



Michael Hogeveen, Jane Miller, Robin Clipsham and (standing) Kristi Frank and Richard Peters on the set of Thumbs, now playing at the Opera House.

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Killing with laughter

Thumbs is a comedy thriller murder mystery playing now at the Opera House — and there's air conditioning

By John Swartz, Special to The Packet & Times

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You know you've hit the big time when the thing you've created isn't known by the name you gave it.

It can be frustrating, but Rupert Holmes takes it in stride. Holmes is the playwright behind Thumbs, the current production of the summer theatre season at the Opera House.

He also wrote a song called Escape. It went to No. 1 in the United States and in Canada. Almost everyone knows the song, even the young folks, except most of us call it the Pina Colada Song.

"The record label came to me and said 'Everyone is asking for that song about pina coladas and you called it Escape. Could we put after the title, parentheses The Pina Colada Song?'" Holmes said.

"I said 'And compromise my artistic integrity?'" Holmes said in a mocking tone.

"They said 'If we don't do that, it won't sell any copies.' So I said 'I guess it's the Pina Colada Song,'" Holmes said.

Holmes wrote songs for Barbra Streisand (including a number of songs for her movie vehicle A Star is Born), Barry Manilow, Dionne Warwick, Dolly Parton and the Manhattan Transfer and recorded five albums before he became an overnight hit.

Holmes often thought of his songs as stories told in three minutes. Then he got a break. Joe Papp, who produced A Chorus Line, asked Holmes a question.

"You're writing little musicals, did you ever think of writing something on a grander scale?" Holmes said.

Holmes told Papp of his 10-year-old idea to turn Charles Dickens's The Mystery of Edwin Drood into a musical.

"He said 'I'd be interested, but how would you end it because I know Dickens died before he finished the book,'" Holmes said.

So Holmes wrote many endings and let the audiences decide how the play should end each night.

The play became a hit and won a Tony Award, and Holmes became the first person to win Tonys for best script, best music and best lyrics.

Then the marketing people got into the act and The Mystery of Edwin Drood became just Drood (with the full title in small letters in parentheses).

"It seems like I have some kind of relationship with parentheses," Holmes laughed.

He's learned to live with his work taking on new names and doesn't get offended when people use those new names in his presence.

"I have to remind myself now and then to call it Escape and not The Pina Colada. If I can make that error, I can understand how other people can," Holmes said.

This brings us to Thumbs. Kind of hard to shorten that one.

"It's a comedy thriller. It's also a murder mystery. There's a specific genre I enjoy writing, which is the comedy thriller where there is a murder mystery, but there are supposed to be laughs along the way. The company that's doing it, Laughoutloud, is pretty good at generating laughs, so I expect that it will be funny," Holmes said.

Thumbs has been produced by a lot of regional theatre companies, especially in Canada, but Holmes, who lives in the Hudson Valley area of New York, knows about the our little company here in Orillia?

"Yes I do, and I know about that beautiful Opera House. I wish I had the time to come up because I'd love to visit the Opera House," Holmes said.

Holmes knows about the Opera House? How is this possible, he hasn't played here in the last 15 years, and he can't remember ever being here before that.

"The Internet is very helpful, and whenever I see a production, I look into where it is," Holmes said.

"I take great interest. I may not have my hand in the work at that point, it belongs to the company that is doing it, but I always feel great gratitude and affection for the people that are working to make the show be funny, and scary at the same time," Holmes said.

Laughoutloud principal and director of Thumbs Dave Campbell knew he had to do Thumbs when he read the script.

"Because it's just so incredibly engaging. What I like about this one is it's very contemporary — the characters have modern-day sensibilities. And, of course, I knew what kind of cast I was going to get, and with a brilliant cast like this, it's unbelievable what you can achieve," Campbell said.

His cast is Kristi Frank, Michael Hogeveen and Richard Peters in supporting roles, with Jane Miller and Robin Clipsham as the leads.

Having two female leads was also what attracted Campbell to the play.

"Women tend to disappear from the ages of 40 to 60 from pretty much all literature and pop media, but all of a sudden, we have two extremely strong-willed, extremely intelligent women facing off in this little battle of wits," Campbell said.

Miller plays a television star and Clipsham is the local sherriff who is trying to catch a serial killer, Tom Thumb (so named because the killer likes to keep souvenirs you can't find on any other animal). Four murders have happened before the television star arrives on the scene, but something tells the sherriff to look a little closer at the star.

"It's incredibly funny. It's very Oscar Wilde almost in terms of its writing," Campbell said.

Thumbs runs to the end of August with evening performances Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (except Aug. 6).

"It's air conditioned. There's matinees when it's really hot out there," Miller said.

Those would be at 2 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays.