

Come from Away writers come here, to Newmarket

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*Now calling Newmarket home are David Hein and Irene Sankoff, writers of the Tony Award-winning *Come from Away*. Supplied photo/Matt Murphy*

Irene Sankoff and David Hein know the value of small-town Canadian charm.

As the writers of the Tony Award-winning musical *Come from Away*, they have transformed the real-life story of Gander, Newfoundland's adoption of 7,000 travellers following the forced grounding of planes after the 9/11 attacks into a smash Broadway hit.

When it comes to good, home-grown stories, they certainly know their stuff. Critically and commercially successful, *Come from Away* currently holds the record as the longest running Canadian musical in Broadway history.

Newmarket may not be as small as Gander — it's roughly 90,000 population dwarfs Gander's 11,000- but according to Sankoff and Hein, the town has more than enough charisma to go around.

"We love Newmarket," said Hein. "It's been really wonderful exploring, seeing how much nature there is. The restaurants are incredible. The community is wonderful. We've really been welcomed with open arms."

Sankoff, Hein and their daughter, Molly, have recently made the move to Newmarket from New York City. Between helping their daughter with online classes and decorating for their favourite holiday, Halloween, they've been exploring all that their new town has to offer. As playwrights, they've been particularly impressed with Newmarket's rich theatre scene.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated much for Sankoff and Hein, as it has for the entertainment industry as a whole. With theatre productions worldwide either placed on hold or restricted, they've seen all five of their *Come from Away* companies — Toronto, Australia, London, Broadway, and their North American tour, postponed. Performances that have gone ahead, like a planned two-location run in Sweden, operate with socially distanced seat plans.

Production for the highly anticipated film adaptation of *Come from Away* — for which they are screenwriters — and a number of other film and television projects in the works have also been delayed.

"We're forever trying to work with coronavirus protocols and restrictions to see how we could do the *Come from Away* movie, but it would obviously be not practical at this point to put a bunch of people in close quarters, or on set in a plane," said Sankoff.

"We're very conscious of all the people who work behind the scenes to make things happen, who are currently out of work," added Hein. "We're trying to get them back, but in a safe way."

Though Sankoff and Hein consider themselves lucky to be able to work from home, quarantine has not been a time to focus inwards or explore creatively. Doing their part to help those affected by COVID-19, they've sponsored a 3D printer that prints face shields and have been delivering PPE themselves. As Sankoff's mother lives in a long-term care home that's experienced a COVID-19 outbreak, it's been a sobering time.

But, as in the story of *Come from Away*, there's been rare spots of positivity throughout it all. Sankoff and Hein are continually impressed by the efforts of local volunteers like Newmarket's George Markow, who is walking 100 kilometers to raise \$100,000 for medical research.

"The story of *Come from Away* is about people coming together to help one another with what they need in a time of crisis," said Hein. "The lesson we learned in Gander in 2001 is still relevant today. That can mean staying apart and wearing a mask, but it also means reaching out to people safely, making sure they're OK, and being there for them."
