

The Atlantic Repertory Company is staging a captivating production of Stephen Massicotte's coming-of-age drama *Mary's Wedding* to kick off ARC's coming-of-age season, which will see the company tour France and Germany for the first time. Last year, ARC became the Atlantic region's newest professional theatre company when it was launched as an initiative to develop a professional theatre residency for emerging artists. Based on the first performance of the second season, that initiative is already proving successful. There was a packed house at the BMO Studio in Saint John where the audience enjoyed many laughs and shed many tears by the end of this powerful production, directed by ARC founder Stephen Tobias.

Mary's Wedding is set on a July evening in 1920, but the main action occurs through a dream in which Mary (Caroline Bell) relives events that begin in 1914—the year that saw the outbreak of the First World War. It's also when the teenaged Mary first meets Charlie (Kenzie Delo), a spirited country boy who yearns to do more in life than work on a farm. The two bump into each other during a thunderstorm that serves as both a metaphor for their tumultuous romance as well as the outside forces that threaten to tear them apart. First, there's Mary's snobby mother, who disapproves of her well-to-do daughter spending time with a "dirty farm boy." Then, of course, there's the war itself, which drives a rift between the couple just as their young love begins to bloom.

Their romance offers a fresh perspective on the play's historical themes. The horrors of mechanized conflict, the disillusionment of naïve soldiers, and the loss of innocence in the muddy trenches of Europe are themes that have been explored time and again in depictions of the First World War dating back to Eric Maria Remarque's seminal novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). But Massicotte breathes new life into those familiar themes through a love story that makes the harsh realities of war all the more poignant for the characters as well as audiences watching their struggle to stay together despite the upheaval caused by the cataclysmic event that would claim [millions of lives from around the world](#).

The strength of *Mary's Wedding* hinges on the actors' ability to make us love and fear for Mary and Charlie as much as they love and fear for each other during the war. That's no easy feat for a pair of emerging actors, but Bell and Delo pull off this daunting task with ease thanks to their natural chemistry. Their first meeting is filled with all the goofy smiles, awkward pauses, and verbal fumbles that you'd expect from two smitten teenagers. Delo's stammered responses and pleading eyes make him instantly lovable as the country boy Charlie while Bell charms the audience through Mary's clumsy efforts to make Charlie feel at ease while talking to someone far above his social standing. In Mary and Charlie's courtship scenes, Bell and Delo provide just the right amount of physical and verbal comedy to make us care about each character through moments of brevity that help us weather the hardships that later befall the couple.

The production's staging of trench warfare is not graphic or gruesome, but the characters' description of war is not for the faint of heart. And neither is mounting a production of this nonlinear play. Scenes rapidly shift from one place and time to another. Older versions of the characters often intrude upon their younger selves through the dream's stream-of-conscious narrative. And locations can shift from the Canadian prairies to war-torn France in the middle of a conversation, which is particularly

challenging for Bell, who must switch from playing Mary to portraying Sergeant Flowerdew—a member of Charlie’s mounted regiment. As if all that wasn’t challenging enough, Massicotte’s script also calls for a cavalry charge during a pivotal battle.

No horses appear on stage in ARC’s production of *Mary’s Wedding* though. The actors handle riding scenes by miming their steeds into existence. Tobias also uses a minimalist approach for the set, which relies on two small screens to establish the play’s many scenes. The tech crew evokes the harbour where Charlie embarks for France by projecting footage of a billowing smoke stack on one screen while the other displays the ocean’s rolling waves. Battles are likewise fleshed out through projections of archival footage of trench warfare. When the script calls for music, the crew plays snippets of swirling, distant music that add a ghostly quality to the production, which suits the script well considering that we are watching scenes that are haunting Mary’s sleep. **Overall, the production’s sparse set and surreal tech remind the audience that they are watching an interpretation of the past through a dream—not a historical reenactment. The ARC team does an excellent job of establishing that distinction, which is crucial to appreciating Massicotte’s thought-provoking reflections on the unreliability of memory and the difficulty of reconciling the past with the present.**

By taking a minimalist approach to the production, Tobias relies on Bell and Delo to carry the weight of the play’s heavy themes, and their dynamic performances prove that the director was right to put so much faith in these young talents. **Delo, in particular, does such a tremendous job of playing a sweet farm boy that it is genuinely horrifying to see him become a soldier that can be just as cold and mechanical as the machine guns that butchered young soldiers on both sides of the brutal conflict. No doubt he and Bell will warm as well as break many hearts on the tour ahead. And if the chemistry between Bell and Delo develops during the run, then audiences in France and Germany in for a rare treat.**