

**ARTS CLUB THEATRE COMPANY  
TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE  
2011/2012 Season**



**Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage**  
January 26 – February 26, 2012

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## WELCOME

This guide was created for teachers and students. It contains an overview of the play’s story and production, as well as interviews, and an informative essay. The guide aims to provide background knowledge and critical ways of approaching the play that will yield fruitful discussion and foster an understanding and appreciation of the theatre arts.

If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions for the guide, please contact our group sales representative at 604.687.5315 ext. 253, or by e-mail at [groups@artsclub.com](mailto:groups@artsclub.com).

The guide was written by Daniel Ralston, 2011 Marketing Intern.

## ABOUT THE COMPANY

The Arts Club of Vancouver was founded in 1958 as a private club for artists, musicians, and actors. It became the Arts Club Theatre in 1964 when the company opened its first stage in a converted gospel hall at Seymour and Davie Streets.

Now in its 48th season of producing professional live theatre in Vancouver, the Arts Club Theatre Company is a non-profit charitable organization that operates three theatres: the Granville Island Stage, the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, and the Revue Stage. Its popular productions range from musicals and contemporary comedies to new works and classics.

## SYNOPSIS

### Act I

In a church hall in Yorkshire, England, a group of chummy middle-aged women joke and chat as they prepare for a monthly speaker's visit to their Women's Institute (WI) group. Chris, Annie, Celia, Ruth, Jessie, and Cora make up the Knapeley WI chapter. They half-heartedly set up the room, gossiping, their minds quite far from the task until Marie, the authoritative leader, makes sure that all is in order. The women take their seats, and attempt to suppress their dismay and boredom at hearing that the esteemed guest speaker will be lecturing on broccoli. The presentation breaks down after the projector (sabotaged by Ruth) cuts out. An exasperated Marie thanks the speaker, then returns to the meeting's agenda. The group has to decide on the subject of its annual calendar; Marie suggests—in keeping with the tone of previous years—scenic views of old bridges in Wharfedale.

As the meeting ends, Annie's husband, John Clarke, arrives bearing his recently made home brew. Some of the women remark that he is looking slimmer than ever, and sensing something amiss, Chris (who works as a florist) pulls Annie aside to ask how things are going before giving John a bag of sunflower seeds. In the hopes of avoiding another dry lecture, they all ask that he give a talk at some point. The women file outside to swig John's brew, while he and Annie are left alone inside. John, who went to the doctor that day, unbeknownst to Annie, has got his results. As he is about to reveal them, the pair are called outside by the others. The seasons pass quickly.

It is now winter, and the women of the WI are organizing a Christmas parade. John's chemotherapy has left him balding and weakened, but he gamely participates, even joking that he likes the rather dreary old WI calendar: marking treatment appointments under images of misty graveyards is inspiring. The women all laugh, and Annie and Chris complain about the dirty and dingy old settee in the waiting room of the hospital.

At the spring fete each woman has been assigned an event to participate in, and it has fallen on Annie to bake a Victoria sponge cake. Frazzled and fatigued, she forgets, but fortunately Chris anticipated this and brought her own—bought at Marks and Spencer. To everyone's surprise and her friends' utter shock, Lady Cravenshire pronounces Chris's cake the best. Prompted to say a few words about her technique, Chris stays cool, remarking that she always followed her mother's advice, which was to butter the bowl, and, for special occasions, to buy from Marks and Spencer.

The scene fades, and John reads from the bag containing sunflower seeds. He proclaims the sunflower his favourite, not for its resemblance to the sun, but for the way it pursues even the faintest glimmer of the sun's rays, and asks them to plant the seeds up on a hill dear to him. As he reads, he rises from his wheelchair and walks offstage, gone forever.

Later in the year the women gather at John's hill. Chris presents Annie with a plaque that reads "The John Clarke Memorial Settee," and promises to raise money to pay for a new one at the hospital. Then she pulls out several nude calendars to show the others, and proposes that they do the same; it would definitely sell more than their old ones. Remembering that John once mentioned a hospital porter who also worked as a photographer, they decide to investigate the possibility.

Lawrence, the porter, comes to their next meeting with ideas. He thinks that they should, at first glance, appear to be doing traditional WI activities, like making jam, but be doing it nude. Having bashfully made his proposal, he retreats and the women confer. Ruth declines, saying that the attractive Chris and Celia just want to show off. However, the others agree, and begin to devise a way to get around Marie.

