

# Contenders return to the Okanagan

STEVE KIDD  
Western News Staff

The George Ryga Centre is getting ready to celebrate its 15th year of operation, and they're planning to do it with some old friends.

The not for profit organization, run by volunteers, has preserved George Riga's home in Summerland — where he wrote the internationally acclaimed play, the Ecstasy of Rita Joe — as an cultural centre and artist's retreat.

The organization is celebrating this year's anniversary with The Contenders, a team up of legendary musicians Gary Fjellgaard and Valdy. For several years, the Canadian troubadours have toured the Interior in support of Ryga Week and the George Ryga Centre.

This year, their Penticton show coincides with the start of George Ryga week in B.C., Nov. 1-7.

"I think it's about eight years in a row that we've done this. It's a chance to team up with my friend Valdy every year," said Fjellgaard, adding that Ken Smedley, artistic director for the Ryga Centre, had turned him on to the meaning behind the project.

"It's kind of a special place, a retreat for writers and the spirit of the whole thing is just absolutely wonderful," said Fjellgaard. "There's people stopping there and they write songs, they write stories — that tradition just carries on."

Fjellgaard said they usually get a chance to

stay at the centre for a couple of nights on the tour.

"You get a special feeling there, especially at night when we're finished playing, sitting around the little table and reminiscing, learning more about George Ryga every year we do this and what a remarkable spirit he was," said Fjellgaard. "I sort of understand him a little bit more as we go on."

Separately, Valdy and Fjellgaard are known as superb performers, but together, their performance has been described as awesome.

"It's quite a combination, because Valdy is the ultimate folk singer and I come from a different thing ... sort of western roots cowboy, working man of background," said Fjellgaard. "It's two completely different styles and it works so well together."

"We feed off each other's energy," said the 72-year-old Fjellgaard, who claims that Valdy has much more energy than him. "But I pretend I have a lot of energy and try and keep up to him."

The duo have even collaborated on two albums — *Contenders*, was followed up by *Contenders 2, Still in the Running*.

"Valdy is such a pro. He's got this really laid back thing, but he always keeps in mind that we're in show business and we're there to entertain people," said Fjellgaard. "I've learned that from him — that we're there to entertain people. Sometimes we entertain ourselves too."



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VALDY AND GARY FJELGAARD are The Contenders, and they're making their annual tour of the Okanagan in support of the George Ryga Centre, with concerts in Penticton on Nov. 1 and Summerland on Nov. 3.

The Penticton concert will be changing venues this year, with the duo appearing on Nov. 1 in the Barking Parrot. That will be followed by a show at Summerland's Centre Stage Theatre on Nov. 3.

"It's always fresh and exciting," said Fjellgaard, who has just released a new CD, *All in the*

*Journey*. "We have a lot of fun doing it, anyways. It doesn't matter where it is."

"It's been over 40 years now that we've been making a living at music. I think that's a credit to the style of music that we do, the longevity of the career, it's the songs that we're writing and the

nature of the music," said Fjellgaard. "Age doesn't seem to matter."

Tickets for the Penticton show are available at the Dragon's Den or by phone at 250-492-3011. Summerland concert tickets can be purchased at Martin's Flowers or by calling 250-494-5432.