

## **Voices, A Granddaughter's Memorial: a biographical profile of Elizabeth Sterling Haynes**



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*The door of the Studio Theatre opened and the girl came in. I looked up from the script I was checking and watched her...young and eager, walking as if, already, she saw her name in lights. I had never actually seen that girl before – and yet I had seen her many times, in many hopeful faces. To me she is always Miss Alberta, dreaming of being an actress.*

Elizabeth Sterling Haynes, Alberta Golden Jubilee Anthology, 1955

At the 1<sup>st</sup> annual Sterling Awards for the best in Edmonton Theatre, 1988

Why did I wear this dress? This is not how theatre people dress. This is not how I dress either, someone gave me this thing, it's cut too low, the belt is too tight and I have to watch how sit or the skirt falls completely open. All the other women have on flowing Guatemalan prints, mirrored Rajasthani dresses

and lace-up boots. I sit nervously waiting to accept a trophy on behalf of my family at these awards named after my grandmother. I give a small speech, sit down relieved and try to remember not to cross my legs.

At the end of the presentations, I am completely surrounded. Overwhelmed by the people who want to share stories about my grandmother: Frank and Marion Glenfield, Joe Shoctor, Walter Kaasa, Roger Deegan, Izzy Gliner, Mary Samuels, Moira Day. I forget all about the dress.

\*

All of my life I've been hearing about my grandmother. About her vision of a theatre that expressed the soul of a people. She was the first University of Alberta Extension Specialist in Drama, co-founder of the Banff School of Fine Arts (now the Banff Centre) and the Universiyt of Alberta Studio Theatre, initiator of the teaching of drama in Alberta schools. She trained countless actors, teachers, directors and playwrights in Edmonton, and throughout Alberta and Western Canada.

A tall woman, a larger than life woman. Described as visionary, passionate, generous. Demanding, outspoken, a radical. She was born in 1897 in Seaham Harbor, England and died in Clinton, Ontario, in 1957. Two years before I was born.

Her mother, Annie Wallace, had preached in Northern England. Her father, William Sterling, was a miner in England and later a Methodist minister in small-town Ontario. My father, Sterling, reported:

*My grandfather's) claim to fame was his oratorical ability and his humanness and relatively left wing outlook toward society. Being raised a boy miner you can imagine that his attitude was toward the downtrodden and...the oppressed people, the working people of the world.*

This voice and outlook, my grandmother inherited.

She attended the University of Toronto from 1916 – 1920, graduating with a B.A. in English and History. She became president of the Victoria College Women's Dramatic Club, fell under the influence of Hart House Theatre's Roy Mitchell and fell in love with theatre. She became a student actress receiving rave reviews for her performance as Hecuba in *The Trojan Women*.

*She had gotten from...(her mentor) Roy Mitchell, the concept of the theatre as a temple and practically everyone who knew her came away with this feeling that....it was holy ground,* said playwright Gwen Pharis Ringwood, her student, colleague and friend.

My grandmother taught school in New York State and, in 1921 married my grandfather, Nelson Haynes, whom she'd met in her high school in Fuller's Corners, Ontario. They moved to Edmonton in 1922 where my grandfather set up a dental practice in the Empire Building on Jasper and 101 St.

In 1922, she bumped into Classics professor W.G. Hardy — who remembered her from their student days in Toronto, where she'd "towed" him

around Little Vic Skating Rink — on the corner of Whyte and 106<sup>th</sup> Street. He suggested she direct a play for the University Dramatic Society and her involvement in Edmonton theatre began.

Between having two children, my aunt, Shirley, in 1923 and my father, Sterling, in 1928, she directed with the dramatic society. In 1929, she began broadcasting drama talks on the “Homemaker’s Hour” on CKUA, became a member of the Alberta Drama League and first artistic director of the Edmonton Little Theatre, the city’s first art theatre.

In 1930, she directed Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* which her biographer, Moira Day, describes as “Edmonton’s first venture into modern expressionism, complete with masks, symbolic sets, whirling lights and a rush of shadowy ciphers.” As well, she found time to direct and act on the Alberta/Saskatchewan summer Chautauqua<sup>1</sup> circuit.

In 1932, the University of Alberta received a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to set up programs and educate rural communities in art, music and drama. Ned Corbett, the director of the Department of Extension, hired my grandmother as the first Drama Specialist from 1933 – 1937. She believed in the power of drama to transform the lives of people in demoralized, depression-era Alberta and planned to expose rural communities to serious, thought provoking plays, as an alternative to the slapstick farces which were commonly performed. She crisscrossed the province, helping organizations such as church groups, United Farmers of Alberta and the Women’s Institute, with play selection, casting and directing.