Back in the church hall several days later, they ready themselves for the shoot. Reassured by liquid courage and the promise that Lawrence will only compose the shots, and then leave the room, they get themselves worked up to it. Celia draws the short straw, and after much abortive posing, and unheeded shouted instructions from outside, Lawrence bursts in and takes charge. Cora goes next, followed by Annie. Creatively placed fruit and cherry buns preserve modesty. As Chris prepares for her shot, Ruth stumbles in, clearly having imbibed, but now willing to pose. She goes, and Chris after her. For the culminating December spread, all the women pose together, and just as the shot is taken, Marie and Lady Cravenshire walk into the hall.

## **Act II**

Trying to get official permission for their calendar, Chris and Annie attend the WI annual general meeting. Chris makes an impassioned speech. The ruling that comes down is clear: the WI does not do nudity, but it does charity. As long as modesty is preserved, they have official approval to call it an "alternative" WI calendar. Flushed with success, they have the calendars printed and make a big splash in the media. The media attention is such that they have a press conference, carefully orchestrated by Chris. Each woman strikes a clothed pose at the door to the hall, and soon they are media darlings, known around the world.

Later, Marie and Ruth meet to play badminton, which they do even though Chris took the net to use as a calendar display at a local fair. Marie expresses her bitterness about the way Chris is handling things, accusing her of wanting to be the star of the show. Ruth is unsettled, but finds some truth in the charge. Soon after, Chris and the other women enter, having sold out of calendars in less than an hour. Marie accuses Chris of attempting to use the calendar as a way to jump out of the run-of-the-mill life she leads without doing any real work for it. Stung, Chris argues with her, and they leave separately.

Jessie, who has stood with the others, unsure of what to do, notices a letter in the mailbox. Letters begin to flood in, from all over the world, and each has an affecting story to tell about how the calendar reminded them of their own or a loved one's fight against cancer.

Their popularity lands the “calendar girls” the opportunity to be on television. Chris is very enthusiastic, but when she reveals that it is an advertisement for soap, the others are less than impressed. However, the camera team arrives, and proffers plastic sunflower girdles that cover the essential parts, and nothing else. The women balk; they do not see how this is to John’s benefit, or why they should have to be known for being naked. Led by Annie, who tells off Chris for her shameless self-promotion and domineering control over the calendar project, they tramp out, leaving Chris alone with the cameras. She eventually declines to shoot the commercial.

Several weeks later all the women, except Chris, have gathered for choir practice in the church hall. They are in high spirits. They receive a letter from Chris and it is read aloud. In it, Chris explains that the cost of the settee was to be £519, but that the calendar has raised £580,000. After the settee was paid for, she donated the remaining money to the hospital. The gift was so generous that the new settee will sit in the renamed John Clarke Memorial Wing. Chris appears at the back of the hall as they read the letter. Chris makes amends with Annie, and the two are reconciled. Later in the day they all walk to John’s hill; the sunflowers are blooming.

## CHARACTERS

### Chris

You want Chris at your party. She will talk to people she doesn't know, find things to say to fill silences and generate laughter. Part of this is because Chris is at home in crowds, holding court, being the centre of attention. Without Chris in her life, Annie would be better behaved, her life less fun. The two of them are like naughty schoolgirls. Ideal car—who cares, as long as it's a cabriolet. Ideal holiday—Algarve.

### Annie

Annie will join in mischief but is at heart more conformist and less confrontational than Chris. After Chris has put a waiter's back up in a restaurant, Annie will go in and pour calm. The mischievousness Chris elicits saves Annie from being a saint. She has enough edge to be interesting, and enough salt not to be too sweet. Ideal car—who cares, as long as it's reliable. Ideal holiday—walking in English countryside.

### Cora

Cora's past is the most eclectic, her horizons broadened by having gone to college. This caused a tectonic shift with her more parochial parents. She came back to them pregnant and tail-between-legs, but Cora has too much native resilience to be downtrodden. She is the joker in the pack, but never plays the fool. Her wit is deadpan. It raises laughter in others, but rarely in herself. Her relationship with her daughter is more akin to that between Chris and Annie. Ideal car—who cares, as long as the sound system is loud. Ideal holiday—New York.

