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Liz Nicholls on theatre

Linda Wood Edwards reimagines a mysterious chapter in our history: The Great Whorehouse Fire of 1921 at Northern Light

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By Liz Nicholls, 12thnight.ca



Sue Huff, *The Great Whorehouse Fire of 1921*, Northern Light Theatre. Photo by Ian Jackson, Epic Photography.

In December 26, 1921, just outside the small Alberta town of Big Valley, a brothel started by an enterprising woman burned to the ground. Narrow escapes ensued, as duly reported by *The Big Valley News* that week. The cause of the blaze was “unknown” ... and unknown it stayed. No investigation happened; no charges were laid.

[MAA and PAA Theatre](#), an indie company devoted to making Alberta history live onstage, discovered a further mystery in the course of their researches. All references to the event and the brothel mysteriously had disappeared from the official town records. What was left behind, a kind of oral history residue, was the persistent rumour that the women of the town had banded together, moral vigilantes, to do the cleansing deed.

That speculation inspired Linda Wood Edwards’s two-hander play

that arrived onstage first at the 2018 Fringe in a MAA and PAA production. *The Great Whorehouse Fire of 1921* returns, in a new version, its professional premiere directed by Trevor Schmidt, to open the Northern Light Theatre season.

“People send David (MAA and PAA’s co-producer David Cheoros) ideas all the time, rumours about this or that,” says Wood Edwards. “This one came as an unsolicited email.” It offered a tantalizing theatrical prospect for the little company founded by a theatre artist (David Cheoros) and an expert archivist (Karen Simonson). Assiduous research turned up ... nothing. “It would have been a major crime, but suddenly the trail was cold.”

The dead end was intriguing in itself. “I wasn’t getting my own work done. So hey, what better thing to do than interfere in someone else’s?” laughs Wood Edwards, a highly entertaining conversationalist. What history didn’t provide, the theatre did. The result is a play that fictionalizes what happened en route to the fateful fire. It imagines an unlikely friendship between the entrepreneurial madame (Sue Huff) and a prim upright Christian woman (Twilla MacLeod) who runs a local boarding house. And it explores the exclusionary tactics of “proper” society, and the support and sabotage that can be part of women’s relationships.

The playwright, who’s been taking her plays (*Spring Alibi*, *True Grid*, *Four in the Crib*, *Trail and Error* among them) to the Fringe since 2005, is on the phone from the Varscona Theatre, watching rehearsals and savouring the experience of revisiting *The Great Whorehouse Fire of 1921* in its professional Northern Light incarnation.



playwright Linda Wood Edwards

“I’m giddier by the minute,” she says of seeing Alison Yanota’s set. “The difference between 10 minutes (turnaround) at the Fringe, a couple of chairs — it’s blowing my mind... I stage manage my own Fringe stuff. Now I see what a real stage manager (Elizabeth Allison) does. And I can up my game!”

In the world of Canadian theatre, where second outings are a rarity, the Northern Light production provides a sense of possibility in another way, too. In the strikingly different version we’ll see starting Friday, Huff reprises her role as the earthy Hastings, the brothel entrepreneur (her Fringe co-star was Linda Grass), but with a dramatic difference. Scant weeks before *The Great Whorehouse Fire* opened in 2018, Huff

developed a scary mystery ailment with paralyzing symptoms not unlike rheumatoid arthritis (“a nightmare,” as Wood Edwards says). All the blocking was custom-remade so Huff could play the role sitting in a chair. It was a



Twilla MacLeod, *The Great Whorehouse Fire of 1921*, Northern Light Theatre. Photo by Ian Jackson.

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performance.

Like the design, the stage activity in Schmidt's production is "much more expanded," as Wood Edwards points out. "Absolutely! And the actors say the words completely differently too.... What a delight!"

Wood Edwards is a theatre-maker with an unusual route into showbiz. Three decades of experience as a consultant to boards of not-for-profits and professional and industry associations ("I do board governance, bylaws, policy") came first. "I only started consulting to not-for-profit theatres in the last 10 years.... All the theatre I've done I looked at through a business lens," she says cheerfully. "It makes the world sane for me to take a business approach, to make sure 'my people' do well enough, or better than most."

