



A Tale of Two Weeklies

Episode 4: Dramatown

Liz Nicholls: Well, it's, I would say that it's a theatre town.

Murray Utas: Yeah. So reviews. Reviews.

Mel Priestley: Yup. I think I've given two bombs and they were so, one of them still makes me angry to think about it because it was just so bad.

Trevor Schmidt: Lots of young artists get tied up in knots and, and work themselves into a fricking frenzy.

Paul Matwychuk: I look back at it, I really don't know how I was able to survive all of that.

Darka Tarnawsky: I think it was kind of like an embarrassment of riches to be honest.

NARR: For 26 years two rival magazines existed as the alternative weekly press in one blue collar, Canadian prairie city. This is the story of Vue Weekly and SEE Magazine, two weekly papers that ran in Edmonton between 1992 and 2018. This is an elegy and love letter to those papers. Their rise, glory days, notorious rivalry, and eventual decline. I'm Andrew Paul. I'm Fawnda Mithrush. And I'm Paul Blinov. And this is A Tale of Two Weeklies.

Liz Nicholls: Well it's, I would say that it's a theatre town. I can't speak in any detail of the dance scene. And you know, the literary scene is a little outside my compass, but there's a lot of theatre for the size of place that it is.

NARR: That's Liz Nicholls, the longtime daily theatre writer for the Edmonton Journal. She didn't work at SEE or Vue, but her career covering Edmonton's theatre scene began before and outlasted both papers life cycles. Her career kicked off right around the second year of Edmonton's Fringe Festival in the summer of 1983. For over 30 years, she covered local stages as her sole beat, and she was the last remaining full time theatre reviewer employed by Postmedia in the country. She left the Journal in 2016 and has been reviewing on her blog 12thnight.ca ever since.

Liz Nicholls: And you know, the small Indies have been proliferating and you'd have to think that the, the pell mell growth of the Fringe has something to do with creating that atmosphere of, 'okay, you've got this great idea, just shut up and do it at the Fringe' about the town, right?



NARR: Before we get into this episode, and how this all relates to our two weeklies, a bit of background on Edmonton and its art scene—in particular, its theatre community. While a lot of weeklies are known for expansive music coverage, one of the unique circumstances about Edmonton is its robust theatre scene, especially for a city of its size. In 2018 there were over 20 companies producing theatre that received operational funding from the Edmonton Arts Council, and that doesn't include cornerstone organizations like the Citadel Theatre or the Fringe Festival, which is massive in its own right, with nearly 2000 performances at the 2019 festival alone. When both SEE Magazine and Vue Weekly started in the early nineties, the city's artists had been benefiting from the influence of the Peter Lougheed provincial government, which historically supported heritage programs. It being Alberta, his was indeed a conservative government, which also supported the arts. It can happen. The Loughheed era, which ended in 1985, has been dubbed by author Fil Frazier as 'Alberta's Camelot' for its thriving economy, which heavily benefited the arts at the time. Between Lougheed's final years as premier and the start of the weeklies, Brian Paisley started the Edmonton International Fringe Festival and numerous theatre companies like the Freewill Players and Shadow Theatre started cropping up, largely from classes of graduates from the University of Alberta's BFA program, one of the most sought after conservatory theatre programs in the country. So that's the scene we're dealing in, at least when it comes to theatre. During the 26 year tenure of both Vue Weekly and SEE Magazine, give or take both running between 1992 to 2018, Edmonton's art scene benefited not only from the amount of coverage that was offered, but also from the rival magazines' attempts to divide space among the myriad organizations producing shows and investing in ad space. I remember one editor at SEE saying that we should try to give each theatre company one cover per season now. No one gets any covers at all. Anyway. On any given production cycle for either paper. There were numerous previews of theatre and dance shows playing that week. Artist's profiles, CD and film reviews, book reviews, interviews with musicians and bands touring through, and every so often some thoughtful writing about the creative ecology of the city. This amounted to a ton of linage in each paper. Just the art and event listings ran up to a dozen pages in the early days when column inches weren't strictly limited by shrinking ad revenues.

