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Theatre Orangeville showcases Norm Foster?s wit and heart with ?The Writer?

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Last week, Theatre Orangeville hosted The Norm Effect, a multi-day celebration honouring the works of Norm Foster. The event featured staged readings of some of his most beloved plays, including On a First Name Basis, The Writer, and Jonas & Barry in the Home.

Foster is one of Canada's most produced playwrights, with over 80 plays to his credit. Known for his sharp wit, warmth, and ability to balance humour with heartfelt storytelling, his works have been performed across Canada and beyond. In 2016, Foster was awarded the Order of Canada in recognition of his contributions to Canadian theatre and his lasting impact on audiences across the country.

For this unique event, Theatre Orangeville welcomed Foster himself, who performed alongside a roster of well-known theatre names. For many in the audience, it was a rare opportunity to see Foster not only as a writer but as a performer, breathing life into his own characters.

On Sept. 19, Foster appeared on stage with Jamie Williams in The Writer.

The play follows Donald Wellner, an accomplished playwright, and his son Blake during their yearly visits after Donald's divorce. Donald masks his loneliness and regret with humour, but over time, it becomes clear that he is slipping into dementia. As Blake struggles to connect with his father, the truth of the family's past ? and the weight of their changing relationship ? gradually comes into focus.

The Writer is a masterclass in minimalism. The entire performance was staged with only two chairs and a table holding a typewriter. This stripped-down setting was far from bare; it carried symbolic weight for the characters. The chairs recalled the atmosphere of a talk-show set, a nod to Donald's past career highs and his need for an audience, while the typewriter anchored Blake's own career as a writer.

The result was a stage picture that represented the play's themes of memory, legacy, and identity.

The choice to present the play as a staged reading meant the production relied almost entirely on the performances. With limited physical action, the actors had to command attention through voice, expression, and timing ? and both Foster and Williams rose to the challenge and delivered.

Foster infused Donald with charm, wit, and bravado, while allowing just enough hesitation and fragility to seep through.

His performance balanced the humour audiences expect from his writing with poignant hints of what lies beneath ? a lonely man struggling to hold on to his identity. Every pause before a joke and each understated compliment to Blake revealed the vulnerability that Donald worked so hard to conceal.

Williams, as Blake, was equally compelling. He captured the frustration of a son trying to connect with a stubborn father while still juggling his own career and responsibilities.

His portrayal of concern was subtle and believable. He mirrored the real ways families often address dementia ? gently correcting, softly encouraging, or allowing small confusions to pass unchallenged. Williams' quiet patience built a sense of authenticity that connected with the audience.

The play's most powerful moment came at the end. When Blake realizes his father is no longer truly present, Williams shifts from

composed strength to raw grief in a matter of seconds. The emotional wave swept the theatre, leaving a lingering silence in the air. It was the kind of moment that reminds audiences why live theatre carries such power.

Throughout the evening, the audience was engaged from start to finish. What began as a cheeky comedy earned steady laughs, but as Donald's decline became clearer, the tone in the room shifted.

By intermission, one audience member could be heard whispering, ?Oh my god,? before the lights dimmed, capturing the stunned reaction that hung over the crowd.

The second act carried heavy emotions, as the audience prepared to say goodbye to Donald alongside Blake. By the end, it wasn't just Blake losing his father ? it was every member of the audience saying farewell to a character they had grown attached to in just one evening. That kind of impact speaks volumes about the writing, the direction, and ultimately, the performances.

Taken as part of The Norm Effect, The Writer was more than just a play. It stood as a reminder of Foster's gift for weaving contrasting themes together in ways that reflect the human experience.