

## Critical Theater Review of “Come From Away”

David McMurray

### Introduction

This critical theater review of *Come From Away* is a critique of the script and theatrical performance of a production that I watched in Toronto, Canada. The production opened on February 13, 2018 and ran until January 20, 2019. The Toronto opening night of *Come From Away* attracted people from across North America. Some of those attendees were from the town of Gander in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador during the fallout from the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack that the show depicts, and are portrayed as characters in the musical. I flew in from Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island to attend the Wednesday, February 14, 2018 evening performance at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto (Figure 1). The performance of this play was an ephemeral experience: Billed as the most successful Canadian musical of all time it was shuttered because of the increased operating costs related to the pandemic (Denette, 2021). After playing around the world, including 855 performances in Toronto, the hometown production abruptly ended its long run on Wednesday, December 22, 2021. The final curtain call sent shock waves through the Canadian arts community and caused hardship for the 300 thespians and stage crew who lost their jobs. Promised financial support from the department of Canadian Heritage and a healthy dose of serendipity resulted in the decision to bring back the show in 2024, with a National Arts Centre premiere in Ottawa then a permanent move to Toronto.

### 1. Background

Irene Sankoff and David Hein’s (2012) original 305-page thespian book told the story of strangers turning into friends—and shone a light on the thousands of people who, in the wake of one of their darkest days, showed us humanity at its best.

The play started to take form with the Canadian Music Theatre Project produced by Michael Rubinoff and made its debut at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario in 2013. The tentative title of the play was *Gander*, the name of the airport located at the furthest northeastern tip of North America. The English-speaking locals welcomed the stranded come-from-aways (this Newfoundlander expression inspired the much better title and refers to anyone coming into the province, and is a welcoming message when displayed on a sign). Newfoundlanders say that the kindness they showed to stranded visitors is “just what people do” (Street, 2021).

The authors Hein and Sankoff were also the playwrights who improved the script, music, and lyrics for Mirvish Production’s musical *Come From Away* (Figure 2). Sankoff and Hein’s (2019) 224-page e-book *Come From Away: Welcome to the Rock* provided an inside look at the hit musical and contained the original text

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along with lyrics and photographs. As well, their online *Come From Away: A New Musical* (2019) was offered as an educational guidebook for teachers and students.

## **2. Methodology and Observations**

To write this review I read the scripts and attended the production.

### **2.1 Methodology**

Prior to attending the performance in 2018, I read Sankoff and Hein's (2012) original script. For this critical review I also read and listened to Sankoff and Hein's (2019) e-book publication. As a priori hypothesis, I thought about how the production might look. As a spectator sitting in the orchestra section of the theater I took in and enjoyed the performance, the music, and the design of the set.

### **2.2 Brief summary of the book and the play**

Irene Sankoff and David Hein's (2012) original idea was to offer quick glimpses of the numerous individuals who made up the larger whole story. In a heartbeat, 38 planes with 6,579 passengers were stranded in a remote town in Newfoundland. The locals opened their hearts and homes, hosting this international community of strangers - spurring unexpected camaraderie in extraordinary circumstances.

The story begins with a first chapter entitled "Before." Beowulf Boritt staged this scene as a particularly simple set in order to emphasize the small town depicted throughout the play. I did not notice very much striking of the set between scenes. Howell Binkley's lighting conveyed changes in scenery, from a claustrophobic plane to the deep, dark, expansive woods of Newfoundland as quickly as Ashley needed them to. The lights were dimmed and the backdrop was flat black when a thespian orated:

It is an island that has welcomed come-from-aways as far back as the time before clocks. In a gallery in The Rooms, the Provincial Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador, there's a display that sums up what contact with come-from-aways means to the province's cultural character: "Contact" is one of the most powerful agents of cultural change. Contact-driven cultural change had occurred many times in Newfoundland and Labrador, as resident cultures and new arrivals met and adapted to each other's presence. The ensuing relations between the newcomers and those who were already "home" have had long-lasting effects on both.

