

Habitat clicks its heels, says 'there's no place like home'

Habitat

Directed by Marianne Copithorne
Starring Reneltta Bourque, Jeff Haslam, Andrew Kushnir, Christine MacInnis and Maralyn Ryan
21 September to 8 October
Theatre Network

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Arts & Entertainment Writer

Some plays aim to deliver audiences a forgotten message regarding the issues that affect us all. This is the reason behind Canadian playwright Judith Thompson's *Habitat*, a story about Toronto residents fighting to close down a group home placed in their rich, upscale neighbourhood.

"[Thompson] writes a lot about the need to protect the underdogs of society, the lower class, minorities and, most importantly, children," director Marianne Copithorne says. "She also has another theme: that each one of us has a monster or a demon or a beast inside of us. The way we deal with this demon is what allows us to

operate in the world and have a sense of hope. Similarly, we can be blocked by it, imprisoned by it, or just stalked and haunted by this burden."

With these reoccurring themes, *Habitat* is anything but a clear-cut, black-and-white play. It challenges people to see both sides of a situation by allowing them to understand the characters' attempts to get rid of a group home—one of the main plot-lines of the story—while, at the same time, retain hope that the children will get to keep it.

"[Thompson's] characters can be pretty dark and greedy," Copithorne explains. "A lot of her characters, when placed into a corner, just come out kicking and screaming. If they feel that they have to protect themselves, they'll bare their teeth. They're not afraid to get ugly."

And everyone involved has every reason to be, because they all have valid concerns.

"I think people are really afraid of what it would be like to live across the street from something like [a crystal



meth addict], because these kids come from really, really troubled pasts," Copithorne says. "It's a struggle to figure out how to rehabilitate people and how to let them fit into society. Everybody thinks it's a great idea as long as it's not right next door to them—as long as it happened way out somewhere where they don't have to deal with it."

For a play that focuses on the necessity for everyone to have a home, one has to wonder why Thompson came

up with a title that has a rather primal connotation like *Habitat*, as opposed to something warmer like home.

Copithorne, however, agrees with Thompson's choice. She and the set designer came up with a definition that they felt was in tune with Thompson's ideas: "A structure that affords a controlled environment for living in extremely inhospitable locations." Copithorne went further and considered the type of habitat one sees in a zoo.

"They're not really what they appear to be like; if it's the polar bear exhibit, it's fake," Copithorne says. "Little fake icebergs and these animals are sort of living in a habitat that isn't really their real environment. It's not really home. Choosing that word helps to ask the question: where is home? Is home a brick house with a picket fence or, indeed, is home encased in our soul? And if we don't have our spiritual health in order, we are spiritually homeless."



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