Darka Tarnawsky: I think it was kind of like an embarrassment of riches, to be honest. There was, you know, to have not only one arts and entertainment weekly in a city the size of Edmonton, but to have two, was pretty cool.

NARR: This is Darka Tarnawsky, President of Bottom Line Productions. She started her publicity firm in 1993 just after SEE made its debut. It now serves local mainstays like Teatro la Quindicina and Brian Webb Dance Company as well as marquee touring clients like Cirque de Soleil and Broadway Across Canada.

Darka Tarnawsky: We would try to always get both but you know, if we could at least get a story in one for each of our clients or each of their shows, that was super important. But we found that they were really supportive of almost everything we did. At first I thought, Oh well there's no way I'll get anything in them, because they were to sort of, you know,



rock and roll and alternative. But they were interested in the mainstream stories as well, you know, especially if we had good photos. I remember mailing in photos, you know, cause there was no electronic or digital transmission of photography. It was crazy. But yes. They, they picked up lots of stuff. Mailing in photos. Yes. Always having little cardboard, 8.5" x 11" pieces of paper so they didn't get crushed in the mail, and mailing a press releases. Like, to send out a media release, it would take me about three days of planning because I had to get all my labels ready and my envelopes and print and fold and stuff and put them in postal code order because that way it was cheaper. And yeah, nowadays you can, things are pretty different.

NARR: Joshua Semchuk now also works for Bottom Line Productions and had previously spent eight years in the Citadel Theatre's publicity department. He's also a graduate of that University of Alberta BFA program in Theatre Production.

Joshua Semchuk: Yeah, we were totally aware of the rivalry, but we always worked really hard at the Citadel to ensure that they both got good stories. And it's something I still practice it in. I teach it to anybody who'll listen to try to give a different story to different publications. I got into a jam one year when John Ulyatt was doing a show in the, in the MacLab, I Am My Own Wife, and John Kirkpatrick was doing a show in the Rice. He was working in a restaurant, the hell was it called? Fully Committed. And so at the time that the rivalry was pretty intense between Vue and SEE, of course, and then the rival then with the Journal. So, so there was a story for SEE where they would do a story about John and John and the roles that they were doing. And basically because they were both one person shows, they were playing all of these characters and we would talk about all the characters that the at the Johns were playing. And then the Journal did the same story and oh my God, did I get in crap for that. But I thought, oh no, but it's not exactly the same story because you're just talking about John and John and in this other story you're doing all of the characters they're playing. No, that didn't go over very well.

NARR: Running the risk of multiple stories on the exact same show, even in the same aspect of a show wasn't the worst problem they could have as arts publicists. Flash forward to 2019 and most productions are fighting for any column inches to publicize their shows and what remains of daily print papers.

Darka Tarnawsky: Although we'd always try to get a SEE and Vue story regardless of what the show was, if it was a mainstream show, like the ballet or the opera, but we'd always try to find an angle that was a little bit more out there, a little bit more interesting. Maybe it was about, you know, one of the musicians who was playing in the pit who was also a recent MacEwan grad who has a rock band on the side. You know, like there was always that sort of look looking for angles that weren't covered by other media. So it also kind of sharpened our skills a little bit as publicists too, to be looking for the right targeted kind of stories that the SEE and Vue readers would want to read.

NARR: Perhaps because Bottom Line was a company with an awareness of not only the arts community, but also the local media landscape, they played a role in the trajectories of



some of Edmonton's most storied arts institutions and still do. The weeklies generally worked well with them and their clients.

Darka Tarnawsky: I've worked with hundreds and hundreds of artists over the years and, and on so many different events. I do remember as publicists if we got a cover story that was like a, you know, a medal of honor, so we'd, you know, get it framed and have it hanging in our office. But you know, that was also always a really big thing. You know, do we have a good vertical cover art that could potentially work for SEE or Vue? And, and so having one of those was like a bit of a trophy, you know. But the thing that I thought was, was awesome about SEE and Vue is that they were interested in those local stories, and they didn't have to be about, you know, just the big mainstream acts. They would be about things that were more eclectic and more emerging. And they just had a real interest in, in that and, so that to us was exciting for our smaller clients and the ones that were just getting started

NARR: As both an editor at the weeklies and a playwright, Paul Matwychuk had a unique take on the weeklies' influence over the arts. Matwychuk first worked for a number of years at Vue covering film and theatre, then briefly moved to Key West Florida. He returned to Edmonton in 2007 to a job as SEE's arts editor.