Following chapter one, a libretto entitled "Welcome to the Rock" provided text narrative and musical explanation for the extended musical work. The opening scene takes place on the morning of September 11, 2001. The townsfolk of Gander, including Claude the mayor, Oz the police constable, Beulah the teacher, Bonnie the SPCA worker, and others describe their lifestyle in Newfoundland. Here is an example from the written libretto section that describes the music and quotes various actors' lines. I actually heard the thespians recite these lines exactly word for word in loud, clear voices:

*A bodhran beats a fast rhythm.*

Claude: On the northeast tip of North America, on an island called Newfoundland, there's an airport—it used to be one of the biggest airports in the world. And next to it, is a town called Gander.

Oz: There's a two-person police department.

Beulah: An elementary school.

Bonnie: An SPCA.

Janice: A local TV station.

The show's very first musical number also informed the audience, "If you're hoping for a harbour, then you'll find an open door." The play featured music with an Irish flavor, honouring the major Hibernian heritage of Newfoundland. In all there were 22 musical numbers accompanied by an 8-piece band and embellished with Irish dancing.

The story continued with the locals explaining how they learned of the kamikaze-like airplane attacks taking place in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. For their part, the uptight travelers seemed to be initially taken aback by their hosts' uncommon hospitality, but they slowly let their guards down and begin to bond with the quirky townsfolk and each other.

The beauty of the script evolved when the two sides bonded. The islanders in Gander and the surrounding towns opened up their homes to the "plane people," regardless of their guests' race, nationality, or sexual orientation. Two women, Beulah (speaking with a heavy Irish accent from Gander) and Hannah (with an equally heavy New Yorker accent), bonded over the fact that both of their sons are firefighters, but Hannah's son went missing. When the song "I Am Here" was performed, Hannah asked Beulah to take her to a Catholic church, and a number of characters made their way to other houses of worship around town and moved to the next musical tune "Prayer."

The story's closing scene took place ten years later. The crew and passengers of the once stranded planes, while the song "Come from Away" plays, reunite in Gander, this time by choice, to celebrate the lifelong friendships and strong connections they formed in spite of the terrorist attacks. The audience then heard the "Finale," as Claude the mayor professed, "Tonight we honour what was lost, but we also commemorate what we found."

### **3. Evaluation**

Similar to most musicals, the original set was designed to be a two-act play with an intermission. For its opening day in Toronto this structure was changed to a single act, 100-minute nonstop show. This format worked well in other venues, too. Employing only twelve actors who switched back and forth between a variety of roles and accents, no individual emerged as hero or villain. Directed by Christopher Ashley, these innovations helped the show to develop into a Tony Award-winning musical.

#### **3.1 Evaluation of the venue and staging**

I watched the performance at the venerable Royal Alexandra Theatre on King Street in Toronto. The 1,244

seat Beaux-Arts architectural structure was built in 1907, and is the oldest theater in North America. In 1963, threatened with demolition, businessman Ed Mirvish bought the building and saved it from the wrecking ball. Immediately he set about restoring the building, stripping the interior to its floorboards to ensure the theatre remained the finest on the continent for its next half century (Figure 3).

The Toronto stage was at the entire disposal of Christopher Ashley. The stage imposed few restrictions on the director concerning movement and set design. The actors had sufficient space to move around and their voices were easily heard (Figure 4). The direction, the choreography, the music, and the arrangements all seemed designed to fully support the actors.

The director's production of *Come From Away* captured all the horror of a world where safety can't be counted on and where life can be nasty, brutish, and appallingly short. The storyline was believable and it reflected reality. The script was based on actual events that took place on September 11, 2001. On that fateful day at 9:26 AM the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration made the decision to shut down its airspace, forcing over 4,000 planes to land at the nearest airport. Inbound flights from Europe were diverted to Canada, including Gander Airport in Newfoundland. In total, 6,579 passengers on 38 planes were stranded in the small town of Gander. In the days that followed the 9-11 attack until the final diverted plane could take off.

### **3.2 Interpretation of the acting**

Many of the characters in the show were based on real people and amazingly there were just 12 thespians to tell all their stories. Each of the dozen actors played a few different roles – representing the townsfolk and many of the passengers in this play.

