



Grosse-Île recalls terrible
yet inspiring times

Description

Irish exiles to Canada remembered on stage 170 years later

By **Byron Toben**

From 1845 to 1852, the Irish population suffered 1.5 million deaths due to what is called the Great Famine, brought on by a potato fungus that destroyed the crop that had become the mainstay of the rural diet.

I prefer to call it the Great Hunger, because while the wee 'taters were indeed wiped out, there were other foods – grains, fish, livestock. However these other foods had largely been committed to sale in England and elsewhere. The laws of contract and the invoking of an extreme free market philosophy led to a disaster. Supply ships from overseas Irish and from some Quaker communities were well intentioned but insufficient.

Many crammed “coffin ships”, beset with on board diseases and deaths headed to Quebec and later to Toronto. The hospitality of the residents, often contracting disease themselves, was amazing.

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A current presentation recalls those terrible yet inspiring times. On stage is **Grosse-Île: The Musical**.

This piece, more of an excellent cantata than what we normally call a musical, was written by husband and wife team of **John Halpin** and **Margaret Forrest**, together with colleague **Hubert Radoux**. Originally created in Quebec City, this show is bilingual French/English (actually quad lingual, as there are some passages in Gaelic or Latin).

The plot focuses on an actual ship, the *Agnes*, out of Cork in 1847. Arriving in Quebec after 43 days at sea, only to be met with a 19-day quarantine, and many more at the hospitals on Grosse Île, where 96 more perished.

In 1909, 62 years later, the famous huge Celtic cross was erected on the site. A senior couple Brigid (**Hera Menard**) and Sean (**Robert Delaney**) visit the cross and recall the events they witnessed there as children.





is that young Brigid, daughter of immigrant Eileen (**Marie-Eve Boucher**) and **Danyal Azizov** that young Sean, who is the child of widowed quarantine doctor **Katee Julien**.

Greg Halpin, the real life son of authors John and Margaret, doubles as the first mate of the ship and as Irish immigrant teacher Donal, married to immigrant nurse Darah (**Marie-Maude Potvin**).

Ms. Boucher also doubles as house keeper to the important priest Father Charles (**David Souza**), stationed on Grosse Île by order of the Bishop .

Four talented youngsters portray orphans and, shades of Greek tragedies, an 18-strong chorus background chanting. The 12 women (six sopranos, six altos) are joined by six men (2 tenors, 4 bass). They are directed by Catherine **Le Saulnier**. Lots of rich music from only three instrumentalists: **Francine Brouillard** on piano, **Johanna Price** on flute and **Kevin Moquin** on guitar.

The 18 songs incorporated include such appropriate titles as *Je Me Souviens*, *Ireland*, *Les Bateaux-Cercueils* and *We Carry On*.

Grosse-Île: The Musical continues at Concordia's Oscar Peterson Hall, November 3 to 5.

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Byron Toben is the immediate past-president of the Montreal Press Club.



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