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Note-perfect jazz tale

By JOHN COULBOURN

TORONTO -- There always has been a sort of good-news, bad-news element to Harbourfront's biennial du Maurier World Stage Festival. Toronto gets a chance to see some of the finest theatre in the world -- that's the good news.

But in this particular kind of setting, if you don't see it quickly, chances are you won't see it at all -- and that's the bad news.

Now, in the very first edition of the du Maurier World Stage Preview (slated to run in the years when the full Festival doesn't), organizers have already captured that same element of urgency.

The work is titled Novecento and it comes to Toronto from Quebec's Theatre de Quat'Sous, by way of the prestigious Edinburgh Festival.

If you missed it in any of its three stagings at the du Maurier Theatre Centre, you unfortunately are too late. After its Sunday opening, Novecento's three-show run closed yesterday.

For now, that is. It is almost certain to return to Toronto in some guise, a prediction based not just on the excellence of the work, but also on the fact that it features local actor Tom McCamus in what is arguably the most impressive performance in an impressive career.

As written by Italian Alessandro Baricco and beautifully translated by Michael Golding, this is a jewel of a tale, a sort of modern-day fable told in a single voice -- The Rhyme Of The Ancient Mariner with memories taking the place of the albatross, if you will.

It is told in the voice of Tim Tooney, a down-on-his-luck trumpet player who fills the stage with his memories of younger, simpler days -- days spent playing on a shipboard band on a boat named the Virginian.

It is there that Tooney strikes up a friendship with Novecento, a young man who has spent his entire life aboard the Virginian.

To survive, Novecento has taught himself to play the piano and has become so skilled at the jazz keyboard that he attracts competition from legends like Jellyroll Morton. But artistry, it turns out, has its price. As the story unfolds, Tooney struggles with the price Novecento is compelled to pay.

As Tooney, McCamus gives a performance of understated depth and power, underscored by an aching stillness and filled with wonder, melancholy and regret -- a performance as much conducted by, as directed by, Francois Girard.

Blending McCamus' near-flawless artistry with the set designs of Francois Girard, the lighting of Marc Parent and the sound design of Nancy Tobin, Girard transforms Novecento into something more than a mere play: a jazz symphony that is perhaps only fully heard by the soul.