The characters Garth, Kevin Tuerff and others were played by American actor Jack Noseworthy. Annette, Beverley Bass and others were acted by Eliza-Jane Scott. Claude Elliot was played by George Masswohl. Canadian actor Kevin Vidal played Bob. Canadian actress Steffi DiDomenicantonio played the character of Janice Mosher.

The cast I watched was cleverly built with several members with strong comedic streaks: including Lisa Horner as Gander resident and den mother Beulah Davis; Ali Momen as the witty Angeleno Kevin J.; Kristen Peace as Bonnie, the Gander animal wrangler charged with caring for a stranded bonobo ape, and Kevin Vidal as Bob, the Brooklyn resident suspicious of the islanders' kindness, and a suave pilot who woos the boy-crazy Annette, played by Eliza-Jane Scott. The relationship shown between the mothers Hannah and Beulah was heart-wrenching. Beulah (from Gander) and Hannah (from New York) bonded over the fact that both of their sons were firefighters.

The script also allowed these actors to deal with obvious prejudice, without them having to take sides or creating heroes or villains. Note the tension in the following scene that takes place in the airport lobby.

Beulah: Around suppertime on Thursday, people are waiting to use the phones and there's a fight in the hallway Ali speaking in Arabic on the phone.

Ali: I beg your pardon?

Passenger 11: You celebrating this? You praying for your friends?

*Ali speaking in Arabic on the phone*

Passenger 11: Why doesn't he speak English?

Ali: Excuse me?

Passenger 8: You telling your Muslim friends where to bomb next?

Ali: This was not all Muslims! And I was not –

Passenger 11: Go back where you came from!

This cast also revealed humor as one of the driving forces behind the musical's identity and message -- it built bonds, it invites, and it makes unimaginable circumstances bearable to start, and eventually joyous. The acting made me sympathize with the notion that good Samaritans must permit eccentricity and even, to a point, endorse it. Without that sympathy, the play would have been reduced to pure chaos and would have failed to portray a Canadian ideal of neighborliness.

### 3.3 Appreciation of language, dialect and accents

The play's title comes from the term people in Gander call people from off the island, a person who comes from away. The script contained foreign languages, such as the capitalized words hymned in this scene that took place between local resident Garth and the passenger Gwandoya.

Gwandoya: There are soldiers everywhere. I see the fear in my wife's eyes.

All (Except Garth and Gwandoya) : PANDE ZOTE SISI.

Gwandoya: The man at the front opens the door.

Garth: I say, "here you are. Out you go." But he doesn't understand. And he's not getting off. None of them are.

All (Except Garth and Gwandoya) : GIZA NA MITI.

Garth: But then I notice that his wife is clutching a bible – well, I can't read it obviously, but their bible – it'll have the same number system ours does – so I ask to see it and I'm searching for something – and then in Philippians 4:6 – I give them their bible and I'm pointing and saying, look! "Philippians 4:6 – Be anxious for nothing. Be anxious for nothing."

Gwandoya: That's how we started speaking the same language.

The very useful online classroom guide, *Come from away a new musical* (Sankoff & Hein, 2019) provides an lexis of words from the play that are used in Atlantic Canada and it contains a useful chapter that teaches students how to speak like a Newfoundlander. The Gander accent sounds Irish because some of the fishing villages in Newfoundland are so remote that the accents of the first people to emigrate have continued down through the generations.

Body language was also extremely important in the play. In Newfoundland English (and in Japanese), voicing the affirmative is often made with an inhalation rather than an exhalation among the older generations. In linguistics, inhaling in agreement is called ingressive pulmonic speech or an ingressive particle.

Ingressive means breathing in, pulmonic refers to the lungs and a particle is a part of speech which is not necessarily a full word, but which is used in conversation.

#### **4. Why this Review is Significant**

*Come From Away* was certainly worth doing as it was uniquely Canadian and it had global reach. Unfortunately it succumbed to the pandemic.

