

New Peterborough theatre company provides opportunities for young actors

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Arts & Entertainment

Planet 12 Productions debuts "Boy Wonders" at The Theatre on King on June 8

By Sam Tweedle -

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Nicole Roy and Derek Weatherdon and the cast of new theatre company Planet 12 Productions during a read-through of "Boy Wonders", the debut production of the company that premieres on June 8 at The Theatre On King in Peterborough. (Photo: Planet 12 Productions)

Derek Weatherdon and Nicole Roy, the couple who put together last winter's highly successful *The Reluctant Dragon* at the Peterborough Theatre Guild, have a unique philosophy when working with kids.

They never want to have an audience member ever leave their show saying “That was pretty good ... for a kids’ show.” They want to create professional and entertaining shows that feature kids, but are aimed at a broader audience.

This philosophy has become the basis for Planet 12 Productions, a brand new theatre company that Derek and Nicole, along with Heather Ross and Amy Keller, have spearheaded. The company aims to give kids between the ages of 11 and 13 opportunities to flex their acting muscles in dramatic roles, and give talented kids an alternative channel to enter theatre than those most often available for them.

“There are kids out there who are super talented,” Nicole says. “These kids can often out-act adults, and they need a chance to do really good theatre.”

Having become familiar faces in the theatre community in the past year, Derek and Nicole appeared together in the *My Narrator*, the Peterborough Theatre Guild’s entry into the Eastern Ontario Drama League One Act Festival, and Derek recently starred in the award-winning drama *A Life Before*, while Nicole was in *No Exit* at The Theatre on King (TTOK).

Derek has a background working with kids as a teacher at Queen Elizabeth Public School in Peterborough, where he has directed a number of school productions before crossing over to do the Theatre Guild’s annual family show last December. Derek believes there’s a lot of potential for kids to be given more opportunities in theatre than they often receive.



Derek Weatherdon and Nicole Roy, the couple who put together “The Reluctant Dragon” at the Peterborough Theatre Guild last winter, have formed a new theatre company. Planet 12 Productions intends to provide a variety of high-quality dramatic productions featuring youth actors. (Photo: Planet 12 Productions)

“I find that in my line of work as a teacher, as well as in the arts, people tend to cut kids short,” Derek explains. “They don’t know what kids are capable of, and often the assumption is that they aren’t capable of very much. They think that it’s often easier to replace a kid with a young-looking teenager or adult — but you don’t have to. The words can be said just as poignantly, and even more so, by an age-appropriate actor.”

Derek and Nicole are not only involved in theatre themselves, but are the parents of Samuelle “Sam” May Weatherdon, one of Peterborough’s most remarkable young actresses. She has appeared in both family and adult productions over the past three years at 4th Line Theatre, the Peterborough Theatre Guild, and TTOK, and she’s currently working in New Stages’ production of *Our Town*.

Derek and Nicole say when TTOK’s Ryan Kerr cast Sam along with Lydia Etherington in Hortense Flexner’s *Voices* last September, they realized that, despite the many opportunities for kids to enter theatre in Peterborough, more could be done.



When The Theatre On King’s Ryan Kerr held open auditions last year, he was impressed by the talents of Lydia Etherington and Samuelle Weatherdon but he didn’t have any roles for them. So he chose American poet’s Hortense Flexner 1916 play “Voices” as a showcase for their talents. (Photo: Andy Carroll)

“Voices was a huge thing,” Nicole says. “That was validation. When Sam and Lydia auditioned for Ryan Kerr, he saw the talent in these two girls but he didn’t have a show for them to do. He had nothing for them, and he could have just let them walk away. But he didn’t want to let

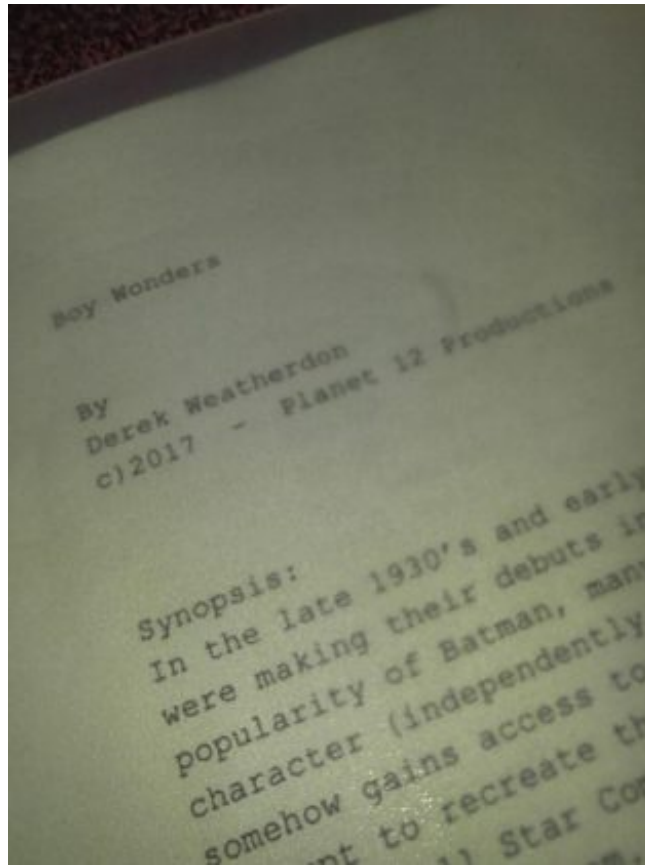
these kids go. He had to find something for them, and that was Voices.”

The Planet 12 Productions team invited six of their outstanding performers from *The Reluctant Dragon* to form a company that will give both acting and production opportunities to pre-teens, but allow them to do theatre that’s more cutting edge than that often associated with kids their age.

“As much as possible, we’re going to be working with the same core group of kids every time,” Derek says. “We’re a true ensemble. We are not focused on musical theatre. We’re not focused on kids’ theatre. We’re not focused on pageantry. The focus is going to be on drama and more serious fare.”

“Most kids’ shows are just that — kids’ shows,” Nicole adds. “They are kids’ shows in their expectations and in their standards and their execution. It’s about dressing them up really cute and have your friends and family come out and see how awesome they look on stage, and that’s it. That’s not what we are going to do.”

Although there are plans to extend opportunities to kids who want to join Planet 12 Productions in the future, the current performers includes Derek and Nicole’s daughter Sam as well as Abbie Dale, Aimee Gordon, Emily Keller, Emma Meinhardt, and Issac Maker. Along with Derek (creative director and sound designer) and Nicole (stage management and producer), the crew includes Dave Butcher (props, lights, and effects) and Heather Ross (lead costumer).



