

# Shipwrecked! launches Atlas Theatre company

BY LIZ NICHOLLS, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM FEBRUARY 15, 2011



From left: Davina Stewart, Mark Meer, Julien Arnold, Glenn Nelson in Shipwrecked!

**Photograph by:** Supplied: Andrew Paul, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON - Was it the shipwreck? The giant whirlpool into which the hero got sucked? Could it have been the way Louis de Rougemont would ride through the South Seas, island to island, on the backs of turtles, prodding them gently in the right eye in order to turn left?

From the moment Julien Arnold discovered Shipwrecked! The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont, he was smitten; amazed by the true (!) story of a Victorian explorer who went to sea, on a lark, in the 1860s and returned to London 30 years later to get rich and famous by writing a best-selling memoir. Delighted, as he says, by the sheer giddiness of letting three premium actors loose on old-fashioned storytelling, as per this thoroughly oddball 2008 creation from award-winning American playwright Donald Margulies.

So it comes to pass that Shipwrecked! launches Arnold's new company, Atlas Theatre, in its new home, the Lower Hall of Holy Trinity Anglican Church. Glenn Nelson presides as Louis. Mark Meer and Davina Stewart animate Louis's high-colour adventure — with animal, vegetable, and mineral. "Really quick and charming and fun," says their director, a notable actor himself. "In one scene Mark plays Queen Victoria. In the next, he's the main character's faithful dog Bruno. Davina is the ship's captain, the love interest ..." The quick changes are non-stop.

Arnold credits the the idea of doing Shipwrecked! to Richard McMillan, the new Scrooge to Arnold's definitive Bob Cratchit in the Citadel's hit Christmas Carol. He'd been in an early production before Louis and the outsized octopus hit New York. To a new company "looking for a niche in a theatre town," the flinty Ebenezer had donated a bright idea.

Atlas, according to its genial founder, who became a director mid-way through a successful and continuing acting career, is "looking for comedy with heart and intelligence. Plays that are entertaining, but explore the human condition — with wit, compassion, and delicacy. Highly appealing. Sophisticated, but accessible. Plays that you can probably bring your parents to."

Hmmm. And Atlas wants to avoid "what's being done in town really well already," he says. Catalyst, for example, "does image-based stuff and it's wonderfu. There's plenty of good edgy stuff. There are already companies that mentor playwrights and workshop new plays." No, Atlas, as befits its name, would explore elsewhere, the international shores, the quirky, the off-centre, the plays that have slipped off everyone's GPS to find its co-ordinates on the Edmonton theatre grid. Arnold lists some of the playwrights whose work he's been reading: Sarah Ruhl, John Godber, A.R. Gurney ...

Then there was the tricky business of finding a venue to call home, a continuing crisis for Edmonton indie theatre. Actually the local theatre atlas already included a Strathcona church, Holy Trinity Anglican, that's proven warmly hospitable, in price, assistance, and attitude, to Fringe artists — most notably playwright David Belke — over the years. And Arnold knew it well, having appeared in several Belke comedies and even directed the 2009 revival of *The Maltese Bodkin* there. Last summer the arts friendly church re-wired the lower level for a lighting grid, an idea generated by the church's Father Thomas Brauer, a former Toronto rock show lighting technician. During the run of Belke's *The Crimson Yak* at Holy Trinity, Arnold reports that "I looked up, saw the new grid and thought 'this is heaven!' " Which counts as a bona fide sign from above.

Meanwhile, the new artistic director continues his actor's life, with upcoming assignments in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* at the Mayfield, and the large-cast *Teatro La Quindicina* premiere in July. For the Fringe, he directs a new Belke at the Atlas home venue. And if Atlas gets really strapped for cash, Arnold, who bounced back from a massive heart attack in the fall of 2007 at age 44 — and dates everything since then "A.J." (After Jammer) — jokingly threatens to do a solo Fringe show called *The Angina Monologues*.

Yes, he's serious, and light-hearted. Which is the spirit in which Atlas arrives on the map.

--PREVIEW

Shipwrecked! The Amazing Adventures Of Louis de Rougemont

Theatre: Atlas

Written by: Donald Margulies

Directed by: Julien Arnold

Starring: Glenn Nelson, Davina Stewart, Mark Meer

Where: Holy Trinity Anglican Church, 84 Ave. and 101 St.

Running: Friday through Feb. 27

Tickets: [TIX on the Square](#) (780-420-1757 or [tixonthesquare.ca](http://tixonthesquare.ca)) or at the door

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