

BLANCHE: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame
A theatrical, poetic song cycle



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This sweeping chamber piece is set in the far corner of a 93-year-old woman's mind. The songs are poetic family movies inspired by the indomitable spirit of a woman who survived the Great Depression, WW 2 and tragic lost love. Onalea is at once a granddaughter, a ghost, and Blanche herself. The musicians in the piece subtly interact with her and play the loves of Blanche's life. Blanche's gravelly voice is underscored in recorded passages amongst the 17 songs, which are a sophisticated mash up of torch, jazz, folk and chamber music. Projected photographs taken on an old Brownie camera during the 1930's and fractured images from silent film, leave the audience with a haunting portrait of this wild prairie dame.



Distilling a long life over a pot of tea will naturally leave some parts of the tale untold. Memories aren't always in order, they can be unreliable, minds can fail, and some parts of life will always remain private. Blanche tells us about how her boyfriend dressed her up in his clothes and took photos of her during the Depression, of the men in her life going off to fight and returning different, about throwing notorious parties, and raising 5 children, about growing old. Onalea gathered these stories during Blanche's last years in a nursing home, before and after Blanche transferred to the dementia ward.

Audiences are incredibly moved after watching the piece. They leave with a renewed sense of connection with their own family stories, questions about the legacy that they themselves will leave behind, and a deep respect for the nuances of a life well lived.

**BLANCHE is a meditation on memory
and a celebration of life...**

**If we don't tell their stories
all will be forgotten...**



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Created and Performed by Onalea Gilbertson

Music by Onalea Gilbertson, Morag Northey, and Jonathan Lewis

Directed by Rachel Avery

64 minutes - no intermission, reasonable technical requirements

Cast/Crew (6):

Onalea Gilbertson

Vocals/Piano

Jeff Gladstone

Guitar/back-up vocals

Jonathan Lewis

Violin/Clarinet

Brian Sanders

Cello

Joey Walls

Lighting Designer/Stage manager

Leif Gilbertson

Producer/Sound Engineer

PRODUCTION HISTORY

JULY 2007: BLANCHE was originally commissioned by the Banff Centre. World premiere: 2007 Banff Summer Arts Festival.

SPRING 2008: Writing and production residency Banff Centre.

AUGUST 2008: Performances at the Sunset Theatre in Wells BC.

OCTOBER 2008: Performances at the Engineered Air Theatre in Calgary Alberta. CD release.

OCTOBER 2011: New York Premiere as a special event of the New York Musical Theatre Festival.

"One of the best shows of 2011" Huffington Post

JULY 2012: Capital Fringe Festival in Washington DC.

"Best of Fringe" DC Metro Theater Review

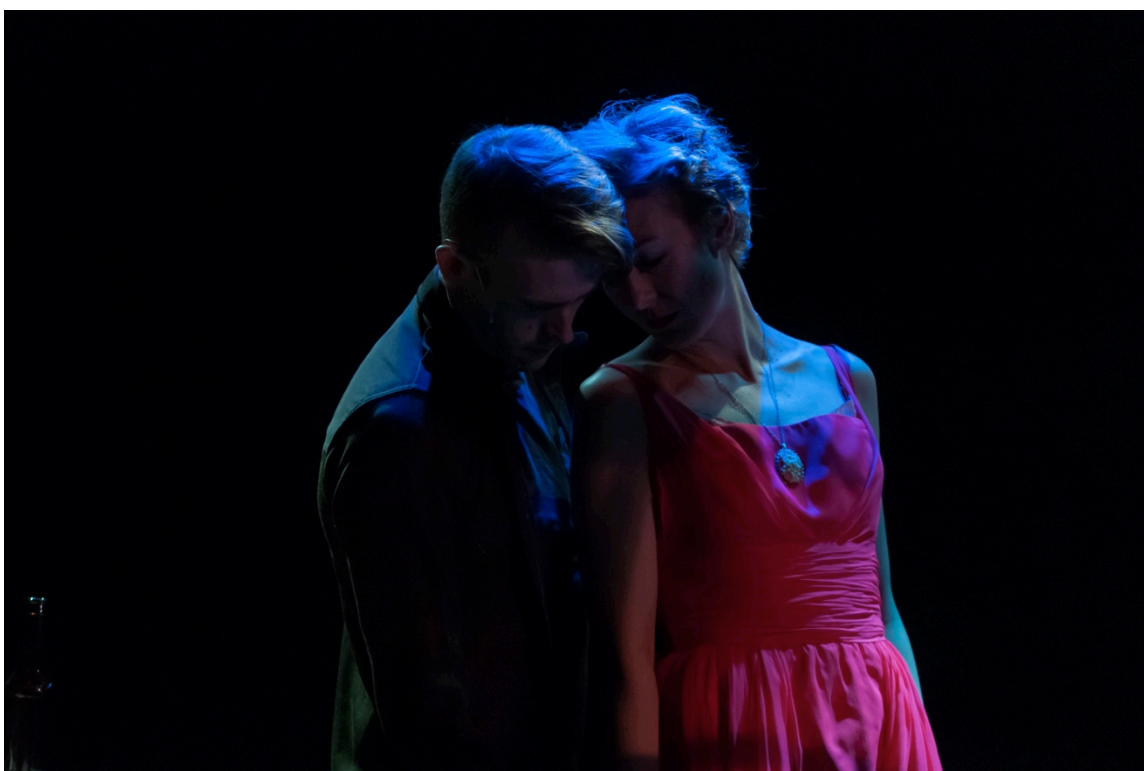
AUGUST 2012: The New York International Fringe Festival.

