

Theatre Orangeville set to present 'Common Ground,' an 80s romantic comedy



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Theatre Orangeville is going back in time with *Common Ground*, a romantic comedy premiering Feb. 6 that blends heartbreak, humour and hope against a distinctly 1980s backdrop.

Directed by Theatre Orangeville Artistic Director Jennifer Stewart, *Common Ground* explores what happens when long-standing relationships suddenly fall apart and what can grow in their place. Set in 1984 in a small town in New Brunswick, the play introduces audiences to Pam and Jake, two strangers whose spouses have abruptly run off, leaving them blindsided and struggling to make sense of their new realities.

Instead of depicting the breakups themselves, the play drops viewers directly into the emotional aftermath. The story follows Pam and Jake as they navigate betrayal and rediscovery with plenty of awkward moments and laughs along the way.

Lauren Bowler, who plays Pam, describes her character as highly cerebral and cautious, someone who lives largely inside her own head. Pam is grounded by her best friend Lizzy, whose confidence and spontaneity challenge Pam to reconnect with herself and rediscover what she wants from life.

"Pam really lives in a constant state of stress throughout this entire show," Bowler said. "She has to go on a journey of reconnecting with herself, and Lizzy is this beautiful prompt of a friend to encourage her to take those next steps."

Lizzy, played by Heather McGuigan, is described as an unapologetic free spirit. Loyal, outspoken and largely unmoved by social expectations.

"Lizzy was given an extraordinary amount of confidence to live the way that she wants to live," McGuigan said. "She either tries to encourage other people to embody that freedom, or she's not bothered by a world that doesn't like it. She is fiercely loyal to her friends."

On the other side of the story is Jake, portrayed by Jamie Mac. At first glance, Jake appears to be a simple farm boy, but Mac says there is much more depth beneath the surface. Jake is plain spoken and direct, someone who may come across as unsophisticated, but who possesses a grounded wisdom shaped by a quiet life.

‘I think Jake is more sophisticated than might meet the eye from the start,’ Mac said. ‘In some ways, he’s just a farm boy who doesn’t have a lot of social experience or worldliness, but he discovers a certain kind of earthly wisdom through the eyes of someone special.’

Mac adds that Jake’s straightforward nature can be misread.

‘He’s a bit of a square peg no matter where he goes,’ he said. ‘People might find him offensive, but he wouldn’t view himself that way. I think he’s lived a pretty simple life, and he’s desperate for a lot more connection than he’s ever had before.’

As Pam and Jake meet while picking up the pieces of their lives, the play explores themes of self discovery, healing and the possibility of new love. The question isn’t just whether romance will spark, but whether these characters can build meaningful connections and support systems after everything they thought was stable has fallen apart.

Stewart said casting was central to making the small cast production work, particularly given the balance required between comedy and emotional weight.

‘It’s about casting the actors you think will work well together, then rehearsing the play and figuring out all the moments,’ Stewart said. ‘What do they want? What do they need? What’s their arc? Then helping them get there through rehearsals so they feel confident and ready to tell the story in a way that’s engaging, interesting and truthful.’

The decision to set *Common Ground* in 1984 was also deliberate. Stewart said the era helps ground the story while raising the stakes for the characters. The culture around affairs, or divorce, was less progressive and less support was available at the time.

Combine that with a nosy, small town, and the stakes have risen significantly.

‘Everyone knows everyone, word gets around fast, and anything deemed not right or not nice is hugely troubling and shameful,’ Stewart said. ‘It’s a bit of a fishbowl, so the stakes are extremely high.’

Despite those tensions, Stewart emphasized that *Common Ground* remains firmly a comedy. The production leans into humour through misunderstandings, awkward encounters and sharp dialogue, all underscored by a distinctly 1980s soundtrack.

‘We decided on 1984 because it was an exceptional year for hits that are still around,’ Stewart said. ‘Girls Just Want to Have Fun, What’s Love Got to Do With It, When Doves Cry, and I Wear My Sunglasses at Night’ they’re songs people still recognize and respond to.’

The goal, Stewart said, is to create an immersive, feel good experience that allows audiences to escape for a couple of hours while still connecting with something meaningful.

‘We’re encouraging people to come in their ‘80s best,’ she said. ‘Dress up’ it’s going to be a fun night out. Humans need hope, whether it’s in relationships, friendships or life in general. There’s always hope. We can never give up.’

Common Ground premieres Feb. 6 at Theatre Orangeville, promising laughs, romance and a nostalgic trip back to the 1980s.

For tickets and more information, visit theatreorangeville.ca.