



Hometown... The Musical!

About half of the company of *Hometown...The Musical!* including Fort McMurray Mayor Melissa Blake (furthest right).

Photo credit: Russell Thomas

Russell Thomas documents the process of creating and staging the largest production in Keyano Theatre Company's history.

To see a photo essay of the rehearsal process, visit theatrealberta.com/all-stages-online.



How do you go about telling a story that captures the soul of a place? Crafting a compelling, entertaining, authentic narrative is hard enough. Articulating it as a piece of musical theatre is a challenge of a completely different magnitude.

As I write this, Keyano Theatre Company, situated in Fort McMurray, the urban centre at the heart of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, is in full-tilt-boogie mode. We are in the middle of preparations for an epic production that tells the story of our community and region, its complex mélange of characters and the essence of home that it inspires. By the time you read this, *Hometown...The Musical!* will have completed its nine-night run at Keyano Theatre, having featured the largest cast and crew in the company's 33 year history.

I've been on the periphery of this adventure since the very beginning: when the notion

was conceived, as interviews were carried out, through the audition process and into rehearsals. I'm knee deep in it as I write this, being both a member of the acting ensemble and a pseudo-archivist of the experience via my *Journey to Hometown* blog, which you can check out at www.middleagebulge.com.

Hometown...The Musical! was designed to hold a mirror up to Wood Buffalo and reflect its richness, complexity and diversity. Below, I've pulled back the curtain on the process and the range of emotions, discoveries and moments experienced along the way.

The past: Casting

Co-creators Claude Giroux, the Artistic Director of Keyano Theatre, and Michael Beamish, a young Albertan playwright and the Coordinator of the Keyano College Conservatory, embraced the process of trying to explain, celebrate and illuminate this place that Premier Redford declared "not a boomtown, but a hometown." Their first task was to craft multiple storylines borne out of dozens of interviews and loads of research.

It's been a breakneck process—the recruitment of actors, musicians, singers and dancers happened while the show was being written. A community development imperative has underpinned this entire production. In other words, the goal has been larger than just producing an entertaining show based on our hometown. There was a recognition that we needed to get more people engaged with what we were doing; we needed to cast our nets wider. An aggressive audition recruitment campaign, one-on-one encouragement and personal relationships all contributed to gathering the most diverse collection of performers that I've ever seen.

There is no way on God's green earth that this show would be where it is today were it not for the recruitment seeds that were planted and tended during the writing process. Securing the commitment of some very busy people was fundamental to achieving the scope and scale envisioned by Claude and Michael. The cast includes a core acting ensemble, elite members of Generation Dance Studio (a Fort McMurray teaching studio), the Shantelle Davidson



Dance rehearsal for *Hometown...The Musical!*
Photo credit: Michelle Ploughman

band (a local country music act), Aboriginal drummers and the Fort McMurray Interchurch Choir. A number of local luminaries have committed to cameo appearances in the production, including Coach and Billy—the “Bar Boys”—two fixtures at the local Blackhorse Pub, and Bear—the owner of Showgirls—an adult nightclub located across the street from Keyano College. Even Mayor Melissa Blake has committed to the show, making an on-stage speech to inaugurate the opening of Fort McMurray’s new airport terminal.

Keyano’s season brochure read “featuring a community cast of over 100” long before anyone had signed on for the ride; as we approach the final stretch however, the total number of performers has surpassed that one hundred mark. There is a refreshing collection of professions represented in *Hometown*—lawyers, site workers,

Performer Jennifer Lynch and Music Director Susan Lexa work out a number.
Photo credit: Michelle Ploughman



educators, politicians, media personalities and business owners—along with a distinct multi-cultural dimension, reflecting a community that has become increasingly global in recent years.

The present: Rehearsal

“This is a work in progress,” Claude Giroux says early in the rehearsal process. “Things are going to change. Be ready for it.”

Some things are adjusted: lines are cut, scene orders change and songs are trimmed. Overall though, the co-creators’ original vision remains almost fully intact. We start with basic blocking, singing and choreography. We put it all together. Then we add new dimensions to the play.

“It’s time to add in the next layer,” Claude says. “Life in the airport.” The airport is *Hometown’s* theatrical setting for the various stories woven through music and dance segments and hysterical multi-media flashbacks to Wood Buffalo’s colourful past.

Claude scans the cast for bodies not currently in the scene, looking for body types, trying to decide in advance whether or not that person would be required in the segments ahead.

He points at three performers. “You, you and you. You’re going to cross left to right, check-in your bags and board the airplane.”

The amount of business involved with staging an airport scene and working with a disparate collection of seasoned performers and absolute newbies is daunting. Stage manager Stephanie Link furiously scribbles actor movements in the master script as the theatrical canvas is created on the fly. The gears inside Claude’s head turn fast and furious as he does the math on what comes next. It’s incredible to watch.

The future: Tech and opening

The staging of *Hometown...The Musical!* will make optimal use of projections and a nine-foot platform that will run the width of the stage, providing a home for the band on the main level and a secondary playing area above. We won’t see the technical elements, video segments and projections until we hit cue-to-cue early in February. All we’ve had to play with thus far are the familiar benches from the Fort McMurray Airport terminal, which are brought in and out of the scene, along with a bar, check-in counter and lots and lots of luggage.

Fort McMurray is a place where people are coming and going from in ever increasing numbers. The current airport, built to serve 250,000 passenger movements a year, is expected to welcome over a million in 2013. The new terminal, which will be theatrically previewed during *Hometown...The Musical!*, will open for real in April of 2014. The airport authority has been very generous in providing some of their surplus benches and CAD (computer-aided design) drawings of what the finished facility will look like, so we will be able to reproduce elements of it on stage. It’s been a very collaborative effort.

From the arc of the stories to the images, songs and movements that create this tapestry, *Hometown* is truly a community creation. What began as a notion, a longing to capture the truth of Wood Buffalo, has grown into something truly remarkable. We are three weeks from opening, but there is a distinct uniqueness to this experience, a pervasive sense that most of us have some serious skin in the game. This is personal. This is our story and collectively we’re going to tell it the best way we know how: with purpose, passion and persistence. **AS**

Hometown...The Musical! ran February 14-23, 2013. It was written, co-created and directed by Michael Beamish and Claude Giroux. Musical Director: Susan Lexa, Choreographer: Kim Hurley, Costume Designer: Tiffany Bishop, Lighting Designer: Alan Roberts, Projections Designer: Darren O’Donnell, Stage Manager: Stephanie Link.

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