

PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY

Ontario's other arts hot spot

Forget Broadway, to get a culture fix this summer, head East to Prince Edward County where jazz, theatre, literary readings are just a few of the offerings

reproduced from *The Globe and Mail*, April 17, 2003 with permission



To get a crack at 35 different stage shows and concerts this summer, you'd either want to be visiting New York City or Picton, Ont.

A town of 4,000 set in the former Prince Edward County (now a municipality), Picton and area is a cultural jewel set in an island environment of about 20,000 residents and summer tourists galore.

Best known for the provincial park that encompasses its sand banks, the Prince Edward region has been sprouting jazz fests, author readings and a packed dramatic and musical schedule at the historic Regent Theatre, where Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille is mounting the coming summer season.

The Prince Edward municipality is just across a bridge from the much larger town of Belleville, but when it comes to the arts, it seems more of the traffic is headed Picton's way.

"When we moved here 16 years ago, there were about 20 artists," reflects Brian Clark, president of the Regent Theatre Foundation. "Now there are 300."

Adopting the 1918 Regent Theatre, a former vaudeville house and cinema that had been closed for many years until the mid-90s, the foundation has put \$600,000 into the Edwardian building which features a 21-metre fly tower and formerly had seating for 900 (now it seats 350.)

"It was the largest theatre between Toronto and Montreal, the first theatre in Canada to have talking pictures," notes Clark. "And it has a very strong community around it."

Strong enough that along with the many live shows and concerts that will be mounted there this summer, the theatre plays hundreds of first-run movies in the course of a year as well as readings, an art auction and other events.

"It's this beautiful vaudeville house by the same architect (John Lyle) who built the Royal Alexandra Theatre here in Toronto," notes Layne Coleman, Passe Muraille artistic director.

"I was invited to spearhead a season there in the summer," he continues. "It was an opportunity to do something outside the city. It's this very old and kind of sophisticated community with great restaurants."

Coleman, long associated with rural Ontario's Blyth Festival in the warm months, was evidently the right person to approach. He's taking up to 20 of his Passe Muraille team for the summer season, which includes Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman's *The End of Pretending*, Mary Frances Moore's *Girls and Horses*, Kevin Quain's *Tequila Vampire Matinee* and Summer-Works' *One Good Marriage That One, That One*.

He adds, "we want to use some actors and musicians from the local community."

They're around. There are plenty of painters and artisans in Prince Edward, but performing artists swell the ranks as well. When the newly formed County Theatre Group mounted an amateur production of *Pirates of Penzance* at the Regent two summers ago, nearly 100 people participated, including almost 50 people on stage and 25 musicians. All but three people were local.

As for an adequate number of spectators, the five performances of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta sold out the Regent each time, all proceeds after expenses going toward continuing refurbishment of the theatre.

"This county is amazing in terms of artistic expression," says John Burns, artistic director of the County Theatre Group and an arts teacher for the local Catholic

school board. "People just show up out of the woodwork."

Burns's troupe is now working on a production of *The Mikado* for May, and the company plans a later mounting of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*.

Perhaps there's no truer sign of an area committed to the arts than literary readings, and they've been held successfully every year in Prince Edward since 1996.

"For the Friday evening dinner, we have no trouble selling 200 places at \$50 a ticket, and it's usually sold out two to three weeks ahead," comments David Sweet, owner with his wife of Books on the Bay in Picton.

"We've been here nine years and even at that time there was a large population of artists," continues Sweet. "We get a lot of people retiring to this area, and a lot of people retire in their early fifties now. We have a very active arts council."

So active that the Sweets have deliberately scheduled their authors' festival "off-season" (May 29-31 this year with 20 authors) "because in July and August there are enough big events here that they don't need another."

One of the latter is the Prince Edward Jazz Festival, this year running Aug. 7 to 10 and headlined by Montreal horn player Guido Basso.

Indeed, the community is developing so impressively, even with a local wine industry making strides, that some raise the fear that the municipality of Prince Edward will become too popular, in the manner of Niagara-on-the-Lake. So far, however, the presence of the arts has been all to the good.

"Theatre Passe Muraille is coming to Picton," notes Clark, "and I don't know who is more excited, they are or we are."