### Jessie

Get on the right side of Jessie as a teacher and she'll be the teacher you remember for life. Get on the wrong side and you will regret every waking hour. A lover of life, Jessie doesn't bother with cosmetics—her elixir of life is bravery. Jessie goes on rollercoasters. Her husband has been with her a long time and is rarely surprised by her actions. Jessie bothers about grammar and will correct stallholders regarding their abuse of apostrophe s. Ideal car—strange-looking European thing which is no longer manufactured. Ideal holiday—walking in Switzerland or Angkor Wat.

### Celia

The fact that Celia is in the WI is the greatest justification of its existence. A woman more at home in a department store than a church hall, she may be slightly younger than Chris or the same age, but she always feels like she's drifted in from another world. Which she has. She is particularly enamoured of Jessie, and despite the fact Jessie has very little time for most Celias of this world, there is a rebelliousness in Celia to which Jessie responds. It's what sets Celia

apart from the vapid materialism of her peer group and made her defect. Ideal car—Porsche, which she has. Ideal holiday—Maldives, where she often goes.

### **Ruth**

Ruth's journey is from the false self-confidence of the emotionally abused to the genuine self confidence of the woman happy in her own skin. Ruth is eager to please but not a rag doll, and despite being Marie's right-hand woman, she is desperate to be the cartilage in the spine of the WI and keep everyone happy. She has spine herself—if she was too wet, no one would want her around. But they do, and they feel protective of her because they sense there is something better in Ruth than her life is letting out. They are proved right. Ideal car—at the start, whatever Eddie wants; at the end, whatever she wants. Ideal holiday—at the start wherever Eddie is, at the end wherever he isn't.

### **Marie**

Marie has gradually built the current "Marie" around herself over the years as a defence mechanism. She went to her Oz, Cheshire, and found Oz didn't want her. She came back scorched. The WI is a trophy to her, which justifies her entire existence. There is a lingering part of Marie that would love to be in that calendar. Ideal car—something German and well-valeted. Ideal holiday—a quasi-academic tour of somewhere in Persia advertised in a Sunday Supplement which she could then interminably bang on about.

### **John**

John is a human sunflower. Not a saint. Not a hero. Just the kind of man you'd want in your car when crossing America. When he dies it feels like someone somewhere turned a light off.

### **Rod**

You have to be a certain kind of guy to stick with Chris and Rod loves it. He can give back what he gets, and has a deadpan humour which has always made Chris laugh. He drinks a lot but never so much as to have a problem. He would work every hour to make his shop a success. And John was his mate, even though the relationship was originally channelled through their wives.

Adapted from *Calendar Girls* (2009)

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Tim Firth has enjoyed a successful and diverse writing career. Winner of a Laurence Olivier Award and a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award, his works have been both critical and popular hits.

Born in England's northwest—where he still resides—Firth settled on writing as a profession just months before leaving for university. Asked to write dialogue in a creative writing course, Firth wrote about the travails of two teenagers trying to come up with song lyrics—something he himself had done. So compelling was the writing that one of the other participants bought the piece for his production company. Firth

then went to King's College, Cambridge, where he continued to compose for the theatre. He wrote for the storied Footlights revue ensemble, and upon the completion of his degree began to write professionally.

Several productions of his scripts garnered praise; he won the Olivier Award for Best New Musical in 2003, for his first musical, *Our House*. He also became involved in writing for film and television. His show *All Quiet on the Preston Front*—later shortened to *Preston Front*—ran between 1994 and 1997, and was nominated for a BAFTA Award. A children's show that he based on the stories his father told him as a child, *Roger and the Rottentrolls* (1996–2000), won the BAFTA Award for Best Children's Entertainment, and received several other nominations.

He is best known for his screenplay for *Calendar Girls*, the hit 2003 film on which the stage play is based. It is among the top fifty highest-grossing British films in history, and was generally well received by critics. He adapted the screenplay for the stage in 2009, and the show ran for nine months in London's West End at the Noel Coward Theatre before embarking on a national tour in 2010.

He continues to write for various media: his recent work includes the screenplay for *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009), the script for *A Sign of the Times* (2009), and a solo album entitled *Harmless Flirting* (2004). In 2010, he was awarded an honorary Doctorate in Literature by the University of Chester.

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



Rachel Ditor is the Literary Manager at the Arts Club, where she runs the Silver Commissions Project, ReACT, and acts as dramaturg on new plays written for the company.

Ditor attended McGill University for her undergraduate degree, and moved on to the University of British Columbia (UBC) for an MFA, with a specialization in directing. She managed the performing arts school at the Jewish Community Centre, and has stayed on at UBC as an adjunct professor, where she teaches a dramaturgy class.

