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Chapters And Verse

Happy 35th Birthday Anne of Green Gables: The Musical

One of our best known Canadian icons is the red-headed, freckle-faced orphan who, in 1908, first leapt off the pages of a novel written by Prince Edward Island's own Lucy Maud Montgomery. More than 50 million copies have sold worldwide, belatedly elevating its author to the list of the 10 most influential Canadians of all time in the field of arts – a list that includes Glenn Gould, Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan. I can't even remember when I first read Anne of Green Gables, but it was early and often.

Montgomery made Anne a cultural force and, in the process, she's become big business. Anne has put Prince Edward Island on the map and is the island's biggest economic engine. In 1998 alone, 1.2 million visitors, many of them from Japan where Anne is revered, spent \$290 million on hotels, meals, and all manner of items bearing Anne's likeness. My favourite is the straw hat, complete with attached bangs and long, red braids.

I had occasion to wear that hat recently, when we gathered together many of the twelve actresses who have, over the last 35 years, portrayed this beloved, beguiling and timeless heroine in Anne of Green Gables: The Musical. The show, which first opened at the Charlottetown Festival of the Arts in the summer of 1965 and is now Canada's longest running musical, was the brainchild of Don Harron, Norman and Elaine Campbell, and Mavor Moore. But each new Anne who hits Gilbert over the head with a slate, and belts out the signature song "Gee I'm Glad I'm No One Else But Me" always captures the hearts of.... well, of everyone.

Jamie Ray was the first Anne in Charlottetown and when she came into our studio, 35 years after her opening night, she brought with her the original script and music. Gracie Finley, the second Anne and the actress who played Anne the longest and the only Anne to actually have been born on the Island, flew all the way from England to join us. Each brought their favourite Anne dolls and assorted presents given to them over the years by adoring tourists. After each performance, each Anne would -- still in costume -- meet the audiences because, as Malorie-Ann Spiller (Anne #3) said, "They believe in her and think she is real. It's very important not to break the illusion." Many of the young Japanese tourists (the book was translated into

Japanese in 1952) bow so low they are almost on the ground, while others weep openly when they meet "Anne".

Wow. What is it about this Anne-with-an-e Shirley? Sharmaine Ryan, who played Anne in 1998 and 1999, believes the Japanese affinity for Anne comes from her devotion to innocence and to family values, while still maintaining her independence. Theirs, she said, is a somewhat repressed society and Anne, while eschewing custom and convention, manages to triumph over long odds. They seem to love her spontaneity and frankness.

Most of the Annes, regardless of their age even today, have exactly the same sing-song voice and exuberant pluck and I wondered if they were all like that before, or, if playing Anne had, in some way, made them each into a version of her.

All of the Annes told me they were profoundly affected by inhabiting the character. Glynis Ranney, who played Anne in the early 90s, said being Anne made her more spirited, independent, and actually developed her sense of curiosity in real life.

I haven't met the twelfth, and latest, Anne who opened the season in June and will play through to the second week in September. The young actress, named Chilina Kennedy, may not yet know that her life will be forever altered by the experience.

It was a lovely moment when I asked the extraordinary gathering (nine Annes in all) if they remembered the words to the songs. They all looked at each other, laughed and then, right on key and in perfect unison -- as if they'd practiced for weeks -- burst into "Gee I'm Glad I'm Nobody Else But Me." I wanted to bow down to the ground and cry, too! It was particularly gratifying because many had not met before our gathering and they were thrilled about the chance to perform together.

Back in 1936, L.M.Montgomery said, "Really, when I first penned Anne of Green Gables so many years ago, I had no idea what would spring from it all." She couldn't have predicted, for example, the recent headlines proclaiming "Anne of Green GAY-bles" to be a lesbian. A Ph.D. student has concluded that Anne's relationship with bosom buddy Diana was "homoerotic". The author of this "study" must have missed the part where Anne marries Gilbert and they have seven children... But enough said about this little bit of academic ridiculousness.

I do wish, however, that Lucy Maud Montgomery could have seen all those Annes who have breathed life into her little girl for decades. Anne, and her creator, have given countless hours of pleasure and inspiration to many a young girl. And while I'm glad I'm nobody else but me, I gladder still that Lucy didn't see me in that hat!