Paul Matwychuk: I think at a certain point they needed someone to cover local theatre because the person that they had moved to Toronto and I had done some Fringe plays. And so they thought erroneously that I knew about the local theatre scene and that sort of became my beat. I, you know, I kind of wanted to do movies, but that's what everybody wants to do. And I sort of wound up in this kind of parallel track of being a theatre reviewer. Knowing what I know now, I think I was lucky. In fact, I didn't have any relationships with anybody in the city, so I didn't have like conflict of interest, you know, I didn't have friendships that were going to be compromised if I said bad things about their show or if I said good things about the show, you know, that's the only reason why he likes the show. So it actually worked out pretty well. From that extent I might have, it actually was maybe pretty smart to get me to do that beat. So I only, it was only after kind of a long period of time that the whole, you know, the difficulties of covering local theatre kind of became apparent.

NARR: Not only could reviews bump or diminish overall ticket sales, their arrivals on Thursdays proved enough to influence the weekend box office. During Governor General Award-winning playwright Vern Thiessen's tenure as artistic director of Workshop West Playwright's Theatre, which ended in October 2019, he understood the importance of the timing of those reviews.

Vern Thiessen: I think that you can't underestimate the impact of when the papers came out and when the reviews came out. So it was just only last year that I kept on saying to people in my at Workshop West, why do we open on Thursday nights? And we all kind of looked at each other and it was, well we opened on Thursday nights because it was historical time to open because then you knew that you would get the Saturday review in the Journal



or the Sun or both if you were lucky. And then the next weekend for the following push for the final push, you'd get reviews in SEE or Vue or both. And so I was like that doesn't exist anymore. So we're opening on Friday. So look, cause that makes more sense. So that impact of having that Vue review come out or that SEE review come out on Thursday could make or break your box office for the weekend. Right. It was huge. It's like everyone picks it up and what are, what are the good shows and what are the not good shows, right? Or am I going to go see this music act versus going to see this piece of theatre? Like, you've got a really great full spectrum in a couple of pages of what was going on in the city written by people who knew the underground scene and you'd never get that in the Journal. Like you'd have to flip through 10 pages first of all, you have to find the section if it existed, right? And then the cover of some Journal page would be some article about Bruce Springsteen or something. Like it wasn't anything about anything local. So you know, that was, that was critical. And it could, it had a huge impact.

NARR: For audiences looking to plan a weekend, if nothing else, the papers could give you some options. Even bad reviews where at least words about your show that people could read and weigh for themselves.

Vern Thiessen: So whether the reviews were shitty or not, didn't really matter. At least people are talking about it and you know, often they go, wow, your show can't be that bad. I've got to go see it. Or why is it really that bad? Wow, that sounds interesting. You know, so it was mediocre reviews that you were really worried about, cause there's nothing worse.

NARR: Being a theatre reviewer in Edmonton had its perks, like free tickets to virtually any production. But it had its challenges too. There was a time when the weeklies weren't welcomed everywhere, and in particular, this was very apparent when it came to one of the city's most longstanding local companies, Teatro la Quindicina, which started in 1982 at the first Fringe Festival. Since it's continued as an ensemble company locally focusing their seasons on the repertoire of playwright Stewart Lemoine at the Varscona theatre. Matwychuk recalls one incident that came to a head when SEE writer Matthew Halliday reviewed one of Teatro's shows.