"...haunting and powerful..." NY Theatre.com

JANUARY 14-26 2013: High Performance Rodeo/Lunchbox Theatre.

"...one hell of a play which ranks right up there with the classic Canadian memory musical Billy Bishop Goes to War." Calgary Sun

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ONALEA GILBERTSON: (Author, Composer, Vocals, Piano)

Onalea creates and performs a unique hybrid of original music and the theatrical. In 2011 and 2012, her original projects *Requiem For A Lost Girl: A Chamber Musical About Homelessness* & *Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame* premiered in New York as special events of the New York Musical Theatre Festival. As a theatre artist she has performed in plays and musicals across Canada over the past several years. Recently she directed *What Brought Us Here* a new work for Calgary Opera.

Selected credits; 7 seasons, ensemble member One Yellow Rabbit; Co-creator/performer symphony shows across Canada/ Hallé Symphony (UK) Perth, Adelaide Symphonies (Dandi Productions); *Bernstein's Mass* (CPO, Hans Graf conducting); Soloist/recording artist *Land's End Chamber Ensemble*; *Only Love Knows Love*; *Mata Hari: in 8 Bullets* (Outstanding Individual Performance Award, NYMF 2013) (David Rhymer) and the lead in the indie short *HOME* by Canadian Filmmaker Sandi Somers. (Ampia award nomination - Best Actress)

Recently Onalea was awarded the *Sandstone City Builders Award* for her work internationally in the Arts and Social Justice.

As a singer/songwriter and cabaret performer, Onalea has opened for Bob Newhart, Daniel Lanois and the East Village Opera Company. Her current work in progress *Torch Songs From the Gypsy Van*, is a song-cycle she plays and performs with jazz & string quartet. Onalea has created four Cd's featuring big band/electronica/jazz trio and original music, available at www.onalea.com.

Onalea was awarded the sandstone city builders award (Spring 2013) for excellence in the arts and Social Justice internationally and the Greg Bond memorial award for outstanding contribution to musical theatre in Calgary. 9Summer 2013).

RACHEL AVERY (Director) Originally from Calgary, Rachel resides in Los Angeles where she attended the School of Theatre, Film and Television at UCLA and has worked in every area of the field since. She is a proud member of both Rogue Machine Theatre and Pacific Resident Theatre Companies. She worked as Assistant to the Director on the CW's *What About Brian* and received a grant from the Canada Council to Direct *Blanche* at The Banff Centre. As an actor this season she originated the role of Megan Halsey in the six month run of the hit show *Re- Animator The Musical* in Los Angeles, New York (Off Broadway) and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (Main Stage); she recently workshopped the new musical *Touched* directed by Tony Nominee Kristin Hanggi. TV/Film appearances include a recurring role on *Big Love*, *State of Georgia*, *Tropic Thunder* and the Indy film *The Giant Mechanical Man* starring Jenna Fischer. Rachel is currently writing a screenplay, which she is also producing to be shot in the New Year.

LEIF GILBERTSON - Producer/Sound Engineer

Leif has worked in many areas production and audio engineering. He has mixed a philharmonic for the Queen of England; crafted victory ceremonies seen by hundreds of millions of people during the 2010 Olympics; designed sound for theatre; produced concerts and events; recorded choirs, orchestras, and marching bands; and is now pleased to play a part in bringing BLANCHE to you. Leif is also General Manager of Springboard dance in Calgary.

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JEFF GLADSTONE (Woody - Guitar, Back-up vocals)

Jeff is a multi faceted theatre artist working across Canada. With a passion for creating new works he has appeared in new plays *The Wars* (Theatre Calgary, Vancouver Playhouse), *Beggars would ride* (Wild Excursions Performance/Push festival), *Back to you: The Life and Music Of Lucille Star* (Musical TheatreWorks/Firehall Arts Centre/Gateway Theatre/Prairie Theatre Exchange). Jeff is also a playwright who's operetta *Out like Flynn* premiered in Vancouver in 2007, and is currently working on a piece about the infamous Canadian Guitar legend, *The Wings Of Lenny Breau*. Jeff is Producer and Artistic director of *The Life Game* created by Keith Johnstone (www.thelifegamevancouver.com) and the annual Here Be Monsters Festival. (www.herebemonstersfestival.wordpress.com).

