complex and truthfully written. Why they show up at this meeting and how they manage Erin’s passion project, and each other, is what drives the play’s narrative,” Drakeford says.

“What I like is that the characters feel like real people,” Murray says. “They are good-hearted, but not without flaws, just like me, and just like every single person who comes to see this play. My hope is the audience will root for them because they remind them of people they know and love.”

There’s another character in “*The Time Capsule*” too; it’s the city of Hamilton. It’s always there as the landscape that gives the play’s characters their home. And it’s a diverse home too, one with both positive and negative aspects.

“I think people will enjoy ‘*The Time Capsule*’ because of the familiarity of hearing about their own city,” Drakeford says, remembering her own history here when she did “*Oklahoma!*” with Hamilton Theatre Inc. in the mid-1980s.

Ironically, in spite of everything, “*The Time Capsule*” wasn’t originally written about Hamilton at all, but rather Sarnia.

“That’s where I grew up,” Murray says. “I wanted to celebrate places like Sarnia, and the wonderful people who live there. But when Theatre Aquarius’s artistic director Mary Francis Moore expressed interest in programming ‘*The Time Capsule*’ for Aquarius, she asked me how I would feel about “It was a no-brainer. Hamilton and Sarnia are similar in their vibe. They’re both places with tremendous pride and strong ties to industry.”

Though he doesn’t feel there’s a specific driving force in his play, for me Drakeford’s Erin is the catalyst who sets everything in motion. Sometimes pushy, she has a strong agenda, and some surprising secrets underneath her seemingly calm centre.

“I’ve played many characters whose choices I don’t personally agree with,” Drakeford says. “But those have been some of my favourites, because I had to work to find their humanity and I love that.”

Drakeford has two key working components in her life, acting and teaching.

“Teaching has always been of interest to me. And certainly, when my kids were younger, I found myself volunteering at their schools. I love hanging out with kids — their energy, their directness are a delight. So, in my mid-40s, I went back to school for a year to get my bachelor of education. What a smart thing I did. And now, between acting gigs, I supply teach for the Toronto District School Board. I love it. I teach kindergarten to Grade 8. I feel I’m a better actor for it. And a better teacher for my acting career.”

Murray’s concentration is his writing. And he admires the work of many Canadian playwrights. He knows how hard they have to struggle to get their work produced.

“I feel like all of them can write a good joke and a good story with heart and purpose. But they also have to be hustlers who keep on writing no matter what. I’m a big fan of such tenacity and drive,” he says.

Drakeford, who is married to actor Oliver Dennis, knows plenty about how elusive acting jobs can be, though she’s done many, some with her husband as her onstage partner.

She has insightful advice for the young folks out there interested in a career in theatre.

“It’s not an easy career choice,” she says. “You have to love it. It comes with a lot of rejection, but that’s not a reflection on your talent. That’s a hard lesson to learn, because to do good work you have to put your whole self on the line. It makes those times of no thank you hard not to take personally. And you have to be OK with not knowing when your next paycheck is coming. It’s a job that needs deep empathy. And we all need more of that.”

That’s something you’ll be reminded of when you watch “*The Time Capsule*.” It’s that sort of play.