Recent dramaturgy credits at the Arts Club include *Tear the Curtain!*, *Don Quixote*, *Mom's the Word: Remixed*, *Paradise Garden*, and *It's A Wonderful Life*. In 2010, Rachel was the resident faculty dramaturg at the Banff Centre's Playwrights Colony and is currently a member of the board of directors of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. Also a freelance director, her most recent credits are *The Philanderer* (Arts Club) and *The Merchant of Venice* (Bard on the Beach).

## AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

***Have you seen the film Calendar Girls? Do you think an audience will expect a great deal of similarity between the film and the play? As the director, how will you differentiate the play from the film?***

I have seen the film and I loved it. The two mediums are so different and the script for the play takes that into consideration. For example, there are far fewer locations in the play than there are in the film, which cuts down on transitions. And the play features monologues for each of the characters. In film you can always do a close-up to get a sense of a character's private feelings. You can't do close-ups in theatre, so the script has created other opportunities for the audience to get to know the women.

***How do you negotiate between the tragic undertones of the play and its many lighter moments?***

Plays that require this balance are always challenging, and I've found that rehearsing for the truth rather than for laughs keeps the play grounded in real people and honest reactions to situations. Once we're in previews the audience helps tell us what's funny by their responses. At that late stage in the process we're ready for that information; in fact we need it to help us finish shaping the play.

***Our society can treat aging women in a dismissive way. Does Calendar Girls present an opportunity to question this view?***

Absolutely. There's a great line in the play where the women are likened to flowers where "the last phase is always the most glorious." There's no question that what the women accomplish publicly and overcome in their private lives really speaks to the strength that comes with age and experience. What's really beautiful is their bravery, their willingness to shake up their lives and take risks, and the rewards that come back to them, and others in their lives.

***The original West End production of Calendar Girls was directed by a man, despite the play centring on women and their relationships. Does being female afford you a different understanding of the play?***

Being a woman directing this play I come to it with some firsthand experiences of how women can behave in groups, and certain anxieties about physical beauty and aging, the balance of home and career. But the story is universal and the script's challenges are going to be answered by directors, no matter their gender, by the influences of their personal taste and style and experience.

***How do you go about casting six women who will come together as an ensemble to convey the chumminess of the script?***

Casting is the most important choice you make as a director. So finding actors that have the right temperament and qualities of the characters is critical. But once you're in rehearsals chumminess isn't hard to cultivate. Especially when it's clear to everyone that a good onstage rapport is necessary, then everyone, in their own way, works toward a level of comfort and trust in the rehearsal room that will manifest onstage.

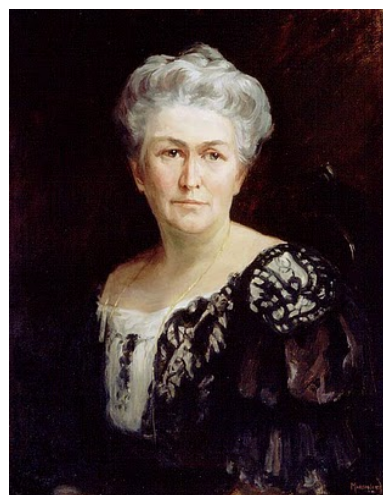
***Staging the nude scenes discreetly will take some sleight of hand; how will you direct these?***

Carefully!

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

The communal gatherings of the Women's Institute (WI) are central to *Calendar Girls*. They provide the women with a social outlet, a support network, and the opportunity to serve their communities. The WI, as originally conceived in 1897, was different; it was an educational resource for women. The goal of the groups was to share knowledge that could be put to use by wives at home. Over time, as it grew from its solely domestic beginnings, the WI became an important social force, and it remains the largest women's volunteer organization in the United Kingdom. In *Calendar Girls*, the WI and its members, traditionally known for "jam and Jerusalem," become a tightly woven female community, representative of both the old and new strains of the WI.

The roots of the WI are in Canada, where the first meeting was held in 1897 in Stoney Creek, Ontario. The initial group of women was gathered by Adelaide Hoodless. When her son died after drinking impure milk in 1889, she became a lifelong crusader for women's education, founding the WI, and helping to found the National Council of Women of Canada. Her fledgling institute formed the female counterpart to the male Farmers' Institute, a contemporary club that later folded. The WI was essentially a rural organization, soon spreading across the farmsteads and villages of Ontario. Within several years, most parts of Canada had their own WI, and the government soon became involved in funding and supervising their growth. Interestingly, the first official liaison between WI organizers and government came in British Columbia in 1911, when an advisory board of four women was appointed by the Department of Agriculture. Their executive was Madge Watt, who would go on to promote the movement in Britain.