BRIAN SANDERS (Bill- Cello)

From Madison, Wisconsin, Brian Sanders received his Masters degree in music from Mannes College in New York City. He received his B.M. from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY. In 2006, he was a recipient of the VSA arts International Young Soloists' award, which resulted in a performance at the Kennedy Center. His teachers have included Timothy Eddy, Steven Doane and Uri Vardi.

Brian has participated in concerts and recordings of many diverse styles, including rock, jazz, Latin American and Indian music. He is currently a member of the band Emanuel and the Fear, with whom he has toured in Europe and the United States.

JONATHAN LEWIS (Ronnie- Violin/Clarinet - Co-composer) Jonathan Lewis is a composer, musician, and music producer from Calgary, Canada. He has written new music for numerous theatrical productions, both for classics like *Our Town* and *Death of a Salesman* as well as for many new works by companies such as *One Yellow Rabbit* and *The Old Trout Puppet Workshop*. His music has also been featured in many film and television soundtracks, as well as original scores for four short films. As a musician, Jonathan performs on violin, viola, electric violin, Greek baglama, mandolin, piano, clarinet, and accordion. He is also a member of several ensembles including gypsy rockers *The Plaid Tongued Devils*, greek ensemble *The Rembetika Hipsters*, and gypsy jazz cats *The Fedora Club*. Samples of Jonathan's music can be heard at

<http://members.shaw.ca/moxamstudios/>



Onalea@onalea.com

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MORAG NORTHEY (Co -Composer) Morag has played for *Les Miserables* (Mirvish Productions), *Phantom of the Opera* (Live Ent.), *West Side Story*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, (Theatre Calgary), *Jeremy de Bergerac* (Forte Music Theatre Guild), collaborated as cellist, singer/songwriter, sound designer: *Why Freud Fainted* David Rhymer (Alberta Theatre Projects), *Blanche* Onalea Gilbertson, *Queen Lear*, Eugene Stickland (UrbanCurvz). *Wizard of Oz* (Alberta Theatre Projects) and Theatre Calgary's *Next to Normal* she added six-string electric cello! Join Morag at her *Together Calgary* series Feb-April, St. Marys' Cathedral, with the new *Out of Emptiness Ensemble*. Morag teaches at *Mount Royal* and *Red Road Cello Studios*. Moragnorthey.com.

JOEY WALLS (Lighting Designer/Technical Director) Recent regional designs include: *El Desdén Con El Desdén*, *Platero y Yo*, *Puro Tango* (Gala Hispanic Theatre, Washington, D.C); World Premiere of Impossible Theater Company's *[missed connections]*, *Requiem For A Lost Girl* (New York Music Festival); *DansSynergy IV* (Ballet Spartanburg, SC), *Dead Man Walking* (American University), *Guys and Dolls*, *Macbeth*, and *Future Preludes* (Washington, D.C.), as well as the American Premiere of *Blanche: The Bittersweet Life of A Wild Prairie Dame* (New York Music Festival, Capital and NYC Fringe). Upcoming: Gala Hispanic Theatre: *La Casa De Los Espíritus*, *Las Aventuras De Don Quijote De La Mancha*. He received his BFA in Design and Production with a specialization in Lighting Design from the University of Michigan. www.jwallsdesign.com



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PRESS QUOTES

"Delicate penetrating captivating songs...a simple story beautifully realized..."
"#13 in the 20 best shows of 2011"

HUFFINGTON POST



"Intimate yet sweeping...haunting and powerful...you found yourself reeling from its emotional punch."

NYTHEATRE.COM

"Gilbertson imbues this nostalgic portrait of womanhood with retro glamour, an enchanting stage presence and a silky voice."

TIMEOUT NEW YORK

"Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame is something special...if you simply love good music and strong storytelling you will find it here. 5 Stars!"
"Best of Capital Fringe"

DC METRO THEATER ARTS

"One Hell of a show"

DC THEATRE SCENE

"Intelligent, nostalgic and quietly artful"

THE WASHINGTON POST

"...one hell of a play which ranks right up there with the classic Canadian memory musical Billy Bishop Goes to War." **CALGARY SUN**

"...a vivid collection of songs that range from heartbreaking to let the good times roll." **CALGARY HERALD**

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SHOW DESCRIPTION (72 words)

In *Blanche*, acclaimed musician and theatre artist Onalea Gilbertson explores the life and stories of her 93-year-old grandmother, taking us through the Great Depression, WW2 and tragic lost love. This original sonic landscape – a poignant mash up of folk, torch, and chamber music featuring piano, cello, violin and guitar underscored with Blanche's recorded voice – spans generations.

Blanche was named “*one of NYC’s 20 Best Shows in 2011*” by the Huffington Post.

SHORT SHOW DESCRIPTION (40 words)

A theatrical song -cycle about Blanche’s memories told by her granddaughter; weaving through the Depression, WW2 and tragic lost love. A poignant mash- up of torch, folk, and chamber music.

*“Delicate, penetrating, captivating songs “one of the best shows of 2011”
Huffington Post.*

