

# FESTIVAL ANTIGONISH

*'...terrific contemporary summer theatre!'*

## Stones in his Pockets artfully told

By Ron Foley MacDonald • Halifax Herald • July 6, 2005

Citizens dodging the many film crews around the province this summer might just want to check out the first offering in Festival Antigonish's 18th season, Marie Jones' dark two-hander comedy *Stones in His Pockets*.

A biting satire revolving around two rural extras in an American big-budget feature being shot in Ireland's County Kerry, *Stones In His Pockets* begins as a **very funny send-up** of the filmmaking process. Along the way, author Marie Jones manages to build in some real **tenderness amidst all that furious and pointed humour**.

With only two actors portraying everyone in the cast, the play relies on a theatrical immediacy and directness that is at once startling and somewhat demanding. Keeping track of all the characters can be, occasionally, quite a challenge. It's a challenge that pays off in very theatrical style of the production and the split-second timing of the **superb cast**.

Jones lets the various conflicts in *Stones In His Pockets* play out with a mix of genuine affection; it's clear that the playwright can't help but identify with both the rube-like locals and the crass - and often very pushy - come-from-aways who are exploiting the location for its abundant picturesque qualities.

It's a play, ultimately, about the act of storytelling itself. How the story is told, and who gets to tell it, are issues that resonate throughout Jones' deceptively light and lively text. With jokes flying every few seconds or so - mostly about the culture clash between underemployed Irish locals and the super-sophisticated trans-national cast and crew involved in shooting the film - the more serious material in the play lurks just below the surface of the sparkling dialogue.

Directed with an emphasis on precision and physical detail by Festival Antigonish's new artistic producer Ed Thomason, *Stones In His Pockets* sports **two virtuoso performances from Jeremy Webb and Andrew Musselman**. As Charley and Jake, the Irish pair of film extras who hold the narrative thread throughout the play, Webb and Musselman deliver very convincing portrayals of Irish Everymen.

The acting duo is called upon, however, to carry out characterizations of a multitude of others, including Ashley and Simon (two fey British assistant directors who brusquely order the extras around), along with the film's director and its imperious American male and female leads. Watching Musselman and Webb transform themselves with a simple sudden turn or gesture is one of the great pleasures of the production.



Andrew Musselman, left, and Jeremy Webb.

**Webb's industrial-strength coyness** as the film's womanly ingenue, in fact, stokes the production with enough **comic wattage** to power a whole season of Neil Simon. His physical metamorphosis as one of the female lead's gargoyle-like bodyguards is equally **impressive**.

Musselman, on the other hand, gets to portray an older film extra - reportedly the last survivor from John Wayne's *The Quiet Man* shoot - with an **unforgettable rustic quirkiness**.

With almost no set - apart from a couple of simple benches and some prominently green arches for entrances and exits - this is a play that must live or die on its acting alone. **Webb and Musselman triumph, with a vibrant command of accents on top of some extraordinary theatrical timing**.

The play darkens towards its second act when one of the locals gets involved in a tragedy that interferes with the high-pressure stakes of the filming schedule. With only one exceptionally goofy sequence of faux-Irish choreography to lighten the tone, the last half of the play loses a bit of its energy and bite. Still, with **Webb and Musselman clearly having so much fun on stage**, *Stones In His Pockets* represents an **undeniably edgier kick-off** for Festival Antigonish.

The play - a hit on both Broadway and London's West End - has already bagged an Olivier Award for Best Comedy. Festival Antigonish's **sterling production** will show audiences why it has already been recognized as a contemporary classic. **Hilariously funny but sparked with surprising touches of real drama and poignancy, *Stones In His Pockets* is terrific contemporary summer theatre.**

867 • 3333

1 • 800 • 563 • PLAY

WWW • FESTIVALANTIGONISH • COM