

The power of love and family overcomes the cultural divide between a girl and her immigrant dad in a world premiere by an award-winning Canadian playwright.

Souvenirs

by Michele Riml

World Premiere!
A CO-PRODUCTION
WITH GREEN THUMB THEATRE

October 15 – November 1
PREVIEW OCTOBER 14



HIGH SCHOOL MATINEE
STUDY GUIDE

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RICHARDSON
FOUNDATION

Prairie Theatre Exchange presents

Souvenirs

By Michele Rimi

A World Premiere

Co-produced with Green Thumb Theatre, Vancouver

Director: Jennifer Brewin

Set & Costume Designer: Brian Perchaluk

Lighting Designer: Erecia Hassell

Stage Manager: Lisa Russell

Apprentice Stage Manager: Sheena Sanderson

Featuring:

Rachel Aberle as Maggie, a 16 year old girl

Ron Lea as Gustav, Maggie's father, a Czech immigrant

There will be one intermission

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested \$5.9 million in the arts in Manitoba.

Nous remercions de son soutien le Conseil des Arts du Canada., qui a investi 5,9 millions de dollars l'an dernier dans les arts au Manitoba.

Prairie Theatre Exchange is a not-for-profit theatre and an active member of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT), and engages, under the terms of the Canadian Theatre Agreement, professional artists who are members of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association.

About the Play

The play opens with Maggie breaking into her father's remote cabin in the middle of the night. She's sure that he isn't there, but when he appears from the bedroom, she's suddenly forced to come up with a story about why she's turned up with no warning. She's certainly not interested in visiting her father, whom she sees as a virtual stranger.

Gustav emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Canada many years ago, married and had a daughter, but his obsession with what he sees as the Canadian dream life – a big house by the lake -- crowds out everything else. His wife left the remote "temporary" cabin years ago with his small daughter, and he's left to continue building that perfect lake house by himself – even though it's clear that he will never finish it because he's so obsessed with perfection. By the time Maggie shows up in his cabin, he hasn't seen her for months, doesn't really know her as a person, and isn't prepared to have her in his home, or his life, at this point.

Through the play, and through the father and daughter's enforced, and unexpected, interaction with each other, secrets on both sides are revealed, old, hidden grievances are aired, and the two begin to come to an understanding, and acceptance, of each other.

"Being able to imagine a future that's positive and promising not only gets us out of the bed every day, it's is one of the great privileges of living in a country like Canada. It's not surprising that so many people around the world have looked to this place to build for themselves and their families, the brighter future that they dream of. Indeed, almost all of us are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants, and the inflow of new dreamers continues.

But it seems the old world follows people into the new one, and dreams meet reality sooner or later, as sure as leaves fall and winter finally arrives. The next generation has no 'old country' and has different dreams. It's into this disparate set of imaginings and realities that Michele Riml places an estranged father and daughter, then has us follow them as they navigate to some place of common understanding. It's a process that we all go through with the people closest to us at some point."

Artistic Director, Robert Metcalfe

Play Warnings: There is some strong language in the play, and the characters smoke a cigarette made from herbal tobacco.

Some of the Issues Raised in This Play:

- The challenges and expectations of new Canadians for their new life and how that can have an impact on their family
- The gap that can exist between new Canadians and their children who are born and raised in Canada – old-world values and customs clashing with what is seen as “normal” in the new country
- How communication and the lack of it can either build up or tear apart a relationship
- How past hurts can be overcome through honesty and communication, to bring a familial relationship to a new place

Play Etiquette

When young people attend a live theatrical performance for the first time, they often come into the theatre without the understanding how different it is from watching TV or a movie – that as well as the audience can hear the performers, the performers can hear the audience!

Please remind your students that:

- The actors would appreciate a quiet audience – that means no talking, eating or drinking, which is distracting not only for the actors, but also for the rest of the audience members in a small theatre like PTE.
- Cell phones must be turned off – even if the ringer is silent, the light from phone screens during texting and other functions is really disruptive and distracting. Imagine waving a flashlight around in a darkened room!
- They need to remain in their seats once the play has started – there will be an intermission for bathroom and cell phone breaks.
- Once the play has started, latecomers will not be admitted. If someone leaves during the show, they will not be able to get back into the theatre.

Active Viewing

To make the most out of watching this live performance, please encourage your students to not only watch the play for the story, but to also pay attention to the set, costumes, music and lighting. These aspects are an important part of a live performance and will enhance later discussions about the play and the students' experience watching it.

After the Show

The actors invite the student audience to remain seated – they will come back onto the stage to answer questions about the play, and about acting in general.