She worked tirelessly. In 1932 and 33, she visited one hundred rural communities giving advice of play selection and direction, added five hundred new plays to the Extension library, addressed two hundred and fifty groups and answered over two hundred query letters. The following year, she advised over 670 individuals on play production. She put tens of thousands of miles on the family Ford on her field visits. According to my dad, my grandfather complained that his wife’s salary didn’t pay for the cost of gas and car repairs. But as she made sacrifices, people sacrificed to work with her. In her 1934 extension report, she described this eager group of thespians:

*Frosty Alberta fields, misty blue in moonlight, are enchanting when watched from the warm security of a house. They can be less attractive when they have to be traversed in zero weather. Yet, a group of people in Fleet drove with horse and sleigh distances ranging from seven to twelve miles to rehearse W.S. Gilbert’s Pygmalion and Galatea.*

Her first application for direction and play selection, in 1932, was from a group in Ryley wanting to organize a play for Canada’s first local Chautauqua. She directed the group in Noel Coward’s *The Young Idea*. In all, 2575 people

<sup>1</sup> Begun in 1874 in Chautauqua Lake, N.Y as a Methodist summer camp providing educational and cultural programs, Chautauqua entertainment programs, held in tents during the summer months, began to tour in 1907 and were brought to Canada in 1917.

attended the Chautauqua which led to the Ryley club becoming affiliated with the provincial drama league. She also directed the Clive Dramatic Society's production of *The Bear* which went on to win for farmer and novice actor Robert Haskins a best actor award at the Dominion Drama Festival. According to my father, Haskins went on to a career on the New York stage.

As more and more individuals and communities began asking for assistance in play selection and production, she turned to short courses, lectures, written bulletins, and radio broadcasts on CKUA. She and Ted Cohen, a lawyer and colleague in the Edmonton Little Theatre and later a New York producer, co-authored two manuals, *Stagecraft and Lighting* and *Make up and Costume*. Between 1933 and 1936, she was "lent" by the extension department to the education department for the Edmonton summer schools of drama and was the director of the first course in the theatre arts given for teachers in Western Canada, a course that paved the way for the chair of drama at the University of Alberta. Minnie Phillipson, actress and secretary for school administrator Fred McNally, reported:

*Educationalists liked her and the students who took her course at summer school admired and loved her very much. Now she was very forthright in her views and wasn't afraid to tell some teachers and even inspectors what was what – and they didn't like her of course. But most of them did; her personality and enthusiasm infected everyone.*

My grandmother's work with teachers and her submission of a proposed course in drama to the department of education were instrumental in Alberta being the first province in Canada to add drama to the secondary school curriculum in 1936.

And then there was the Banff School of Fine Arts. In 1932, the Alberta Drama League proposed a summer school for drama. My grandmother, with Corbett's help and support, approached President Wallace for funding. He provided \$1000 in Carnegie grant money with the stipulation that at least forty people must attend and in 1933 the Banff School of the Theatre (later the Banff School of Fine Arts and the Banff Centre) was born, with she and Ted Cohen as instructors. On the first day, two hundred and thirty people from all over Western Canada paid the one-dollar registration fee to attend. In subsequent years, she was instrumental in luring to Banff such luminaries as her mentor, Roy Mitchell, his wife Jocelyn, Wallace House from New York University, Alexander Koiransky a former co-worker of Stanislavski, and Frederik Koch, a playwright and teacher from North Carolina with whom Gwen Pharis later studied.

Given the school's populist origins, regional playwriting was taught. Plays such as Saskatchewan housewife Minnie Bicknell's play, *Relief*, which went on to the Dominion Drama Festival finals, were first workshopped at the school.

The Carnegie grant was renewed for another two years in December, 1935. However, President Wallace and Corbett, both of whom had championed

her work and let her set her own course, as well as her colleague, Ted Cohen, had left the province by the fall of 1936. The university considered hiring “some suitable young Englishman holding a degree with special training in dramatics, to teach dramatics.” My grandmother was not considered, perhaps because she was a married woman at a time when many men were unemployed, perhaps because of her lack of graduate degree. The young man chosen was Donald Cameron. Says Moira Day, the relationship between Cameron and my grandmother “was frustrated by deep character conflicts and differing administrative approaches.” So, in 1937, with no job prospects in Alberta and an ill husband, she moved to New Brunswick to take a position as drama specialist in the Education department.

