

# FESTIVAL ANTIGONISH

*'an anthology of verse unfolds before your eyes'*

## Joni Mitchell: River resonates

By Andrea Nemetz • Halifax Herald • July 13, 2005

Taking in Joni Mitchell: River, which opened Friday at Festival Antigonish, is like watching **an anthology of verse** unfold before your eyes.

The Canadian singing-songwriting legend is as much poet as musician, as evidenced in this musical journey through 29 songs from the 61-year-old Rock and Roll Hall of Famer.

Audience members are as likely to leave the Bauer Theatre with the words of the prairie troubador echoing through their heads as they are with her unique and complex melodies.

Joni Mitchell: River, was created in 2002 by Allen MacInnis and Greg Lowe and opened at the Prairie Theatre in Winnipeg, with MacInnis directing the show he described as a "theatrical concert."

Festival Antigonish director Ed Thomason saw it at the Vancouver Playhouse (where it starred Spirit of the West's John Mann) in 2004 and thought it would be **perfect for the intimate theatre** at StFX, where "River" runs in repertory until Aug. 19.

The two-hour-plus production featuring Nova Scotia actors Raquel Duffy and Margot Sampson, and Toronto's Mark Uhre, bringing to life thoughtful songs of love and longing, hope and desperation is perhaps best viewed as a series of monologues.

Each of the songs - from the opening Help Me, a 1974 hit which pitches the audience into the breathless world of falling hopelessly in love, to the closing strains of the surprisingly wistful Both Sides Now, which Mitchell penned and Judy Collins took to the top of the charts in 1968, is **like having the iconoclastic Mitchell sit down and tell you a personal story**.

There is no dialogue. Instead, the "stories" are connected through Mitchell's singular voice, arranged as "chapters" entitled Falling in Love, War, Trouble in Paradise, Big Business, Falling Apart, In the Psych Ward, Wrong and Right and Some Wisdom.

Duffy, who was seen last season at Festival Antigonish in Humble Boy and Don't Dress for Dinner, Sampson, who is known for her cross-Canada touring work in A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline, and Uhre, who just finished up a run as Sky in the Toronto production of Mamma Mia, **blend their voices seamlessly into intricate harmonies and resonating solos**.

Dave Carmichael, who plays 10 different guitars in the production, many donated by Antigonish owners, and Dave Christensen on keyboards, percussion and sax (the sax particularly memorable wafting unseen as Duffy croons Hejira) are the **perfect accompanists**, supporting but never overwhelming the vocalists.

Director Jean Morpurgo uses the space - and the simple set with two wrought-iron fenced balconies flanking an impressive stone-surrounded door - to its best advantage with the characters and musicians leaning or performing in various openings at different times.



Jean Morpurgo, Raquel Duffy, Mark Uhre, Margot Sampson and Dave Carmichael

Among the audience favourites on opening night were: Woodstock, the 1969 hit for Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young; the a capella Fiddle and Drum with lines like "What time is this/To trade the handshake for the fist;" the comic Be Cool with doo-wop girls Duffy and Sampson sporting dark shades; Big Yellow Taxi; the title track River (MacInnis picked the name because he loved the line "I wish I had a river to skate away on"); Uhre's longing version of Down to You; Sampson's confessional A Case of You; Duffy's moving Magdelene Laundries and the trio's Songs to Aging Children Come.

Those attending Friday's opening gave the cast a **prolonged standing ovation after the final number** - the dreamy anthem Both Sides Now - then joyously joined in for an encore of Big Yellow Taxi clapping and belting their hearts out to its familiar lines.

Joni Mitchell: River, which should be seen more as a collection of short stories than a novel, will likely improve as the season progresses and the actors grow more comfortable in the world of the artist who was awarded a Grammy for lifetime achievement in 2002.

On Friday, they picked up steam midway through Chapter Three with Be Cool and gathered confidence throughout the show.

It will be interesting to see the results of an informal poll. Audience members can vote for their favourite Mitchell song through tips from bar purchases dropped in four containers marked "A Case of You," "Big Yellow Taxi," "Woodstock" and "Other."

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