About the Playwright – Michele Riml

Michele Riml is an award-winning playwright from Vancouver, BC. Her work has been produced across Canada and in the USA. Her last play at PTE was the wildly popular *Sexy Laundry*, which was recently translated into German for its premiere in Berlin in 2010. Other critically acclaimed plays include *Miss Teen*, *Under the Influence* and *RAGE*, which won the 2005 Sydney Risk prize for Outstanding Original Play and was recently produced in French. Her most recent play the 2008 hit Arts Club show, *Poster Boys*, will take the stage at Theatre Network in Edmonton in November. Michele's plays for young audiences include *Cool*, *Invisible Girl*, *The Skinny Lie* for Green Thumb Theater and most recently *Tree Boy*, which premiered in Canada and in Chicago last year and is being produced by The Olney Theater in Portland this year. Michele is currently working on a one- woman show, *Taking it Off*, with and for Deborah Williams (of *Mom's The Word*), as well as a new full-length play.

A Conversation with the Playwright

This is a world premiere of a brand-new play. How long did it take to get the play from an idea to a finished script? How many drafts did it take, and did the final version differ significantly from your initial vision?

I've known for a few years that I wanted to write this play. A couple of years ago I worked on the first draft during the summer, and then put it in a drawer while I opened a new play. When I took it back out, it was ready to write. It came quite easily over a period of a few months writing. But those months were spread out over two years. The final version did not differ significantly with my vision. I always wanted the play to be a father and daughter coming from different places forced to confront high stakes in a close environment. One significant and very helpful decision was to make Gustav from Czechoslovakia.

Where did the idea come from? Is this a story from your personal history or experience? Why a father/daughter relationship rather than a mother/daughter?

This is perhaps the most personal play that I've written as it has direct parallels to my relationship with my own father when I was in my teens. He also made souvenirs. The play, of course, became its own new thing as the story developed. I was interested in exploring the relationship between a father and daughter, different generations, but also of two people who are used to hiding and lying to protect themselves who are forced to get vulnerable. The gift of Gustav's situation in the play is that it forces him to get honest with his daughter and the same holds true for Maggie. I think parents and children often feel they have to pretend with one another, and I was interested in getting under that façade with Maggie and Gustav. Also, exploring the idea of souvenirs -- all the things we collect for memories, compared to the value of real intangible memories we make by spending time with one another -- was interesting to me.

Which character did you most relate to while trying to tell the story? Was it difficult writing from the perspective of a new Canadian, or writing in the language of a teenage girl?

Funnily enough, I relate strongly to Gustav, but I don't share his world view. I understand though, as a parent, his desire to create a safe place for his family. And I understand how obsession and fear can block us from the very thing we are trying to achieve, which I feel for Gustav is a connection with his daughter. I tried not to write the language of a "teenage girl", but instead figure out how this particular girl, Maggie, relates and communicates. The challenge is that teenage girls often don't say what they're feeling; actually many people don't say what they are feeling or even know what they are feeling. So finding ways to communicate through action and silence is paramount to creating an authentic character.

How important is set design to the telling of your story? Do you write with a picture of the set in your head, and is it a problem if ultimately the actual set is different than you'd pictured?

Set is very important, as is setting. In this case, a feeling of remoteness is key, as is the simplicity and realness of the small home. I'm usually very impressed with what a set designer brings to the play and I'm particularly happy when their choices reflect an understanding of characters in the play. Yes, I wrote seeing Gustav and Maggie moving around a very specific set. Simple things like knowing that there is a half eaten sandwich by a chair at the beginning of the play, tells me that Gustav isn't eating a lot, and isn't cleaning up before going to bed, so maybe he's tired. You can see where each choice about set and props actually becomes information about the character and what's going on in their lives.

Are there any special challenges for a female playwright in Canada?

I have not experienced them, but that said I have had my plays produced when I am the only woman playwright in the theatre's season. So perhaps there is a bias still working out there -- which is strange, considering that women make up the larger percentage of audiences. Historically, "women's stories" get less time than men's, but I don't write "women's stories", I write about what interests me -- humanity. And we're all human! The other challenge I find is simply one all working moms share, I think, which is just finding time and balance to do everything and be a good mom.

How many plays are you working on right now?

Too many! Kidding (sort of). I can only write one play at a time. But right now I am fine-tuning *Souvenirs* before rehearsals start. I am tweaking *Poster Boys* which premiered at The Arts Club and is going up at Theatre Network in Edmonton in November. I am writing a one woman show called *Taking It Off* with and for Deb Williams of Mum's the Word. And I am working on two new plays *The Amaryllis* and *City Light* (which feels like it might turn into a musical). I also have an idea for a sequel to my play *Sexy Laundry* that I want to explore...

Group Discussion Topics -- Lying

Gustav: So. Your mother, she knows you are here?

Maggie: Yeah.

Gustav: You're missing school?

