

# The picnic that became a great escape

Newfoundland students take a wartime memoir to Washington

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**T**erry Rielly's compelling story opens a long way from this Paradise on the Rock he calls home — the one that Alex, the protagonist in Rielly's story, finds at the end of his long journey.

Rielly is a St. John's-based musician and a writer whose first play, *Some Picnic*, will be getting a great deal of attention in the coming months. The spotlight begins tomorrow, when the drama club from Prince of Wales Collegiate in St. John's, made up of students in Grades 10, 11 and 12, will perform *Some Picnic* at the Georgetown Convention Centre in Washington.

The project was sponsored by the Asper Foundation, which each

year selects roughly 800 high-school students from across Canada to visit the United States Holocaust Museum and take part in an educational curriculum provided by the Foundation on Human Rights and the Holocaust. This is the first time that participants from Newfoundland and Labrador have been chosen.

"It's important not to shy away from this stuff, especially for children, because they are so impressionable, and can learn about this stuff in a non-threatening way," says Rielly, best known in St. John's as the children's performer, *The Teddy Bear Man*.

"It's one thing for us to discuss it as adults in a historical sense — that this terrible thing can never happen again — but they are the



Rielly with his high-school cast: The real-life trip took a family from Brussels to France, Spain, Portugal, London and finally Montreal.

ones who can really make a difference. They are still making choices in their lives that can affect real change."

*Some Picnic* is about one family's adventures, escape from Belgium during the Holocaust. It is based on the true story of Alex Gilbert, the father of Rielly's partner, Sherril Gilbert. Alex is now 73 and resides in Montreal. Mark Day, a 17-year-old in Grade 11 at Prince of Wales, plays young Alex in the show.

The play focuses on an eight-year-old Alex. His parents, Maurice and Frieda, learn that the Nazis are about to descend on Brussels the following day.

Thanks to Alex's father, they leave immediately, on May 9, 1940, making it out just in time. But his parents don't tell the boy the truth of their often-frightening journey. Instead, they tell him they are going on a picnic.

"I wanted this story to come from the boy, Alex," Rielly says. "He was led to believe he was going on a picnic, that his parents were tak-

ing him out for the day. But they were packing up all this weird stuff. They were afraid if they told him the real story it would leak out and foil their plan to escape.

"They got out. But they lost

**The play tells the story of a boy whose parents have a single day's notice to pack up the family and flee the Nazis**

many relatives."

*Some Picnic* has its origins in interview transcripts with Sherril's father and grandparents on the subject of their life in Europe and escape from the Nazis. Her father has read the script along the way and offered input, mostly to get the details right. "His memory was sharp, and part of it had to do with my grandparents' determination not to make this such a horrible

thing for him," she says. "He still had very much a kid's notion of it." Sherril, who says her father will eventually see the play, predicts it will be overwhelmed to see the work performed.

The real-life trip lasted more than six months, and took Alex and his family from their home in Brussels to France, Spain, Portugal and then London, where they lived until moving to Montreal when Alex was about 16.

Rielly fiddled with the details of the script up until the last week, incorporating details supplied by the real Alex. The students, who have been mentored by drama teacher Tolson Barrington, have embraced the story even more enthusiastically than Rielly thought possible.

"The students have really taken it on," Rielly says. "Some of them have even adopted Jewish accents for it. It's very powerful stuff."

Keith Samuelson, an English teacher at Prince of Wales and a Holocaust and human-rights

scholar, had been asked by the Asper Foundation to introduce its Holocaust-education program to students on the Rock. When this same time, Rielly brought him. *Some Picnic*, and Samuelson knew he had to have it performed. He talked to the foundation, which put the play on the program.

"I just thought, 'What if we perform it in Washington?'" recalls Samuelson. "It's been a dream come true. It's such a personal play. The person is still alive and the students are taking it and portraying it with such passion. To create a work of art about an historical event is really something. And that it's an original work is so powerful."

So much so that the organizers of the Edmonton Fringe Festival have already called, and are planning to put it on later this summer.

"The play really gets you right in here," Sherril Gilbert says, touching her clenched fist to her heart. "It doesn't just stay in your head. It makes you want to do something in the world."