

# Miss Fortune's Portmanteau blends visual art, theatre, music

**THE CHRONICLE HERALD** Andrea Nemitz

Published November 17, 2014 - 4:27pm



Rayna Smith-Camp plays Miss Fortune and Sarah Albu is Sarah Clench in Vocalypse Productions' Miss Fortune's Portmanteau at the Women's Council House on Young Avenue in Halifax, from Wednesday to Nov. 30. (STAFF)

Mary Howard is in Janice Jackson's DNA.

The fictional Victorian woman was created from tales of Jackson's great-grandmother, a drunk who was frequently arrested for assault and battery, and characters found in Judith Fingard's 1989 book, *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax*.

And she's a main character in *Miss Fortune's Portmanteau*, an hour-long presentation from Jackson's Vocalypse Productions that reimagines life in Victorian Halifax, complete with specific local references.

"It's a combination of visual art and projections, of music, theatre and improv, combined with the Danish film school Dogme," says Jackson, who directs and stars as Howard in the show.

The immersive, interdisciplinary show will be staged amid the gorgeous stained glass windows, antique light fixtures and vintage furniture in the Women's Council House on Young Avenue, from Wednesday to Nov. 30. Built in 1903 for George Wright, who died on the Titanic, the Halifax house is a perfect backdrop for the tale of seven women.

"It's not a period piece; we're re-inventing history, not re-creating," Jackson explains.

“It’s speculative, not what could have happened but ‘what if that had happened,’” adds Lukas Pearse, who did the audio score.

“It’s like an alternate reality,” chimes in Sarah Albu, a Montreal actor and singer who is one of four cast members.

Jackson, a soprano known for her interpretation of modern music, first portrayed Mary Howard at Nocturne in 2009. Howard was part of family lore for the Cape Breton-born, Halifax-based singer. Her grandfather, Hubert, was one of England’s Home Children, sent to Cape Breton from an orphanage in England as an eight-year-old to work as a labourer. His mother was part of the inspiration for Howard, whom Jackson dubs Scary Mary.

“I asked Barbara Lounder to write a libretto for the character and Arianne Pollet-Brannen to do costumes.

“We decided we needed to make a bigger show because there were more stories. Barbara’s a visual artist who uses text in her work, and it’s a brilliant script.”

Initially, Jackson was going to portray all the characters who come to life in Lounder’s stories.

But she added Rayna Smith-Camp to portray Miss Fortune, who serves as an unofficial policeman making sure everyone behaves themselves; Albu, who plays Sarah Clench, a 16-year-old debutante, as well as a fishmonger; and Emma Leigh Rivera as a cook and a Halifax woman. Besides Howard, Jackson plays a broken body.

Miss Fortune has a portmanteau — a fabulous old steamer trunk Jackson bought and refurbished — that she moves around the Women’s Council House as the story progresses. The audience follows the trunk — and the actors — to different rooms.

The trunk’s drawers contain props, and sound and projections come out of the trunk. The projections, designed by Robert Bean, include historic Halifax photographs, Victorian line drawings and, for a scene in the kitchen, a variety of fish and sea creatures.

Clench, based on a real person, “thinks she knows everything,” says Jackson.

“She’s bored and is rehearsing for a Gilbert and Sullivan show and thinks she’s an opera star.”

Albu, who holds degrees in voice and theatre performance from Concordia University, calls Jackson her mentor. She studies with her over Skype and has been in Halifax for Opera From Scratch.

She describes Clench as “a little bit like Cher from Clueless, a rich girl who thinks she knows everything and that everything is about her. Thinking of her as a Valley girl helped me get into her as a human and less of a caricature.”

In Miss Fortune’s Portmanteau, Albu sings, acts and dances while sporting a fabulous full-skirted, tight-bodied dress made from shoes.

As Albu reads from Clench’s diary, she remembers different events in Clench’s life and sings in wildly different styles, from Anglican chants and 12-tone songs from Schoenberg and Webern to Gilbert and Sullivan tunes.

She also delivers fishmongers’ calls that Pearse based on ones he remembers from growing up in north-end Halifax.

Pearse worked with the Miss Fortune libretto, which is almost like text and is the most historically grounded part of the show.

He says the recorded music treads a grey area between composition and sound design.

“It is more than film or concert music in that there’s a real concentration on the way that it is presented that is part of a theatrical element.”

Both Pearse and Jackson describe the show as magic.

“There’s a magic as history comes to life,” enthuses Jackson.

“But it’s magic history as opposed to magic realism,” Pearse concludes.

**Presented by:** Vocalypse Productions

**When:** Nov. 19 to 30, Wednesdays to Sundays at 8 p.m.

**Where:** Women’s Council House, 989 Young Ave., Halifax

**What:** A re-imagining of events in the lives of seven Victorian Halifax women, combining music, theatre, performance, and improvisation, that includes audience interaction

**The Players:** Miss Fortune, Rayna Smith-Camp; Mary Howard/Broken Body, Janice Jackson; Sarah Clench and Fishmonger, Sarah Albu; Halifax Woman and Cook, Emma Leigh Rivera

**The Team:** Barbara Louder, playwright; Janice Jackson, director; Lukas Pearse, sound score; Robert Bean, projections; Arianne Pollet-Brannen, wearable art

**Tickets:** \$20, \$15. Seating is limited to 25 people per evening. Call 902-429-1797 or buy [online](#).

***About the Author, Andrea Nemitz***

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