##### **4.1 Canadian**

*Come From Away* is a Canadian musical, written by Canadians about Canadians. It brought Canadian creativity to Broadway, and showcased the Canadian spirit of compassion, resourcefulness, and generosity. It's a unique story, rooted in a singular tragedy—but it's emblematic of what it means to be a neighbor and a friend. When a grieving United States shut down its airspace for the first time in history, *Come From Away's* communities—like so many others—did what neighbors do: they pitched in, stepped up, and opened their arms.

##### **4.2 Global reach**

Theatrical productions ran from 2013 until 2021 in: Oakville, Ontario; San Diego, California; Seattle, Washington; Washington D.C.; Gander, Newfoundland; Toronto, Ontario; Broadway (New York); Winnipeg, Manitoba; Dublin, Ireland; West End (London); Melbourne, Australia; and Rotterdam, The Netherlands. It was the longest running Canadian play ever to show in Broadway. *Come From Away* ran in Toronto from February 2018 to March 2020 and reopened briefly in December 2021.

##### **4.3 Permanently closed**

Mirvish Productions permanently closed its musical in Toronto, describing the costs of reopening amid tightened pandemic restrictions as prohibitively high and risky. The show's producer David Mirvish explained, "This is not the way any of us wanted this to end. *Come From Away* deserves to have had many more years at the Royal Alex" (Denette, 2021). Striking the set, the stage crew completely deconstructed the stage and removed props, costumes, lights, and sound equipment when the show ended its run at the venue (Figure 5). The theater has gone dark until the next show time, post Covid-19.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In this thespian review, rather than cover a wide variety of production elements, I focused on developing a few key ideas such as: the venue, the script, the actors, and the accents. Based on what I read from playguides (a term used in Japan meaning entertainment material obtained from an authorized ticket agency), my initial impressions of how the play could have been performed, and what I actually saw in situ, I believe *Come From Away* was highly successful and hope to see it in Japan (Figure 6).

