



*Theatre Newfoundland Labrador*

## Our Frances by Berni Stapleton

### 1 THE STORY – FRANCES CLUETT, VAD

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Frances Cluett was born in Belleoram, Newfoundland in 1883. At the age of 33 she left her Fortune Bay home to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), an organization committed to assisting military personnel during World War I. She trained in London, England for work in a military hospital and in 1917 was stationed at the 10<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in Rouen, France.



### 2 THE LETTERS

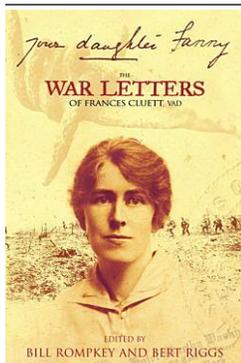
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During her four years of service overseas, Nurse Cluett wrote many letters to home. The letters to her mother in Newfoundland described the atrocities of war, the valiant deeds of soldiers of the Newfoundland Regiment and the despair of young men dying on foreign shores.

There were thirty-one letters that provide a true, concise and compassionate account of women at war. They also provide a genuine and personal snapshot of what life was like in the casualty hospitals of England and France during those years of slaughter that we call World War I and the toll that it took on the women who worked there.

### 3 THE BOOK

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Flanker Press of St. John's published Nurse Cluett's letters in the book ***"Your Daughter, Fanny – The War Letters of Frances Cluett, VAD"*** in 2006. The letters were compiled and edited by Bill Rompkey and Bert Riggs. In 1993 the Rev. Vernon Cluett wrote to Mr. Riggs telling him about the letters of his aunt, Frances Cluett that he had in his possession – he wondered if the archives at Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II Library would be interested in them.

Before long, two packages containing the letters and other documents including a worn photograph album with more than one hundred photos arrived at the archives where they remain today. They have since become one of the most important and frequently used bodies of material in the archives documenting Newfoundland women and the War.

## 4 THE PLAY

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In 2013 in anticipation of Theatre Newfoundland Labrador commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Newfoundland Regiment and World War I we felt it was important to include a woman's perspective from the point of view of the women who were directly involved in the war. TNL approached one of Newfoundland and Labrador's most accomplished playwrights, Berni Stapleton with the book "Your Daughter, Fanny – The War Letters of Frances Cluett, VAD." After three years of work the play received its world premiere at the Warehouse Theatre in Cow Head at TNL's 2016 Gros Morne Theatre Festival , playing 41 times before



heading out on tour to and toured 12 rural Newfoundland & Labrador communities, including Fanny's hometown of Belleoram.

## 1 THE STORY – BACKGROUND

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### World War I

- **World War I (WWI or WW1)**, also known as the **First World War**, or the **Great War**, was a global war originating in Europe that lasted from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918.
- More than 70 million military personnel, including 60 million Europeans, were mobilized in one of the largest wars in history.
- Over 9 million combatants and 7 million civilians died as a result of the war.
- It was one of the deadliest conflicts in history.

### The Newfoundland Regiment

- During World War I **The Newfoundland Regiment** served in France, Belgium, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Germany, and the United Kingdom during the First World War.
- It trained in England and Scotland, it fought in some of the largest and most deadly battles of the war, it defended Allied strongholds from enemy invasion, and it joined the occupation force in Germany after the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918.
- The first active front that the Regiment served on was the Gallipoli Peninsula - a Turkish controlled landmass in southeastern Europe.
- The first 1,076 men of the Newfoundland Regiment arrived in the early hours of September 20, 1915 and joined the 29th Division of the British Army. They were quickly thrust into the chaos of trench warfare.
- On March 16, 1916, it set sail for northern France. The German Army had seized control of the River Somme and Allied commanders wanted to reclaim the area.
- The Newfoundland Regiment was ordered to capture the German trenches near the village of Beaumont Hamel.
- On July 1, 1916 during the Battle of the Somme the Newfoundland Regiment was decimated – of over 700 men who went over the top that morning only 68 answered roll call later that day and it took survivors five days to bury their dead.