Maggie: It's a professional day tomorrow.

Gustav: What is right here? That is a simple question. And it is the only question. What is the right thing?

Maggie: Well, what if you don't know?

Gustav: You know because of this. (*pats his gut*)

Maggie: But sometimes...people make mistakes.

Gustav: Yes, I know. A mistake you can make right. But a lie is not a mistake. Especially a lie to yourself. It is a decision.

Gustav: She had a good life. That's what matters. Look at that dress. This was her dress for parties. For christenings. For weddings she wore this dress. Her smiling dress.

Maggie: Her smiling dress?

Gustav: Yes. Because in that dress she would dance. She would laugh. She liked so much a good joke or a party with people. I was just a boy. And I remember that dress. When my mother wore this dress, she was happy.

How is lying more than not telling the truth?

Does motivation make a difference?

What kind of lies are told by Maggie and Gustav?

To whom are they lying?

Does lying to yourself count as a lie? Is stealing lying?

Is the picture Gustav paints of his mother a lie?

Group Discussion Topics – Drug Abuse and Denial

Gustav: Do you take drugs now?
Maggie: Not really. Sometimes.
Gustav: Why?
Maggie: I like the way they make me feel.
Gustav: What do they make you feel?
Maggie: Nothing. I don't know. Less.
Gustav: You want to feel nothing?
Maggie: It's just for fun. To let go a little...
Gustav: To let go of what? Really, I want to know. I'm not angry.
Maggie: Control. Like the felling that you have to figure it all out. It's like you can just be.
Gustav: Just be drugged.
Maggie: Never mind.

Gustav: I have a lake. I have a road. I have a view. It is worth something, no? This asshole can't see it. I just need to finish that goddamn house and everything, it worth more. Everything falls into place. I can pay back...

Maggie doesn't think she has a drug problem. Does she?

How do her actions reflect her denial or substance abuse?

What is Gustav in denial about?

How can one person's denial affect those around him or her?

How can it affect the life of the one in denial?

Group Discussion Topics – Immigration

Maggie: Everyone is different. Everyone is ... himself.

Gustav: Yah. Yah. But where you come from is a big part. Maybe it's a good thing and you work with it. Maybe it's a bad thing and you work to overcome it. Either way, it's a big part.

Maggie: Remember when you made the Knudelicky for International Day at my school? I was in grade 4. You drove down.

Gustav: Yeah, sure.

Maggie: I asked you to make it. You were standing there at the table with the ladle in your hand in front of that big black pot of soup. That little Czechoslovakia flag in front of you. You made enough for half the school. Everybody just walked by. Even the stupid teachers. "Taste the World" they called it. But they didn't even try it.

Is it harder to be a "new Canadian"?

How is it different from being born in Canada?

Are there any personal examples in the class of an immigrant's expectations of the new life in the new country different from the reality?

Is the relationship between immigrant parents and their Canadian children different or more difficult than within a family that's been in Canada for a couple of generations?

Is Gustav prejudiced? Is Maggie?

Does everyone feel different from other people at some point in their lives? Is that unique to Maggie or is it part of being a teenager?

Group Discussion Topics – Symbolism

Maggie: But the bears always come around, right?
Gustav: Black bears. Harmless bears. This one's different. He's big.
Maggie: You saw him?
Gustav: A grizzly.
Maggie: Oh my God.
Gustav: I smelled him. He stinks. Like death. They get a taste for something. And they want more. No fear. I keep the compost in the shed. I put wire around the rabbits. Still he comes.

Is the bear real?

Is it a symbol?

If so, what does it symbolize?

Why does Gustav think there is a bear?

What does the lake house symbolize for Gustav?

Do the souvenirs hold any special meaning?

What does all the cooking in the play symbolize about the relationship between Maggie and her father?

Group Discussion Topics – Communication

Maggie: This is ME. OK. That's what I'm trying to say. I'm not your little girl with good grades skipping through the f...ing meadow like Maria. I took your pills because they were there. OK? Because I like them. I like all of it. Whatever you got – I like it! I'm not your beautiful mother!

Maggie: Get away from me.

Gustav: These are the drugs talking.

Maggie: Well, at least the drugs let me talk...

Gustav: You can talk—

Maggie: No, I can't.

Gustav: We talk.

Maggie: Whatever.

Gustav: TALK TO ME!

If Gustav had been able to be honest with Maggie earlier in her life about the struggles of his family, would they have been as estranged as they ended up?

What role did Gustav's repeated comparisons of Maggie to her grandmother – at least the version of his mother he told her about -- play in the way Maggie felt about herself?

What did Maggie keep bottled up inside that made her feel better once she and her father talked?

What is it that finally precipitated honesty between Maggie and her father?

Can we take away any kind of lesson from their example?