

Celtic Nights - Oceans of Hope

There are few regions of Canada without a connection to Celtic history, be it through family roots or other influences. Our own East Coast still holds strong to the musical traditions of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, producing that distinctive energetic sound that at times, makes it hard to sit in your seat and in other moments, brings forth a wonderful melancholy.

On Saturday night, the Celts were brought right to our doorstep by the Kelowna Community Concerts Association, one of only two stops in Canada. Celtic Nights - Oceans of Hope promised a lot in their synopsis, and in spite of some minor technical issues, they delivered. Through song, dance and narration, they effectively told the stories of those who left their homeland in order to create a better life elsewhere. The storytellers were a blend of musicians, dancers and vocalists - all from Scotland and Ireland, and all beautiful and strong performers.

The show itself was a wonderful and satisfying mix of moving lyrical ballads, energetic Irish Dance, and engaging narration. Kevin Olohan, one of two brothers in the show, was particularly humorous in his storytelling and introduction to the céilí - a traditional social gathering involving song, dance, and the exchange of stories. His brother Ciaran opened the evening with his deep, rich voice in "That Land I Loved So Well", setting up a strong, dramatic opening that soon included the entire cast (beautifully dressed, in matching grey suits and floor-length gowns). When not delivering beautiful solo pieces, the voices of the six vocalists (including Amber Marie Edwards, Rebekah Shearer, Mark Anthony Irwin and Emily O'Dwyer) intertwined to create those rich harmonies distinctive of Celtic music. All the vocalists sang beautifully, taking the audience on a journey and connecting to memories in a way that only music can.

As wonderful and engaging as the singing was, I would argue that the dancers truly stole the show, bringing forth an enthusiasm that had the audience cheering and clapping along. With microphones clipped to their shoes, they were able to hold their own against any of the other instruments. A crowd favourite seemed to be the number in the second act, which began with the bodhrán - a Celtic hand drum, being rivaled by a male dancer with hard shoes (similar to tap shoes). This evolved into a comical and very impressive dance-off between both male dancers, displaying a showmanship that had the audience almost leaping to their feet. As a dancer, I was particularly impressed when I saw five pairs of feet (showcasing intricate footwork) producing a unified sound.

In live theatre, there is always the possibility of technical issues. At times, there were microphone issues and the accompanying backtracks threatened to overpower the musicians and vocalists. However, the professionalism of this cast carried through to create a highly entertaining and heartwarming experience. They did not miss a note, nor a beat, as they delivered an extremely polished and otherwise smoothly-run show. More importantly, the cast conveyed true enjoyment on stage, and seemed eager to bring the audience into their stories. To quote co-producer and vocalist Rebekah Shearer, they wanted to "create an experience" where they could be themselves on stage - not only deliver a show. In observing the audience, it was clear that there was a deeper connection happening for some, that went beyond simple appreciation of a well-sung song.

This being my first Kelowna Community Concert review, I was surprised to learn that something of such high calibre was run entirely by a team of volunteers, headed by Betty Skilbeck. Celtic Nights - Oceans of Hope brought forth a rich Celtic history lesson, reminded us of some of our country's proud heritage, and gave us plenty of fun to boot. Their homeland may be across the ocean, but with Celtic Nights, everyone is invited to the céilí!

- Lyndsey Wong is a local singer, actress, dancer