

'Floyd Collins' Shows Adventure, Its Consequences In Beautiful Vancouver Musical



"Floyd Collins" is the story of an adventurer looking for excitement and fortune who gets his foot caught under a rock. Stuck in a cave somewhere beneath Kentucky, Floyd becomes our constant companion in the musical, Floyd Collins.

The 1996 musical by Adam Guettel ("Light in the Piazza") is based on a true story from 1925.

Book writer Tina Landau considers this simple but alarming tale from the points of view of Collins, his family, and his nation. The poetic treatments of hope and disappointment, adventure and its consequences, work well in a beautiful Vancouver production directed by Peter Jorgensen.

There was a time, it seems, when tourists liked to climb into caves and have a look around. "Cavers" like Floyd Collins devoted their spare time to discovering new sites for viewing and new sources of family income. During one of his searches for a new tourist site, Floyd (Daren Herbert) shows us the physical reality of a carefree explorer leaping with joy in the freedom of the caves who is suddenly stopped: stuck and stunned. When we see Herbert stop moving we feel a kind of death. His exuberance is now contained, his joy curtailed. We are with him: trapped and alarmed. He can't move at all. And so the story begins.

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Floyd's family finds him, but cannot get very near him in the tight spot that holds him captive. They can speak with him but they cannot free him. A giant boulder prevents a family reunion. The depth of the cave is reflected in the depth of this work. Herbert, as Floyd, sings of his character's hope, dreams, despair and fear. For most of the play, Herbert is lying motionless on his back, visible to the audience, trapped in a crevice at the front of the stage. We cannot take our eyes off this solitary figure even when the action moves above ground, to the activity of his family and the sensation-seeking media. Herbert's presence never lets us forget the human pain at the centre of the story.

The hero of the piece is Floyd's brother, Homer, who is determined to save his brother, who visits his brother deep in the ground, and who participates in the many attempts to save his brother. The sequence where a group of men attempts to pull Floyd from the cave (a tactic which may rip his foot or leg off) is especially horrific for the audience and for Homer who finally stops the attempt and his brother's agony. Played by Michael Torontow, the character presents an emotional turmoil that guides us through the story. His hope is our own, his torment also. His strong, clear voice (like Herbert's) can be plaintive and angry. Torontow is as at home with belting as he is with a quiet ballad.

The story is compelling and Guettel's songs, mostly influenced by Kentucky-style folk music, capture the emotion of the piece. A novelty song, "Is that Remarkable?", provides a good comic sequence where the gathered reporters remark on what makes a good story. Tension is briefly relieved. "The Ballad of Floyd Collins" is a haunting piece of story-telling (reprised in the second act) that reminds us of how dark the situation truly is.

Director Jorgensen manages tone well. The basic sadness of the play is set aside for moments of hope and remembered joy. He gives us a varied mood and he moves his

actors well through a small performance space. Sometimes he makes us believe the characters are in an expansive outdoor environment.

The folk-style music is well-performed by a small orchestra that manages to include a double bass and a banjo. And the singing is often very good, especially by Herbert and Torontow, but also by Krystin Pellerin as Floyd's sister Nellie, and by Andrew Wade as a reporter who develops a special friendship with his subject. The company is excellent in the haunting harmonizing of The "Ballad of Floyd Collins."

While the human drama is well-conceived and presented, the play's cynical treatment of the media as attention-seeking and generally uncaring is overstated and shallow. This element of the Floyd Collins story is the least interesting.

Set designer Amir Ofek has managed to establish an ideal work space for the actors, a main performance platform comprised of a variety of angled surfaces, and the commanding crevice at the front of the stage where the trapped Floyd spends most of the play.

With a cast of 13 in a small theatre, this production provides local audiences with the unusual opportunity to see an excellent musical up close. The intimacy of the theatre underscores the intimacy of the story. This production is a gem.

[Floyd Collins](#) by Tina Landau (book) and Adam Guetell (music and lyrics), directed by Peter Jorgensen, Patrick Street Productions, at the York Theatre, Vancouver, until March 30. Tickets at thecultch.com.