

## Theatre of The Rock

In Newfoundland, the play's the thing to help replace the cod once king

By *Melanie Chambers*



A performance of the Rising Tide Theatre company's *New Founde Lande Trinity Pageant* (LEFT) and *February* (ABOVE).

**AMID PROPS THAT ARE** quintessential 1960s Newfoundland kitchen — including Purity hard bread and a wringer washing machine — a widow named Terese recounts her life in an isolated fishing community. “And I didn’t want him to go, for there’s no other man in this cove would have launched his boat in a gale like that.” She points to her husband’s photograph, wipes her tears away and turns back to the laundry.

“It’s not to say she doesn’t feel, but she decides not to indulge those emotions,” says Donna Butt, the lead in *Terese’s Creed* and the artistic director of the Rising Tide Theatre in Trinity, N.L., on the Bonavista Peninsula. “She has to move on.”

It’s an apt metaphor for rural Newfoundland communities struggling since 70,000 islanders left after the cod moratorium in 1992. And while theatre isn’t the economic behemoth that the fishery once was (near its peak in 1989,

fishing directly employed 37,000 in Newfoundland; in 2014, seasonal theatre employed between 500 and 600), it’s become a small yet vital part of life in towns such as Trinity, drawing those who might not otherwise visit.

“Theatre is the new fish plant,” says Jeff Pitcher, the artistic director for Theatre Newfoundland Labrador, the Corner Brook-based company that started the town of Cow Head’s Gros Morne Theatre Festival in 1996. “It’s been tough for Newfoundlanders during the last 20 years, but theatre keeps the pride alive. Years ago, people were just passing through; now, theatre is part of their journey because they know they’re going to get part of the culture and the story.”

In Trinity, for instance, Rising Tide Theatre’s *New Founde Lande Trinity Pageant* recounts local history during an outdoor walkabout performance. In *Cupids*, meanwhile, by the western shore of

Conception Bay, Perchance Theatre performs Shakespeare with a nod to the Newfoundland dialect, which retains elements of Old English. You’d be just as likely to hear “Have you ever seen the like?” at the town post office as in *Richard III*.

The plays can also be polemical. When the *Globe and Mail*’s Margaret Wente wrote in 2005 that former premier Danny Williams reminded her of a deadbeat brother-in-law, it inspired Pitcher’s *Ed & Ed — Trapped!* In the play, the Eds, anticipating negative reaction from visiting press, take a CBC journalist hostage and use her camera to make demands for control of the fishery and the return of their provincial brethren working in Alberta. “First and foremost,” says Pitcher, “these are Newfoundlanders’ stories.”



See an interactive map of Newfoundland’s theatres that highlights this summer’s must-see shows at [mag.cangeo.ca/jun15/theatre](http://mag.cangeo.ca/jun15/theatre).