Adelaide Hoodless. J.W.L. Forster.  
c. 1897.

Photo credit: University of Guelph

In Britain, after a chance meeting between Watt and John Nugent Harris, the Governor of the Agricultural Organization Society, the British Women's Institutes were adopted at the 1915 convention of the Society. Although they worked together to promote the new association, Watt and Harris had limited success until food production became a focus of the war effort, making domestic food conservation important. A great surge in memberships led to the foundation of 1,405 WI chapters by 1919.

The WI continued to grow in Britain as a centre of female community. The movement created a social forum for women, in which they could speak without fear of male derision or interference. This feminine appropriation of space was particularly politically motivated in the 1920s: between 1918 and 1928 only women over thirty who met property qualifications had the vote. In 1928, women received the same voting rights as men, but the WI remained an assertion of female political agency.

Today, the WI purports to focus on activities and resources for their members: “from craft and competitions to cookery and recipes.” However, they are also socially and politically involved, lobbying government to take action on misleading information on food products and maternal healthcare in developing countries, among many other issues. In *Calendar Girls*, the former qualities are emphasized, making the WI seem a staid and conservative organization. However, the camaraderie and solidarity of the women in creating their own community, independent of outside influence, speak to the true aims of the WI movement.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. The WI plays an important role in the play. How does it model accepted norms of behaviour for the women? What are these norms?
2. Nude calendars, as the women in the play know, are commonplace and often contain pictures of much younger women. Why did the calendar elicit so much attention in the play and in reality?
3. What plot mechanisms does Firth use to sustain the dramatic suspense of the play until its conclusion?

## SOURCES AND WEBSITES TO EXPLORE

### Books

Ambrose, Linda M. *For Home and Country: The Centennial History of the Women's Institutes in Ontario*. Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1996.

An in-depth account of the development of the WI in Ontario. The narrative is chronological and comprehensive, perhaps too much so for an enjoyable casual reading. Contains many archival images.

Andrews, Maggie. *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997.

Explores the British WI from its beginnings in 1915 until the 1960s through the prism of the burgeoning feminist movement. The book provides a historical narrative and relates it to theoretical discussion about the nature of the WI movement.

McKiernan, D. W. *Cinema and Community*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Discusses the film version's presentation of the female community that constitutes the WI. The work delves into the makeup of the women's collective identity and their construction of it.

Scott, J. W. Robertson. *The Story of the Women's Institute Movement*. Idbury, Kingham: The Village Press, 1925.

The first historical account of the WI. Is the standard resource for detailed information about the early years of the movement—it contains some information on the Canadian origins of the WI—and is cited often in other literature on the WI.

### Websites

*Questioning the Story*. <http://www.chasingthefrog.com/reelfaces/calendargirls.php>

An article on the site addresses the gaps between the true story of the women and the film version. It is entirely applicable to the play, and has information on the release of the original calendar in 1999.

*Tim Firth*. [www.timfirth.com](http://www.timfirth.com)

A useful biographical resource on the playwright.

## ATTENDING THE SHOW

### Arriving at the Theatre

Please arrive at the theatre 30 minutes before the show to pick up and distribute tickets. Buses may unload passengers in the loading zone in front of the theatre but engines must be turned off while doing so. Alternate parking for buses will be necessary for the duration of the show.

### Theatre Etiquette

In order to ensure an enjoyable show for all audience members, please share these general theatre etiquette guidelines with students.

- Please turn off mobile phones and other electronic devices for the duration of the show. If you are concerned about missing an emergency call, please leave your name or device and seat location with an usher, who will alert you.
- No outside food or drink is allowed in the theatre.
- Please finish refreshments purchased at the concession in the lobby before entering the theatre.
- Please be modest with your use of fragrances so that audience members with allergies can also enjoy the performance.
- If you must leave the theatre during the performance you will be seated again at the intermission or another appropriate interval.
- Please respect your fellow audience members and the performers by refraining from talking during the performance.
- If you have a complaint about another guest, please tell an usher or the Audience Services Manager rather than approaching the person yourself. They will be happy to address your concerns.