The first production of Planet 12 Productions is "Boy Wonders", an original script by Derek Weatherdon. (Photo: Planet 12 Productions)

"We have a group of kids who are quite good," Derek says. "They have presence, they have personality, and they have the right attitude. They are very trusting, their families are very supportive, and they take it seriously. Our short-term goals are to give these kids heavy fare. To have them say things and create things on stage that would not be typical for kids, but may be typical for adults.

"We also want to promote opportunities with other theatre companies for these kids. We want to help them with their auditioning skills and their acting abilities. We don't want to keep them; we want to send them to other places. Planet 12 Productions is just a place where our kids will always get a place to act."

For their premiere show, Planet 12 Productions will be presenting Derek's original play *Boy Wonders* at TTOK from June 8th to 10th.

A fan and collector of comic books, Derek has written a twisted and poignant look at superhero sidekicks with some real-world twists. For this production, which tells the story of six sidekick superheroes in the 1940s, the kids will be joined onstage by popular Peterborough actor Brad Breckenridge.

"Boy Wonders is sort of The Breakfast Club meets superheroes, but it's deeper," Derek says. "It's a story that's going to take a big look of what being a sidekick is.

I've read a lot of Golden Age comics: The Sandman and Sandy, Green Arrow and Speedy, Merry the Girl of 1000 Gimmicks, Boy Commandos, The Newsboy Legion. As comic book fans, we just accept sidekicks as being a part of the genre. We don't question it. It just makes sense because it's been there forever."

"Look at Batman and Robin," adds Nicole. "It really hit home with the kids when we talked about them. This rich bachelor millionaire with no wife and no family, with only a butler, who dresses up like a bat at night, he goes and adopts this orphan kid."

"Batman puts this kid in a bright red shirt and then he throws him in gunfire," Derek continues. "Meanwhile, Batman stands in the shadows, and we don't question that. This is the thing that Boy Wonders explores. It's not a touching story. It's more of a horror story, but it's going to let these kids shine right off the bat."



Abbie Dale
as
Kirby the Bellhop



Aimee Gordon
as
Betty Benson



Emily Keller
as
Robert Gaines



Samuelle May
as
Dana McArthur



Isaac Maker
as
Dash Dawson



Emma Meinhardt
as
Jimmy Wentworth

The cast of "Boy Wonders", which premieres in June. (Photos: Planet 12 Productions)

While many theatre companies only offers kids one or two opportunities to appear in shows per year, Planet 12 Productions plans to do multiple productions a year.

“We never want the kids to ever be asked the question ‘This is a great show, what’s next for you?’ and have nothing to say but ‘I don’t know, whatever comes up’,” Nicole explains.

There are solid plans to do productions in September and December, including a show featuring adult actors with an all-kids stage crew.

“If the kids aren’t in the show, we want them on crew,” Derek says. “We have a possible adult show in the works which we want the kids involved in behind the scenes. It’s three adult actors and the kids will be crewing it.”

Although there are many fantastic opportunities for kids to get into theatre in Peterborough, Planet 12 Productions has the potential to be something very unique and niche. Giving kids of such a young age the chance to work together on dramatic productions aimed for an older audience will be something very interesting to see.

Having seen all of the kids from Planet 12 on the stage before, I have little doubt that they have what it takes to make some very raw and compelling theatre.

“There are going to be a lot of eyes on us,” Derek says. “People are really curious about what we’re going to do, and they seem to be very positive about it. There will be a lot of people who are going to want to come out and see what we are all about.”

For more information and updates on Planet 12 Productions, visit their [Facebook page](#) and [Facebook group](#).

Boy Wonders explores what it's like to be a superhero sidekick

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Arts & Entertainment

Debut production from Planet 12 Productions runs June 8 to 10 at The Theatre on King

By Sam Tweedle -

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The cast of *Boy Wonders*: Emily Keller as Cowpoke, Aimee Gordon as Boo, Samuelle Weatherdon as Test Tube, Brad Breckenridge as The Mixer, Abbie Dale as Kirby the bellhop, Emma Meinhardt as Target Boy, and Issac Maker as Shiny the Glimmer Boy. (Photo: Andy Carroll)

On Thursday, June 8th, Peterborough's newest theatre company, Planet 12 Productions, presents their inaugural production *Boy Wonders* at The Theatre on King (TTOK) in downtown Peterborough.

Written and directed by Derek Weatherdon, *Boy Wonders* takes the concept of the superhero sidekick and turns it on its head with a realistic look at what being a young person in that position would actually be like.

Making the play even more compelling is that, with the exception of popular actor Brad Brackenridge, the cast is completely made up of age-appropriate actors all under 14 years old.

Taking place just after World War II, the greatest gathering of American mystery men is taking place at La Grande Hotel Ballroom in New York City. Diamond Man, The Concrete Kid, The Marksmen, Super Ghost, Professor Impossiblo, and Katy Star – Rodeo Queen have come together to create the greatest superhero team of all time.

However, as the crowds gather in the street to witness this historical event, another meeting is congregating in a hotel suite upstairs. The six young sidekicks of these costumed heroes — Shiny the Glimmer Boy (Issac Maker), The Mixer (Brad Brackenridge), Target Boy (Emma Meinhardt), Boo (Aimee Gordon), Test Tube (Samuelle Weatherdon), and Cowpoke (Emily Keller) — are also meeting for the very first time.

As a young starstruck bellhop named Kirby (Abbie Dale) seeks out stories of their heroic adventures, one by one the sidekicks reveal their origins ... and the not-so-super realities of their lives.



Aimee Gordon as Boo, Samuelle Weatherdon as Test Tube, Brad Breckenridge as The Mixer, Issac Maker as Shiny the Glimmer Boy, and Emma Meinhardt as Target Boy. (Photo: Andy Carroll)

In an entertainment industry where superheroes and comic book franchises are now big business, *Boy Wonders* is an interesting original production that deconstructs the elements of the genre. The concept of a masked vigilante throwing a youngster into the line of fire has

been a part of comic books since the introduction of Batman's partner Robin The Boy Wonder in 1940. Since then, it's just something that readers have accepted as being a part of the superhero tradition.

Originally the sidekick was introduced by writers because they felt having a young character in the story was a way to give the younger readers a character to identify with, and hundreds of teen sidekicks have been introduced throughout the history of comics, primarily in the "golden age" between 1938 and 1950.

