

# Show brings artist's story to life

*Colours in the Storm* offers history of 'Picasso of Canada' Thomson

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At times the human psyche is driven by passion, a passion so deep it becomes the focus of our very being. This is a rare breed of passion, one found in only the most creatively inclined minds.

Tom Thomson, the legendary Canadian artist who spent countless hours depicting the vast scenery of Algonquin Park in the early 1900s, had this rare mind. Now a vital figure in Canadian art history, Thomson's personality, character and the mysterious circumstances surrounding his death are put on stage by the Festival Players of Prince Edward in the group's latest performance *Colours in the Storm*.

Directed by Sarah Phillips, who is also the artistic director for Festival Players, the performance documents the life and work of Thomson, whose legacy is now cemented within the annals of Canadian art. Famous for such paintings as *The Jack Pine*, *The West Wind* and *The Northern River*, Thomson finally discovered his artistic talent at the age of 35.

Enamoured with the lush green forest and wildlife of northern Ontario, Thomson spent five summers at Algonquin Park, long enough to build an extensive catalogue of landscape paintings.

The foundation of *Colours in the Storm* is its depiction of history, with the performance bringing to life a slice of Canadian heritage which may be overlooked by some, or even unknown to other younger audience members.

Every day history has a place within some form of media and popular culture. There are web sites dedicated to historical significant events, and major media publications which feature a "This day in history" segment. There is even a history channel, appropriately named The History Channel.

But when history is shown through the lens of theatre there is a different flavour to the story. A story which previously existed only in written material is now reenacted live on stage, and for even just a few hours the audience can venture with the performers to a long-ago time in a far off place.

Phillips says theatre brings an added dimension to history that is hard to find elsewhere. "It's different to see a person standing there than it is to read about someone," she said. "You see so many more facets of the character."

With a mix of comedy and drama, *Colours in the Storm* explores more than just Thomson's artistic talents. Although his paintings eventually inspired the Group of Seven, Thomson was a quirky painter during his time wandering the wilderness of Algonquin Park. He formed a deep bond with the people of the park, connecting on a level which produced a range of emotions, from love and admiration to hatred.

The performance shows more than merely a man, more than an artist even. By the time the final bows are finished and the clapping complete, the audience understands how a man became deeply intertwined and inspired by a place and its people.

Stephen Sparks, a 25-year theatre veteran and University of Alberta graduate, took the lead role and was faced with the challenge of capturing the fascination Thomson developed with the woods of Algonquin Park.

To be truly emerged in one's surroundings requires being pushed to the brink of obsession, reaching the tipping point and turning back at the very last instant. Sparks accurately portrays Thomson as he walks the line between creativity and insanity. Locals thought there was a certain mental instability to Thomson, but he was just driven and unable to switch off his artistic eye, even in social situations.

But although Thomson shows the stereotypical oddball artistic traits, he is modest to the bitter end and unable to acknowledge his immense skill. He is often shown frustrated, feverishly trying to get an exact colour with the Algonquin trees or water that only he is able to see.

The inner battles of Thomson make for a unique character and persona, an interpretation that was as challenging for Sparks as it was entertaining for the audience.

Sparks said *Colours in the Storm* attempts to make a connection between history and our modern appreciation of artistic talent.

"Thomson really changed people who came across him," said Sparks.

"He was the Picasso of Canada."

Thomson's death is shrouded with mystery, forming a story in itself. Thomson died while in a canoe on Canoe Lake, and days later his body was discovered with a bruise near his temple and fishing line wrapped suspiciously around his leg.

*Colours in the Storm* can be seen at the Fields on West Lake.



## A TALE OF CANADIAN HISTORY

Winnie Trainor (played by Eliza Jane-Scott) embraces Tom Thomson (played by Stephen Sparks) during *Colours in the Storm*, the latest Festival Players of Prince Edward performance which can be seen now at the Fields on West Lake. (Submitted photo)