

# TARRAGON THEATRE

JANE URQUHART'S  
*the* WHIRLPOOL



ADAPTED & DIRECTED BY BRIAN QUIRT

**Choreography by Julia Sasso  
Set & Costumes by Dany Lyne  
Lighting Designed by Bonnie Beecher  
Music Composed by Justin Haynes  
Stage Managed by Maria Costa**

**February 23 to April 2, 2000**

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## ***Study Guide***

### **INTRODUCTION:**

This play may be different from other shows that you have seen. First of all, its original form is a novel – the first novel of Canadian writer Jane Urquhart. It is also an unusual type of novel – not focussed so much on a direct plot or narrative but on a subtle and indirect exploration of the reciprocal relationships people have with each other and their landscapes. Much of this exploration is psychological; the book is driven more by description and metaphor, than dialogue.

Brian Quirt, the director and adapter, has tried to meet this challenge on stage through the use of extensive movement and choreography to express psychological states. In conventional theatre and literature the major emphasis is often on narrative or story; other elements of form are not addressed with equal weight. Dance however, does not always lend itself to literal interpretation in the way words do. Therefore, it is important as an audience member to participate by responding to these forms as well as by analyzing the plot.

This theatre piece is an opportunity to allow voice, movement, and design to enliven all of your senses, and to gain equal footing with the narration. You may emerge with more impressions and feelings than concise understanding (and that's ok!)

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## **CHARACTERS:**

**Fleda McDougal**, aged 25, a lover of English poetry, particularly that of Robert Browning, camping out in a borrowed tent on Whirlpool Heights (played by Tracey Ferencz).

**David McDougal**, her husband, older, a military historian with rabidly pro-Canadian views; thinks the Yanks undeservedly claim the credit for victory in the War of 1812; passionately obsessed with Laura Secord, who appeared to him in a dream, asking that he be her champion (played by Martin Julien).

**Patrick**, a Canadian poet, young, convalescing after an illness, from Ottawa; he becomes obsessed with swimming across the whirlpool (played by Jordan Pettle).

**Maud Grady**, a young widow, the proprietor of the Grady & Son Funeral Parlour, which she inherited after the sudden death, from fever, of her husband; she spends much time cataloguing and saving items found on the drowned corpses found in the Niagara River and its whirlpool (played by Christine Brubaker).

**Boy Grady**, Maud's five-year-old son, strangely silent, though he picks up words (and notions) as the play progresses (played by an adult actor, Andrew Massingham).

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## **SETTING:**

The entire stage area is inhabited by each of the 5 characters and represents different locales depending on who is playing in the space. Some locations that are designated are: a height of land overlooking the Niagara River whirlpool; Kick's Hotel in Niagara Falls; the Grady & Sons Funeral Parlour and the garden in its yard; a lecture-hall; a museum; a tent; the river's edge; and the whirlpool itself. It is the summer of 1889.

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## **SYNOPSIS:**

Set in Niagara Falls, Ontario, in the summer of 1889, *The Whirlpool* brings together five individuals who are drawn to the swirling waters of the Niagara River.

Fleda McDougal, the young wife of the military historian David McDougal, is camping out on their land at Whirlpool Heights, obsessed with the poetry of Browning, waiting for her husband to build her a long-promised house.

However David, watching the Americans across the river, is busy researching the battle of 1812 in the region, and is also most particularly obsessed by Laura Secord (whom he imagines that his wife resembles.) He develops an unexpected friendship with Patrick, a young poet spending a convalescence in the area. Patrick has already been watching Fleda from the woods, hoping to insinuate himself into her company. Patrick is shocked when he discovers that Fleda – the object of his fantasies – is David's wife.

In the town, too, is Maud Grady, a young widow who has taken over her late husband's funeral home business; she becomes hypnotically preoccupied with the swimmers and daredevils who have drowned in the river, and the young children who have died of the fever, all the time fretful about her own strange, silent child, the five-year-old Boy Grady.

Boy Grady also develops a relationship with the poet Patrick that allows the child an outlet to communicate in his unique fashion.

