

HTI production wins over this Anne of Green Gables fan

Hamilton City Magazine

By Allison M. Jones

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Allison M. Jones is devoted to Lucy Maud Montgomery and her iconic characters and was charmed by this well-acted, well-designed, well-directed and sold-out musical.



In the lead-up to Hamilton Theatre Inc.'s production of Anne of Green Gables: The Musical, I'll admit I was worried. It wasn't anything HTI had done. It was me. I have adored Anne of Green Gables, the iconic 1908 novel by Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery, since the mid-1980s. I've read most of Montgomery's books, bought books about her life, her poetry and her correspondence, even collected antique copies of her novels as well as magazine issues in which her short stories were published. I've pored over her personal journals, followed the scholarship into L.M.'s life and literary legacy, and have book quotations hardwired into my soul. I have Big. Feelings. about Anne Shirley, Gilbert Blythe, and all the rest and, strictly speaking, I wasn't convinced Anne of Green Gables required a musical treatment. This was despite knowing it has been performed as a musical in Charlottetown, PEI and beyond for decades.

It turns out, I needn't have worried so much about whether I'd enjoy the production or, indeed, whether I could do justice to the review. HTI's production, which sold out quite early on in the run, is a very enjoyable show. The company has put lots of thought and heart and, dare I say it, imagination, into its staging. At the concession stand, styled as an outlet of Blair's General Store, you can purchase a raspberry cordial, Marilla's Kitchen blend tea, or Willard's ice cream. Nearby on a chalkboard, you can take part in a poll based on a quote directly from Anne: "Which would you rather be if you had the choice – divinely beautiful or dazzlingly clever or angelically good?" (I chose dazzlingly clever. I was delighted to see it was winning. Anne herself would have approved).



Sarah Gazzola (Miss Stacey) with her students in HTI's Anne of Green Gables: The Musical.

PHOTO: Paul Merrill

Adapted from the novel with book by Donald Harron, music by Norman Campbell and lyrics by Harron, Campbell, Elaine Campbell and Mavor Moore, *Anne of Green Gables: The Musical* was created as a live special for the CBC. It was performed and broadcast for a second time in 1958. It then became a stage musical and premiered in 1965 at the Charlottetown Festival. In 2014, Guinness World Records recognized *Anne of Green Gables: The Musical* as the longest-running annual musical theatre production in the world. It was staged at the Charlottetown Festival from 1965 to 2019, then saw its 2020 and 2021 performance years disrupted by the COVID pandemic. From 2022 onwards, it was decided the musical would be staged biennially. There have been notable productions of the musical across Canada and Japan (where Anne is completely beloved), in the U.K. and in the United States.

Those familiar with the novel will know that it follows the journey of Anne Shirley, a red-haired orphan who arrives unexpectedly at the Cuthbert farm in the small PEI community of Avonlea and finds (mis)adventure and, eventually, a place to truly belong with her unlikely adopters and many new friends.

Lily Galivan brings unabashed enthusiasm and charm to her Anne Shirley. She is feisty, irrepressible, and funny, a whirling dervish with bright red braids. I'm astonished that Galivan is still in high school, given her ease and command of the stage. In this iteration, Anne's energy, her outspoken and precocious nature is dialled up, whereas the character's essential sensitivity is underplayed a little. We get glimpses at the past horrors that have fuelled Anne's flights of fancy and escapism, but musical Anne focuses more on her razzle dazzle. It's moments with Al Helsdon (as Matthew Cuthbert) where Galivan's Anne shows her softest

side, and Helsdon's Matthew responds with a warm, gentle understanding and empathy that is genuinely touching to see.

Lyla Miklos' Marilla Cuthbert is suitably stern and a little severe, but most impressive are the moments when little quirks of her mouth betray humour and understanding, not unlike the way that Colleen Dewhurst so masterfully portrayed the cracks in Marilla's restraint in the two CBC miniseries of the mid-'80s (that are my personal favourite). Miklos' expressions say so much, for instance in an early scene when Mrs. Blewett, who hasn't a lick of the kindred spirit about her, is sizing Anne up like a new household appliance.

For me, no one can compare with the late Jonathan Crombie, but this Gilbert Blythe (Gregory Sokil) is quite earnest and likable. Rachel Lynde (Leah Drury) is a difficult character to play, being a meddlesome, overbearing and even infuriating woman, but one who is essentially kindhearted and nurturing. Drury holds her own and manages to elicit both groans and laughter from the audience. Diana Barry (Amanda Ramirez) is everything you want Diana Barry to be: sweet, pretty, understanding, loyal – and physically comedic during a certain misadventure with a bottle of presumed raspberry cordial. Josie Pye (Liyah Imbert) is funny and gleefully insolent.



The cast of Anne of Green Gables: The Musical at Hamilton Theatre Inc.

PHOTO: Kreations Photography

Sarah Gazzola is a stand-out as she not only plays three separate roles (Miss Stacy/Mrs. Sloane/Mrs. Blewett), but she somehow manages to excel at playing one of the most wonderful characters in Anne's

life (supportive teacher, Miss Stacey) as well as one of most repellant (blowsy, brittle Mrs. Blewett). Olivia Hunt brings an unexpected and delightful physical comedy to Moody MacPherson which, I'm shocked to say, actually improves upon the book character. Well done.

Excellent work has been put in by musical director Jennifer Ferreira. As my theatre companion pointed out to me during the intermission, there was a very satisfying balance between the live music (truly an amazing asset of HTI) and the vocal performances. There have been times in the past when the score has overpowered the voices in HTI productions, but in Anne of Green Gables there is a lovely balance between them. Choreographer Erika Bennett, as well as movement coordinator Kayla Jensen, must be commended on their work in preparing the cast so beautifully for a production that not only features many song and dance numbers but is chock full of movement from start to finish.



***Al Helsdon (Matthew Cuthbert) and Lyla Miklos (Marilla Cuthbert)
in Anne of Green Gables: The Musical. PHOTO: Paul Merrill***

Costuming for Anne of Green Gables comes from The Muses (Hope Wickett & Jenn Helsdon), who have done a wonderful job at outfitting the cast of about two dozen characters with period-appropriate and attractive garb. I was especially impressed by the footwear, since it's one of the first things to take me out of a story when the shoes don't match the era, and it must have been an enormous challenge to furnish all the actors with suitable shoes.

Under the direction of Mallory Toye, a long-time lover of Anne of Green Gables, this cast of 18 performers, many of them young people, are thoroughly entertaining as they recreate some of the most beloved

scenes from the classic novel for about the length of time of the average movie. As a family outing it feels like a good value for money, and I was delighted to witness many families of various configurations in the audience, but particularly the many happy-looking girls with equally charmed grown-ups. As a long-time fan of L.M. Montgomery, that sealed it for me. Watching new generations of young people discover or celebrate Anne Shirley through the platform of this musical was sincerely touching.

Congratulations to the entire cast and crew on staging a complex and colourful show in which the many moving parts feel so well integrated.

Anne of Green Gables is the second production of Hamilton Theatre Inc.'s 67th season, and it will round out its 2025-2026 playbill with Grease. Tickets are on sale now.



***Gregory Sokil (Gilbert Blythe) and Lily Galivan (Anne Shirley) in
Anne of Green Gables: The Musical. PHOTO: Paul Merrill***

NEED TO KNOW

Anne of Green Gables: The Musical

Feb. 27, 7:30 p.m.

Feb. 28 and March 1, 2 p.m.

This run is SOLD OUT

Contact info@hamiltontheatre.com or phone 905-522-3032 to get on the wait list

Hamilton Theatre Inc.

140 MacNab St. N., Hamilton