But what *Boy Wonders* does is take a look at just how inane the whole concept is. The idea of throwing a kid into the heat of battle to fight criminals, mad men, and Nazis — where they could be punched, shot at, or worse — is crazy. It's a concept that other writers have tackled before, but Derek writes a show that puts together all the nostalgia of classic comic books with real-world sensibilities and a ton of pathos. The result is a very different type of superhero story.

Whatever your expectations of a show starring kids are, you probably won't be expecting what you are going to get with *Boy Wonders*. Yes, the performers are all under the age of 14 but this show is not "kids' theatre". This show is not cute. There is no pageantry. Despite a few funny moments, it's not even a comedy. It's definitely not The Teen Titans. *Boy Wonders* is a drama about a group of kids caught up in a dangerous and strange lifestyle who come together and, for the very first time, realize they are not alone.



Emma Meinhardt as Target Boy, Abbie Dale as Kirby, Brad Breckenridge as The Mixer, and Samuelle Weatherdon as Test Tube. (Photo: Andy Carroll)

What is great about Planet 12 Productions' talented young cast is how honest their performances are, and how the cast all support one another on stage. Nobody steals the spotlight or upstages any other actor, and *Boy Wonders* gives each of the performers their moments in the spotlight where they can reveal their stories and deliver lines that pack an emotional punch.

From the boy whose only job is to be shot at to the girl who just wants to go home, *Boy Wonders* is a story of pain and pathos. However, somehow the youthful energy of the performers prevents the show from drowning in its own tears.

So how does Brad Brackenridge fit into this production? Without giving away too many details, Brad plays a 40-year-old man who has basically been banished to the kids' table. The interesting thing about Brad's performance is that his character is equal to the characters played by the kids. Despite his years of experience in the theatre, Brad never overshadows anyone and supports his co-stars as much as they support each other. It's a fantastic thing to see and adds to the strength of this show.

Each of the kids in *Boy Wonders* brings something unique to the show, aimed at allowing the audience to pick their favourite characters.

Abbie Dale, as Kirby the bellhop, is wide eyed and optimistic. Issac Maker, as Shiny, is a

brilliant detective, filled with big words and a grandiose presence. Emma Meinhardt, as Target Boy, is scrappy and emotionally damaged. Aimee Gordon, as Boo, is charming and ladylike but out of place amongst the other kids. Samuelle Weatheron, as Test Tube, is judgmental yet tragic. Emily Keller, as Cowpoke, is endearing and adorable but sad.



Emily Keller takes centre stage as Cowpoke as the cast of *Boy Wonders* listen to her origin story. (Photo: Andy Carroll)

Although their characters are based on one-dimensional stock characters from comics, each of them creates a three-dimensional character on stage with a compelling story to tell.

Furthermore, *Boy Wonders* goes beyond taking a realistic look at sidekicks to deconstructing masked mystery men themselves. What sort of people would dress up in a mask to fight crime? Through the sidekicks' stories, we discover that their mentors may not be the heroes we expect. Instead they are madmen, victims of PTSD, con men, and people in over their head. It's an interesting twist on comic book heroes.

I also want to make mention of the costumes created by Heather Ross for this show. The cast looks great in vintage outfits from the late 1940s. The costume for each performer is as unique as the character itself. From Test Tube's futuristic jumpsuit to Cowpoke's Dale Evans inspired outfit, the cast looks fantastic. There are a few costume surprises within the show I can't reveal, but I will say that a lively discussion of the costuming for this show did happen among the people in the special preview audience after the show. The costumes in *Boy Wonders* are definitely memorable and beautifully unique.

I admit I have been anticipating *Boy Wonders* for a while now. When I first heard the concept it

really piqued my interest, as well as fed into my own lifelong fandom for costumed heroes. After finally seeing the show I can honestly say that it did not disappoint. It's not what some people will expect and will really surprise a lot of audience members. The script is very smart and gives the audience a lot to think about.



Sidekicks unite! (Photo: Andy Carroll)

But most of all *Boy Wonders* is a showcase for the young actors involved in the show. These kids are not amateurs. I have seen them all on the stage before and they are all very good actors with professional attitudes. Often we underestimate kids in the arts. *Boy Wonders* proves that kids are not just human props to be moved around the stage in cute costumes. They can offer a lot and can also bring complex ideas and emotions to the stage.

I can honestly say that the kids in *Boy Wonders* are just as good as many adult performers that I have watched. I really hope that everybody who works in the theatre, especially as directors

and producers, will come and see this show and see what these kids can do. These are the future stars of our theatrical community.

Boy Wonders is a unique show that not only deserves to be seen, but will have people talking for a long time. Planet 12 Productions has created something special with this one. This is a show that shouldn't be missed.

Boy Wonders runs from June 8th to 10th at TTOK. Performances start at 8 p.m. and admission is \$10 or pay what you can.

Peterborough's Planet 12 Productions heading to Toronto Fringe Festival in 2018

 kawarthanow.com/2017/12/12/planet-12-productions-peterborough/

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News & Community

Derek and Nikki Weatherdon's company of young actors also staging a new version of 'The Reluctant Dragon' for local schools

By Sam Tweedle -

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Planet 12 Productions director, writer, and co-founder Derek Weatherdon (with his back to the camera) during a kitchen meeting with the company's six talented young performers: Aimee Gordon, Emma Meinhardt, Emily Keller, Abbie Dale, Isaac Maker, and Samuelle Weatherdon. The company is staging a new version of "The Reluctant Dragon" for local schools and will be taking "Boy Wonders" to the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2018. (Photo: Sam Tweedle / kawarthaNOW.com)

In November 2016, I sat in the green room at the Peterborough Theatre Guild where I was introduced to a group of young actors performing in *The Reluctant Dragon*, last year's annual holiday family show at the Guild.

With the show's producer Nikki Weatherdon leading the discussion, I spent an hour visiting with Emily Keller, Aimee Gordon, Samuelle Weatherdon, and Isaac Maker — a bright and articulate group of young actors with a serious passion for performing.

At that time, little did I realize that for the next year I'd be following these same four kids, along with co-performers Abbie Dale and Emma Meinhardt, who would be selected by Derek and Nikki Weatherdon to form the cast of Planet 12 Productions.