These lives each take their own path, for their own reasons, toward the power of the whirlpool. Mr. Quirt feels that the book is “about a place, it's not about any one person's story...[it's about] how particular landscapes bring people together or pull them apart, or shape their reactions to things.” Therefore, contrary to conventional storytelling, the emphasis is placed on the immediacy of interaction between a group of people and the landscape that surrounds them.

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## **NARRATIVE:**

In his stage adaptation of Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*, Brian Quirt (the director) determined that an interweaving of text, movement, fluid visuals and music would best evoke the passionate, poetic world of the original.

He teamed up with a choreographer (Julia Sasso) and built a story that is partially told through words and completed with movement. In this way the audience receives information about the characters - their relationships with each other and with the land - in two equally important and distinct ways. They get to know much by what the characters say, and by how they move; how they interact with each other and the set.

Because Mr. Quirt chose this path when he adapted the novel, he primarily transcribed text. Rather than giving the characters additional words to convey their emotions, he has employed choreography to express each one's psychological states.

Mr. Quirt's goals were determined when he began the adaptation: "I set a condition that I would only start with text from the book; I wouldn't try to fill in gaps by writing new scenes. There are large parts of the story that could never have dialogue. But you can show them physically in a way that moves the story ahead but also allows us to explore the emotions of the characters through movement."

One specific area is the fantasy worlds of each character. As the play progresses and relationships develop, the audience is privy to the deepest desires of the characters through choreography, which illustrates their innermost urges.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR, THE ADAPTER AND THE PLAY:**

*The Whirlpool* was Canadian writer Jane Urquhart's first novel, published in 1986; her remarkable career now includes three books of poetry, the short-story collection *Storm Glass* and the novels *Changing Heaven, Away* and *The Underpainter*, which won the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction in 1997.

Initially Brian Quirt approached Ms. Urquhart to inquire about the possibility of her writing a play. Ms. Urquhart posed the option of adapting *The Whirlpool* instead and that was the beginning of this project. The play was developed and workshopped by Nightswimming – a company of which Brian Quirt is the Artistic Director. The piece has also received readings and workshops through other theatres such as: Buddies in Bad Times, Canadian Stage Company/du Maurier World Stage and Tarragon Theatre.

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## **STAGING QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES:**

- a) What do you feel Dany Lyne (set designer) is trying to convey through her design? What would you do differently or keep the same?
- b) Name 5 different 'locations' that are created on the set. How do the man-made structures differ from the natural locales? Sometimes, more than one location is portrayed in the same space on the set. What elements differentiate one location from another?
- c) What are some possible reasons that all 5 actors stay onstage for the whole play? What is different at the end?
- d) How do sounds and music help create different atmospheres? Rhythm also serves as a backdrop for different characters so consider the music associated with David as compared to the music which supports Fleda. What roles can music play in a theatrical piece? Can you think of music that you feel would have an impact on this production?
- e) Choose a piece of literature that you have studied in English class and, in groups, discuss the challenges of adapting it for the stage. How would you deal with each element: e.g. what plot do you keep or omit? How many characters and how many actors do you enlist? Consider design opportunities for some of the following: lighting, sound, set, costume, movement, props, or multi-media (slides, video projections, etc.) Choose one scene from the story and stage it, based on your group discussion.
- f) What role does movement play in *The Whirlpool*? Is it a replacement for words and/or ideas? (Consider Maud's movement at the beginning of the play). Is the movement in this presentation successful at conveying ideas or images? If you were asked to choreograph a movement sequence to express a state of mind or an emotion how might you begin? (Think of it like composing music to enhance text: look at texture of movement, velocity, spatial design, etc.) What can movement convey that words cannot? Create a movement piece alone, or as a group, which juxtaposes an urban, man-made environment with a natural landscape.

- g) Can you find places in the production where physical actions mirror the emotional states of the characters? Discuss the role of the fantasy sequences such as the dance between Patrick and Fleda during David's lecture – what other ways could this have been staged?  
How the actors use the set also gives clues to their unspoken feelings: what might motivate Boy Grady to change the position of the waterbags in Act Two? How does this change his relationship with Maud? How does it change the physical space on the set?
- h) An adult actor plays Boy Grady. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of this? Does the wardrobe support the character for Boy Grady? What about the wardrobe for the other actors?
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## **THEMATIC QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES:**

When discussing the Niagara River, Fleda says: “It’s total nonsense, these men flinging themselves into the rapids, as if the river cared. Why do you always think you have to conquer something just because it is there. I already *know* what the river can do. No one has to prove it to me.”

