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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Val Lieske,  
AD of Fire Exit Theatre

Conducted by Liane Faulder,  
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Val is the founder and Artistic Director of Fire Exit Theatre. She has a BA in Theatre and Speech from Trinity Guild (UK) and is a member of Playwrights Guild of Canada. She, along with her colleague, Barrett Hileman, launched the first-ever Theatre Program at Ambrose University, which is now part of Ambrose Arts. Val worked for 15 years with Centre Street Church in Creative Arts and Communication and is an instructor with Alberta Bible College teaching Arts and Culture. She has studied playwriting with Clem Martini, Lucia Frangione, and Trevor Rueger. Val worked with Alberta Playwrights Network for 10 years as an administrator and dramaturg.

Past directing credits include: *Absence*, *Nativity in the City*, *Sunny Side Up*, *God's Man in Texas*, *Holy Mo & Spew Boy*, *Duty to Warn*, and *This Waking Moment* (Fire Exit Theatre), *God's Favorite* (Rocky Mountain College), *Wrappings*, *Work in Progress*, *Transit*, *The One* (CSC), and *Evelyn Strange* (Asst. Director, Vertigo Theatre). Val has written numerous full-length plays including: *Past Tense*, *Sunny Side Up*, *Absence*, and *Duty to Warn*. She has also written various short plays and poetry, and she is the co-author of the book, *Crossroads Café*, which spent some time on Calgary's bestseller list. Val freelances as a speaker, educator, spoken word artist, and writer. She believes that the only way to change culture is to create culture, and that storytellers are changing the world. Val is one-half of the Arts Chaplain team in Calgary and loves nothing more than drinking good coffee with creative people.

**In the Words of Liane:** Val Lieske is inspiring in at least three ways.

For one thing, the founder and Artistic Director of Calgary's Fire Exit Theatre got her start in theatre relatively late. In her mid-thirties, after spending more than a decade as a banker, Lieske found herself at the curb, carrying a cardboard box with picture of her dog, Sandy, and a mug stamped with a corporate quote.

Lieske decided to create a whole new life. With no previous experience running a theatre, she formed Fire Exit (that's the second inspiring thing). It's now a \$200,000 a year company that's produced roughly sixty shows in its eighteen-year history. Nearly half of those productions were directed by women.

The third point of inspiration is the reason Fire Exit exists – to explore faith in all its dimensions. It's a sometimes-lonely pursuit, says Lieske, because there is little in popular culture that reflects the religious perspective.

"I think that faith is still one of the last taboo subjects," says Lieske, a practising Christian in a large evangelical church. "...Art is my way to create thoughtful conversations for everyone, not just people who share my belief."

I spoke to Lieske about why faith-based theatre matters, and the upside of a plague. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and length.



**Liane Faulder:** *Religion gets a lot of bad press. What perspective do you hope to bring to the stage through Fire Exit?*

**Val Lieske:** Secular media has portrayed people who identify as Christians as homophobic, abortion-clinic bombing, crazy people. And I'm not super happy, either, with how the Christian artists, mainly Americans, put out movies that don't represent us. I'm interested in simply being portrayed as trying to navigate life, just like anyone.

**LF:** *So what kind of plays do you produce?*

**VL:** I am looking for lesser-known work. I'm not producing Shakespeare, I'm not going to do Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. I'm looking for thoughtful content.

**LF:** *For example?*

**VL:** In 2017, we did *Freud's Last Session* (by Mark St. Germain), with guest artist Daniel Van Heyst, an Edmonton director. It's a hypothetical conversation between Freud and C.S. Lewis. It's brilliant. In 2015, we did *The Amish Project*, by Jessica Dickey.

It's about a guy that went into an Amish school in the States and killed students. It was a one-person show starring a woman who plays everyone. It's riveting and hard to watch.

We don't do Bible stories. What I'm doing is not safe and fun for the whole family. I'm interested in hard things. I have gathered a very eclectic audience of believers and non-believers. People who are just interested in the story.

*LF: What are some of the benefits that Fire Exit offers to the theatrical community?*

VL: Well, we have a playwrights' competition called "Scripts on Fire" for new plays to try and create Canadian content. It has a December 31 deadline and applicants can submit through the website at [scriptsonfire.ca](http://scriptsonfire.ca). Or, writers can always submit directly, anytime, to me at [val@fireexit.ca](mailto:val@fireexit.ca). Between the competition and other submissions, we probably get twenty-five to thirty submissions a year. About forty percent are by women.

Plus, I am an arts chaplain to this community. Every season, someone will get cancer, and a marriage will fall apart. I have a really giant coffee budget and love to listen. Lots of people have taken me up on that.

For the last three years, Fire Exit has hosted "The Blessing of the Artists," inspired by the [Broadway Blessing](#). We celebrate the upcoming season. This past year, I invited Vertigo Theatre and Lunchbox Theatre and they came and did scenes from shows that were coming up.

*LF: What should people keep in mind if they want to submit plays to you?*

VL: Research who we are before you submit. Read our mission statement. Look at our season history. In eighteen years, we've never done a musical, yet people send them to me. I'm looking for a well-crafted story that fits our mandate.

For Scripts on Fire, we have a three-person blind jury that reads, as well as myself. For other scripts, I read them, and if one tweaks my interest, I send it to a director and another writer for feedback. Playwrights can feel free to follow up with me by e-mail.

*LF: Like many theatres, your last show of the 2019/20 season was cancelled. What are you thinking about as the COVID-19 pandemic shutter's live theatre?*

VL: There is a phrase in the Old Testament in the Book of Psalms. Selah. It means pause. It's a musical term. This is where you take a breath.

I don't mean to downplay how really horrible this is for lots of people. I've given my life to art, that's how important it is to me. But in the same breath, we're not curing baby cancer. We're telling stories. Let's keep our eye on that.

If you're not able to be an artist right now, focus on being a great daughter, a good friend. We'll go back to being artists again, but we need to find our identity in other ways, not just in what we produce.



A multi-award-winning feature writer for the Edmonton Journal, Liane Faulder is the author of *The Long Walk Home: Paul Franklin's Journey from Afghanistan*, a book of non-fiction that chronicles the recovery of a soldier who lost both legs in Afghanistan. In 2015, Liane was awarded the Alberta Playwrights Network Discovery Prize for her play inspired by *The Long Walk Home*. In 2018, that play, *WALK*, debuted at the Edmonton International Fringe Festival.

