

A Jane Austen play? Yes, no, maybe

Characters in The Watsons realize they're in a play

BY DELANEY SMITH

When a playwright loses control of her own characters, chaos is never far behind.

At the Kanata Theatre, director Val Bogan is leaning into that chaos with *The Watsons*, a comedic stage adaptation inspired by an unfinished book by Jane Austen.

The production runs March 25 to April 4 and begins like a traditional Austen story before quickly unraveling into something much less predictable.

"It starts off as a sort of gentle Jane Austen story," Bogan said. "And then it just crashes into complete mayhem."

Austen began writing *The Watsons* early in her career

but abandoned it after just 38 pages.

She never returned to it, instead going on to write novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion*.

UNFINISHED NOVEL

Playwright Laura Wade uses that unfinished beginning as the foundation for her play. In Wade's version, the playwright inserts herself into the story and attempts to finish Austen's work, only for the characters to realize they are fictional and decide to rebel.

"They say, 'What do you mean we're characters? You mean we can't make our own decisions?'" Bogan said.

"Then it becomes this philosophical discussion about being a character and not having control over your life."

The show opens with Emma Watson, a 19-year-old who has been sent back to her



Photo provided

Just a few of the 21 cast members who will stage *The Watsons* at the Kanata Theatre between March 25 and April 4. The Regency era costumes hint at the connection with English novelist Jane Austen.

family home after her wealthy aunt cuts her off financially. With little money, Emma and

her sisters must marry to secure their futures, a familiar premise for Austen readers.

But once the characters discover they are part of a play, the tone shifts dramatically.

"There are some ridiculous bits and some really fun comedy," Bogan said.

Despite the lighthearted tone, the play explores deeper themes about creativity and the difficulty of making art. Bogan said Wade uses the character of Laura – the playwright within the story – to reflect on the challenges writers face.

"It's really hard work to be great," Bogan said. "You're putting your art in front of people knowing they're going to judge it."

The production also presents logistical challenges. With 21 performers on stage, it is one of the larger casts at the Kanata Theatre.

"And then there's the costume challenge," Bogan adds.

As a period piece, much of the show uses Regency-style costumes.

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The play also includes ballroom-style dances in the first act, followed by more playful choreography later as the story spirals away from its traditional roots.

“The costumes will be amazing,” Bogan said.

Bogan said the mix of comedy and thoughtful moments is part of what drew her to the script.

SOME SERIOUS COMEDY

“There are serious bits when the characters start questioning who they are,” she said. “But there’s also a super lot of fun.”

The cast, she added, has been working for months to bring the show to life.

“They’re working really hard and they’re terrific people,” Bogan said.

The play contains some language and mature jokes, so the theatre recommends it for audiences aged 14 and older. For viewers unfamiliar with Austen, Bogan says that’s not a problem.

“You don’t have to be a Jane Austen fan to enjoy it,” she said.

And while the story eventually veers far from Austen’s original pages, Bogan says the production still pays tribute to the author’s legacy.

“There are lines in the play that come straight out of Jane Austen’s novels,” she said.

In the end, Bogan hopes audiences will simply enjoy the ride.

“I think people can expect to have a nice evening,” she said. “It’s just so much fun.”

For showtimes and tickets, visit kanatatheatre.ca.

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