Elizabeth returned to Edmonton in 1938. In the 1940s she became head of the drama and writing section of the Allied Art Council and oversaw the writing, directing and performing of many plays in support of the war effort and community services – and apparently lending out their Victorian furniture to various productions. My dad remembered their Victorian love seat “being rescued from the storage in the Royal George Hotel’s basement. How it got there no one seemed to know.”

Joe Shoctor, founder of the Citadel Theatre, recalled in 1974:

*Thirty years ago, I acted under Mrs. Haynes’ direction in Ten Cents a Copy (in Talmud Torah Hall) and Maxwell Anderson’s war play, The Eve of St. Mark (in Westglen school).*

*Theatre became as important to me as breathing.*

*I’m doing nothing these days but raising the five million dollars to build the new Citadel in the Edmonton Centre.*

*Elizabeth made me want to be in theatre.*

Her reputation as a teacher continued in the forties and fifties, with students such as Alice (Polley) Coutts, later an Edmonton actress and drama teacher, seeking to train with her. Alice wrote:

*I was just a high school kid at Strathmore, Alberta. The district drama festival was the highlight of our year. When I was chosen to be the secretary for the adjudicator, Elizabeth Haynes, I could hardly wait for the day! By the end of the day I was convinced that all my nickels and dimes must be saved, to get me to the drama classes at the Banff School. And when, in 1948, I came up to the University to major in drama, there was never a time I did not feel I could discuss problems and papers I had to write, with Elizabeth. Her influence and guidance continued when I taught drama myself. Her door and her heart were always open.*

My mother, Jessie, as a seventeen year old aspiring actress from Biggar, Saskatchewan, won a scholarship to the Banff school in 1945. She met my grandmother when she adjudicated the University of Saskatchewan “college nights” productions in 1948:

*I watched the adjudicator climb the steps to the stage. Unusually tall and big-boned, she moved with the energy of a tiger. (Her) hat was a head-hugging cloche of shimmering black satin, saucily cocked over her brown hair (with a) peacock (feather) that nodded like a California Quail's top knot. The black net veil dusted her generous nose and shadowed her violet eyes... her voice was mesmerizing – at times, throaty and fierce, at times stilled to a whisper which traveled to the last row of the Arts College auditorium...The next day she held private adjudications with each director and actor, an unusual generosity of time and energy. I was nervous about being in the presence of such an intellectual person. (But) her warm manner and flashing smile soon put me at ease.*

My mom moved from Saskatchewan, where she'd been teaching, to Edmonton where she took an acting course with my grandmother in 1954. My father, who was often co-opted into driving actors and delivering props, was sent by my grandmother to rescue my mom and a group of actors stranded at Whitemud Creek in a rainstorm. He asked her out. They were married a year later.

Though suffering from deteriorating health, the result of chronic kidney disease which she developed as a young woman, my grandmother continued to take on new projects. As an Edmonton public school board trustee from 1945 to 1947, she worked for better teacher conditions, smaller class sizes and the establishment of the theatre at Victoria High School as well as teaching classes in drama and puppetry for the recreation commission.

Her final accomplishment was the establishment of the Studio Theatre in 1949. In 1945, the first chair in Drama was established at the U of A and in 1946 Bob Orchard was hired. He and my grandmother both had an interest in social theatre, Stanislavskian techniques and were alumni of Hart House Theatre. Bob was instrumental in getting two Quonset huts, left over from the war, for the theatre building and the support of university president Andy. Elizabeth was a guest director and actor and contributed to eight main season plays between 1949 – 1953, including her production of *Othello* which went to the Dominion Drama Festival finals in Victoria and *MacBeth*, in which my grandfather, Nelson was co-opted to play the third murderer, apparently because he looked good in tights.

Local director, theatre manager and practitioner, Frank Glenfield, described the working relationship between Orchard and my grandmother:

*Bob was a chaotic director – delightfully mentally stimulating but...he directed out of chaos....Elizabeth worked through the person and she directed the spirit or soul of the actor....He had all the technical concepts of how the show should go and how it should work....But she would do the actual practical work in making it go....But I felt they were very attuned....he the dreamer and impractical; she the dreamer, but practical.*

Her involvement with Studio Theatre provided a second opportunity to train a generation of theatre practitioners including Tom Peacocke, Grant Reddick, Jo Cormack and Walter Kaasa. Peacocke, who became head of the department of drama at U of A, described adjusting lights at Studio Theatre as part of a course he was reluctantly taking as part of his education major.

