

# Kensington church stars in Heritage Minute shoot

BY ERIC VOLMERS, CALGARY HERALD MAY 11, 2014



Hillhurst United Church in Calgary was turned into a First World War hospital for A Heritage Minute scene on Friday May 9, 2014.  
Photograph by: Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

Stephen Massicotte compares it to telling a joke. Not that there is anything particularly funny about Canada's role in the First World War, nor was the acclaimed playwright going for comedy when he wrote the two Heritage Minutes that are currently being shot in Calgary for Historica Canada.

But when you are telling a 60-second tale of wartime heroism with period sets, historically accurate costumes and more than 40 extras, it helps to have an expert sense of timing. Every word counts.

"There's not a lot of room to embellish," says Massicotte. "Every second of it gets put through the ringer. These are not just bits of drama that I want to do. Historica Canada are the bosses on this and they have a real commitment to assuring that things are historically accurate."

Hillhurst United Church in Kensington has been transformed into a field hospital in northern France, where a group of Canadian "Nursing Sisters" are caring for the wounded as bombs drop around them.

That's the first one. The second is being kept under wraps, with the only details being provided are that it also takes place during the First World War and involves hockey.

A former Calgarian and award-winning playwright, Massicotte currently lives in New York City. But he was enlisted by Calgary's Stir Films to write the spots. He knew he wanted to concentrate on Canada's contributions to the First World War, a time period he visited in one of his best-known plays, *Mary's Wedding*. Massicotte came up with 10 possible stories, hoping to shine a light on lesser-known heroes from the war.

"It was the coming of age of Canada where we were finding an identity that was different than the Empire," he says. "Unfortunately, it was because of the war. But we weren't exactly the colonies anymore. We found our own command and a bit of our own voice. I think it was a transitional period for Canada."

Which makes it a perfect period to examine with those famous Heritage Minute spots. They began in 1991 and have become a cherished part of our cultural landscape. The short films have covered everything from the Halifax Explosion, to the construction of Maple Leaf Gardens, to Laura Secord's heroism during the War of 1812.

After a seven-year absence from the airwaves, a call for more of our country's key moments to be chronicled was put out by Historica Canada.

Co-producer Brent Kawchuk of Stir Films and parent company Corkscrew Media, which won seven "Rosies" at the Alberta Film and Television Awards last month, put together an impressive team to tell the tales. Grant Harvey, a Calgarian who has been at the helm for episodes of *Heartland* and *Orphan Black* and feature films such as *Freezer Burn* and *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning*, was brought in to direct.

Actress and Calgary native Siobhan Williams, another *Heartland* alumni who currently stars in the ABC drama *Black Box*, was also enlisted, as was Vancouver actor Jared Keeso, best known for playing Don Cherry in two TV miniseries.

Everyone is working for scale and putting in long hours over the two-day shoot in Calgary, which will utilize the church and the old First World War sets that still stand from Paul Gross's film *Passchendaele* on the Tsuu T'ina Nation outside of Calgary.

"One of the things going in that Brent and I decided was that we wanted to put as much as possible of this on the screen because this is a shot that Canadian heroes have to be remembered," says Harvey. "The challenge has been to rally our team and collaborators to get behind this. We've decided rather than spread the money out too thin, Brent and I and Stephen are all just wearing a lot of hats."

And there are, of course, distinct challenges to pulling off a 60-second period drama. One unexpected road bump is that modern actors tend to be a lot bigger than men were 100 years ago, which meant not many fit into the hockey gear and soldiers' uniforms the wardrobe supervisor managed to locate from the time period.

"The pilots were little guys to fit into the cockpits," says Kawchuk. "And, just in general, actors today are guys going to the gym. They just didn't do that."

While there is no set date for when broadcasters may decide to run these spots, Kawchuk says they will likely launch in the fall.

For Massicotte, who says it's his dream to make a Canadian war movie, researching the heroism of the Canadian Nursing Sisters was inspirational.

"You can never run out of war stories to tell," he says. "I would love to do something like this as a film. The sisters one is just waiting to be a movie or a novel or a play. So I have been thinking about exploring one of these stories deeper in another medium."

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