Samuelle Weatherdon, Isaac Maker, and Emily Keller rehearse a scene from the new version of "The Reluctant Dragon" which Planet 12 Productions will be performing at area schools. (Photo: Derek Weatherdon / Planet 12 Productions)

A year later, I am sitting in the Weatherdons' kitchen peering into their living room to watch the same group perform a brand new revised version of *The Reluctant Dragon*. Planet 12 is restaging the show, streamlined and with a far punchier script, for four special performances at area schools over this holiday season.

"It's a crowded field this time of year," says director, writer, and Planet 12 co-founder Derek. "There are a lot of shows going on, and there are a lot of opportunities for classrooms to go and see a show. But that takes permission forms and a lot of money: for a class of thirty kids it's about four hundred dollars for one class.

"We are trying to reverse that and say 'We'll come to you'. We'll show up, set up, and do a

high-quality show. You have no permission forms, no busses, no hassles, and you don't need to do anything but bring the kids to the school gym to see the show. As a teacher, I know how nice of a gig that is. You don't deal with the hassle of a field trip, but you do get all the same entertainment as if you did."



The cast of the updated version of "The Reluctant Dragon" is (top row) Isaac Maker, Abbie Dale, Emma Meinhardt, Samuelle Weatherdon and (bottom row) Aimee Gordon, Addison Wylie, and Emily Keller. (Photo: Amy Keller)

Following the same basic plot as last year's show, Derek's rewrite of *The Reluctant Dragon* has reduced the number of performers, resulting in a more cohesive production.

Taking place within a virtual reality video game played by an unnamed gamer (Aimee Gordon), *The Reluctant Dragon* follows the misadventures of Knee Cap (Samuelle Weatherdon), a bored shepherd who longs for adventure. Hearing tales of dangerous dragons by companions Fingers and Thumbs (Abbie Dale and Emma Meinhardt), she and her best friend Radishes (Emily Keller) meets a mild-mannered slacker dragon (played by adult actor Addison Wylie, recently seen in *Evil Dead: The Musical*).

Befriending the dragon, the pair soon must protect it from the cruel and selfish Prince Scumworth (Isaac Maker), who plans to permanently banish it from his kingdom.

Although I enjoyed last year's production, I couldn't help but notice how the new version is a far more coherent telling of the story, with a more intelligent script offering something for both adults and children to enjoy on an even field.

"I want the broad strokes to be appealing enough for young people to get it, but mindful that

there will be teachers watching it and some grade seven and eight kids,” says Derek of the rewrite. “There has to be something there for everyone. There has to be a clever joke, or a way to make the characters relatable.

“Ultimately you want people watching the show to wish they were in it. It has to look contemporary — it can’t look like a cheesy or awful show, especially when going into a school. You can tell a story and make it intelligent at the same time.”

“A lot of people think that everything has to appeal to only the younger kids,” Nikki adds. “They don’t know how to make it appeal to the older kids and the adults at the same time. We think we managed to do that. We spent the first few rehearsals laughing through the script.”

After what has been an amazing year for Planet 12 Productions producing theatre aimed towards an adult audience (primarily at The Theatre On King), the restaging of *The Reluctant Dragon* represents the company’s return to producing theatre for children. Soon after the first production of *The Reluctant Dragon* ended, Derek and Nikki handpicked their players from their brightest cast members and, with the support of the parents of the performers, formed Planet 12 Productions.



The Planet 12 company at the Little Lake Cemetary Twilight Pageant in September. (Photo: Luc Matteau)

The company launched its inaugural show in June with the highly talked about *Boy Wonders*, which shocked audiences — expecting a kids’ play — with its mature content. A story about the real lives of teenage superhero sidekicks, *Boy Wonders* featured kid actors, but was definitely not a kids’ play.

After a small cameo in the Little Lake Cemetery Twilight Pageant in September, the company followed up in October (with the kids mainly behind the scenes) for *Incident On Gun Mountain*, a 1970s grindhouse-inspired thriller featuring Sasquatch lore.



Abbie Dale of Planet 12 Productions performing in "Incident On Gun Mountain". (Photo: Andy Carroll)

Through these productions, the Planet 12 performers have worked with a number of local theatre favorites including Brad Brackenridge, Lindsay Unterlander, Josh Butcher, Nathan Glovier, and Kelsey Gordon Powell.

The result has been a non-stop hands-on education in professional dramatic theatre that has helped the group of young performers really step up their game.

As I watched them rehearse the new version of *The Reluctant Dragon*, I couldn't help but notice how much each of the performers have grown within the last year. Not only are they all much taller, they've also grown as performers. I've always been impressed by maturity and dedication of Planet 12 performers, but the education that they've received in theatre throughout 2017 really shows.

Although there will be no public performances of the new version of *The Reluctant Dragon*, classes at Chemong Public School, Lakefield District Public School, RF Downey Public School, and North Cavan Public School will be getting the special chance to see this latest Planet 12 offering.

However, there will be more chances for the general public to see the Planet 12 kids as they head into what is going to be an exciting second year for them, when they relaunch *Boy Wonders* on the Toronto stage as part of the 2018 Toronto Fringe Festival!

Despite having only a 12 per cent chance of being selected for Toronto Fringe, Planet 12 found out only a few weeks ago they won a slot in the renowned drama festival.



Planet 12 Productions will be performing “Boy Wonders” at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2018. Pictured is the cast of the original production: Samuelle Weatherdon as Test Tube, Aimee Gordon as Boo, Isaac Maker as Shiny the Glimmer Boy, Emma Meinhardt as Target Boy, Brad Brackenridge as The Mixer, and Emily Keller as Cow Poke. (Photo: Andy Carroll)

In July 2018, Planet 12 will be doing seven performances of *Boy Wonders* over two weeks at various different Toronto venues. This is exciting news for both the company and the performers, as the theatre community beyond Peterborough will get a chance to see these talented performers for the first time.

After watching a performance of Kate Story’s *Festivus Rattus Rattus 2035* at The Theatre On King during the evening of the Fringe Festival lottery, Derek and Sam saw that Planet 12 got selected when they turned on their phones following the performance. The result has been a lot of excitement for the group.

“Sam texted all the kids to tell them that we got in,” Nikki recalls. “A few minutes later, I got a text from Aimee Gordon’s mother that read ‘Can I guess from all the screaming coming from Aimee’s room that we got into the Fringe festival?’”

Derek and Nikki are hoping they’ll be able to bring the same cast from the original show, but it’s too soon to tell. With their cast members, as well as adult performer Brad Brackenridge, often performing in other shows beyond Planet 12, schedules could be a bit tight. But as the

Weatherdons explain, the families of the performers are all on board and understand what the opportunity to be seen at Fringe means for both the company as well as the kids.