*During a quiet moment, a voice the like of which I had never heard before, floated through the auditorium, rich, resonant and vital....I remember striving to imagine what body, what face could produce such a sound. Purposely I dropped my wrench to the floor and climbed down (the ladder) to retrieve it. I fixed my gaze on the most statuesque figure I had ever seen. It was at that moment that I subconsciously began to reconsider the direction my life would take.*

*There was nothing in our working...relationship from then until she died that was not a source of inspiration to me. As I write this, Beethoven's Ninth is playing in the background. A happy accident, for the work of Elizabeth Sterling Haynes seems to me, upon reflection, always to have been a "Hymn of Joy."*

Grant Reddick, Calgary actor and teacher, described my grandmother's expectations of her students:

*Each time I work on a play and I reach the stage in rehearsal when my actor's ego or my middle-aged complacency tells me that what I am about to present will be good enough...a mentor lodged in a corner of my brain begins to nag and prod my flagging artistic conscience.*  
*"Have you really done your best?" she demands. "Is the playwright served by your effort? Is this work of yours worthy of the theatre?"*  
*"No," I admit, "I could probably work harder."*

And then there was her softer side. My mother reported:

*The cast of a play that she was directing...complained to her at dress rehearsal that (a young boy) was getting the light cues mixed up and this would spoil the performance. Elizabeth, who had given the job to (this) lonely, fatherless teenager, said to them, "and what is a stage performance compared to a young boy's soul?" The next day the lighting...was flawless.*

In 1953/54, Orchard went on sabbatical and my grandmother was hired as a sessional instructor. In that year, she offered community actors' workshops. She and Gordon Peacock attempted to involve more students, including young children, in productions and encourage student drama society productions. She founded the Women's Theatre Guild to promote Canadian

theatre and helped found two young peoples' theatres. Then Orchard returned, and she was not rehired.

One of her last great roles was Countess Aurelia (the madwoman) in Orchard's 1951 production of Girandoux's *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, a satire which revolves around the attempts of a group of homeless people, waitresses and "madwomen" to stop the Presidents, prospectors, and Barons of Paris from destroying their favorite café by drilling for oil. The Edmonton Journal noted "her stage presence and command of the role was excellent, particularly in the scenes in which she struggled to free her mind from the reminiscences of the past."

Her health failing and her prospects for employment in Alberta dim, Elizabeth moved to Ontario to be near her daughter and grandchildren, and then settled in Clinton, where my grandfather worked part-time as a dentist. She taught evening classes in drama and had plans to start a Little Theatre group to provide talent for the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. She was casting Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* when she died on April 26, 1957.

*Haynes produced neither theatre buildings nor cannon of creative or philosophical work which can be analyzed in isolation from her life. She was a highly intelligent and well read woman, but her particular genius lay less in her own inspiration than in an impressive capacity to inspire others and create new conditions or environments in which the creativity of others could flourish....At a certain crucial time in the 20s and 30s, an extraordinary woman came into conjunction with an extraordinary time, place and set of colleagues and circumstances which allowed her to exercise her particular genius to the fullest and transform the dramatic face of a province.*

Moira Day

*Elizabeth was a force, a creative energy unleashed at a time when creativity was suspect and at a place where creativity was often ignored in the hope that it would go away....The Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Theatre has never existed as a building....But she often quoted...Roy Mitchell as saying, 'you do not build a theatre with bricks. You build it with people.' Her theatre exists in the people whose life she touched.*

Gwen Pharis Ringwood

My grandmother's legacy continues in my life and the lives of my parents and aunt, sisters and cousins. In me, it manifests in a love of words and ideas, a suspicion of hierarchies and systems.

*Now I can see how words mar a woman  
Wrap gently around her like the finery of costumes*

*And then bind.  
You kept refusing to be bound,  
Ripping the fabric asunder  
Despite protests  
Just like that curtain in the Medicine Hat theatre,  
The one that had no middle part,  
Saying  
'the show must go on,  
I'll sew it up later.'  
Did you ever sew it up after you left  
Or did you leave it as open as the door to your home  
And welcome entering strangers?*

Leslie Haynes, granddaughter

Sometimes I feel that the world I inhabit is much smaller than my grandmother's was. It seems there are fewer people of vision, people who see the world as a "rich, illuminating place," who work every day of their lives to build community.

"They're still here, my dear," my grandmother might say to me, looking up from her script and fixing me with those intense violet eyes.

"You just have to look harder."

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