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## Appendix

Figure 1

Show Tickets for Valentine's Day and Local Theater Magazines

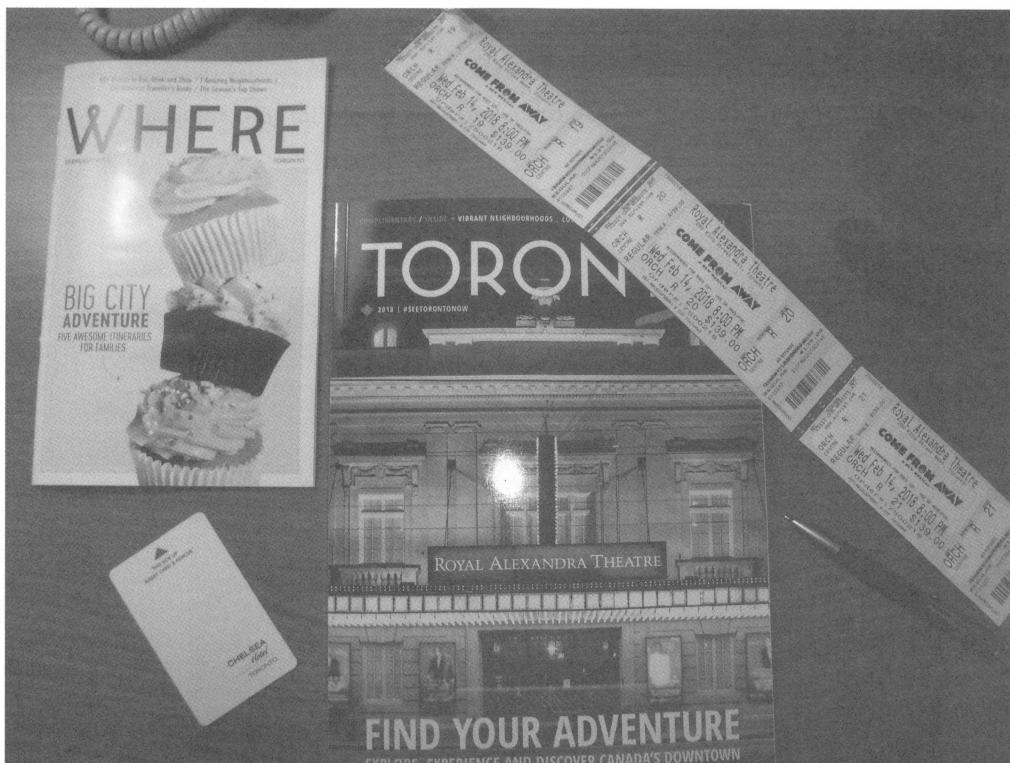


Figure 2

*Photograph from Outside the Royal Alex*



*Note:* Built in 1907, the refurbished Royal Alex is located on King Street, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 3

*Photograph of the Marquee for Come From Away on Opening Night*



*Note:* This marquee is the brilliantly lit roof-like overhang at the doorway of the theater, holding a performing arts theater sign above the Royal Alexandra building's entrance off King St. Toronto.



Figure 4

*Photograph from the Reviewer's Seat of the Stage for Come From Away*

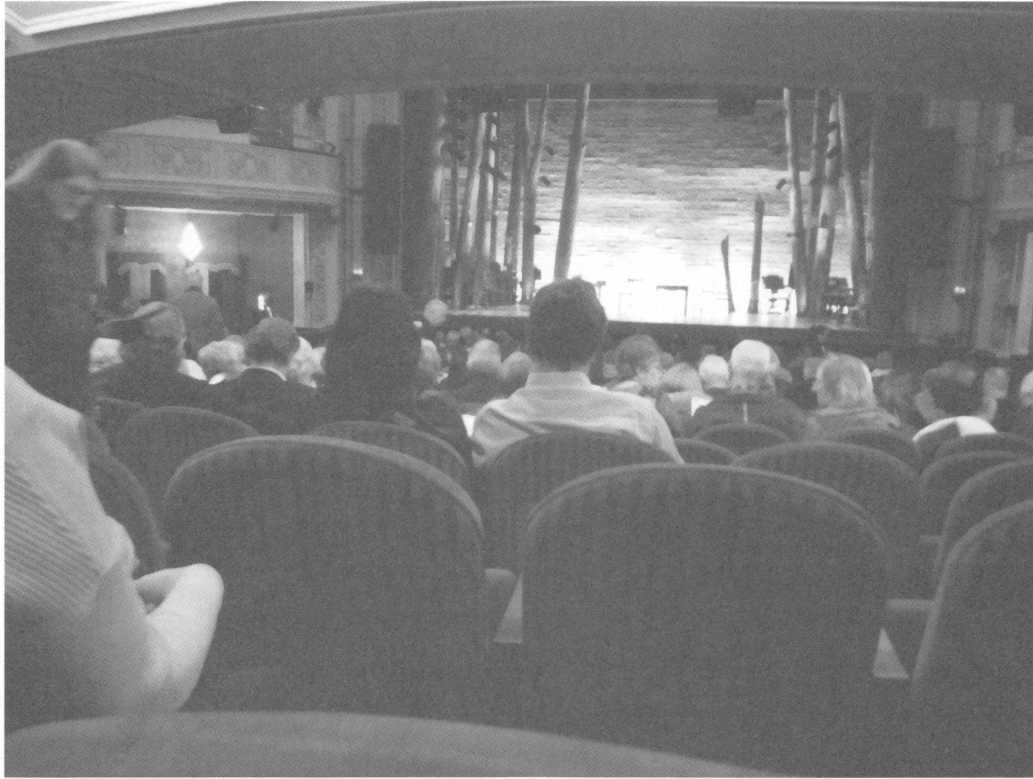


Figure 5

*Photograph from Inside the Royal Alex During Dress Rehearsal*



*Note:* This view is from the reviewer's seat located at the back of the orchestra section.

Figure 6

*Photo of Musical Specialist Professor Toshihiro Iida and Mr. Fumio Higashi Standing in Front of the House*



*Note:* Books were for sale in the lobby of the theater which was used for public entry to the building from the outside street.