“We talked to everyone before we applied for the festival,” Nikki says. “We explained to the kids and their parents what it would be mean. We were very blunt, and everybody got it.

“The interesting challenge we’ll have is with the marketing. Fringe has a kids’ stage, which isn’t because kids are in a show but because it’s a show for kids. Boy Wonders is certainly not a kids’ play. We’ll have to make sure that even if they see a cast of kids, they realize it’s an adult show.”



Planet 12 founders Nikki and Derek Weatherdon with their daughter, and Planet 12 player, Samuelle Weatherdon. (Photo: Sam Tweedle / kawarthaNOW.com)

What many people may not realize is the clever way Planet 12 has been weaving elements from all of their stories into one another, in a universe-creating project. Each Planet 12 show contains subtle references to the others. Characters from one show can be related to characters in another, places and events from other shows are referred to, and background objects may have obscure references from other shows. Even during *The Reluctant Dragon*, I was amused to find a reference to *Incident On Gun Mountain*.

“What we are doing is creating a solid world through our shows,” Derek explains. “We’ve been inspired by Quinton Tarantino in regards to that, and we take all the little bits and connect them.”

The most obvious repeated references are to the fictional La Grande family. Although yet to appear in any of the shows, Derek has referred to the family in all the shows he has written so far, starting as far back as a show he wrote for Queen Elizabeth School, where he teaches, called *Rock and Roll versus Zombies*.

“Rock and Roll versus Zombies took place at La Grande Music Hall” Nikki says.

“Then *Boy Wonders* takes place at La Grande Hotel,” Derek adds. “And the bourbon bottle in *Incident On Gun Mountain* is from the La Grande Distillery. Our next show is called ‘How Can You Tell if You’re Being Secretly Poisoned’ which will feature members of the La Grande family for the first time. It’s about the patriarch of the family who is the victim of an assassination plot. Our company is going to be playing the children of La Grande, and the patriarch will be trying to figure out which one of them tried to kill him.”

However, with *Boy Wonders* heading to Fringe, the next original Planet 12 Production possibly will not be launched until next fall. But 2018 will prove to be an exciting second year for the group. With the Toronto debut of *Boy Wonders* and more original world-building shows on the way, Planet 12 has just begun on what is becoming an amazing theatrical journey.

Personally, over the last year I have really grown fond of each of Planet 12’s six young performers. I’ve enjoyed getting to know them through their performances on stage, and to see them grow stronger as performers with each show. As someone who enjoys original theatre, knowing there is much more on the way from this group is an exciting thing for me, and one of the things I am most excited about in the upcoming year.

“The whole idea of Planet 12 was always to have something on the go,” Nikki says. “There is always something for them to do. We don’t have kids who act as window dressing. Our kids have more to do. They don’t just have one line. They are all too good to waste. There is no star — they are all the star.”

The best theatre in Peterborough and The Kawarthas in 2017

kawarthanow.com/2017/12/24/best-theatre-peterborough-kawarthas-2017/

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Arts & Entertainment

kawarthaNOW's theatre reviewer Sam Tweedle's top show picks and shout-outs to the theatre community

By Sam Tweedle -

Published December 24, 2017



"An absolute triumph". kawarthaNOW's theatre reviewer Sam Tweedle says the best musical of 2017 was the St. James Players production of "Mary Poppins", starring Gillian Harknett and Warren Sweeting in the lead roles of Mary and Burt. (Photo: Sam Tweedle / kawarthaNOW.com)

As the year winds down to its final days, the stages of the Kawarthas are quiet after a busy season of Christmas concerts and family shows. This gives me the time to sit back and take the time to reflect on the theatrical highlights of 2017.

Over the last year I attended and wrote about 43 different shows. I also wrote about a few shows I didn't get a chance to see, and saw a couple of shows I didn't write about. Certainly some shows were better than others, but local theatre companies really stepped up their game. Each show I saw in 2017 had its individual merits and were, for the most part, high quality productions.

Together, everyone who acts, writes, produces, directs and creates for the stage made 2017 a landmark year where a show opened almost every week. There was an incredible output of work, which makes it difficult to pick out just a handful of show to highlight.

But every year a few shows rise to the top. In my opinion, here are the productions (in order of staging) that were the stand-out shows of 2017.

More Than a Memory

Peterborough Theatre Guild, May 2017. Written and directed by Paul Crough. Starring Jerry Allen, Mardi Kennedy, Kate Suhr, Kate Brioux, Max Czmielewsk, Dan Smith, Mark Hiscox, Lisa Devan, Bridget Foley, Paul Crough, and Carl Christensen.



Jerry Allen as Fergal Quinn, Dan Smith as Kieran Rafferty, Mark Hiscox as Lorcan Slattery, and Paul Crough as Finn Kennedy in "More Than a Memory". (Photo: Sam Tweedle / kawarthaNOW.com)

Originally produced in 2015 at Ennismore's Homestead Theatre, *More Than a Memory* was an unusual choice for the Peterborough Theatre Guild's annual musical but it was a welcomed one. Usually going the route of Broadway shows each year, producing a relatively unknown locally written show was a risk, but one that paid off. The production was a huge success for the Guild, giving people not lucky enough to get one of Homestead Theatre's golden tickets the chance to watch this emotionally powerful production.

Set in Doengal Ireland in 1918, *More Than a Memory* introduced the audience to the Quinn family: patriarch Fergus (Jerry Allen), his wife Moira (Mardi Kennedy), and daughters Fiona (Kate Suhr), Maureen (Kate Brioux), and Dipna (Brigit Foley). The Quinns and their friends and family dominated the rollercoaster of the first half of the show, filled with their joys, fears, anger, rivalries, shames, loves, and mysteries. But when Fergus dies of a heart attack, everything comes to a head as the characters pay homage to the beloved head of their household.

A beautiful musical filled with the highest highs and the most dramatic lows, the show featured its own inner drama when two key cast members had to drop out of the show in the final weeks of rehearsal. However, Mardi Kennedy (who took much of the show on her shoulders) and Kate Suhr (who made her return to Peterborough from the Toronto stage as a last-minute addition) managed to fall seamlessly into the show.

More Than a Memory was a powerfully emotional show people talked about for months after it was completed. It was also the show for which I had more people who don't normally attend theatre tell me that they saw and loved. It was most definitely the widespread audience favourite of 2017.

Ordinary Days

Arts for Awareness, June 2017. Directed by Caitlin Currie. Musical direction by Justin Hiscox. Starring Hannah Bailey, Carl Christensen, Keely Wilson, and Joshua Butcher.



