

## **To Shut the Mouths of Lions**

by John Hill

***Northumberland Today***

According to Tolstoy, all happy families are alike but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. The variations in the unhappiness within the McBride family in Dave Clark's powerful drama *To Shut the Mouths of Lions* leaves an audience awestruck. The play now opened at Cobourg's Firehall Theatre and running weekends until April 16 is reminiscent of and even surpasses Tracy Letts' Pulitzer Prize winning stage play *August: Osage County*.

Playwright and Director Dave Clark has put together a powerful and at times shocking presentation of a family re-uniting to celebrate Christmas (or Boxing Day?) in 2014. Although it is a family that is coming together in a typical Yuletide celebration of closeness, a major theme in the piece is the distance that separates the family unit. Each of the family members has secrets that emerge (like peeling an onion) well throughout the script.

Neil Torrie who plays the family patriarch, William McBride has his own secret that creates a Berlin wall in his emotional dealings with his wife and the two sons who are returning home for a family dinner. His blustering and bravado are foiled by the supportive yet challenging wife, Geraldine, played superbly by Jan Crane.

A main fracture line emerges as son Richie (Jeff Caine), who lives only a few blocks away, has come out as a gay man who is married to his husband Gareth (Derrick Cunningham). Richie and his dad, William, are emotionally remote. Richie, once the youthful hockey superstar, was adored by his father at the expense of the second son. Now, the relationship is soured and has become hostile when Ritchie entered into his marriage.

The other son, Rob (Nick Storm) and his wife Colleen (Sarah Foord) have flown in from the west coast to be present. Rob and Colleen, driven by political outrage, have ultra-liberal views that put them at odds with the ultra-conservative leanings of William. Rob and Colleen have their own secret.

Obviously conflict develops but tensions are often eclipsed by a great deal of humour when characters trade barbs. Much of that humour is politically incorrect and audience members seemed at times to need assurance that it was O.K. to laugh. The dialogue was often, at the same time, fiercely funny and bitingly sad.

This is a play that Dave Clark wrote having been inspired by the account of the sexual molestation of NHL player Theoren Fleury. But most of all, Clark tells us that the play is really a call to arms against present day society that continues to be divided by race, creed and sexual orientation rather than uniting to fight real injustices such as pollution and deprivation of economic opportunity to many. The play's length (running time: 2hrs. 15 min) may seem a tad long but it would be difficult to suggest edits.

The entire cast performed brilliantly. There wasn't a weak link in the entire crew. Jeff Caine had never acted before and Nick Storm made a theatrical debut after a thirty year absence. Sarah Foord joined the production just six weeks ago.

Firehall Theatre is an intimate acting arena. Scene changes were accomplished taking the observer from the living room, the dining room, the kitchen and a bedroom with relative ease through lighting and prop manipulation. Credit goes to Stage Manager Lana Missen and Set Designer Lisa Schnalzer-Missen.

The Northumberland Players have every right to be proud of this amazing production. *To Shut the Mouths of Lions* is not to be missed.