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Export date: Thu Jul 3 6:39:00 2025 / +0000 GMT

What?s ahead for the arts in North Hastings

By Sarah Vance

Despite overall gains within the cultural sector, which has seen a Theatre District designed in downtown Bancroft, as well as new venues such as A Place for the Arts and Bridge Street Gallery, questions are rife about the status of longstanding events such as the summer theatre program.

With little information released about the upcoming season, and a new management overseeing the Playhouse stage, there is speculation as to whether or not such organizations as Black Fly Theatre will be left looking for another venue.

?It has been 25 years since the Theatre Guild restored the Playhouse,? said Kevin Newman, of the Bancroft Theatre Guild. ?Community theatre has been happening in Bancroft since the 1970s and it is the reason why there is a theatre locally.?

While the Bancroft Theatre Guild identifies that many original performers are set to perform this season, organizations such as Black Fly theatre are feeling left in the dark.

?The infrastructure for a summer theatre season at the Playhouse has pretty much evaporated since new management took over,? said Dan Boileau. ?Both community groups ? the Bancroft Theatre Guild and Blackfly Summer Theatre ? are in search of a new venue.?

But the Playhouse will hardly grow dark. ?Croft Talks continue monthly, as does the North of 7 film fest, featuring movies screened at the Toronto International Film Festival. Musical and comedy performances are also set to continue; coming up next are Lorne Elliott and the Rick Fines Trio. There will be local performers as well. For example, the North Hastings Community Choir, a four-part choral group, is continuing to gather once a week to rehearse for their annual spring concert, which will take place at the Playhouse in May.

?We will be presenting ?Come to my Garden' over the May 14 to 15 weekend,? said Kathleen Postance, choir coordinator. ?We have an afternoon matinee on Sunday and an evening performance Saturday night.? Another local musical group led by Judy Edgar will put on a new edition of Broads-Way this fall.

Millennium Park provides a summer venue for musical series like the Wednesday night Mineral Capital Concerts. As well, planning for the Summer Art and Craft Show, taking place over the July 30 long-weekend, is also underway.

?We are in our 35th year hosting our two shows, which are dedicated to local artisans having a venue for their art,? said Nancy Brookes, who co-ordinates the Millennium Park Craft show. ?The deadline for applying is May 30, with a cost of $140 to display for two days.?

Art spaces continue to be a theme identified by Kathy Figueroa of the Poets Society of Hastings County North.

?I would like to see the creation of a permanent cultural centre to promote the literary arts in this region,? said Figueroa. ?There's one in Lakefield, which houses the writing and memorabilia of authors who have lived in that area, such as Margaret Laurence and Susanna Moodie.?

Cooperatives such as A Place for the Arts, a community driven space that sees not-for-profits, musicians and visual artists working under one roof, is making significant headway towards this end.

?Our goals are to provide arts exposure through the work in our shop to the artists in the studio ? the writers and musicians that meet here,? said Don Wilson, of APFTA. ?The community is integral to what we wish to create and we look forward to more collaboration.?

A commercial gallery, Bridge Street Art, which is located just down the street, is new this year and presents locals including Susan Dunlop, Rocky Green, David McIntosh, Arne Roosman, Sue Prentice, Freddie Towe, Anne Roney and Classina Weese. ?We are offering life drawing classes [and] a studio class on colour and composition by David McIntosh,? said Anita Murphy. ?I also teach the fundamentals of drawing and the classes are a great success.?

These visual arts organizations run parallel to the Bancroft Art Gallery, which has a season of monthly installations. Next up is a mother-and-daughter team, Olga Szaranski and Lucy Manley, who are putting on a show in April of landscapes entitled ?Roadside Painters.? There's the annual invitational juried show in May, and later this summer, an exhibit of Algonquin First Nations artists. In the fall, the gallery diversifies with a Fibre Art exhibition.

So overall, despite a big question mark about live theatre, the arts in Bancroft remain lively.