Director Caitlin Currie with the cast of "Ordinary Days": Hannah Bailey, Carl Christensen, Keely Wilson, and Josh Butcher.
(Photo: Caitlin Currie / Facebook)

In her directorial debut, Caitlin Currie knocked it out of the park with *Ordinary Days*. A show I had never heard of, Art for Awareness' production quickly became one of my favourite musicals. Written by Adam Gwon, *Ordinary Days* is a clever and hip yet emotionally potent look at four young people trying to make their way in post-9/11 New York. A wonderful script on its own, what made this show so good was the delectable cast Caitlin assembled including Hannah Bailey, Carol Christensen, Keely Wilson, and Josh Butcher. Under the musical direction of Justin Hiscox, this company made musical magic together.

Ordinary Days features two separate stories that only cross once in an obscure way. However, while poignant in their own ways, the stories and characters couldn't be more different. In the first story, cynical student Deb (Keely Wilson) creates a strange and unlikely friendship with good-natured but unsuccessful artist Warren (Josh Butcher) over her missing thesis notes. In the second story, dreamy romantic Jason (Carl Christensen) tries to break down the emotional barriers put up by his girlfriend Claire (Hannah Bailey).

The stories weave in and out of each other with a series of wordy but beautiful songs, with the highlight of the show being Hannah Bailey's emotional gut-wrenching performance of "I'll be Here" which didn't leave a dry eye in the theatre.

I loved *Ordinary Days* so much that I not only saw it twice, but purchased the original cast recording which a fixture in my car became all summer long. But despite the quality of the original cast, my heart longed to listen to the Art for Awareness cast again. The original cast recording pales in comparison to the version I saw on the Gordon Best stage. *Ordinary Days* definitely contained the best cast assembled for any show this past year.

Boy Wonders

Planet 12 Productions, June 2017. Written and directed by Derek Weatherdon. Starring Brad Breckenridge, Abbie Dale, Aimee Gordon, Emily Keller, Isaac Maker, Emma Meinhardt, and Samuelle Weatherdon.



Planet 12 Productions will be performing “Boy Wonders” at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2018. Pictured is the cast of the original production: Samuelle Weatherdon as Test Tube, Aimee Gordon as Boo, Isaac Maker as Shiny the Glimmer Boy, Emma Meinhardt as Target Boy, Brad Brackenridge as The Mixer, and Emily Keller as Cow Poke. (Photo: Andy Carroll)

The inaugural show from Planet 12 Productions, *Boy Wonders* was one of the most talked about shows of 2017. It both shocked and entertained audiences and challenged the way the local theatre community works with kids on the stage. A dramedy about a group of superhero sidekicks banished to the “kids’ room” while their mentors form a superhero team in a hotel ballroom below, *Boy Wonders* featured six performers between the ages of 11 and 13 playing characters their own age, accompanied by local favourite Brad Brackenridge who, although a grown man, is wedged in the role of a “sidekick”.

Boy Wonders wasn’t what many audience members were expecting. Although humorous at times, the show is more of a horror story than a comedy. As the sidekicks open up about their lives, a story filled with abuse, violence, and situations that prevent the kids from living normal lives begins to unfold. What the audience ended up seeing was a drama brilliantly acted by a group of extremely talented kids.

There are two things that made *Boy Wonders* a winner: the cast and the writing. The audience was introduced to six wonderful young performers — Abbie Dale, Aimee Gordon, Emily Keller, Isaac Maker, Emma Meinhardt, and Samuelle Weatherdon — who created interesting three-dimensional characters the audience came to love. In some cases, audience members found their own favourites (I leaned towards the tragic and angry Target Boy and the poised but sad Boo). Furthermore, these kids were able to keep up with the very experienced performer Brad, who never loomed over the kids but managed to become their equal. Planet 12 proved that kids don’t need to be moving props in musicals, and they can step up to the challenge of creating very thoughtful dramas.

As for the writing, Derek Weatherdon was able to create a world of plot and characters, each

which could easily become their own spin-off or sequel. In fact, during a private conversation with Derek he revealed to me that a *Boy Wonders* sequel isn't an impossibility.

I also want to give a shout out to Heather Ross for the creation of the show's costumes. In addition to the period costumes the cast wore throughout the show, the superhero costumes at the end of the show were highly imaginative and a stunning and memorable visual. *Boy Wonders* contained possibly my favourite costume work on 2017.

A sell out each night it was performed at The Theatre On King, people were unfortunately turned away. However, *Boy Wonders* will be returning in 2018 as Planet 12 revives the show and takes it to the Toronto Fringe Festival. This should mean some more chances to see this incredible production again. One of my favourite shows of 2017, I can't wait to see it again.

Raising the Barn

Globus Theatre, August 2017. Written by James Barrett and Sarah Quick. Starring Brandon Swann, Shannon McCracken, Jennine Profeta, Dave Pearce, James Barrett, Sarah Quick, Anna Black, Mark Whelan, Kevin Sepaul, Shelby Camman, and Chris Gibbs.



Brandon Swann and Shannon McCracken as star-crossed groom and bride Brandon Jones and Shannon McGee in "Raising the Barn". (Photo: Sam Tweedle / kawarthaNOW.com)

In this celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Lakeview Arts Barn as a public space, James Barrett and Sarah Quick broke down all the walls of reality with the most experimental show they've ever produced for Globus Theatre. *Raising the Barn* was their first foray into

“immersive theatre” where the audience becomes part of a show that happens all around them.

When the son and daughter of two rival Bobcaygeon grocers get married, the town’s mayor (Dave Pearce) books the Lakeview Arts Barn for his daughter’s wedding. However, the barn has already been booked for a theatrical performance so, when the audience arrives for the show, the bride doesn’t know that the audience are not wedding guests.

This is the basic premise for the show. As the real audience arrived, they found themselves intermingling with actors playing colourful characters. The theatre was turned into a wedding dining hall, where the audience watches a wedding, enjoys a feast, and partakes in all of the speeches, drama, and hilarity of a wedding where anything can happen.

With their largest cast yet, James and Sarah brought back many of their most popular actors, including Brandon Swann, Shannon McCracken, Jennine Profeta, Dave Pearce, James Barrett, Sarah Quick, Anna Black, Mark Whelan, Kevin Sepaul, Shelby Camman, and Chris Gibbs. Having so many members of the Globus Theatre family together in one show truly made it seem like a celebration all its own.