- a) This quote expresses Fleda’s views of the river; how does her opinion differ from that of Patrick or David?
- b) From Fleda’s discussions about crossing the suspension bridge, and about being trapped in Kick’s Hotel versus returning to Whirlpool Heights, what can we intimate is her relationship to nature? What does she want from it and how does she interact with it?
- c) When David returns from seeing a man die in the rapids he says “I doubt you could see anything more grotesque, even in battle.” Why do you think people are drawn to the pursuit of danger, or to conquer nature? What do you think is responsible for the rise of dangerous adventure sports like rock-climbing, and bungee-jumping?

Near the end of the story, with regards to Laura Secord, Fleda declares: “Nobody understood. It wasn’t the message that was important. It was the walk”

- a) What has Fleda realized and how does it inform her actions at the end of the story?
- b) Is this similar to the reason that Patrick needs to swim the whirlpool rather than only write a poem about it – why or why not?
- c) How does Fleda’s views of Laura Secord differ from David’s?
- d) David is so wrapped up in his work and world-views that he does not see the changes in Fleda. What does he say he believes has happened to her at the end. What do you think has happened to her?

What is the difference between the way that Patrick sees Fleda and David sees Fleda? Why does she want to be watched by the poet?

Why can Patrick find a way to speak with the Boy but Maud cannot? In what ways does the Boy attempt to communicate with his mother and she with him?

Fantasy and obsession play large roles in this story. What are the sources of obsession for each character? How do these fixations isolate the characters from each other? Is there a message in this for our own lives?

David speaks incessantly about what it is to be Canadian: even within our myriad of cultural backgrounds, what makes us truly Canadian? What things can we do to take pride in and promote our 'Canadian-ness'? In what ways are we the same as Americans? How are we different? Discuss the obstacles faced by Canadian artists in the face of American cultural domination. Is it important for a country to have heroes, and to honour its history?

What might the whirlpool be a metaphor for?

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# **INSIDE THE TARRAGON THEATRE** ***for teachers and students***

Welcome to the Tarragon Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome all of you to *The Whirlpool*. In addition to viewing and studying the production itself, it is also important to be aware of the mandate and history of the Tarragon Theatre. This in turn will broaden your understanding of the shows that are produced here.

## **MANDATE**

The Tarragon mandate is “To develop Canadian playwrights and produce their scripts; to shape a community of Canadian artists and actors to interpret these plays; and to build an audience to receive and accept this work”. The theatre is continually reaching out to new artists---playwrights, actors, directors, and designers. By adhering to our mandate, we are able to celebrate the talents and stories of many, many Canadian artists thus making Tarragon an important aspect of Canadian culture.

## **OUR SPACES AND FACILITIES**

If you take a tour around the theatre, you will soon notice that The Tarragon Theatre is a different type of theatre than The Elgin Winter Garden or the Pantages Theatre. Instead of sitting in a huge auditorium, you will be sitting in smaller more intimate “black box” theatre spaces. The Mainspace is Tarragon’s original 205-seat auditorium; it is the site of 5 of Tarragon’s yearly productions. In 1983, we added the Extra Space; this is a 100-seat flexible auditorium designed for more intimate experimental shows. It is the site of 3 Tarragon Theatre productions as well as numerous other touring and small theater-company shows. As well, both theatres have been venues for the Toronto Fringe Festival and Summerworks.

If you take a walk back-stage, you will see our scenery, properties and wardrobe shops, administrative and production offices. Upstairs we also house the Tarragon Studio; this end of the building contains a lobby and three spaces which play host to both our own rehearsing productions and rental companies, as well as provide room for receptions, workshops, and other developmental activities.

Our ground level, including both theatres and the lobby, provides full access and facilities for the physically challenged. In June of this year, Tarragon will briefly close its doors to renovate so that we can add an elevator making the entire building accessible. The addition of an elevator has prompted other renovations as well: when our doors reopen, Tarragon Theatre will proudly show off it’s new audience washrooms, box office, concession area, and soundproofing for the Extra Space!

