

Magic, Music and Merriment: Wilbury kicks the year off with a Rhody premiere

Scottish border ballads, rhyming couplets and site-specific performances at local bars make Wilbury's *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* seem more like an offering better suited for the annual FringePVD festival than their first mainstage offering of 2020. Fitting, as David Greig's acclaimed play about an academic's somewhat supernatural journey of self-discovery eschews traditional stage sensibilities for moments of magic, music and merriment that rely on interaction with an audience drinking and immersing themselves in this Celtic experimental stew.

Wilbury Theatre Group's artistic director, Josh Short, says that *Prudencia Hart* is among the most "wild, whimsical and flat-out most fun shows that I have ever read." He notes that director Brien Lang has been campaigning for years to have Wilbury mount a production. "Every year we'd make a request for the performance rights and every year we'd be told to wait until the National Theatre of Scotland's seemingly never-ending worldwide tour was over. At last, though, we were thrilled to receive the permission to give *Prudencia* the rollicking Wilbury treatment we've been waiting for. It's an incredibly exciting blend of cutting-edge theatrical techniques and deep-rooted storytelling, making it easily among the most unique shows we've ever produced here at The Wilbury Group. We couldn't be more excited to finally get the opportunity to share it with our audiences."

Hart concerns a collector of traditional Scottish border ballads, who feels that she has a duty to preserve and protect this native art form. However, a late-night encounter with the sketchy Nick challenges Prudencia's notions of the meaning behind these ballads and their function in society. The storyline is often blurred, involving the audience in the transformative nature of this almost ritualistic lyric storytelling.

Lang spoke with *Motif* about his deep love for this script and his approach toward staging it for Wilbury.

Terry Shea (*Motif*): What drew you to this play and why have you fought so hard for Wilbury to produce it?

Brien Lang: I first read *Prudencia* about five years ago and have been lobbying hard for a Wilbury production ever since. We tried for several seasons to get permission to do the show, but between the continued success of the National Theatre of Scotland's world tour of the show and a recent New York production, it took until now to finally get the performance rights.

TS: Was it just this script you loved? Are you a fan of Grieg's other work?

BL: David Greig has quickly become one of my favorite contemporary playwrights. All of his work is incredibly imaginative and unique and contains all of those elements that make for great theater — comedy, suspense, innovative storytelling and, quite often, music that weaves seamlessly into the performance.

TS: A large number of these performances will be in the Wilbury space (40 Sonoma Court, PVD), but you have the show happening in local bars on selected dates as well. How will you reconcile that

difference?

BL: The show itself is meant to be performed in a bar setting. The audience will walk into the theater, which will be transformed into a cozy pub for what appears to be a traditional session or 'ceilidh' which then turns into the cast sharing a story that becomes part epic poem, part heroic ballad, part group trip to hell and back. But, in the spirit of the show — and the National Theatre tour — we'll be bringing the show out into the community as well. We currently have shows booked at our neighbors in Olneyville (Troop, RiffRaff) and Providence (The Wild Colonial Tavern) with more to be announced. There are some unique challenges to traveling with the show, but we're sure that the combination of friendly pubs, inventive staging and, more than likely, a bit of alcoholic lubrication will lead to some wild, memorable theater!

TS: In a show that sometimes gets compared to *Once*, where the main performers are also required to be musicians and singers — sort of pseudo-musical — what was your approach to putting together the creative team?

Lang: We've assembled a wonderful group of actors, musicians and designers and we're all thrilled at the idea of getting this up in front of an audience both at Wilbury and at pubs around Rhode Island. We're especially lucky that our music director, Jeff Kerr, has studied both Scottish Gaelic and the bagpipes so the soundtrack of the show will be based in traditional Scottish folk with more than a few Wilbury twists thrown in!

The Wilbury Theatre Group continues its 2019/20 Main Series season into the new year with the RI premiere of David Greig's global hit play, The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart. Jan 16 - Feb 2 at The Wilbury Theatre Group, 40 Sonoma Ct, PVD. For the complete performance schedule, visit The Wilbury Theatre Group online at thewilburygroup.org

** Select performances will take place at these locations: Sun, Jan 26, 6pm at TROOP; Sun, Feb 2, 6pm at Riffraff Bookstore/Bar; Sun, Feb 9, The Wild Colonial (time TBA)*