- When news of the battle reached Newfoundland and Labrador, there was widespread grieving. July 1 became a national day of mourning and the first Memorial Day ceremony took place one year later.
- During the First World War, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment won 16 Battle Honours and 284 individual honours and awards.
- Of the 6,241 men who enlisted, 1,305 were killed, 2,314 were wounded, and 180 became prisoners of war.

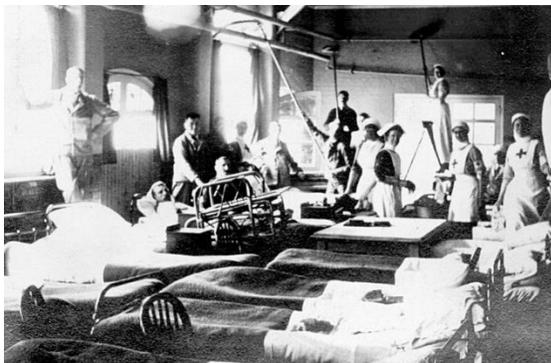
### **Belleoram, Newfoundland**

- Belleoram, Newfoundland is on the western side of Fortune Bay on the south coast of Newfoundland. The community sits on a narrow strip of land hemmed in between the bay and steep hills that rise behind it.
- The population during World War I was 698 – in 2011 the population was 409.

### **Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD)**

The British Red Cross Society formed the Voluntary Aid Detachment in 1909 to provide auxiliary medical service in the event of war.

- Women from Newfoundland and Labrador were not allowed to enlist in the armed forces during the First World War, but they could still serve overseas as nurses. They worked long hours in crowded and chaotic hospitals treating severely wounded soldiers from the front lines.
- Newfoundland VADs had to complete several weeks of training before going overseas.
- In St. John's they took courses in first aid, home nursing, and hygiene; they volunteered in local hospitals; and open-air drills taught them how to pitch hospital tents, care for wounded soldiers, and build and cook on camp fires.
- After the VADs had completed their training in St. John's, they were dispatched overseas. Newfoundland and Labrador sent its first contingent of five VADs overseas in November 1915. By the end of the war, about 40 had left the island.



- Most served in Europe's overworked military hospitals. They cleaned wards, sterilized medical equipment, bandaged wounds, bathed patients, prepared their meals, and made their beds. If patients were too wounded to hold a book or pen, then the VADs read aloud to them and wrote their letters home. The women also watched over the dying soldiers. Later, they prepared the bodies for the mortuary.
- The hospitals were chronically understaffed and medical personnel struggled to treat the convoys of wounded soldiers who poured in from the front lines. The VADs worked long hours and had little time off – one half day off each week, and one full day off each month. Frances Cluett worked 12-hour shifts in Rouen, France.

## 2 THE LETTERS OF FRANCES CLUETT, VAD

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### Frances Cluett

- Frances Cluett (June 25, 1883 – November, 1969) was an army nurse and educator from Newfoundland, noted for her service during World War I, and especially for her many letters back home beginning in 1916 that conveyed the eye-opening experiences of a young woman leaving home for the first time and explaining in vivid detail the horrors of war.
- She was born in Belleoram, Newfoundland, and during the war served in the Volunteer Aid Detachment in Europe.
- Cluett's two dozen letters give a detailed account of her departure from St. John's, travels to New York, London, France, and Constantinople, and of her amazement at the horrors of the front line.
- These letters are currently housed in the Centre for Newfoundland Studies at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, and are in the process being published to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the battle at Beaumont Hamel in which so many Newfoundland men lost their lives.
- Cluett wrote of her time spent attending countless soldiers at the 10th General Hospital in Rouen, France. Cluett was a spirited woman with a strong devotion to church and family — she describes in her letters the terror and awful suffering and yet it never dampens her spirit, which is best summed up in the last line of her expressive Easter Sunday letter, perhaps the darkest she wrote: *"Nothing would induce me to give it up."*



