

Matches Strikes Up a Comedic Blaze

"If it's funny, it's in the show!!"

This has been the catch phrase of By Committee's production of "Playing With Matches", part of this year's London Fringe Festival.

Originally conceived by local stand-up comedians Tim Condon and Paul Merrifield, and their wordsmith friend Sandy Ross, "Playing With Matches" promises and delivers an hour of side-splitting comedy, where no cow, not even Bessie, is sacred.

See what happens when two outrageous people meet on a blind date. Terry, a brilliant 37-year-old virgin with a hate-on for David Suzuki finds his match with Catherine – a real lady, especially in the evening. No, folks, Catherine is not a hooker – sorry. She's something else entirely.

Using material from Paul Merrifield's big black binder of rants and gags, Tim Condon has pulled out a tale that will shock and amuse anyone who's ever tried dating – online or otherwise. To properly capture the female voice, professional wordsmith Sandy Ross rounds out this triumvirate. As Ms. Ross quips, "Here's to feminism, when one woman can do as much damage as two men."

"The collaboration on this play has been an amazing experience," says writer/director Condon. "From the very beginning of rehearsals, I've encouraged the actors and backstage crew to bring their ideas and creativity to the piece. Improvisation has been key to the process, where surprising material comes out of the moment. We've killed a lot of trees with our revisions."

"Playing With Matches" is a Fringe Festival first for some, including Darren Schmidt, who makes his debut as Terry Scott, a character Darren describes as "funny, fun to play, and eerily close to myself at times." Condon says "Terry is unlike most real people – he's likeable and loathsome at the same time, a balance that Darren masterfully maintains."

Schmidt adds: "I wanted to be a part of London's theatre community. It's been so gratifying. Everybody's been so supportive. The only trouble I'm having is describing the show to my parents! It's raw, it's real, and it's not for kids."

No, this politically incorrect comedy is not for the young, but is for the young at heart. The humour comes from its crystal clear focus on relationships, sex, environmentalism, aging, and more. The stand-ups who wrote the piece know that people laugh when faced with the truth. They have included many of their poignant observations. Producer and co-playwright Paul Merrifield describes the show as "a good sitcom without the bleeps. We wrote it for people who don't usually watch theatre. It's accessible."

Bring a tissue and check your hang-ups at the door when you go to see "Playing With Matches", running August 2 through August 10 at the Spriet Theatre in the Covent Garden Market (upper level).



Playing With Matches (60 minutes)
By Committee Productions
Spriet Theatre, London, Ontario

Playwrights: Tim Condon, Paul Merrifield, and Sandy Ross

Director: Tim Condon

Featuring: Debbi Abbott, Tim Condon, Andrew Gibbes, Andrea Hutchison, Timothy Lewis, Gregory Mate, Darren Schmidt, and Jacqui Vandale

Mature Audience (18 and over), coarse language

Tickets: \$9.00

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Two Stand-ups Sit Down To Write A Play

What happens when two stand-up comedians turn their pens toward a theatre plot instead of a punch line? If you attend this summer's Fringe entry "Playing With Matches," you'll find out. London comics Tim Condon and Paul Merrifield were encouraged to put their heads together by Merrifield's incisive wife Sophie. "Hey," she said. "Why don't you two idiots write a play?" In comedy, that kind of comment is high praise. "Preview audiences have been laughing all the way through," says Merrifield. "We've had complete strangers tell us that they've heard good things about our show, and are excited to see it for themselves."



Two years ago, this odd couple – Tim and Paul, not Sophie and Paul – didn't know each other. Following the closing night of a play at the Arts' Project, Condon crashed the cast party hosted by the Merrifields. Tim and Paul spent more than an hour ignoring the other attendees as they shared notes on comedy. A few weeks after that meeting, Condon responded to a posting online for comics looking to travel to Hamilton venues. He did not know he was emailing Paul. It seems these two idiots were destined to meet, and maybe this Fringe show is the reason.

Merrifield, a right winger (not the hockey kind), and Condon, a leftie, don't agree on much as far as politics go. Condon hugs trees that Merrifield would rather cut down. The irony is that by day, Mr. Merrifield tends the grounds at London's beloved Springbank Park. "London hates sunshine. What's with all the stupid trees?" he rants. "Sure, trees are pretty ... until they fall on your power lines!" Condon sees the humour, even though he disagrees, which is a core requirement of most comedians. "You have to be comfortable playing Devil's Advocate. Comedians know that everything is flawed. Jay Leno goes after Democrats and Republicans in the same monologue. Creating this play has given me the chance to see things from the other side of the fence."

Midway through the process, the Condon-Merrifield duo discovered something missing from their play – a legitimate female "voice". Enter Sandy Ross, a woman who earns her daily bread writing business copy. More than up to the challenge, Ms. Ross takes the piece to even higher heights, providing among other things insight into the depilatory habits of the fair sex. We won't ruin the very funny gag about what happens when leg bleaching turns ugly. She also tries to take credit for a lot of the unrefined language peppered throughout the script. "Don't let the dimple fool you," she warns with a wink.

"Playing with Matches", which opens August 2 and runs through August 10, takes shots at everything: from sex to Canadian icon David Suzuki. "We think this play has something to offend everyone," Merrifield quips. Condon adds: "Some comedian once said that if you're not offending someone, you're probably not very funny either." This love story offers new ideas and twists on some old themes. Oh, take note that it contains some language that would make George Carlin blush. Actually, the writers

have included only three of Mr. Carlin's Seven Words You Can't Say on Television, none of which are of the compound variety. As the Narrator of this play says, "Those of you with sensitive ears may want to stuff your programs into them." That said, this play is about more than a few words you can't say on TV. It's a look at life through a different lens, and there's a love story at its core like none you've seen before.

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