An incredible night filled with big laughs, great food, and performances that charmed audiences, *Raising the Barn* was a whirlwind of a comedy that sometimes thrilled and sometimes confused audiences. However, everyone who walked away from the night will never forget it. Highly creative and truly hilarious, *Raising the Barn* was the crown jewel of one of Globus’ best seasons yet.

The History of Drinking in Cavan

4th Line Theatre, August 2017. Written and co-directed by Robert Winslow. Co-directed by Monica Dotter. Starring Robert Winslow, Edward Belanger, Cyndi Carleton, Justin Hiscox, Mark Hiscox, Shelley Simester, Kiana Bromley, Maude Rose Craig, Tristan Cruise, Emma Khaimovich, and Gary Reker.



At its heart, "The History of Drinking in Cavan" is Robert Winslow's personal story about his own family's history of drinking, in particular his mother Jean's struggle with alcoholism. (Photo: Wayne Eardley)

With potentially the most misleading title ever, Rob Winslow's newest play *The History of Drinking in Cavan* blindsided people who weren't prepared for one of the most emotional and personal shows ever performed at the Winslow Farm.

Is the show about the history of drinking in Cavan? Well, sort of — there is a history lesson dealing with the manufacturing of liquor and the pub culture of the Kawarthas. But a show about liquor and boozing wouldn't interest me very much. What actually makes *The History of Drinking in Cavan* such a powerful show is that Rob, an iconic arts professional in our community for decades, strips back the veil of his life.

He bares all of his emotions in a show that reveals some of the most painful moments of his life through a look at his often-difficult relationship with his late mother. While audiences have been watching Rob play characters for years, for many this is the first time we've ever seen him so raw and open on stage. Some might call it self-indulgent, but I felt it was an incredibly human and brave performance.

Beyond the subject matter, Rob also demonstrated the power he has at controlling a stage and an audience by, in one moment, bringing an uproarious scene to a standstill where the audience was even too scared to breathe. It was one of the most impressive and incredible things I've ever seen on the stage.

Festivus Rattus Rattus 2035!

The Nervous System, November 2017. Written and directed by Kate Story. Starring Derek Bell, Brad Brackenridge, Sylvie Dasne, Naomi Duvall, Rob Fortin, Ryan Kerr, Shannon McKenzie, Mike Moring, Susan Newman, Robyn Smith, and Kate Story.



In Kate Story's "*Festivus Rattus Rattus 2035!*", Brad Brackenridge portrays the greedy mayor of a post-apocalyptic Peterborough. (Photo: Andy Carroll)

Every once in a while something — a piece of music, an art work, or a show — comes out that challenges you so much that you begin to question the way you create your own craft and the way art is created in the community. For me, it was Kate Story's apocalyptic tale *Festivus Rattus Rattus 2035!*.

Presented as the conclusion to the Precarious Arts Festival that ran throughout the month of November, *Festivus Rattus Rattus 2035!* is a terrifying tale of Peterborough in the future, without children and without hope. Weaving local and international politics into a futuristic retelling of The Pied Piper of Hamelin, Kate creates a future that is terrifyingly plausible, in a story that hit far too close to home for comfort.

With its powerful performances, beautiful songs, and the most imaginative use ever of the space at The Theatre On King, *Festivus Rattus Rattus 2035!* is an artistic epic. It challenged me, it was ruthlessly individual, and it had no interest in being a crowd pleaser. It was raw, unhinged, harshly political art, and made me realize that truly good theatre isn't always created to fill seats. Instead, it fills minds, makes powerful statements, and creates something the audience will think about for days.

Festivus Rattus Rattus 2035! did all of these things for me. In many ways, it changed the way I will look at art and theatre going forward.

Mary Poppins (Best Musical)

St. James Players, November 2017. Directed by Natalie Dorsett. Starring Gillian Harknett, Warren Sweeting, Macayla Vaughan, Ben Freeman, Christie Freeman, Keith Goranson, Jacque Butler, Robert Ainsworth and more.



Warren Sweeting as Burt, Gillian Harknett as Mary Macayla Vaughn as Jane, Ben Freeman as Michael, Keith Gorenson as George Banks, and Christie Freeman as Winifred Banks in "Mary Poppins". (Photo: Sam Tweedle / kawarthaNOW.com)

Peterborough loves its musical theatre, and many of the shows on this list are technically considered musicals. But when it came to musical theatre in its purest form, *Mary Poppins* was a triumph all to itself.

I knew this show was going to be special when I visited the St. James Players for a Sunday afternoon rehearsal a few weeks prior to opening. The sense of energy and joy was addictive and, while family theatre is not my favourite genre, *Mary Poppins* managed to seduce me.

Making a stage star out of Gillian Harknett (who up to that time had played chorus roles) in the lead role and returning longtime leading man Warren Sweeting back to the centre stage in the role of Burt the chimney sweep after a what seemed like a long absence, *Mary Poppins* far exceeded any expectations with perfect performances by a well-cast company.

I can only think of one or two other other occasions when a musical production in Peterborough has managed to hit this level of polished professionalism. The show was an absolute triumph.

I was also impressed by young actors Macayla Vaughan and Ben Freeman, who actually had the most stage time and lines of the show, and were pushed to stay in step with the more experienced actors sharing the stage. Much like the kids in the Planet 12 Production shows, these two performers had to step up their game and become far more than just human props. Once again, it is great to see kids doing some seriously incredible work on the stage.

In the time I've been reviewing local theatre, I have never seen anything like the "Step in Time" number near the climax of the show. I honestly cannot find a publishable phrase to describe what I felt while watching that number. It was just an amazing feat of theatre.

After a few difficult years, St. James Players finally have rebuilt their reputation as a family theatrical institution and, with *Mary Poppins*, created a show that is going to be tough for anyone to follow. *Mary Poppins* was practically perfect in every way. Loved by audiences, it was just the fantastical and heart-warming show that we needed. A huge triumph for director Natalie Dorsett and her company at St. James Players.

Here are a few shout-outs for other local productions in 2017:

Everybody Loves Archie



The cast of "Everybody Loves Archie" included (back to front): Colton Beale as Moose Mason, Thomas Bodrug as Jughead Jones, Sarah Daye as Ginger Lopez, Matt Campbell as Reggie Mantel, Alivia Buchan as Veronica Lodge, Antje Kroes as Midge Klump, Samantha Pickard as Betty Cooper, Jacob Howan as Archie Andrews, Issac Martin as Dilton Doily, and Aiden McDonald as Ethel Muggs. (Photo: Sam Tweedle / kawarthaNOW.com)

I want to give a big shout-out to Jen and Greg Nugent and the kids in Enter Stage Right's

production of *Everybody Loves Archie* for giving me a chance to spend some time with them and allowing me into their space to talk about Archie, Jughead, Betty and Veronica and the gang at Riverdale High.