## HISTORY

Housed in a former cribbage board factory, the Tarragon theatre was founded in 1970 by Bill Glassco, a former professor at the University of Toronto. The first production was a play called CREEPS by David Freeman. This first play was representative of Tarragon's strong mandate to produce innovative, interesting new work by Canadian playwrights. This became a tradition, which has carried on up until the present. During Bill Glassco's twelve seasons as artistic director, Tarragon earned critical and popular acclaim and became a pioneer in the production of new Canadian plays and artists.

In 1982, Urjo Kareda, a former drama critic of the Toronto Star and literary manager of The Stratford Festival became the new Artistic Director. Under Kareda, the Tarragon continues to focus on exciting new Canadian work, and has productions of innovative international work as well. A continuing feature – begun by Bill Glassco - has been the presentation, on occasion, of modern perspectives on classic plays (by Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, Goethe).

## TARRAGON'S PLAYWRIGHTS

The Tarragon continues to champion works of protean Canadian playwrights such as Joan MacLeod, Michel Tremblay, Morris Panych, Don Hannah, John Murrell or Judith Thompson. We are also fostering a new wave of dynamic Canadian playwrights such as Jason Sherman, Janet Munsil, Diane Flacks, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Guillermo Verdecchia, Michael Healey, Ken Garnhum, M.J. Kang, Jonathan Wilson and Morwyn Brebner.

Many of these playwrights were originally members of one of the Tarragon/Chalmers Playwrights units. Established in 1982, the unit is renewed annually. The unit has six to seven writers who work on scripts or scripts in progress both collectively and individually with Urjo Kareda and Andy McKim. The process is very intensive. The writers who have been in this unit include: Jason Sherman, Joan MacLeod, John Mighton, Beth Herst, Brad Fraser, Don Hannah, Michael Healey and Atom Egoyan. The unit "shows its stuff" in a week of readings from their new plays. This free public offering is held in December and may be of interest to senior level, OAC students possibly working on plays of their own. Please call Kristen Van Alphen at (416) 536-5018 x.229 for more information or if you would like to join us at this event.

### *Playwrights-in-Residence*

Tarragon has created four office spaces for playwrights-in-residence – a "room of their own" where writers can both work on their own and also connect with their peers and the theatre staff. This year's playwrights-in-residence are Morwyn Brebner, Daniel Brooks, Ken Garnhum, Jason Sherman, and Michael Healey.

## TOURING AND VISITING ARTIST

Tarragon has mounted productions at the Edinburgh Festival, in London and Birmingham, the Mayfest in Glasgow, Edmonton, Expo '86 in Vancouver, the Young

Canada Games in Charlottetown, the duMaurier World Stage Festival, and at Montreal's Festival Des Ameriques. Tarragon plays have been produced by many theatres across the country and outside of Canada: in the U.S, Great Britain, Australia, Europe, and South America.

### AWARDS AND AUDIENCES

Tarragon has a continued tradition of high artistic achievement. In 1994, we received more Dora award nominations than any other theatre in Toronto. Our Governor General Award playwright recipients include Judith Thompson, John Krizanc, Ann Marie MacDonald, Joan MacLeod, Guillermo Verdecchio, Morris Panych, Jason Sherman and Michael Healey. Our Chalmers Award winners include David French, John Murrell, Tom Walmsley, Don Hannah, Ken Garnhum, Judith Thompson, Jason Sherman, and Michel Tremblay (Tarragon has been a pioneer producer of Quebec Playwrights in translation). Mallory Gilbert, Tarragon's General Manager, is a recipient of the Brenda Donohue Award and the M. Joan Chalmers Award for Arts Administration for her distinguished contribution to the theatre community. Urjo Kareda, who was awarded the Order of Canada in 1995, is the 1999 recipient of the Toronto Arts Awards for creative excellence in the performing arts.