And as for Wood Edwards the playwright, "I always say that when I have a really pressing need to use an adjective I write a play."

A kind of dark hilarity all its own attaches to her playwriting debut, as she recounts. At "a really bad point of my life," 1996 to be precise, she'd opted to change the scene by hiking the 55 km. Chilkoot Trail in the Yukon. She later turned this into a Sterling-nominated Fringe show *Trail and Error*, starring Ellen Chorley.

At the time "I was just wandering around Whitehorse and saw a sign on a telephone poll, about a 24-hour playwriting competition. "It cost 30 bucks and you got a hotel room, and I really wanted a bath, and I had a pen and paper," she says. "So I signed up for it."

"I had a couple of meals, two baths and a shower, and wrote some stuff. And at the end of 24 hours someone knocked on the door and said 'you've got to hand it in now.... I just hated what I wrote and told them to take it away or I'm going to set fire to the f-in' thing."

"Six weeks later I was day-drinking with some retired teachers in the bar of the Capital Hotel in Whitehorse," she continues. One of them had noticed a public service announcement on CBC North to the effect that "anyone knowing the whereabouts of Linda Wood from Edmonton, send her to Nakai Theatre." She 'd won a prize, and she got handed a cheque.

That play was *Spring Alibi*, her first. It premiered at the 2005 Fringe, introduced Wood Edwards to the Edmonton theatre scene, and has travelled widely since, including productions at the Yukon Comedy Arts Festival, the Capital Fringe Festival in Washington DC, and the Adelaide Fringe. "And it kinda changed the trajectory of things for me," she says.

Wood Edwards riffs on her own life experience in plays like *Trail and Error* or *True Grid*, about the bonding amongst die-hard football fans. *Four in the Crib* is spun from her mom's experience in a seniors home. "As a dialogue writer," as she puts it, the pandemic has been hard to negotiate. "I discovered that my inspiration comes from overhearing other people in conversation.... Not hearing anyone talk for months and months has been a pretty deep hole. I'm just starting to get out now."

Her go-to pandemic form? The 10-minute play ("I like the discipline"). Her go-to place for eavesdropping? Golden, B.C. She hadn't been there for many months, till last week. "I spent 20 hours and left laughing my head off and going 'ah, that feels better'.... If you're stuck there for more than three days, either you're never leaving or never coming back. I became one of this never-leave people." Ah, not coincidentally there's a Wood Edwards play, her last produced before the pandemic, drawn from that thought: *Three Nights To Forever* premiered at the 2019 Fringe.

Meanwhile, there's another Wood Edwards/Cheoros collaboration in progress, this one a farce ("too big for the Fringe") that sets nine characters in motion in a high-end restaurant. And the Grey Cup is coming up, Wood Edwards' 26th in person, and an unmissable event in her world. The air of authenticity about *True Grid* is a tip-off. Like her late husband Brian Edwards — he passed away in July, and TSN did a tribute — she is a super-fan.

The day before we talked she'd been to a Grey Cup season launch party and "won an awesome beer fridge." And she's happy to talk about the Elks' dismal record this season. "For me, since I work with boards, everything starts there.... Of course when your only tool's a hammer, everything's a nail."

Meanwhile, before she leaves for Hamilton and the CFL Alumni Association Board's annual general meeting, there's theatre, and a premiere. "Writing is fun!" she says. "How else do I get all the noises out of my head? The difficult is finding the plot. My characters talk and talk, until they tell me what the hell they're supposed to be doing. And that can take a long time!" Sometimes there's a fire.

PREVIEW

The Great Whorehouse Fire of 1921

Written by: Linda Wood Edwards

Starring: Sue Huff, Twilla MacLeod

Where: Varscona Theatre, 10329 83 Ave.

Running: Friday through Nov. 28

Tickets (must be purchased in advance) and vaccination/ masking protocols: northernlighttheatre.com.

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