### Fanny's Letters

- Thirty-three-year-old Frances Cluett left on a coastal boat in 1916 from Belleoram harbour and sailed along the coast to Placentia, then to St. John's, New York, Liverpool and Lincoln, England where she completed her training and finally to Rouen, France.
- Her letters show Fanny Cluett to be a woman of self-confidence, courage, determination, humour, intelligence, strong faith, devotion to service and a woman with a strong Newfoundland identity.
- The letters paint the war from the perspective of the nurse, of one who saw the casualties, of one who experienced the horror, of one who saw the pain and the sacrifice, the ultimate service.
- In the hospitals and on the wards she experienced and dealt with the worst the War had to offer.
- She describes the illnesses and the cures in great detail. She has the eye of a novelist for the details of life; the dress, the foods, the joys and wonders.
- Through it all she is faithful to her roots, faithful to her family and her home.
- Her inability to find her cousin, Vince, before he dies is especially poignant.
- She never forgets Belleoram, which has formed her. And she is not a Canadian but a Newfoundlander whose identity is strong and distinct.

*Lincoln,  
Feb. 25/17.  
Sunday night*

*Dear Mother,  
...Oh Mother! We are put on rations. A 2 lb. loaf of bread must last us two days; and we are also given 3/4 lb. sugar to do us for a week. Each nurse was presented with a small bag to hold her loaf of bread and tin of sugar. I did laugh the first morning these bags were given out. We all went up to one of the nurses in single file to get them...*

### 3 THE PLAY – *OUR FRANCES* BY BERNI STAPLETON

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An extraordinary new play celebrating the life and heroism of Frances Cluett, VAD. Fanny was born and lived in Belleoram, Newfoundland. In 1916, she joined the Volunteer Aid Detachment and was shipped overseas to London, ultimately serving for four years at the 10th General Hospital in Rouen, France. The play is inspired by her many letters to home, detailing the horrors and heartbreak she witnessed, and revealing how her humor and resilience captured the love and loyalty of all she encountered.

### 4 The Artists

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**Playwright: Berni Stapleton**

Berni is a Newfoundland-Labrador actor and playwright. She works to explore the inner lives of Newfoundlanders who find the extraordinary within the ordinary. She is committed to the creation of plays which illuminate the culture and heritage that is unique to Newfoundland and Labrador.



**Director: Jeff Pitcher**

Jeff has been the Artistic Director of Theatre Newfoundland Labrador for the past 16 years and has directed his share of great plays. There are no favourites but some of the memorable productions include; *The Ed & Ed Trilogy*, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and *Beauty Queen of Leenane* by Martin McDonagh, *Soldier's*

*Heart* and *1949* by David French, *Double Axe Murder* and *A Rum for the Money* by Berni Stapleton, *The Maritime Way of Life* by Charlie Rhindress and these are only a few!

**Stage Manager: Sarah White**

Sarah is a Stage Manager/Theatre Technician from NL, who earned her B.F.A. in Theatre Stagecraft from M.U.N.'s Grenfell Campus. Her most recent work includes Assistant Production & Company Manager (TNL-GMTF) *Ed & Ed's Nutcracker Christmas* (TNL), a stint at Grenfell Campus as a Theatre Tech, a tour with the Allison Crowe Band, and playing as a part of East Valley Special. She's looking forward to touring England & Scotland with *Our Frances*!



**Costume Design: Wendy Vey**

As a Costume Designer and Cutter, Wendy has been working in professional theatre since 1982 and in her day job as Wardrobe Supervisor for Grenfell Campus' Theatre Department since 1989.

She continues to design and build costumes for other theatres including Stage West Theatre Festival, Gros Morne Theatre Festival, and recently MUN's School of Music. In addition to costuming Wendy has written and directed family shows for Stage West Theatre Festival and presented workshops in costuming and puppetry. Wendy; the artist; considers herself "A Maker of Things" and free time is spent felting wool sculptures and artsy stuff.



