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## ENTERTAINMENT LOCAL

### THEATRE REVIEW

# Port Stanley Festival Theatre's latest offering, about a chili cookoff will have you laughing so hard you forget summer is ending



By Dan Brown, The London Free Press  
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From left, Danielle Nicole, Franny McCabe-Bennett, Jeffrey Wetsch and Jane Spence star in *Five Alarm* at Port Stanley Festival Theatre. (Mark Girdauskas/Special to Postmedia News)

PORT STANLEY - *Five Alarm* isn't a life-changing comedy.

However, it might change your summer.

It supplied me with enough laughs and thoughtful moments that I temporarily forgot the end of summer is on the horizon and there are more sunny days behind us than ahead.

Nobleton-raised playwright Kristen Da Silva takes a slender premise and wrings every possible laugh out of it.

The cast is top-notch.

The players made me chuckle and think.

This production is worth the drive to Port Stanley's Festival Theatre.

Ava Rose (Danielle Nicole, who does a solid job of being the narrative anchor in a tricky role) wants to win her hometown chili cookoff after years of failing to nab the top prize.

That's it.

That's the elevator pitch.

Before the day is over, childhood secrets will be exposed, blood will be shed and one pot of chili will be tossed in the garbage, another sabotaged via oversalting.

Ava's dim assistant, Ellen (Franny McCabe-Bennett) is the comedic heart of the play.

Ellen has seen a thing or two.

And she can't stop being serious when she should be light-hearted, and vice versa.

She's the kind of person who would pull a fire alarm when she's feeling lonely so she can hang out with firefighters, whose utility belts she speaks of in dreamy tones.

Ellen grows close with Ava during the course of the cookoff.

Ellen, naturally, wants to cement their friendship the only way she knows how:

Ellen: Put out your hand

Ava: Why?

Ellen: So I can cut you for the blood oath.

Their competition is the too-serious Connie (Jane Spence) and her hired gun sous-chef, Tucker (Jeffrey Wetsch).

"I need you to get out of my bubble of personal space," Connie commands her assistant when he gets too close.

Tucker, for his part, is a graduate of the Cordon Bleu School — the one in Buffalo, N.Y., not Paris.

"Chili is her blood," the starry-eyed Tucker says when he spots Rose one picnic table over.

Even better, Da Silva's script will keep you guessing where the narrative is heading.

And the laughs just keep coming.

Ellen has a habit of quoting from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. At least that's who she thinks she's quoting.

"The sous-chef of your enemy is your enemy," she says in one of her more questionable pronouncements.

Who knew the ancient Chinese military treatise from the fifth century was so applicable to small-town chili cookoffs?

That said, I won't give away the absolute biggest laugh, which prompted prolonged guffaws and even cheers from the audience around me.

Let's just say rural folks will get it, because the joke comes at the expense of the current provincial government.

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## If you go

**What:** Five Alarm, presented by Port Stanley Festival Theatre.

**When:** To Aug. 12, matinees 2 p.m., evening shows 8 p.m.

**Where:** Port Stanley Festival Theatre, 302 Bridge St.

**Tickets:** Tickets are \$35.50 plus HST and handling for evening shows, \$32.50 plus HST and handling for matinees. Contact the box office at 519-782-4353 or visit [portstanleytheatre.ca](http://portstanleytheatre.ca) for tickets, show times and ticket packages.

**Rating:** \*\*\*\* (out of five)

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