Paul Matwychuk: So this was a tomato play written by Stewart Lemoine, a remount of a successful, very well reviewed, award nominated, if not award winning, Fringe play. And they were doing it in the regular season. And Matthew wrote a, like, mixed to negative review of it, liked the performances, but he felt that the vibe of the situation was a little creepy. I think that was like a legitimate criticism. It's presented in that very charming, you know, Stewart Lemoine bantering back-and-forth kind of way. That was Matthew's take on it and he didn't find the Lemoine style as charming as a lot of people in Edmonton do, which is a perfectly fine critical stance. He was not a guy who reviewed a lot of theatre. And so I think this kind of at least—I think a lot of people they'd comment. You know, Ron Pederson, a regular Teatro performer wrote a letter to the editor.



NARR: Ron Pederson is an Edmonton-born actor who's appeared on pretty much every Canadian stage from Stratford to Second City to Soulpepper. But what we elder millennials know him best for was a three season stint on MadTV.

Paul Matwychuk: There's this whole back and forth in the letters to the editor column about this, and I guess this ultimately led to us being banned from Teatro. We were told that our reviewers are not, you know, they were not going to give us complimentary tickets anyway. So I thought, Oh, for heaven's sake. So they had a new, another production going up at that time. So I told the reviewer to just buy a ticket, go see the show, review it, and we'll reimburse you for the ticket. And that made the Teatro people, especially I think it was Jeff Haslam, who at that point was the artistic director of the company, and if he wasn't at that point, he was certainly like a primary creative force in the company. He felt this was like, you know, unforgivable. Even though it was a good review, as I recall, the of the play. And this we were, you know, we were officially banned and we were told by Jeff if any of our people were in the theatre, he would throw them out bodily himself. And I toyed with the idea of reviewing their next play from like a chair like across the street and review it that way. Is it like that this was the best seat I could do? I thought, oh, why continue this, you know, let's just let it lie. Cause at the time Liz Nicholls was always ready to write, you know, story after story about them. So, you know, I think this was a, this was a bit of throwing his weight around. It came to you know, kind of bite him in the ass a little when he went after a local blogger in very abusive ways. And that became a whole national thing. Yeah. For awhile. And really, you know, he had to kind of, I think lie low for a little while and delete his social media accounts, but that felt like a little of karma. I guess.

NARR: Matwychuk is referring to an incident in 2010 when Jeff Haslam lambasted a local blogger for her online review of a show he was in during the Fringe. We won't go into it here because it didn't happen in the weeklies, but we'll include a link in the show notes. Suffice it to say that the online lambast fired right back at Haslam for lashing out at a blogger who was, for all intents and purposes, quite a loyal fan and a paying subscriber to his company's season.

Paul Matwychuk: Yeah, I mean that was, I guess that was the most dramatic example of like a local theatre company being upset with our coverage. I am much happier that I have no longer reviewing theatre when I was at SEE. I just kind of stopped doing it because I just felt like, you know, I was writing more and more plays and I felt like this is just not worth the emotional energy of making people mad at me. And I, you know, I really tried to be conscientious with how I approach theatre reviewing and not be like intentionally mean or personal. But you know, having your play not get a good review sucks.

NARR: Back to Joshua Semchuk.

Joshua Semchuk: From I, I always have a memory of Paul making sure that he was everywhere. He saw everything and he was always well versed in it. He would never hazard a guess. And so my attitude with those kinds of writers is if, whether it's music or art or theatre or



film, if you see lots of it, you can, you have an expertise to be able to comment because you can then compare and you can say, well, I've seen this writer's work before and, or whether are, I've seen the work when it was workshopped over here at Azimuth Theatre, and now I'm seeing it as it's going to the Rice or whatever. I mean, that's totally invaluable. They had more knowledge about it than, than I did. But because of the two of them, they had the capacity to cover volumes of stuff.

NARR: Trevor Schmidt of Northern Light Theatre arrived in Edmonton around the time both weeklies began and was attracted by the scope of the theatre scene in the city.