**Set Design:**

**Brian Ball**



Brian is a BC based Artist and Designer. Born and raised in Newfoundland, he completed his BFA in Visual Arts from Memorial University where he also fell in love with the world of Theatre. After He has a MFA in Theatre set and Costume design at UVIC (Victoria). In 1994 he moved to Vancouver to work in both Theatre and Film industry. Recently he has returned full time to his original love of Theatre design, and has been working non-stop in BC and across Canada for the past five years. Apart from his Design work he is also a practicing Visual Artist, Painting landscapes of the East and West coasts of Canada. He has shown in galleries across BC and Newfoundland, and has works in private collections from Johannesburg, London, Barbados, and across Canada.



**Lighting Design: Jeff Pybus**

Previous design credits include *Pippin*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *The Drowsy Chaperone* (Showtime, Lighting) *Sunday in the Park With George* (Theatre Sheridan, Projections). Jeff is a graduate of Sheridan College in Oakville, ON (theatre technical production).

**Sound Design:**

**Dan Fletcher**

Dan is from Toronto, ON and is currently attending Ryerson University studying Theatre Production. Previous credits: Production Assistant for Saskatchewan Express, Apprentice Technical Director for Driftwood Theatre Group.



**CAST**

**Frances Cluett:**

**Una Hill-McMullin**

Una is originally from Wolfville, NS but has made Corner Brook, NL her home for the past five years. She completed her BFA in Theatre at Grenfell in 2016 and was fortunate enough to win the Andre Noble award in her third year. Some of her favourite projects have included: *1 Henry IV*. (Grenfell Production dir. Michael Waller), *Soul Singing* (BTO dir. Jamie Harding), and *Fly Me To the Moon* (GMTF dir. Jeff Pitcher). Una just completed her second year with TNL's GMTF and she's very excited to taking on the role of Frances Cluett to the upcoming production and tour of **Our Frances**



**Hans:**

**Craig Haley**



Craig has spent seven consecutive seasons with TNL's GMTF. He has been working as an actor for nearly two decades and has performed on stages from England to Alberta. Fans of the festival may remember Craig from such shows as *Heroes*, *Our Frances*, *Brazil Square*, *The Known Soldier*, *With Cruel Times in Between* (which also toured England in 2015), and many, many others. Craig is excited to be traveling back to the UK in October with **Our Frances**. Originally from Grand Bank on the province's south coast, Craig holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Memorial University.

**Marty:**

**Colin Furlong**

Colin is an Actor from Mt. Pearl, NL and has spent 11 seasons with GMTF. Recent credits include, *Tangly: A Holiday Pantomime* (RCAT); and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (Artistic Fraud), which toured Canada and Newfoundland in 2017. Colin's credits include *AfterImage*, & *Fear of Flight* (Artistic Fraud); *Tempting Providence*, *Mary's Wedding*, *With Cruel Times in Between* (TNL); *Brand New Beat*, & *RIG* (Rising Tide), *Armstrong's War*, & *Whereverville* (New Curtain); & *In The Backseat* (Eastern Front). Colin looks forward to returning to the UK this October with **Our Frances**.



Colin Furlong

## 4 STUDY QUESTIONS – AFTER SEEING “OUR FRANCES”

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1. Who is “Our Frances” about?
2. Where is she from?
3. What is the VAD?
4. When did World War I happen?
5. What is the “Newfoundland Regiment?”
6. What is the play about?
7. Who designed the costumes for “Our Frances?”
8. Who designed the set for “Our Frances?”
9. Who played Frances?
10. Who played Hans?
11. Where is Hans from?
12. Who played Marty?
13. Where is Marty from?
14. Who wrote “Our Frances?”
15. What did you think of the play “Our Frances?”

*This study guide created based on information from the following sources:*

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