

STEVE RUSSELL/  
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Linda Griffiths, pictured here at the Factory Theatre, has written a new work called *Age of Arousal*, about the sexual and political upheaval visited upon a suffragette's school for secretaries.

## THEATRE

# She's arousing interest

Linda Griffiths' highly anticipated *Age of Arousal* has playwright feeling like 'bursting out of confines' again

RICHARD OUZOUNIAN  
THEATRE CRITIC

Linda Griffiths is in love again.

The object of her affections is the sometimes giving, often unforgiving world of the theatre to which she's devoted most of the 51 years of her existence.

"Sometimes I say to myself, 'This is no way to spend your life,'" observes Griffiths after a day of rehearsals for her latest play, *Age of Arousal*, which opens next Friday night in a Nightwood production at Factory Theatre.

"Then the lights go down and something rises up in me and I feel like a fool, but it's love. It's not always a healthy relationship, but it's from deep inside whatever viscera I have and I can't fight it."

After the disappointing response to her 2003 play *Chronic*, she's been largely absent from our stages for the past few years, but it looks as if she's coming back with a vengeance.

*Age of Arousal* had its premiere in Calgary earlier this year to such an enthusiastic response that she's already got four other productions of the play happening or scheduled around North America.

"At a certain point," she laughs, "it was like sending out notes in bottles. Some people would read it and respond immediately. Others wouldn't get it and just let the message float back out to sea."

The woman who's given us plays as diverse as *Maggie and Pierre* and *Alien Creature* hasn't just marched to the beat of a different drummer; she's been the majorette in front of the band, twirling her baton and spurring everyone on to new and edgier heights.

And, this time, she discovered her inspiration in the least likely of places: the dollar remainder bin of a bookstore. The volume in question was George Gissing's 1893 novel, *The Odd Women*.

"I had never heard of the book or

## GETTING PERSONAL WITH LINDA GRIFFITHS

### 1. What was your first job?

I was 16 and worked at Reitmans in the Fairview shopping mall in the suburbs of Montreal. I lasted two days before I quit. I wanted to climb out of my skin, I was so bored.

### 2. If you weren't a playwright/actor, what would you be doing?

It's hard to think of myself in any other profession, but I love doing research so much that I think I might want to be a journalist.

### 3. What's on your iPod?

I don't have an iPod, but my guy, Kevin Kennedy, has done an independent CD with Chas Lawther called *Get Right Church*, full of gospel and blues, and that's what I'm listening to now.

### 4. What's the last good movie you saw?

*Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. I love living in the past.

### 5. What TV show must you watch every week?

I have a big thing for William Petersen who plays Gil Grissom on *CSI*. But I only like the original set in Las Vegas, not all the clones. Richard Ouzounian



Only the original Vegas-set *CSI*, with Marg Helgenberger and William Petersen, will do for Linda Griffiths.

the writer, but I flipped it over and there on the back it said 'Five Victorian Spinsters' and I was hooked. I've always been a bit of a Merchant-Ivory slut. I can always spend many, many hours watching someone in a bonnet walk across a green field."

But as she delved into the book (set in 1885 in the world of the suffragettes), she found more than she had bargained for.

"My opinion of these women grew, as did my admiration of them and my delight in them. I didn't know they were so witty.

"Feminists are always portrayed as humourless and I don't understand why, because the ones I know are funny and wry and have a fine sense of the ridiculous."

She began writing the play about Mary Barfoot, an ex-militant suffragette who now runs a school for secretaries. A trio of spinster sisters and a charming but dastardly man

arrive and rock Barfoot's world, causing political and sexual upheaval.

In the process, she resurrected an idea she had used in some of her past works called "Thoughtspeak," which consists of the characters voicing out loud the sentiments they would normally leave internalized.

"I used it as far back as *Maggie and Pierre*," she recalls. "I would have Trudeau in the middle of a boring political situation and then he would suddenly shout out, 'I want someone to f---!'"

"It was the perfect technique to employ with these Victorian women. What was going on underneath was such a splendid contrast to what they showed the world. The minute I started to let them go, it was like I was shot out of a cannon. I'd look up from my writing and 10 hours would have gone by."

For someone who first knew suc-

**6** *I've always been a bit of a Merchant-Ivory slut. I can spend many hours watching someone in a bonnet walk across a green field.*

LINDA GRIFFITHS

cess in the halcyon days of Toronto's alternative theatre movement, Griffiths is the first one to admit that "it's much harder to have the same effect on an audience now. It mainly seems to happen in niche situations where you play a week in

this city, a few days in another and piece together a public for your work that way."

But although she insists that "I don't live in the past," she still has a certain nostalgia for the time "when plays burst out of those confines to reach the toffs and the groundlings at the same time."

She points to her work *O.D. on Paradise*, which played at Theatre Passe Muraille in 1983 as a prime example.

"We created a tropical paradise inside Passe Muraille in the middle of winter. Volunteers came in from the streets and made paper flowers, thousands of them. Shops on Queen St. decorated their windows with displays of sand and shells to theme up with the play. It's always wonderful when an audience community comes together around a play."

And at the risk of attracting the wrath of the ever-watchful theatre gods, Griffiths is willing to venture that with *Age of Arousal*, "I'm getting this feeling again of bursting out of confines, a desire to look for more truly theatrical work. We need less minimalism these days. It's time for maximalism again."

The only thing that might disappoint some people is that Griffiths, the electric performer, isn't in her own play this time around.

"Even though Paul Thompson once told me that 'sometimes the actor knows things that the writer doesn't,' I didn't feel the need to propel or fuel this project from inside. I'm perfectly happy to watch other people do it."

But that doesn't mean Griffiths has given up performing. Far from it.

"I'm currently working on a one-woman show called *The Last Dog of War*," she reveals, "but that's all I'm going to tell you now. You'll just have to wait and see."

And knowing Linda Griffiths, it should be worth the wait.

## THE ESSENTIALS

### 1956

Born in Montreal on Oct. 7.

### 1974

Graduated from Dawson College, then a year at McGill, where she earned a teaching certificate, and a year at the National Theatre School, after which she was asked to leave.

### 1978

Founding member of the 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon and one of the creators of its seminal work, *Paper Wheat*.

### 1980

Wrote and starred in her most famous work, *Maggie and Pierre*, which started at Theatre Passe Muraille, played the Royal Alex, travelled across Canada and wound up in New York.

### 1983

Starred in John Sayles' film *Liana*, for which she won the A.G.A. Award in Los Angeles.

### 1984

Her play *Jessica* is first produced in

Saskatoon. It later goes on to a production in Toronto. It wins a Dora Award, a Chalmers Award and the Quizzane International Festival Award.

### 1986

Served as co-artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille for two years with Layne Coleman and Clark Rogers.

### 1999

Her play about poet Gwendolyn McEwan, *Alien Creature*, debuted in

Toronto, won a Dora Award, a Chalmers Award and was nominated for a Governor General's Literary Award.

### 2007

*Age of Arousal* opens to rave reviews at Calgary's playRites Festival. Productions in Toronto, Philadelphia, Vancouver and Windsor are scheduled as a result of its reception.

Compiled by Richard Ouzounian



Linda Griffiths in her 1999 play *Alien Creature*.