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VIEW Magazine

by Tom Macken

The Grand River in Ontario, from its source near Dundalk in the north, flows almost 300 kilometres to its mouth near Port Maitland on Lake Erie's north shore. It is fed from many tributaries in its journey and by the time it gets close to Cayuga it's handsomely wide and seems to be sensing it has not far to go. That's the impression it gives from its banks on the long forgotten Ontario village of Indiana and the Ruthven Estate of the Thompson family; it's on the move. Ruthven, a name of Scottish origin, graces the park and the neo-classic mansion higher up the sloping bank.

Last Sunday was cold and sunny, the river bluish gray in its discreet hurry, and I was emerging from the coach house of the estate, its early 19th century beams and rubble stone walls, into an Autumn peace of sorts, the green of the spacious lawns, the aged trees, foliage still intact but thinning. There were no Thompsons around, the family long dispersed or died out, but I knew them all in a kind of spooky way. The village of Indiana, Ontario, is only a memory, the bustling river traffic that brought trade and prosperity to the place and to the Thompson family was swallowed by the latter part of the 19th century and disappeared, absorbed by the railroad that chose Cayuga, just down

river a few hundred kilometres, for its stopping place. The family stayed on, however, its stalwart plantation preserved, and as the 20th century began the Thompsons had yet one big adventure to play in the life of the Grand River and its place in history: The Great War, or World War I.

Back up now to the Carriage House and an hour or so earlier. It's been turned into a small theatre by the keepers of the Estate and by Studio Babette Puppet Theatre for the purpose of telling the tale of Violet and Andrew Thompson and their three children, Peggy, Walter, and Drew. The collaboration of puppet theatre and the Ruthven Estate brought us all to this place last Sunday to enjoy an hour of puppetry. As November 11 (Remembrance Day) 2013 approached, the events of 1914-18 in Europe and the lives of the Thompsons of Indiana, Ontario, loomed significant for the Education Coordinator, Natalie Campbell, of Ruthven Park, and she recruited the creative minds of Studio Babette. The puppets are about one third life-size and are the artistic genius of three puppeteers who make up Studio Babette, Marie Franck, Helena Adamczyk, and Kerry Corrigan. As well as creating the puppets, they also write and tell the stories for their little inanimate actors.

All five of the family took up the cause of King and Empire and went to war. It's a story perfect for the season and the creators want to engage us in this remembrance in a uniquely Ontario way. They take us from the childhood of the two lads and their sister on the banks of the river just outside the Carriage House, and with their playmate, Joseph, a Mohawk boy, we join them in their imaginary and ironic games of soldiers and fighting. It's an eye-opening experience to watch puppet theatre, a very basic form of story-telling with a long and sturdy cultural history. It demands a highly enjoyable kind of suspension of disbelief at first, and then all unsuspecting, the manipulators disappear and the make-believe becomes real. We grow up with the children; we eventually go to war with them. We cross the Atlantic by ship, we suffer with the wounded in English hospitals, we brave the ugliness of the trenches at

Passchendaele, and we meet others involved in the battles. When I came away and went out into the bright cold November afternoon the spirit of the Thompsons was there by their mansion, on the green lawns and in the Grand River's purposeful progress.

Performances to sell out houses for schools take up the week days, but on Sunday of Remembrance Day weekend, the 10th, another performance for the public will be given. The drive to Ruthven, just the Hamilton side of Cayuga, is so easy, the setting perfect, and a story that needs to be told is told with delightful grace and practised skill.

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