Trevor Schmidt: Mm. I want to say 93 or 94, maybe even 94 95, somewhere like that. I came with a production from Toronto of the musical Grease that was running at Stage West, which was, is now the Mayfield. And I arrived with that show. And I met Maralyn Ryan and Kate Ryan on that show and they both said, you should stay here. This is the best place to be. And at that point, it really was the most exciting place in Canada for theatre, for live theatre. There was more theatres per capita here than anywhere in North America, and the work being done was really exciting.

NARR: And Schmidt did stay, it's been 20 years since he left Toronto and he's been steadily working in theatre here ever since. He became artistic director of Northern Light Theatre in 2002 and directs and designs for other companies and usually is involved in one or more shows each summer at the Fringe.

Trevor Schmidt: I mean, I'm very old Fawnda, so I don't take it as seriously any longer about the reviews, but I know that lots of young artists get tied up in knots and work themselves into a fricking frenzy, like foaming at the mouth that someone gave them a bad review at Fringe. And I'm like, good Lord, get over it. Like, it's Fringe. And they are, they're never going to review again and go out and handbill. Yeah. Or turn it on them, like use the bad review. That's sometimes is very effective. So it can be, it can be.

Fawnda Mithrush: We found working at the magazines that like the zero and one star shows still get people going to them like they're, you know, people love it.

Trevor Schmidt: Yeah. That's like the rubber neck in car accident. Like let's watch that. Let's go.

NARR: Nevermind the annual best of Edmonton roundup issues. If you asked anyone in the theatre community when the weeklies shone brightest throughout the year, it was during the Fringe. So what is the Fringe anyway? By definition and inspired by the grand daddy of Fringe festivals created in Edinburgh, a Fringe festival is an unjuried, uncensored celebration of independent and experimental theatre. Ticket prices are much lower than main stage theatre in the regular season, and hundreds of performances occur over the festival span, which in Edmonton is 11 days each August. For context, the 2019 Edmonton Fringe program contained 260 shows and 1900 performances. Because of the sheer amount of performances, its summer holiday timing and the accessibility of tickets, audiences at the Fringe tend to go beyond the



typical scope of theatre subscribership each year. The official Fringe grounds—approximately six city blocks—see upwards of 800,000 in attendance. In 2019 that attendance was higher than the long suffering Edmonton Oilers saw in their 2018/19 home season.

NARR: Reviews of Fringe shows are also essential to helping audiences decide just which of the few hundred shows they should see, and this is where SEE and Vue came in. With stables of young and eager freelancers who were used to staying up late, the weeklies were able to review dozens more shows than even the dailies, who would often send writers from other departments to help cover the festival. Until its end in 2011, SEE Magazine had long been running a special print issue that guaranteed every Fringe show would be reviewed by the end of the first weekend of the festival. Paul Matwychuk oversaw these print issues for years.

Paul Matwychuk: SEE had been doing those 'every show reviewed' special issues before I came over there. And, you know, I don't think if those hadn't existed, I don't think I would have started them because it seemed impossible. Like at Vue, I was perfectly content to just, you know, like do a thing on the Thursday. I guess we would review pretty much every show. But you know, the Fringe would start on a Friday and you know, so Vue would run its reviews usually on the next Thursday's that gives a lot of time to see everything. SEE on the other hand, would get everything reviewed by in an issue that would come out on Monday morning. Right? So you would have to get incredible logistical thing where you would have to get an army of people to see everything on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, write them up, you'd have to edit everything, put them all together, lay it out and get the issue out. And I was I was amazed that I was able to do it and it got harder every year because they would, they would like, the Fringe would expand every year and they would bring in more BYOVs, or bring your own venues, which are like non regulation theatres, and all of those venues would usually schedule all of their plays at the same like prime time, which had the most appeal, so you'd have all these shows that would conflict with each other. You know they all be going at the same time, so you need to deal an even larger group of reviewers to go out and see them.

NARR: As far as moving ticket sales go, the Fringe was where the weeklies' reviews had the most immediate and visible impact. Since 2010 ,the Fringe hasn't had less than 200 productions running concurrently. All of that happens alongside street performers, outdoor beer tents, food trucks, and more. The potential audiences were there certainly, but their attention was being pulled in multiple directions at once. For an artist, a flashy five star review would convince total strangers to buy a ticket to your show. That was vital to your show actually making money, especially if you weren't local, but that attention was a double edged sword. To the reviewer, for your red nose clown show, may be someone whose only experience with clown is the movie IT. Yet could raise our break your box office all at the same time. Something Matwychuk was certainly aware of as editor.



