

'Classy' criminal honoured by local playwright

Flying bandit subject of one-man show at Showboat Theatre

BY JOHN LAW
Review Staff Writer

PORT COLBORNE – Playwright Lindsay Price wants to make sure no one forgets about the Flying Bandit.

He was flashy. Well-liked. Sharp-dressed. And one of Canada's most celebrated criminals.

Not quite a modern day Robin Hood – he stole from the rich, but didn't do it for the poor – Ken Leishman was still a media-created celebrity for his slick heists and charming personality. No one was hurt during his robberies, and the public loved his "classy" approach to crime.

As Price sees it, he was a "very Canadian" crook.

"He would kidnap people, and they would say how nice he was," she says. "He was always described as the 'the dapper Leishman' or 'the businessman Leishman.'"

Which makes Price's play "The Flying Bandit" one of the oddest true crime stories in Canadian history. Had Leishman been American, she's convinced, he would be a legend.

A one-man show starring Price's husband, Craig Mason, "The Flying Bandit" doesn't celebrate a life of crime so much as ask why Leishman was so popular. It begins with a small boy who grows up hearing about Leishman's exploits and treats him as a hero, to the disappointment of his parents – who actually did something heroic by escaping the Ukraine during the Second World War.

Over the next two hours, Mason – playing more than 25 roles – reen-



John Law, The Review

Niagara playwright Lindsay Price and husband/actor Craig Mason revisit one of Canada's most charming crooks in "The Flying Bandit." It opens in Port Colborne Wednesday.

acts the story of a man who dreamed happy ending.

big, but couldn't write his own In 1957, Leishman put on a suit,

got in a plane, flew to Toronto, calmly robbed a bank and flew back to Winnipeg that same day. It went so smoothly, he attempted the same thing soon after, but the bank manager was less obliging. Leishman was sent to the slammer, despite catching Canada's fancy.

Upon release (for good behaviour, of course), he set his sights on a bigger prize – a stash of gold being kept at Winnipeg International Airport.

"(Leishman) had a brilliant plan to get this gold. But once he had it, he had no plan to get rid of it."

Craig Mason

In 1968, he managed to nab \$383,000 worth of gold – still the largest gold heist in Canadian history. The plan was a thing of beauty, but Leishman had no exit strategy. He hid his shiny loot in a snowbank, which was found by authorities soon after.

"I was able to talk to an undercover RCMP guy, who said that Leishman was king of the set-up ... then seemed to forget what to do after," says Price.

"He had a brilliant plan to get this gold," adds Mason. "But once he had it, he had no plan to get rid of it."

Price methodically researched the story, digging through newspapers in Winnipeg and Toronto to capture the public's fascination with this unlikely folk hero.

Mason has performed the show several times over the past decade, but this month's run with the Showboat Festival Theatre is the play's

professional debut.

It's still a low-maintenance show, says Price – the set consists mainly of a single chair – but Mason's grasp of the material fills the stage.

"It's really a play that exists in the imagination of the narrator and the imagination of the audience," says Price. "It's our job to make sure we're creating worlds with my words and Craig's action."

"If we've done our job, we will take the audience to all of these locations across Canada. It won't matter what's on stage."

The show marks a departure for the Niagara newcomers, who spend most of the year introducing high school students to theatre.

Their company, Theatrefolk, with Price as primary writer, creates original and adapted scripts for students to perform, taking the duo across the U.S.

It necessitated a move from Toronto to Crystal Beach this year, where they could be closer to the border.

When the company started 12 years ago, there was a "stigma" about making shows specifically for schools.

"But now I get to make a living writing," she says. "There's no theatre group more optimistic, dedicated and enthusiastic than a high school group."

"It's an absolute joy watching my plays being done in a high school."

Adds Mason: "I think J.K. Rowling proved that there's no shame writing for the youth market."

The Flying Bandit is at Showboat Theatre at the Roselawn Centre for the Living Arts (296 Fielden Avenue) July 25 to August 11. Tickets are \$26 adults, \$23 seniors. Phone 905-834-0833.

jlaw@nreview.com