



“Serena Ryder gets Elora crowd to Sing! Sing!”

Review

By Kelly Waterhouse

When the Elora Festival organizers look back on this season and wonder if their return to the Elora Quarry series was a wise decision, I hope they will dwell on the spectacular event that took place here last Thursday night, when Canadian Juno-award-winning songstress Serena Ryder took to the floating stage before a sold out audience. By far this performance will be a highlight of the 30th anniversary season of the Elora Festival.

On a day with threatening grey clouds and scattered rain showers, it is safe to say that Serena Ryder gave our black and white world a little bit of red, (one of my favourite songs on her set list) when she sang her soulful heart out through a stellar selection of her musical repertoire, spanning a career only four albums old of both original and uniquely borrowed ballads by the likes of Leonard Cohen and Ed McCurdy. What she shared with the audience is only the beginning of a career that, given her genuine talent and grounded sense of self can only ensure a future of continued success.

While the audience shouted out affectionate support from the top of the cliffs and the rocky banks to the bleachers around the Quarry’s jaded infrastructure, there was an intimacy to that space in time that felt as if this show could have been anywhere, in a parking lot or a grand theatre, and been every bit as wonderful. That’s because the real treasure was Ryder’s spirit. Singing her hit “All of Love,” it is very clear that this is a young artist whose music is her muse for life, with a voice that celebrates her comfort in her own skin, in her own artistry. Witnessing her humorous, quirky personality with the wit of a seasoned professional so naturally blended with the vulnerability and innocence of a newcomer was worth the price of admission. Ryder took her audience on a personal tour of her own self-discovery and in turn, struck a chord with her followers, both old fans and new.

From “Weak in the Knees” to the encore of “Sing, Sing” she had her audience intrigued. Perhaps my favourite moment was during her rendition of “Last Night I Had The Strangest Dream,” the anti-war anthem by Ed McCurdy, when I watched as a mother duck lead her string of ducklings on a swim behind the stage, as Ryder sang about creating a better world. The irony was not lost on my neighbours watching from the rocks. We were all humbled in that moment. Once again, nature and music connected us to something far greater than any traditional auditorium ever could.

Looking around at the audience, it was interesting to see the age range of the crowd, which speaks to Ryder’s ability to tell wonderful stories with a voice that is wise beyond her years. For the older generations, this is a refreshing sound compared to the pre-fabricated music-for-marketing-sake of the American Idol culture today. But more so, I

was inspired to see the number of young girls, from children to adolescents who had this rare opportunity to see a talented female singer/songwriter/musician who has not bought into the tart-culture of girl performers of late. Looking back on Ryder's career, anyone can see that this woman has blossomed into her own sense of self, void of fake attempts to fit into the mass-market, sleezed-up Barbie-doll rock'n roll stereotypes that are plastered all over video channels and media campaigns. On stage that night was a priceless lesson in the power of authenticity.

Serena Ryder spoke to the audience about a valuable life lesson in patience. She explained her own reckoning in the realization that patience is not about waiting; patience is about surrendering, it's about getting on with life instead of waiting for it to happen, and giving in to whatever comes your way. On this warm summer's night, the brave organizers of the Elora Festival took a chance that the heavens would hold their rain showers for one last Quarry Concert Series. What they took was a leap of faith right off the edge of the Quarry. It was worth every risk.

As Ryder and her awesome band got back in their boat to head for the shore, the audience down by the water serenaded her with their own off-key rendition of "row, row, row your boat," a sincere attempt to show their appreciation for the band. She won't soon forget us here, and we won't soon forget her either.