Paul Matwychuk: And I think that the theatre community looked a little askance at it for good reason because as I say, a lot of the people writing those reviews were not experienced theatre goers and their judgments could be a little, I mean everything is subjective, but a little wonky. Like they could be impressed by things that are kind of commonplace in Fringe shows or they would be, you know, kind of missed the point that that was the thing. I always hope like they wouldn't miss the point of some artistic show or just like not get something. And so it was, I would always be like, you know, I always tend to have a bit of a heavy editorial hand as I was preparing that issue.

NARR: Still, if an artist managed to land a stellar review or star rating, even an excellent quotable line or two from an otherwise disappointing review, it could help them further on down the line. Mel Priestly, longtime writer for SEE and eventual editor of Vue, started out doing Fringe reviews, as did many of the budding arts writers for both papers. The Fringe was a testing ground, not only for theatre artists, it was where emerging writers and critics were tested out to you. And you'll hear our co-producer Paul Blinov in the following interview with Mel Priestley.

Mel Priestley: The first year I did it, I had never written a theatre review in my life. And then all of a sudden I had to go review, say I probably six or seven shows the first time. And Paul Matwychuk was my editor at SEE, and he's a bit of an intimidating guy. I had never met him in person, but for a young writer to work with Paul, anyway, he just made me feel very intimidated and like I knew nothing, and I was afraid. So I probably didn't sleep for like two days because I spent hilariously long writing those first reviews because they had to be perfect. And I think as a result, they were a little stilted. They were probably very stilted. Because I was just, I hadn't found my voice and I was just, you know, very concerned about doing a good job and making sure that I was doing justice to the show and talking about it intelligently. To the point where Paul actually told me that I could like lighten up or something like that after a few in because he could tell I was obviously very tense. But yeah, so it was, it was wild and crazy. It was fun for sure. To go out and be a reviewer and to scribble notes. That's when I first started to perfect my technique of scribbling notes in the dark in a notebook that you then take home and have to decipher what the hell you wrote. I have, I still have all of my old theatre books my notebooks, so I obviously enjoyed it.

NARR: Being writers at the weeklies didn't always mean you were in great physical shape, between laid production nights and long weeks of covering all sorts of happenings about town. But there was a special kind of stamina required in those first days of the Fringe. It was like the only marathon you'd run all year.

Paul Matwychuk: You know, I look back on, I don't know where I got the energy, like when I was at, when I was at Vue and when I was at SEE, especially during the summer where there was like a real crunch of, you know festivals of the Folk Fest, the Fringe, Blues festival, the Jazz festival. It's like a whole string of, LitFest, like a every weekend for somehow I was also putting on a one person show. So while setting up, I call this coverage and I looked back and I really don't know how I was able to survive all of that



NARR: For both writers and artists alike. One of the most contentious points of Fringe reviewing was the star rating system throughout the year. Neither SEE nor Vue placed star ratings next to theatre reviews, putting the onus on arguments and words rather than a quick numerical rating. But at the Fringe, this was different. Both papers added a zero to five star rating system. SEE used half stars, Vue did not, which changed how the reviews landed for readers. Anything less than a four star review wouldn't exactly bump up your sales. Even if it was a glowingly written three and a half, for writers too, they proved a difficult vector to consider alongside their words.

