

Wandering Menstruals part of Antigonaut

Posted on September 17, 2013 Richard MacKenzie, richardmac@thecasket.ca

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The Wandering Menstruals will once again be part of the Antigonaut. The festival takes place Sept. 27 and 28. PHOTO: Contributed

For Antigonaut – Art after Dark 2013, the Wandering Menstruals female choir will be, appropriately, wandering.

“We’ll be caroling essentially, through the festival,” co-director Jenn Laudadio said of the group’s participation in the Sept. 27 and 28 event.

"What we'll probably end up doing is singing our repertoire as we move through the festival groups. Then find a spot, stop and sing a few there," she added in describing the group's stage as the entire festival site.

Origins

In talking about the origins of the group, Laudadio said it developed out of a 2009 conversation she had with Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) executive director Lucille Harper as the two neighbours were out gardening.

"She [Harper] said there used to be a singing group and worded it as a feminist choral," Laudadio said. "She said it would be so much fun to resurrect something like that and said 'I would love it if you would consider leading it.'"

"I felt a little nervous about taking that on myself, in terms of skill level, and so I asked Betsy [MacDonald] if she would like to do that with me."

Laudadio talked about the "casual" approach in the beginning which remains today so that any women interested in being part of the choir feels the inclusive and welcoming nature.

"We really do work hard to make people feel welcomed and, instantly, help them fit in," she said.

"We really aim for low stress with this choir. It's not a requirement to be here every week, we're not taking attendance. And in the spirit of that, no one is obliged to sing at a gig, to perform. It's really about making the choir fit in your life, when it works."

MacDonald picked up on the point.

"Knowing how to sing isn't a requirement," she said, adding being able to read music isn't a necessity either.

"It's just wander in when you can. But there has also been a lot of commitment to the choir and a lot of musical growth which has happened since we started singing together," she added, noting it's a reflection of the enjoyment members share from just being together and singing positive songs.

Laudadio noted while the idea behind starting the group was to provide a once-a-week sing-a-long space for women, it wasn't long before requests were coming in for the group to perform at different functions around town.

"Within a few months, we started having requests to perform in public," she said, listing film festivals, book launches, protests, university functions, Christmas concerts, picnics, rock shows, cabarets and art festivals amongst some of the activities.

"That wasn't the initial intention of the group at all but it became a demand that was expressed around town. So the Wandering Menstruals were born as a performance group rather than just a sing-a-long space."

In selecting songs to sing at an event, Laudadio talked about a combination of factors and the sometimes rewriting of well-known tunes.

"We try to find songs that speak to our mission statement or in the spirit of what we're about," she said, adding the theme of the event and anticipated audience are also important factors. She said at least one song that encourages audience participation is also included.

"Or if I song doesn't fit that, we adapt it. [We do] a lot of rewriting of songs to feminize them or to be more in tune with our approach to the music and message. Those rewrite sessions are a lot of fun and, again, everyone is participating in them."

MacDonald noted one rewrite session involved a popular Atlantic Canadian artist who had composed the song.

"The choir did a rewrite of an Ian Sherwood song which was neat because he is an Atlantic singer/songwriter and he worked with the group to rewrite this particular song," she said.

Laudadio noted an opportunity this past spring which involved a rewrite.

"We had done a rewrite with the intention of airing a song on Weekend Mornings on CBC with Stan Carew," she said. "So the Wandering Menstruals hit the airwaves and were heard even as far as Korea. I received an email from someone in Korea who was streaming live ... that was pretty exciting for us."

Sit-in Sept. 19

MacDonald talked about an event coming up this month being organized by the group.

"We're doing a small gathering ... a sit-in for peace in Syria," she said, noting it will take place Sept. 19, at 5

p.m., at the Chisholm Park gazebo.

Laudadio said the group is inviting the general public to participate.

"Even if someone comes along with a guitar and they have a song they would like to sing," she said. "We'll have some songs printed off as well."

"We invite anyone to come and sit, listen, meditate, join in on song or bring a song," added Lilion Quarmyne, also a co-director of the group.

The AWRC is the rain location.

Antigonight
appreciation

Turning their attention back to Antigonight, the three women talked about what, to them, the festival says about the community.

"I think it speaks to the diversity we have and creative talent this community attracts," MacDonald said.

"And that, in addition to the traditional Scottish culture, there is a lot more going on culturally in Antigonish then one might realize at first glance. It's something for our community to take pride in."

Quarmyne also picked up on the diversity theme.

"Each year it happens I'm surprised by the variety, diversity and the creativity that people come up with," she said.

"There are always a couple of artists I've never heard of before and that is always a real pleasure, exciting."

She also noted the inspiring unity shown by the artists during the festival.

"One of the many things that makes me proud is the artists of Antigonish coming together to say, 'we live in a time when arts funding is being cut left, right and centre and we are being told the arts don't matter. But we're refusing to accept that.

"We value the arts, we're going to put them out there and make it a really interactive, dynamic, living space ... something really special"

Laudadio talked about the transformation she sees at Antigonight.

"I've been in Antigonish since the year 2000 and, for me, the first time I went to Antigonight, I said, this space feels like a city," she said.

"For the first time it just felt like we had transformed this pocket of Antigonish to make it come alive in the way a city feels. A city has a different kind of buzz than a town or village has ... a different one, not that it's better or worse. There was a magic I hadn't felt in my over a decade of living here when I walked into that space."

She also shared MacDonald's and Quarmyne's thoughts on the diversity displayed.

"There is such a diverse amount of artistic practice going on here that, even for people in the artistic sphere, we don't know about it necessarily," she said.

"And then for the general public to have the opportunity to walk through a space you pass through in your car every day and to see it transformed and become a venue like that for everyone in the town and county.

"It's important to reclaim that as a venue and have that exposure to the public."

The Wandering Menstruals gather Mondays, 5:15 to 6:30 p.m., at the AWRC and any women interested in joining, or obtaining more information, can contact the centre.