

British Theatre Guide

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Wingfield's Folly

Dan Needles

The Belfrey Theatre, Victoria BC

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30 July–25 August 2013

Canada exports many types of commodities to the United States including (as playgoers over the years can attest) really good theatre to Broadway; other times, however, plays come to the roost.

The Belfrey—a professional theatre company located in Victoria, BC—has had the honour of premièring all seven of the Wingfield plays, many of which have gone on to revivals all over Canada. The Belfrey is now offering a summer revival of the first three plays in the cycle.

Focusing on the mishaps of Walt Wingfield, a stockbroker who tired of the rat race and became a farmer in the Seventh Concession—that is, in the heart of rural Canada—we watch as Walt struggles with livestock and with his neighbours, both of whom seem treat Walt as the big affable form of alien invasion from the urban world that he is. He may have no clue what he's doing but it's his heart (as big as his farm is small) that saves him.

Walt is the creation of Dan Needles, originally in the form of a newspaper column in which Walt writes a weekly letter to the editor of the local paper detailing the current sets of difficulties he faces; the columns (and now Needle's play) are wonderfully comic tellings of rapidly cascading disasters.

In the third play of the revival, the one now under review, Walt, facing his second “profit-free year” of farm life, tries to branch out into new ventures—only to find that his turkeys die at such a rate that he begins to wonder if he will need a backhoe to bury all the carcasses. (Backhoes move a *lot* of dirt). Walt does learn how to get his great plough horse King to move when Walt discovers that King's been trained to get going only to the sound of rattling bottles. It's a sign of the depth of Walt's inability to cope with his own livestock that this is presented as a huge triumph. It certainly impresses his neighbours.

However, Needle's play is not just funny; it has wider concerns. What Needles is dealing with—in very comic ways—is the fact that farm life in rural Canada is not easy and many of its farmers discouraged. Like a modern day Jimmy Stewart, Wingfield may be totally at sea but he's willing to get in there and do what's needful for his community. The current scheme is the creation of the Walt—a local currency that immediately becomes devalued due to inflation, a comic reinvention of Canada's currency against the world currencies at the time of the play's creation (as a youngish man in those days, I would travel to Canada a lot—American dollars went really far in the Canadian economy).

Wingfield—and all of his neighbours—are played wonderfully by comic actor Rod Beattie with what used to be called a “rubber face.” As directed by Douglas Beattie, Rod plays, in rapid succession, Walt's editor; Walt himself; his neighbour Freddie and Freddie's sister Maggie (Beattie's

impersonation of Maggie is particularly funny and charming); the old Squire; Don; the cheapskate grocer downtown; Freddie's loser nephews; and on and on, each with their own voice and posture.

Beattie does a wonderful job of recreating each character over and over again without the help of costumes or changes in makeup. It's a comic tour-de-force and it's impressive. It's not just posture or voice—it's Rod Beattie's expressive eyes as well. He gets big laughs just by shifting his eyes to the left or staring at a fixed point (usually representing a Walt who is big trouble, often with Maggie).

More than that though, the play reaches back through the collective memory of the audience. Jokes about the ways in which farmers dealt with being priced out of their markets got a laugh, yes, but also murmured call outs—"that's right" or "yep" or a knowing laugh as audience members, some of whom, I learned preshow, had grown up on farms, reacted to the truths of Needle's play and the honesty and warmth of both Douglas Beattie's direction and Rod Beattie's bravura comic performance.

Reviewer: [Keith Dorwick](#)