Mel Priestley: And the star rating system is a thorn in my side particularly I have written about it. You've written about it. It's not a perfect system. I think a lot of people hate it, but we also kind of, I guess like it or we have to use it. It's, it's difficult. And assigning stars was often the hardest of writing review because you know that you could write whatever words about a show, but most people are just looking for stars and they want to know is it two stars or is it five stars? And quite really realistically you could kind of help sink a show by giving it two stars. The dreaded two star review I think, which is faint praise but not great. Even a three star review is considered, I know some people consider it like a bad review because they can't market that. No one runs around saying, Hey, come SEE your three-star show. It's four or five stars. And I, I definitely think I was a bit harsher because I didn't want to just go around throwing stars at everybody, because I thought that a five star review is that's, that's like a perfect show that's, you know, something that you're going to remember, not just in that festival, but like for years after. And if I think back to the handful of Fringe shows that I can remember out of the hundreds that I've seen, there is still some that I do remember from those early days because they were so good. Yeah. Well a five star review. I mean, if it made me cry, you know, that's a good one. Like if it really got to my emotions or if it made me laugh hysterically for like the whole hour, then certainly so, so those things that really pull at you, if there's nudity, that always sticks out to you. And I'm not saying put nudity in your show to get better reviews, although that might work depending on who's reviewing you. I saw clown vagina like two or three years in a row and I was just like, okay, what's going on? Why do I keep going to the naked clown shows? But hey, you know, that's what a lot of people think of Fringe as being. And so you don't go SEE people what they think they go SEE the clown vaginas.

NARR: Murray Utas recognized the value of having two weeklies long before he became the artistic director of the second largest Fringe in the world. As a longtime producer at the tiny 55 seat Azimuth theatre, Utas took over the Edmonton Fringe in 2016, which has since seen exponential growth in the festival and in its off season programming.

Murray Utas: Reviews, reviews. I think that if you are going to write critically on something that you've just experienced and, you want to put those words out, I much more appreciated new writers or writers from other areas. In the Vue and the SEE realm that were brought in to whether it was like to bolster up for the Fringe or to review during the season. Just how that they approached the words and it seemed like they were more open to talking about what that experience was like for them. Where sometimes if I



think of the, the larger ones where all of a sudden you're the sports writer and you've got to go to the Fringe, you're already angry that you have to review some shows. So you may have a bit of a bend that, that that takes you in more of a wagging your finger kind of way as opposed to opening up to whatever that experience may be. So I appreciate it. Reviews, I think that there is a real balance between what's a good review and what's a bad review and how do they, how do they impact your show? At the festival, there's a huge sort of, and has been right from, from day one when the stars arrived to where we are now, of what that means. Right? And, and how that is, and that's where you'll find the most combination of writers that may not know the craft of what they're going to see. Right, for viewing the Fringe, you know? Yeah. What I felt in these last few years is that the pushback that was coming about stars, one of the things that I saw, that I don't think helps anything either, is there was a ton of stars given away last couple of years, right. That are all of a sudden, I'm going, okay, well stars, if they're there, you can't just be one. Well, I don't want anybody mad at me. Somebody would give me five, right? Yeah. Right. Cause that does no one anything. And we all know that at three and a half stars, the kiss of death, right? It's like I really loved it. Three and a half stars. So no one's coming.

NARR: For some, just having the reviews happen was enough. Trevor Schmidt and noticed that the reviewers didn't always have the same take on a show. So any coverage really was a boon.

Trevor Schmidt: So it was great when, when SEE and Vue would do every single show in the whole Fringe festival in the first three days. Monday. Yeah. Like that was crazy. That was crazy to me. And it was also a total crap shoot because you didn't know who you were going to get. So even, you know, you get the horticulturalists from the Journal and you get a 19 year old student from from Vue, and SEE Magazine is somebody who you've competed with in theatre for your entire career. So it's all just a crazy crap shoot. And it reached the point where it was sort of ridiculous. I remember we did a show one year, there was about five or six reviews coming out in like dailies and things like that. And, and we got like five stars, four stars, three stars, two stars, one star. And so we posted all of them outside our theatre with the big sign that said, the critics agree.

NARR: Despite the qualm some artists might have had with the weeklies, quantity over quality of coverage was still a plus. Getting your show in print preview review or even just a photo meant something. It didn't always convert to ticket sales or bums in seats, but having a clipping could help with grant applications and sponsor pitches. Sometimes a physical record that a piece of live theatre or a dance show, in an ephemeral way, ever existed at all was meaningful. Back to Darka Tarnawsky.