### TARRAGON SPRING ARTS FAIR

Andy McKim inaugurated this free festival in 1985. An exciting arts event, which takes place this season over the weekend of May 27 & 28, the Spring Arts Fair features theatre, performance art, dance, readings, children's programming and more. Performances take place all over the theatre: in the Extra space, the studio, the prop-shop, the wardrobe, offices and places you would never expect. Students are encouraged to attend this free, fun, carnival type event. We have also begun to recruit a large number of students as volunteers - please call the theatre if you are interested.

### TARRAGON PROGRAMS FOR EDUCATORS

This year we have begun to offer a variety of programs to educators. 'Teacher nights' is an event which occurs shortly after a show's opening and is designed to allow teachers from different regions to meet and interact in a social setting. It is also an opportunity to view our productions early to determine the possibility of incorporating them into class curriculums. A free ticket is included in the evening, as well as a pre-show 'drink and mingle', complemented by a brief chat with a member of the production.

We are also offering three workshops this season, anticipated to be of interest for personal, professional or curriculum development. The workshops again offer an opportunity for educators to meet one another outside the regular sphere, to receive creative stimulation, and to continue a relationship with professional theatre. This

season's sessions are *An Approach to Playwriting*, *Design: The Creative Shoestring*, and *The Reviews*.

## TARRAGON PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS

All the students who come to the Tarragon Theatre are a very important part of our audiences. Many of our plays deal with subjects that are of great interest to young people. Students have enjoyed seeing productions that, though not written specifically for them, deal with issues pertinent to their own lives. Thought, humour, and innovation replace spectacle and students begin to realize that many different kinds of theatre are possible.

At our student matinees, we attempt to give our students an exciting and intensive theatre-going experience. We offer pre-show tours, so students can gain a full picture of the theatre that they will be attending and pre-show discussions and workshops concerning the play that they will be attending. Of course we continue to offer post-performance discussions so that students can comment and ask their questions "in the moment" with various members of the cast. We are in the process of expanding our educational programs this year and input from teachers and students regarding new avenues to explore would be greatly appreciated.

Tarragon's work with young people extends beyond their attendance at performances. We offer a variety of opportunities for students to engage in theatrical pursuits. Our focus in this area is to develop activities wherein students looking to make a serious commitment and accept a creative challenge can work with theatre professionals in a professional environment.

### *Spring Training Project*

Every spring, we offer the Tarragon Theatre Spring Training Project where we select a group of talented young people to participate in an intensive series of workshops led by professionals in the field. These workshops are text based and result in a performance at the annual Spring Arts Fair.

### *Young Playwriting programs*

Being a playwright's theatre, we have programs designed for young writers as well as young actors. Our first program in this regard is the annual *Under 20 for Under Twenties* playwriting competition. We accept submissions from Ontario resident writers who are under the age of twenty and all plays must be under twenty minutes in length. The winner receives \$250.00 and a professional workshop reading of their play at the Spring Arts Fair. We held this contest for the first time two years ago and it has become a great success. Some teachers have made the writing of the plays a class project. Again, viewing the free play-readings during December could be a useful tool in this process.

Our second program is the *Young Playwright's Unit*. Students interested submit a sample of their writing with a letter of intent, and meet with the Program Director. From this, a core group is chosen which meets throughout the March Break and weekly until

June. The participants attend workshops in design, directing and improvisation to gain a sense of play development and through intensive sessions which include creative exercises and text study they begin to develop their own scripts. This year our program director is planning to take a summer break, to allow unit members to progress with their own writing projects, and meet again in the fall to review the script development of each participant.

### *Co-op Placements*

Tarragon also takes on co-op students from the secondary and post secondary levels. Practice studies are made available in both administrative and production areas. There are no co-op placements available in terms of performance but through their co-op placements students are able to observe and experience the inner workings of a theatre environment.

### *Career Days*

Tarragon also offers career days with tours and discussions for students considering a career in theatre or for those who wish to research it for a project. These days must be arranged a few weeks in advance. Please call Kristen Van Alphen, if you are interested.

Thanks to the generous support of Petro Canada, our youth theatre training encompasses workshop classes for high school students and educators, high-school matinees, training and performance projects for the Spring Arts Fair and young playwright development.

We hope that you have found this study guide to be interesting and informative. Thank you for attending *The Whirlpool*. We look forward to having you back for one of our many of our productions here at Tarragon.