

# Alberta Theatre Guide

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## Unsuspicious- La Cité Francophone- Edmonton

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*Unsuspicious* played as a workshop for the Stage Struck Festival and will enjoy a full run at this years Edmonton Fringe Festival 2016.



*Unsuspicious*

*Written & Directed by Maria Colonescu*

This year, Edmonton's Fringe Festival will have a rare treat on offer- a titillating new play revealing the warm, candid, and delightfully dark traditions of mother-daughter relationships. Workshopped at the Stage Struck Festival for new work, *Unsuspicious* shines through as a diamond in the rough and come Fringe, you will not want to miss out on this absolute gem of dramatic storytelling.

We are invited to an intimate tea party where three generations of women from a proud French family will reveal the closely-guarded mysteries behind their 100-odd year old tea set. This very special heirloom, as well as the ritualistically retold tales behind it, has connected the women of the family for generations. Brewing tea and tales with this ancient family treasure is sacred; an essential

rite of passage as each mother must unveil the family's secrets and each daughter must carefully guard their inherent wisdom. At the appropriate time, each story must be told in full, never watered down, never neglecting the more unsavoury details, and with new stains and scratches come new stories from each woman. In this way, they have brewed a powerful arsenal of life lessons with which to arm the next generation against life's cruellest tests.

Although afternoon tea is, for most Canadian families, a relic which remains lost in the dregs of our colonial history, we can all identify with the importance of a quiet chat over a hot cup of something soothing. Even more heart and tummy warming is the prospect of a sweet home-baked treat to dunk, and when our hostesses pass out delicious looking madeleine's (a cherished family recipe since grandmother read Proust's ode to the delicate goodie), the audience is instantly welcomed into their closest circle of trust.

Playwright Maria Colonescu's brilliance is in her deep understanding of human relationships, especially profound intra-family eccentricities; her keen insight manifests not only through her sensitive and scintillating writing, but also in her approach to direction and stage craft. She literally has us eating out of the palm of her hand.

Comparable to Edward Albee's wonderful examination of the female "self" in *Three Tall Women*, *Unsuspicious* is told by three women from different generations coexisting together on stage to tell their collective stories. Grandmother, Mother, and Daughter, though being born in different ages into vastly different worlds, have all faced similar trials of womanhood and have all found solace, strength and resolve through the tea pot tradition. The omniscience of the three generations onstage together, each presented to us as she was in her early forties, blurs any temptation toward weak linear plot devices and cleaves rather to their consanguinity- their unbreakable bonds as women raised by and growing with each other.

Coming from a family of nearly all women myself, it is undeniable that the maxim "like mother like daughter" can often stretch to "like great-grandmother like grandmother like mother like daughter".

Each woman is presented as a hostess behind her own tea table and Colonescu has given them recognizably individual voices directly linked to their personalities and time periods. Her intricate characterization and sound theatrical construct work to seamlessly imply change and the passage of time through the generations, whilst fortifying the deep-running connections of the characters' blood and background.

Grandmother, a well-groomed lady of Parisian society played by a demure yet deliciously glint-eyed Marcia Anderson, presents us the woman of the early 1950's. In a full-skirt and pearls, she tells us how women weren't allowed to do much else other than have children and host tea parties. We're taught that everything must be just so; for even if one is hosting one's enemy with perfectly civil intentions of ruining them over tea, there's no reason it can't be a properly lady-like and thoroughly pleasurable afternoon.

We can imagine that Mother, shown at her prime in the swinging 1970's, might very well be the hostess to the most respectable key parties in the neighbourhood as well as afternoon tea. Nicole Grainger's gay and bubbly portrayal vacillates effortlessly between child-like and maternal (which is, after all, her precarious position on the generational spectrum). She is all charm and guile as she

generously shares with us the horrific trials of her life. Between them, Grainger and Colonescu paint a very realistic picture of a spirited survivor of an era which was particularly tricky for young wives and mothers.

Daughter is our direct link into the family, played sensitively by Elizabeth Grierson with all the coquettishness, pride and wisdom of her foremothers. Yet in spite of all the advances in women's rights and freedoms up to the present day, she still faces many of the same dangers which threatened women decades before. Though much on the surface level of society has changed, the lessons of the tea pot must still be carefully observed. She is still a woman, and must not be unsuspecting of men.

Whilst writing this, I have been puzzling over how to define "strong women". It is a term I have been tempted with throughout this review and, although I know exactly what it means to me, "the word", as Feste says, "is over-worn". It has come to be a stamp for the foreheads of the stubborn, the self-assured, the assertive, the woman who fearlessly voices her opinions or dominates a room. Although these marks of confidence are not inherently negative, I have heard such inadequate generalizations applied to "strong women", oft warping the term into a sort of gender slur, and never so often as in the theatre.

There is now and has always been a problem surrounding the portrayal of "strong women" in theatre. This insipid idiom is often carelessly wedged into a casting breakdown to designate "the feisty one" or a woman who is hard-done-by and must stand tall through her plight. In most plays, there is only room for one strong female character because of the desperately narrow view theatre has taken on what the strength of women means and its impact on stage. This short-sighted notion can creep in as an unwritten law of form for playwrights; unfortunately, audiences are often more comfortable dealing with balanced archetypes in easily digestible situations to the tune of a serenely tranquilizing linear plot-line.

However, *this* accomplished group of women, and by this I mean both the written characters and the company who bring them to life, deliver a razor-sharp picture of womanhood and women's relationships through the ages without having to rely on any re-heated ideas or diminish the powerful affects our characters have on the audience and on each other.

Though unquestionably strong, they are beautifully flawed. What's more is that they see and love each other for their whole selves without prejudice. No archetypes or idioms needed. Just like any meeting between colourful women, you will belly laugh, gasp with terror, sink with sorrow, and most importantly, you will not be able to take your eyes off of them.

I can't wait to see how this extraordinary story-telling experience will grow in the months before its official run at the Fringe this year, and I urge you to get your tickets as soon as they become available. Watch this space!

*Related article on the rest of the Stage Struck Festival to come soon*

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