

Kevin Kerr's



Unity (1918)

A Playgoer's Guide

"A deftly interwoven tapestry of the disaster that strikes the town of Unity, Saskatchewan, during the 1918 flu epidemic. This extraordinary play refuses to bend to sentimentality, revelling instead in the gallows humour and unrequited loves of a community facing imminent death." – citation awarding *Unity (1918)* the 2002 Governor General's Award

About the Author



Playwright Kevin Kerr was born in Kamloops and grew up in Saskatchewan. He studied theatre at the University of British Columbia and at Studio 58, Langara College, Vancouver. Kerr is a founding member and co-artistic director of the Electric Company Theatre in Vancouver, a collective with which he has co-written several plays including *Brilliant!*, *The Wake*, and *The Score*.

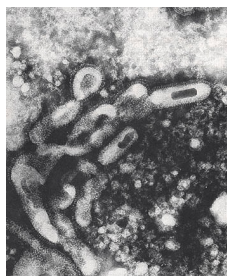
In 2002 he received the Governor General's Award as a playwright for *Unity (1918)*. The play was developed while Kerr was playwright-in-residence at Touchstone Theatre in Vancouver during its 1999/2000 season, and premiered at Touchstone in 2001 at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. It has since played at The Great Canadian Theatre Company (2003), Prairie Theatre Exchange (Manitoba Theatre Workshop) (2004), Theatre Passe Muraille, and Regina Little Theatre (2005)..

Kerr and the Electric Company (including Kim Collier, David Hudgins and Jonathon Young) have earned numerous Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards for the 1998 Vancouver production of *Brilliant!*, including Best Production, and Best Original Script. [From the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia]

A Synopsis

In the fall of 1918, a world ravaged by four years of war was suddenly hit by a mysterious and deadly plague--the "Spanish Flu." The illness struck not only the young and the elderly, but also people in the prime of their lives, advancing rapidly toward mortality in its victims. As fear of the dreaded flu begins to fill the town of Unity with paranoia, drastic measures are taken. The town is quarantined in an attempt to keep the illness out. Trains are forbidden to stop, no one can enter, and the borders are sealed. But when the disease descends upon the town despite these precautions, the citizens begin to turn on each other as they attempt to find a scapegoat for the crisis.

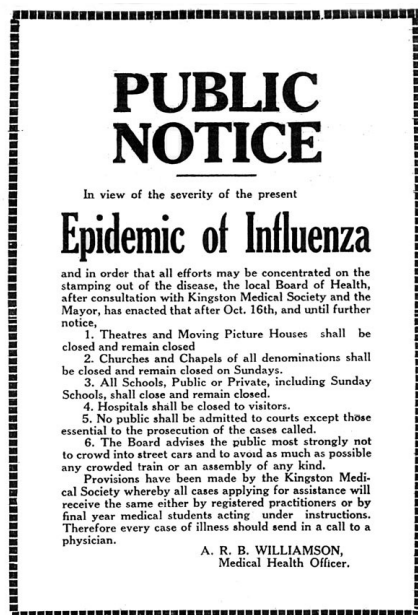
The “Spanish Flu”



The most famous and lethal outbreak [of influenza] was the so-called Spanish flu pandemic (type A influenza, H1N1 subtype), which lasted from 1918 to 1919. Older estimates say it killed 40–50 million people while current estimates say 50 million to 100 million people worldwide were killed. This pandemic has been described as "the greatest medical holocaust in history" and may have killed as many people as the Black Death.

This huge death toll was caused by an extremely high infection rate of up to 50% and the extreme severity of the symptoms. Indeed, symptoms in 1918 were so unusual that initially influenza was misdiagnosed as dengue, cholera, or typhoid.

The Spanish flu pandemic was truly global, spreading even to the Arctic and remote Pacific islands. The unusually severe disease killed between 2 and 20% of those infected, as opposed to the more usual flu epidemic mortality rate of 0.1%. Another unusual feature of this pandemic was that it mostly killed young adults, with 99% of pandemic influenza deaths occurring in people under 65, and more than half in young adults 20 to 40 years old. This is unusual since influenza is normally most deadly to the very young (under age 2) and the very old (over age 70). The total mortality of the 1918–1919 pandemic is not known, but it is estimated that 2.5% to 5% of the world's population was killed. As many as 25 million may have been killed in the first 25 weeks; in contrast, HIV/AIDS has killed 25 million in its first 25 years. [from Wikipedia]



Some views of the play

“Kevin Kerr's *Unity (1918)* is a rich pastiche of lyricism, overt symbolism, and social commentary. Located in Unity, Saskatchewan, the story effectively conflates global armed conflict with the rampant international spread of influenza that killed millions of people worldwide in the autumn of 1918 (estimates range from twenty to fifty million). A fictitious account based on actual historical conditions, the play creates a structurally loose-knit portrayal of a tightly wound community -- one isolated by distance, fear, and ignorance in the face of an enemy that knows no boundaries or distinctions of class, gender, or belief.” – Bruce Barton, *Letters in Canada*

“ . . . the play does present challenges for the reader. Kerr employs the Caryl Churchill effect of overlapping dialogue, marked with asterisks, dashes, and ellipses. Some continuity between the abruptly shifting scenes is provided by twenty-one-year-old Beatrice Wilde, whose diary frames the play and tracks events as she and her friend Mary await the return of their soldier boyfriends. “ – Virginia Cooke, *Canadian Literature*

“it's the genuine article -- a Canadian work so good that everyone wants to produce it.” – *Vancouver Sun*

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