Darka Tarnawsky: You know, that was sort of the way that artists were being legitimized was by how many press clippings they had, right? How many reviews, how many previews how many photos in, in magazines, all that type of stuff. It was super important. And so it not only helps sell and establish the awareness of the artists, but it did chronicle, it was their history. I remember media kits that were hard copies and were full of, you know,



reviews and clippings and, and that doesn't exist as much anymore. I think artists are relying more on creating their own content and having that on their own social media channels and sharing them. I think when they do get something in print, it's a really big deal. And I always keep the hard copy clippings still. I'm that kind of a person. But you know, we always tell them to make sure they have a clipping package and PDF with their links and all of those things. So they, they still get that kind of coverage, but it's just fewer and far between. And so it they don't sort of have that sort of legitimacy stamp from some of that. Some of those people out there like, you know, the, the Liz Nichols of the world for example. Right? And there are people who are bloggers and influencers and you know, have great social media followings and they can say great things about artists, but do they have as much legitimacy? Not so sure. It all depends. Right? So it does change the face of things a lot.

NARR: After the internet and social media really got rolling in the early 2000s, fiscal challenges at the weeklies started to become noticeable. Not only were the papers usual 40 to 50-plus page runs steadily declining, the names and roles on their mastheads were constantly shifting around, some disappearing entirely.

Darka Tarnawsky: It was scary because you spend all this time developing these relationships and sort of assuming that you're going to be able to get, you know, Gilbert will do this story. I know he'll be all over it and you know, and Mel, will do this one and you know, so that sort of personnel change and the downsizing was, was frightening and it continued to, you know, up until about a year ago when when Vue closed its doors as well. So it just meant one less place that we could count on to get the story told. So, and then that happened also of course with Postmedia and radio stations doing less and less on air interviewing, less and less arts coverage on television stations. At times I was like, hmm, maybe there's no use for us publicists anymore.

NARR: Publicists weren't the only ones to notice changes across the media landscape. In the final years of both SEE Magazine and Vue Weekly, those artists who grew to know the writers that regularly covered their community, on stage or otherwise, also began to see the shift.

Trevor Schmidt: I miss having two papers. I miss having a relationship with the people that worked on the papers so that they understood what kind of work we've done in the, they understand the kind of work that we're interested in doing in the future. They have a sense of, of the legacy of what the company has done for 45 years. What I've done in the last 20 some years here in Edmonton. They understand you as an artist or your company as an artistic institution and they generally supported that. Now I feel like the last incarnation of Vue was filled with new people who knew nothing about anything.

NARR: Next time on A Tale of Two Weeklies: By the time we arrived on the scene in the mid 2000s, the weeklies were already starting to struggle. Advertising revenues were down, page counts were shrinking and staff positions were being cut. A significant amount of



turnover was happening too. And there was a general sense of foreboding. How long could both papers keep holding on?

Duff Jamison: It was a tough job, a stressful job and try to keep those things alive essentially. Right.

Michael Nunweiler: Let's not mention any names. We'll leave names out of it.

Paul Matwychuk: Yeah, I guess I would have been fired eventually because everyone eventually got fired at SEE.

Eamon McGrath: So sort of the level of experience and commitment and all those things was really going down. So a lot of the things that get written are not as good as they were when you were, you had like three editorial levels to go through before it hit the page.

Jeff Holubitsky: And at that point I knew that maybe I had done this long enough, I couldn't do it anymore.

Gord Nielsen: And so in a way everybody, I forgot what they deserved.

Eamon McGrath: Yeah. I mean to me it was like the last nail in the coffin of an era that had already ended by the time that I was involved in it.

NARR: A Tale of Two Weeklies is produced by Andrew Paul, Fawnda Mithrush, and Paul Blinov. Music is by Luke Thomson. Artwork is by Michael Nunweiler. This series was made possible with project support from the Edmonton Heritage Council. Special thanks to Edmonton Community Foundation for use of their recording studio.