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Prodigals' tale taps the Soo

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Murder and stalled adults mix in *Prodigals* (with Tara Pratt, Timothy Johnston, and Brandyn Eddy).

DAVID COOPER

You can't go home again, as Thomas Wolfe noted, although you can always write about it. Wolfe's protagonist, George Webber, was vilified in his hometown for what he wrote about it after he moved to the big city. Hopefully, Sean Minogue will avoid suffering the same fate. In his play *Prodigals*, the 29-year-old Vancouverite revisits the place where he spent his formative years; Minogue lived in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, between the ages of 10 and 20. *Prodigals* tells of a group of go-nowhere young adults dealing with the murder trial of one of their own. Their former friend Wesley, who got out of "the Soo" to study law in Toronto, returns to testify and in the process opens a few old wounds.

Interviewed over coffee at the Starbucks in the International Village Mall, Minogue says the play's setting wasn't a major focus until director Peter Boychuk began pushing him in that direction and he recognized that the characters he had created were a lot like people he had known. "If you're going to write a play about young people dealing with their direction in life, and starting to realize that their shortcomings are overtaking them, that type of thing, it just makes sense to ground it in a particular location," Minogue says. "And so Sault Ste. Marie provided that, and in doing so it's opened up a ton of emotional baggage—stuff that you don't even realize you have that's in the back of your head, that you start exploring for a while. I feel that's given the play some emotional resonance."

The play's accused murderer, Benny, is at the centre of the story, although he never actually appears on-stage. A bully who never outgrew his tough-guy persona, Benny finally took things too far after a drunken bar fight left him feeling like he still had something to prove. Minogue says that Benny's story isn't based on any particular case, but was inspired by what seemed like a steady stream of bad news coming out of the Soo.

"My sister and I would find out about things that happened in Sault Ste. Marie by looking at the crime beat that's coming out online," he says. "We would find out that this friend that we went to high school with is now dead, or is on trial, or had just beat the crap out of someone and is now arrested or something like that. Or we'd hear rumours. Someone would get hit by a car. All these things, they build up, and they get worse and worse, and you get this impression as an outsider, to look back on your old hometown and say "Oh, man, that place is a mess.'"

Twenty Something Theatre, which is presenting *Prodigals* at SFU Woodward's Studio T, held a workshop production at Havana last spring, garnering a serious amount of audience buzz and a [positive write-up](#) from the *Straight's* own Colin Thomas. Several drafts later, Minogue says the finished *Prodigals* script is a more measured meditation on the postadolescent malaise of its characters.

"The overall tone of the production has a much more mature feel to it," the playwright says. "Not to say the last one was immature in any way, but the last one had this frantic energy. Every time we read it in the room there was just tons of energy coming from every actor, whereas now everyone's had more time to sit back and think about their characters."

One of those is Greg, the resident lush, who never hesitates to cut through the B.S. and speak his mind, and in so doing provides the play with much of its dark humour. Minogue says that although he put a little of himself in all six of the characters in *Prodigals*, Greg is the one closest to himself—or, at the very least, he wishes he could get away with being more like Greg.

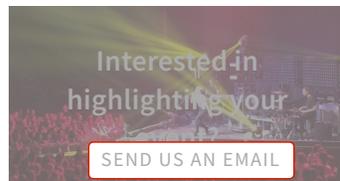
Traits from Minogue's buddies from Sault Ste. Marie crept into the characters, as well. A couple of those old friends, who have since escaped to Toronto, have given the writer their opinions of *Prodigals*, and fortunately for him, it was the kind of feedback that George Webber would have killed for.

"They've both read it and reacted positively to it," Minogue says. "They both kind of laugh. It's pretty self-deprecating to see that aspect of your personality—because I draw a little bit of their personalities into this. All my friends from the Soo like to drink, so I've seen the worst of them, but they were both really pumped to see that their home was something that I cared about too. They're a little bit more attached to it than I am, because they were born there. So it meant a lot to me that they weren't offended or embarrassed or anything like that. And they weren't. Or at least they didn't tell me."

***Prodigals* is at Studio T, at SFU Woodward's Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, from this Thursday to next Saturday (May 5 to 14)**

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