

From the Heart: A journey not to be missed - By John Threlfall



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When it comes to indigenous relations, I consider myself a pretty engaged and compassionate person. I well know the history of British Columbia and our poor track record since Europeans initially encountered First Nations people- from smallpox and ethnic prejudice to residential schools and the treaty process. And, as a journalist, I'm no stranger to modern problems like substance abuse, reservation conditions and missing women. I've done land claims research for the Stó:lō Nation, worked with a multicultural theatre company (as the token white guy) and my kids attend a school with a high percentage of aboriginal children. Yet even taking all that into account, I still found my cultural preconceptions and hegemonic assumptions challenged by the remarkable new production, *From the Heart*.

Subtitled “Enter into the Journey of Reconciliation,” *From the Heart* offers just that—an opportunity to literally take the first steps in a process that just might change the way you think about the world. And while that sentiment certainly applies globally, the intention here is much more local-geographically, with our own city first, and the province second; but emotionally, director and show creator Will Weigler is clearly centred upon our hearts. By walking through a constructed labyrinth and “discovering” a series of short scenes all aimed at unsettling those of us descended (in whatever fashion) from a settler population, Weigler leaves it up to his audience to decide how much they take away from this piece of living theatre. (Indeed, some viewers have been so moved that they are now participating in this 90-minute production; such is its inherently organic structure.)

There really is nothing ordinary about this challenging, rewarding and ultimately inspiring production. From its venue—a 14,000-square-foot empty retail space at Uptown transformed into an enormous labyrinth constructed out of doors, windows and suspended fabric by eco-architect Mark Lakeman and tensile fabric architect Mar Ricketts—to its performers (local residents, as opposed to professional actors), *From the Heart* unfolds as you journey through the labyrinth, encountering about a dozen brief, often participatory, scenes along the way.

From simple songs and marionettes to shadow projections and more traditional scenes, *From the Heart* offers a wide range of theatrical moments culled from a collaborative creative process. Described as “a new theatre production about transformative stories that have moved non-Indigenous people to see their relationships with their Aboriginal Neighbours in new ways,” this fascinating piece was created in partnership with the Victoria International Development Education Association and the Inter-Cultural Association—apt partners indeed for the journey undertaken by cast and audience alike.

Inspired by Paulette Regan’s bestselling 2011 book, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, *From the Heart* picks up on Regan’s bold argument that non-Aboriginal Canadians “must undergo their own process of decolonization in order to truly participate in the transformative possibilities of reconciliation.” (The Director of Research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Regan's vision should be seriously considered by anyone truly interested in moving towards an inclusive future and not just whitewashing history.) Fortunately, Weigler’s imaginative and skilled use of applied theatre techniques and familiar cultural iconography makes this daunting idea manageable enough for anyone to walk away with a new sense of enlightenment. Adding to the mix are the skills of Kwakwaka’wakw performance artist and poet Krystal Cook, plus singing and movement coach Bisia Belina.

Rather than focus on presenting us with answers, Weigler and his sincere cast of co-creators instead offer issues and ideas upon which the audience can’t help but ruminate—be that later at home, or while sipping tea post-show in the heart of the labyrinth. Personally, it's been nearly a week since I experienced this production and it's still firmly lodged in the front of my head, and heart.

Don’t go to *From the Heart* expecting either a traditional sit-down presentation or a professional quality production; instead, approach it as you would a participatory ritual or spiritual gathering. I would (and already have begun to) encourage everyone to attend this special theatrical event. My hope is that it will organically grow beyond Victoria and fill empty retail spaces around the province—and the world—with its vision of hope, recovery and reconciliation.

Simply put, *From the Heart* is the most memorable piece of theatre I’ve seen in many years. Don’t miss your chance to begin a new journey of understanding, no matter how much of an ally to Indigenous peoples you believe you already are.

John Threlfall

From the Heart: Enter into the Journey of Reconciliation
Wednesdays through Saturdays, July 3-27
Show times are at 7:00, 7:20, 7:40, 8:00, 8:20 & 8:40pm
Uptown Mall, upper level (Blanshard St Entrance)
Tickets \$10 at TicketRocket 250-590-6291