As an obsessive Archie collector, I can truly talk about Archie Comics all day, and the time I spent with this engaging and talented cast was a true joy for me. Forget the CW's *Riverdale* — they made my Riverdale High dreams come true. I loved the show, and was thrilled to see the characters I love come to life in a way I want to remember them as well as some of my lesser-known Riverdale friends — such as Cheryl Blossom, Midge Klump and, especially, Ginger Lopez — show up on the Peterborough stage.

I loved talking with all of the cast and want to thank them for making everything Archie.

Eugene Ionesco plays at The Theatre on King

Nothing would get me more excited in 2017 than to hear Ryan Kerr would be directing another one of Eugene Ionesco's absurdist comedies at The Theatre on King (TTOK). Making a splash with *The Bald Soprano* in 2016, Ionesco became a trend at TTOK, with each of Ryan's productions of surrealist playwright's often difficult play more ambitious than the last.

Ryan brought together a core group of performers — Dan Smith, Matt Gilbert, Kate Story, Lindsay Unterlander, and Andrew Root, and more — for these shows which included *Maid to Marry / The Leader* and *Frenzy for Two, or More*. Each of these nonsensical yet hilarious shows had its moments, but one of my very favourite theatrical moments of 2017 was the appearance of "The Leader" as played by a barely recognizable Ryan Kerr in a paper costume.



Ryan Kerr in the title role in Eugene Ionesco's "The Leader".
(Photo: Andy Carroll)

Ionesco at TTOK is amongst my very favourite theatrical events and I'm hoping for a lot more in 2018. Luckily for those who missed the performances, they are available to view on YouTube — definitely something you'll want to see.

VIDEO: Maid to Marry / The Leader

VIDEO: Frenzy for Two, or More

New Stages The Page on Stage Reading Series



Canadian comedic actress, screenwriter, and playwright Diane Flacks participated in a staged reading of her play "Unholy" as part of New Stages Theatre Company's popular The Page on Stage reading series.

Possibly the most engaging and often controversial nights of theatre in Peterborough were created by Randy Read when he brought top professional actors and playwrights from Toronto to Market Hall for a series of powerful play readings. Although the actors read the scripts instead of performing them, Randy would often bring the full casts of some of Toronto's hottest shows for a one-night only performance followed by an audience talk back.

In 2017, Randy dealt with heavy topics such as pedophilia in *The Trouble with Mr. Adams*, xenophobia in *Disgraced* and the role of women in modern religion in *Unholy*. Provocative and hard hitting, these shows challenged the audiences both mentally and emotionally.

Randy has chosen to dedicate most of the current New Stages season to the popular readings, including a two-part reading of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* next April and May. If you've yet to go to one of New Stages The Page on Stage readings, this is something you need to put on your list of things to do in 2018.

Wes Ryan's Trauma-Informed Theatre



Slam poet, artist, dancer, choreographer, and actor Wes Ryan. (Photo: Erin Murphy)

When Wes Ryan found his personal story of childhood sexual abuse exploited by an out-of-town theatre company, he fought back in the bravest way possible: by creating a brand new piece of theatre that allowed him to reclaim his own narrative.

These Are Horizon Days featured Wes telling his often-difficult story through a series of disciplines that included dance, art, music, poetry, and drama. Equally funny and heart wrenching, Wes bared his soul and changed lives with his powerful presentation. With this brave and emotional piece, Wes created a very important piece of theatre not only for him but for the audience that saw it. Wes is not only a survivor, but a true artistic treasure.

These Are Horizon Days was not only good theatre but, as Wes told me, it is just the beginning of a bigger project for the future.

Best New Actor in the Kawarthas



Lindsay Barr made her theatrical debut as Cheryl in “Evil Dead: The Musical”. In 2018, she will be starring as Captain Hook in St. James Player’s spring musical “Peter Pan” as well as bringing Janis Joplin to life in her own musical revue celebrating the late singer’s musical legacy. (Photo: Sam Tweedle / kawarthaNOW.com)

Although she is no stranger to the Peterborough stage, it’s hard to believe award-winning musician Lindsay Barr had never acted in theatre before she took on the role of Cheryl in Killer Trees Production’s *Evil Dead: The Musical*.

Highly animated and with expert comic timing, Lindsay just “killed it” as Ash’s pun-spouting demon-possessed kid sister in a role as hilarious as it was terrifying. With one of the most spirited performances in the show, Lindsay obviously found a new calling as she is slated for two more shows in 2018 — including playing the villainous Captain Hook in St. James Player’s upcoming production of *Peter Pan*, and recreating the music and the passion of rock icon Janis Joplin in a new musical revue she is producing at Market Hall.

I am excited to see more stage performance by Lindsay in 2018, and I think we’ll be seeing her more and more on the theatre stage for a long time to come.

Photographer Andy Carroll



The man behind the photos: Andy Carroll. (Photo courtesy of Jill Stavelly)

Last but far from least, once again I want to take a moment to thank local photographer Andy Carroll for being a constant presence in the arts community, and capturing so many of the arts events in our city with his expert eye.

Andy's photos often occupy many of my articles, and I am constantly amazed the way he captures our city with so much beauty — especially the creativity and the passion of the arts community.

Andy is a true gift to our community. I want to thank him for his constant presence and for generously allowing kawarthaNOW.com to publish his photos.



Archie Comics fan and kawarthaNOW.com theatre reviewer Sam Tweedle (back row, fourth from right) with the cast of Enter Stage Right's "Everyone Loves Archie". (Photo: Enter Stage Right)

As I look ahead to 2018, I want to thank everyone in the theatre community who has allowed me into their space, trusted me to see their shows, worked with me to create articles, talked to me about their projects, and shared their art, their vision, and their passion. There needs to be a certain amount of trust in allowing a stranger into a safe artistic space, and I'm grateful that so many people trust me to come into theirs.

Although I am not a performer, you have made me feel more like an extended part of your family this year more than ever, and I value and cherish that. I am your constant audience and your biggest fan. My goal is to always find the attributes that make each of your shows special and to get people in seats. That is how, together, we create a stronger arts community.

Thank you for an incredible year, and I can't wait to see what is coming up next in 2018.